

Progressive Newton 2017 Municipal Candidates' Questionnaire

(Please submit answers to ProgressiveNewt@gmail.com by Friday, August 18; answers will be available to the public)

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AS SPECIFICALLY AS POSSIBLE:

1. How will you approach collective bargaining with public unions and how will you weigh the value of well paid, skilled union labor against potential cost savings from outsourcing?

As a city councilor, I would not be involved in collective bargaining. I would advise those who are to consider the quality of the work and customer (taxpayer/resident/parent/student) satisfaction, not just the potential cost savings.

2. What value do you place on increasing affordable housing in Newton, and what concrete steps will you take to expand affordable housing?

Newton will never be as affordable as we might wish, because of our combination of location convenient to Boston and major highways, access to public transit, the reputation of our schools, and assets like the Newton Free Library. One of my major motivations for running for office is the need to preserve our most affordable houses - the smaller Capes, bungalows and ranches that are being torn down and replaced by houses three times as large. If we want to preserve middle class homes in Newton, we can't let our zoning be dictated by the housing preferences of the very wealthy, and developers who profit from destruction and rebuilding and displacing current residents. For most homeowners in Newton, the cost of their housing is already determined; the threat to affordability is rising taxes, which will be exacerbated by additional residential development. For renters, the risk is that the possibility of higher density development will cause landlords to sell out to developers, as has happened at Court Street, Washington Terrace, and any place where older two-families have been replaced by luxury townhouses.

I support increased the inclusionary zoning requirement to at least 20% from the current 15%. All affordable units should be affordable in perpetuity. Affirmative marketing requirements should be met to ensure that all eligible units are on the Subsidized Housing Inventory.

3. Do you support the welcoming city ordinance? What other steps will you take to make our city welcoming to all, regardless of race, class, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other discrete characteristics?

Although I was not concerned that the Newton Police Department would become an arm of ICE, I supported the language that was passed, as a way to formalize the city's position, and reassure residents and visitors to Newton. The overwhelming response urging passage of the ordinance indicates that we are a welcoming city.

4. What concrete steps will you take to combat global climate change, increase renewable energy, and decrease energy consumption in Newton?

I will continue to work to reverse the decline in Newton's public and private tree canopy which is important to improve air quality and mitigate the heat island effect. As the main organizer of the Newton Tree Conservancy's Community Tree Plantings, I coordinate the planting of about 100 trees each spring and fall.

I've been raising awareness of gas leaks and working to get them repaired since 2010, when our first large-scale tree planting coincided with Bob Ackley's Newton Gas Leaks Tree Survey. We test all our planting spots for leaks and report them to National Grid, which has led to many faster repairs than would otherwise have occurred.

I support increased use of solar power in locations that do not require cutting trees, converting city vehicles to low- or zero-emission as vehicles are replaced, and reducing energy consumption in city buildings by setting thermostats no higher than low 60s F in winter, and no lower than high 70s in summer.

5. What does Black Lives Matter mean to you?

Black Lives Matter has been very valuable in increasing awareness about treatment of, and risks to, people of color.

6. Would you support a zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory language by city employees?

It would depend on what is included in the definition of "discriminatory language," since that term is subject to interpretation, and speech codes can be legally problematic. Also, "zero tolerance" implies that an employee could be fired for a first offense that might happen spontaneously, perhaps under stress, and that could be an overly harsh punishment.

7. What concrete steps will you take to address income inequality in Newton?

A major contributor to income inequality in Newton is loss of our smallest, most affordable houses, and older rental properties, to teardowns. Unless zoning and demolition regulations are changed, every home in Newton is likely to eventually be replaced by one that is much larger, probably at maximum allowed FAR, or higher by special permit, and much more expensive. I will support reducing allowed FARs, increasing required setbacks, and lengthening demolition delays, to disincentivize teardowns and preserve more of our houses that will not appeal to the super-wealthy.

