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# League of Women Voters of Newton

# Newsletter

Volume 22, Issue 2

visit us online at [www.lwvnewton.org](http://www.lwvnewton.org)

April, 2016

Save the date! Annual Meeting -- June 2 at Karoun's!

## LWVN Public Statement to Charter Commission

March 30, 2016

Dear Chairman Krintzman and members of the Newton Charter Commission:

In our experience helping collect the more than 8,500 signatures required to establish this Charter Commission, the opportunity to reduce the size of our City Council was by far the most compelling reason Newton voters chose to sign that petition. Ask any signature collector, and you will hear that the quickest way to gain a voter's interest was to mention that a Charter Commission would be able to propose a change to the size of the then Board of Aldermen. Across the city, pens were seized with gusto.

This enthusiasm for change is no surprise to anyone, of course: the size of Newton's legislature was the key un-addressed change left over from the last charter review. Newton voters also overwhelmingly supported a reduction in the size of the City Council in not one but two non-binding referenda, in 1996 and 2000. In 2006, 10 sitting legislators (many of whom are still sitting) supported a proposed reduction of the board's size, to no avail.

We hope this Charter Commission will propose a reduction in the size of the City Council for some very specific reasons:

- The unusually large size of Newton's City Council means a diffusion of responsibility and low accountability. Voters must cast ballots for 17 aldermen every two years (16 at-large plus 1 ward councilor) –

a very large number of candidates for even the most civic-minded voter to stay informed about, especially when you add the need to evaluate an additional eight school committee members and sometimes a mayor.

- That information burden on voters, however, is reduced because so few seats are contested. The sheer number of people needed to fill all 24 seats on the City Council, coupled with the residency requirement, means that we sometimes have members who aren't eager to serve. Many of us in this room know of instances where candidates have had to be pressured to run because no one else showed any interest.
- The size of the City Council costs our legislators and our residents untold wasted hours. Just finding the time for all 24 councilors to speak on a topic and ask questions extends the process of governing substantially, with meetings often running so late that even highly interested members of the public leave before the discussion is over. Anyone who has sat through these meetings can attest to the rarity of original comments after the first 5 or 6 Councilors have spoken.
- The size of the City Council is a burden to the rest of Newton's government, as well as to its citizens. In your recent hearing on the executive branch, for example, the Mayor of Braintree couldn't fathom how a single Mayor could work

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The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization. Regular membership is open to all citizens (men and women) of voting age; associate membership is open to young people and noncitizens. Your annual dues give you membership in local, state and national leagues.

For more information about the League of Women Voters, including information on joining us, call 617-383-4598 or visit [www.lwvnewton.org](http://www.lwvnewton.org).

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**Topic Meetings**

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**Keep up with the workings of the  
City Council!**

Read the *LWVN Docket Digest*,

available each week at

[www.lwvnewton.org](http://www.lwvnewton.org)

*Charter Commission statement, continued*

with 24 legislators in a productive and efficient manner. In your last public hearing, one citizen described the impossibility of advocating effectively for her cause: she simply did not have time to communicate with each and every one of the 24 Aldermen, because she also had a job.

What would a smaller City Council have to offer? A smaller City Council could choose to focus on policy matters and delegate administrative details to professionals. It could devote its time to the larger picture, and delegate smaller, less-controversial decisions to appropriate staff. Constituent services are, and will always be, important, but it is neither efficient nor effective for constituents to believe they must contact their own councilor to be sure a pothole is filled. A smaller City Council could clarify roles, improve service, and devote more time to long-term strategic thinking.

Those who want to keep a 24-member Council often argue that if something isn't broken, we shouldn't try to fix it. Newton certainly isn't "broken," but just as certainly, there's room for improvement. All change carries risk. But to refuse to change out of fear is just as risky.

