

Newton Conservators

2025 Newton Candidate Questionnaire

Respondent: Jacob Silber

Office Sought: Ward 8 At-Large Councilor

Question 1:

What are your top 2 or 3 goals and/or objectives from the Newton Open Space Plan:2020-2027 (see pages 147-150 for the Plan's Goals and Objectives) and what do you plan to do to promote them? (FYI, a priority of Newton Conservators, relating to Objective 6C on page 150, is to complete overdue and future Conservation Restrictions in a timely manner.) Are there items that you believe are missing from either the open space plan or conservation discussions in our community, and how would you address that? (400 words or less)

Response:

My top objective, which is encompassed to some degree in Goals 1 and 5, would be to increase utilization of open spaces. The best way to assure that Open Space is properly maintained and funded is to increase community demand for such spaces.

I am a frequent hiker in Kinnaird Park, which due to its location (limited walkability access) is underutilized. My question would be, therefore, how can we assure that not only are such sites more easily accessible (connectivity), but how can we create structured activities that increase usage.

Here are some ideas specifically for our parks: Figure out better ways to create fun and engaging activities for parents and children to use such spaces – scavenger hunts, geocaching and other games can engage kids and get them away from screens, as well as provided a much desired outlet for parents (to accomplish the same goal). Create more events that are space-adjacent, and link those events to the spaces involved.

Golf courses - presence of golf courses aligns in many cases, such as in Ward 8, with lack of access to open spaces. While I'm not familiar enough with the history of working with these private entities, I would like to find out more about what we have done as a city to promote the highest and best use for this land.

Question 2:

The climate crisis is one of the biggest detrimental impacts on our open spaces. How would you accelerate or add to the actions recommended in both the Newton Climate Action Plan: A Living Plan for 2020-2025 (focused on reducing greenhouse gases) and the Newton Climate Vulnerability Assessment and Action Plan (focused on changes to protect natural resources and reduce effects of extreme weather events)? (400 words or less)

Response:

I worked in the renewable energy industry for 10 years, and while I am optimistic about the potential for climate change mitigating technologies such as solar and transportation electrification, I am also realistic about our ability to fundamentally change the trajectory of anthropogenic climate change on a local scale.

Tree removal is perhaps the greatest risk to our open spaces, as it removes our natural environment's ability to absorb precipitation from what is seemingly an increase in extreme weather events. The 100 year storm now seems to be far more frequent. Stronger protections for existing trees is a priority.

Second, I believe we need to focus more on energy as an economic alternative, not just a climate alternative. With power prices rising yearly (especially delivery charges), and power demand forecast to increase 40% in the United States in the next 10 years, more education about the strong investment characteristics of solar from a homeowner perspective is an alternative way to encourage mitigation technologies that can appeal regardless of individual concern about climate change.

Encouraging EV use in the city accomplishes two goals - first, use of power infrastructure in a non competitive way with peak load requirements, and reduction of noise levels across the city which make our open spaces (and all our spaces) more pleasant to use.

Finally, we can achieve a goal of increasing access to our open spaces and reducing overall vehicles on the road by embracing the future of autonomous vehicles. I do not believe that we should expect expansion of public transit in Newton – our state institutions are still struggling with more urban areas. But we can have an impact by making sure that people have an alternative, if desired, to owned vehicles.

Question 3:

Do you believe current funding levels in the City budget are sufficient to maintain high quality open space and address growing climate mitigation needs? If not, what would you do about it? (400 words or less)

Response:

The city budget is under pressure from many sources, but mostly it is due to a change in inflation rates that have caused our revenues to grow at a rate below our expenses. That said, only by making sure that Newton is a desirable place to live can we assure that funding will be available to maintain our open spaces.

The city has underinvested in attracting commercial taxpayers, and that needs to change. If we focus on increasing our commercial tax base, we solve our funding levels, which in turn reduces competition for funding.

We already know what makes Newton a great place for residents – great schools, high quality of life, and our open spaces. We need to ask that same question about what makes Newton a great place for businesses.

While not mentioned in the questions, adaptation will become of greater importance than mitigation, barring a significant change internationally to arrest climate change. This means strongly considering the vulnerabilities in both our built environment as well as open spaces to warmer summers and flash flooding. We must make changes in zoning to assure that we are not planning for the past. Nothing will destroy our city budget faster than tail risk events like destroyed or damaged buildings.