I also support reducing and eliminating where possible, fees for what should be basic city services, including school bus fees (also bad for traffic and the environment since they encourage more car trips), and fees for participation in school activities (which are part of a balanced education, and increasing important to getting into college).

8. Under what circumstances would you support an override?

As noted above, for many moderate- and fixed-income residents, taxes are the cost they cannot control, and that could cause them to have to leave Newton. Therefore overrides should be used sparingly. I would be most likely to support debt exclusion overrides that have a fixed duration and specific purpose, like school renovations, or funding the unfunded pension and OPEB liability.

9. What steps would you take to assist seniors, millennials, and others who might be cost-burdened? HUD defines cost-burdened as paying more than 30% of their income for housing.

Newton should consider adopting a residential tax exemption, as allowed under state law for owner-occupied primary residences. We should also review eligibility limits (income and assets) for tax assistance programs, and consider adding additional brackets that would be eligible for lower levels of assistance, and raising the exemption amounts to keep pace with rising tax levels.

10. How would you improve access to transportation? What do you see as Newton's role in advocating for expanded transportation?

I would obviously like to see higher frequency service including off-peak and reverse-commute, as well as accessible platforms on our commuter rail stations, but Newton has limited power to extract improvements from the MBTA. Green Line frequency is good during the hours it operates, but late night service should be restored and expanded. Within Newton, ideally there should be low cost shuttle service connecting village centers, shopping areas like Needham Street, and popular destinations like the Newton Free Library. Bicycle facilities, especially the easier components like bike racks for parking, are valuable, but bicycling is not an option for many people, and not safe or practical at all times.

11. What do you believe the role is of local elected leaders in promoting progressive policies at the state and national level?

Local elected officials can act both in an individual capacity, and as a body, to endorse progressive policies. Even non-binding resolutions can be helpful in building support for action at the state level. Many cities and towns, including Newton, have passed resolutions urging passage of bills related to gas leak repair, and not billing customers for lost and unaccounted for gas. And policies adopted at the local level can inspire eventual statewide adoption, as was the case with public smoking bans.

12. Why are people poor?

People are poor for varied and sometimes related reasons. Even in Massachusetts, with better health insurance coverage than most states, having a serious or chronic health issue - one's own or a family member's, can deplete savings and affect the ability to earn a living and accumulate savings. Some people are more able than others to overcome adverse circumstances, and conversely, others can start life with every advantage, like our president, or literally win a lottery, and end up in bankruptcy. Unequal funding of education across communities is also a factor. Many people spend more than they can afford for housing in pursuit of a good school system. Lawsuits in other states have established the inequities of funding education through local property taxes. A truly progressive solution to provide equal educational opportunity would be to fund education through a statewide tax, with local communities deciding how to spend their allocation, rather than providing the opportunity for a Newton education to a relative handful of housing lottery winners while insisting that Newton schools be the best.

YES/NO (Massachusetts state legislature bill numbers follow in parentheses, where applicable):

1. Do you support or oppose a \$15/hour minimum wage? (S1004 / H2365) Undecided, due to concern over impact on employment.
2. Do you support or oppose paid family medical leave? (S1048 / H2172) Yes.
3. Do you support or oppose the 2018 ballot question to place a 4% increased tax rate on taxable income over a million dollars per year? I will probably vote Yes, but want to review the economic arguments for and against.
4. Do you support or oppose the 2018 ballot question to roll back protections for transgender individuals in public accommodations? Oppose rolling back protections.
5. Do you support the safe communities act? (S1305 / H3269) Agree with the objective, but would want assurance from law enforcement agencies that public safety will not be adversely affected.
6. Do you support the great neighborhoods bill? (S81) No. It appears to have been written to favor development interests over local control over zoning and building regulations.
7. Do you believe Newton has met its obligation to provide affordable housing under MGL Chapter 40B? Yes. The Law Department of our pro-development administration is confident we have.

Thank you!