Another frequent refrain is that voters want to continue to be able to contact their representatives. Reducing the size of the Council will not somehow mysteriously remove Councilors' ability to answer calls or emails. Residents who are passionate about an issue, whether it is dog parks, leaf blowers, development or anything else, will still be able to advocate with their representatives. Fewer councilors will make it easier to meet each and every one.

What seems to fuel this argument is the fear that a smaller group of councilors means less chance of finding a sympathetic ear. Which, of course, it will. But how many representatives can a body have before it becomes mired in mud, slowed to a crawl by the unimportant, and ineffective in tackling important issues, especially the unpopular and the controversial? Government is not, and should not be, about efficiency only, but some level of efficiency is necessary to be effective.

For the record, we note that Newton's City Council is by far the largest in the Commonwealth; the next largest is 15, and Boston itself manages with only 13.

Fewer councilors will inevitably mean individual councilors will have to field more calls. It will also reduce a citizen's choice of councilors to approach about an issue. We are confident that these are not fatal burdens – in fact, we believe they are strong advantages. A smaller Council would offer the opportunity for a more engaged electorate and more accountability for councilors. A reduction in size would necessitate a review of how and why our Council works the way it does, and a chance to align it with the realities of the present day. Our current Council structure of 24 aldermen, three residents from each ward, two of them elected by the whole city but one by the residents of that ward only, was concocted in 1897, when Newton became a city and "streamlined" its legislature from a bicameral Board of Alderman (one per ward) and Common Council (two per ward) to a single body. Then, as now,

politicians were no doubt reluctant to put any of their fellows out of a job. The two bodies were combined into one without reducing their numbers. Today, nearly 120 years later, in an immeasurably different world – one with automobiles, telephones, radios, televisions, computers, cell phones, and the internet, not to mention reverse 911 call systems -- we think it is time to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our government by reducing the number of legislators.

Sincerely,

Susan Flicop  
President, LWVN

**Welcome New Members!**

Frieda Dweck  
Ruth Goldman  
Mary Potere

## President's Letter

Dear LWVN Members,

**Charter Commission:** With so much happening in Newton, I wanted to be sure to draw your attention to the work of the Newton Charter Commission, and ask all our members to take a moment to email the group with your thoughts. The entire commission can be reached by emailing [chartercommission@newtonma.gov](mailto:chartercommission@newtonma.gov).

The Newton Charter Commission (NCC) is a very hard-working group of nine elected members who have been discussing the best way to structure our city government. They have discussed and held public hearings on the executive branch (Mayor's office), the legislative branch (City Council) and the School Committee. All the votes they take now are straw votes, meaning that they are essentially "taking the temperature" of the commission, but are not the final word on the topic yet. Some of the ideas recently discussed include:

- Keeping a strong Mayor form of government: the NCC will be revisiting this as they discuss the pros and cons of a City Manager form of government;
- Extending School Committee term limits from 4 terms to 6: the NCC is expected to revisit this decision as well, especially in light of the City Council term limits (still to be discussed at the time of this writing); and
- Reducing the size of the City Council to 13 members—8 councilors elected at large but with residency requirements (one per ward) and 5 at-large councilors with no residency requirement. The straw vote was unanimous in favor of this change.

LWVN supports a strong Mayor form of government, reducing the size of the City Council (but with no specifics on number or makeup of the group), and removing term limits. We have given testimony at each public hearing, but it is important for all citizens to weigh in on these issues. In reality, it is often those opposing a change who take time to comment, so hearing from everyone, including those in support of a change, gives a fuller picture of what Newton residents are thinking.

LWVN has a cadre of observers who take notes at the NCC meetings. These are available on our website, [lvvnewton.org](http://lvvnewton.org), in the Charter Commission box on the upper right of the home page. We would love to have more observers, too! If you can help out even for one or two meetings, please let us know at [info@lvvnewton.org](mailto:info@lvvnewton.org).

**Election Commission:** LWVN has been observing discussions this year by the Election Commission to solve some issues that have arisen at several polling locations in elementary schools. Traffic is always a problem, as are the concern for security in the schools and the disruption in the regular school day for students and staff. The situation at two of the schools has been resolved satisfactorily with the help from the School Department, but the Memorial-Spaulding polling location will most likely be moved to Temple Beth Avoda. This is still being discussed by the City Council, but the change, recommended by the Election Commission and the City Council Finance Committee, is awaiting a vote by the full group. The Election Commission is also evaluating the new State requirements on early voting. We will work to keep you informed of the discussion and a public meeting on the topic that will be held soon.

**Annual Meeting:** Save the date for June 2, 2016! LWVN will hold its annual meeting at Karoun, 839 Washington St. in Newtonville. Look for more information soon, including the program plan and local action priorities for next year.

And, as always, there are too many people to thank for all the work LWVN has done recently. I did want to single out Ellen Grody and Lisa Mirabile for their wonderful work planning and organizing topic meetings this year. Ellen and Lisa have brought us many interesting meetings on highly relevant topics. Our next topic meetings will be in the fall of 2016.

In League,

Sue Flicop

## LWVMA Day on the Hill, February 9th

By Sharyn Roberts

The League Day on the Hill was held on Tuesday, February 9, 2016, at the Massachusetts State House on the theme “Why This? Why Now? What Finally Moves Legislation?” In the Gardner Auditorium, we heard from Senator William Brownsberger, Representative Shawn Dooley, and Pamela Wilmot of Common Cause, each with their take on what drives the legislative agenda, what factors bring bills through the process for a vote, and how advocacy groups such as the League of Women Voters can influence this process.

They suggested that when appealing to legislators to get bills passed:

- make the argument personal, i.e., this is how this legislation affects me, my family, my neighborhood, my city/town;
- if possible, visit your legislator in person;
- when emailing, go beyond boiler plate format;
- partner with other groups with like mindedness;
- be aware of the culture of the time the original legislation was formulated;
- be polite, be patient, but persevere.

We then heard from our LWVMA Legislative Specialists

who identified key legislation, tracked it over the entire session, testified at hearings, issued calls for action when needed, and participated in coalitions.

Then with our talking points for featured bills in hand, we met over a light lunch in one of the conference rooms of the State house. All four of our legislators were invited. We were joined by Senator Cynthia Stone Creem, two of her aides, and two of Representative Kay Khan’s aides who described their legislative initiatives and the bills they were supporting. Our Newton League was represented by Lois Levin (LWVMA Transportation Specialist), Newton City Councilor Alison Leary, Governor’s Councilor District 3 Marilyn Petitto Devaney, and Pia Bertelli and Sharyn Roberts from the LWVN Board.

We discussed affordable housing, child safety, criminal justice, elections and voting, the environment (specifically energy and resource conservation to combat climate change), good governance to improve access to public records, health care, immigration, transportation, and women issues, specifically pay equity.

When we thanked the legislators for being in sync with the legislation that our League was supporting, Senator Creem said that it was always a pleasure to talk to us but if we really wanted to make an impression, we should concentrate more on those areas of the state who are not in accord with us.



## Cuba with The League of Women Voters of Florida

### *An excellent and fun experience!*

By Priscilla Leith

I joined a tour to Cuba in October, 2015 sponsored by the LWV of FL. The leader, Cuban born U.S. citizen Annie Betancourt, and our Cuban guide Elio helped 25 of us from various states understand the culture, history and politics. In return, we gave Elio a lesson in U.S. presidential politics and election laws to deal with his confusion about what he heard and read about the 2016 races.

Our plane flew from Miami to the small airport at Santa Clara, and then we rode by bus to Cienfuegos on the south coast where it was a balmy 90+ degrees on the Caribbean seacoast. During the week we toured Trinidad (a historic city in the hills founded in 1514); Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs); Havana; and Cojimar and Hemingway's estate Finca Vigia. We visited a rural school on our way from Cienfuegos to Havana. We saw the Zapata Swamp where U.S. troops (deemed "mercenaries" by Cubans) tried to invade Cuba in the early 1960's; visited with faculty and students at University of Havana where we discussed Cuban history and politics with them. We visited the U.N. Cuban Association where we were fed a lot of government-inspired propaganda regarding the status of the Cuban people from representatives of women's groups; and we had lots of good food at numerous family-owned restaurants.

We learned that:

- Relatives going to visit in Cuba can bring along as baggage shrink-wrapped bicycles
- People traveling go on foot, by horse, bicycle, horse and buggy, ancient tractors, old or new cars, sometimes buses. In Cuba "only God knows when the bus is coming", according to Elio
- Cuba has first-class health care (free) and education (free up to post-graduate studies)
- Cuba has bad housing, crumbling buildings, few jobs for trained professionals when people finish their educations
- Baseball is very popular, and Cuba has many baseball teams and stadiums
- The Santeria religion derived from Africa and Haiti and is clustered in rural areas
- Sugar cane is still grown. It requires processing within 2 days of cutting, and cutting is extremely hard work, with lots of bending over to cut the ground level stalks that hold the best sugar juice.
- Fidel Castro's wife is related to the Bacardi family who still own sugar plantations outside of Cuba, and she shares in profits earned by that company selling its brand of rum.
- Fidel Castro, at age 33 when he seized power, was a "cult figure" for a Catholic nation, because he was the same age as Christ when he was crucified, he had a beard, he had disciples (the rebels).
- Cubans have ration books which are usually in the hands of the wives, because they buy the food, thus giving them a lot of power in their households
- Rural school children learn historical poems about Che Guevara, the martyr who was killed in South America leading guerrillas and recite the poems by memory for guests, like us.

**The Florida League of Women Voters has a license with the State Department to take delegations of members of The League of Women Voters to Cuba to meet with local citizens, speak to the people there, and foster open dialogue and understanding with the Cuban people.**

For further information on LWVFL trips, please contact Priscilla Leith at [islpris@verizon.net](mailto:islpris@verizon.net) or Karen Price of Needham LWV at [karen.price@comcast.net](mailto:karen.price@comcast.net). For information about upcoming trips to Cuba, contact [thefloridavoter.org](http://thefloridavoter.org).

## Topic Meeting Notes

By Ellen Grody and Lisa Mirabile

### **FEBRUARY**

#### ***Newton's Election Commission***

For our February 3<sup>rd</sup> topic meeting, the LWVN invited the members of Newton's Election Commission, along with city clerk David Olson, to join us for an information discussion about what the Election Commission does and how it works. Although David Olson was unable to attend at the last minute, Commissioner Jan Huffman graciously fielded the many questions meeting attendees mustered. In a nutshell, the Election Commission is made up of 4 individuals, 2 each from the Republican and Democratic parties. The local parties submit 3 names each to the mayor, who makes the final appointments. Terms last for 4 years. When asked whether the Commission might be improved by the addition of a fifth member who is unenrolled, Commissioner Huffman explained that the make-up is governed by state law, but added that the commission's work hasn't, in his experience, involved any partisan issues. The main work of the commission is to certify election results, ensuring that there have been no irregularities and responding to and investigating any complaints such as issues around sign-holding locations. They also supervise election officials, including poll-workers, and conduct required trainings. And they review polling locations and can recommend changes to help ensure that all voters have the best access possible to the polls. When asked specifically about using schools as polling locations, Huffman explained that schools have been the widely accepted default locations, but that when issues or objections arise, the commission relies on a set of criteria for recommending polling locations, including accessibility, parking, the size and flow of the space, and cost. Last, we touched briefly on the implications of the new law allowing early voting which will go into effect in November.

### **MARCH**

#### ***Later Start Time for High Schools?***

On Wednesday March 9th, LWV Newton held a topic meeting "Why So Early? Rethinking the High School Start Time". The presentation by Chris Steele and Risa Shames of the Newton South School Council showed that there is a discrepancy between the amount of sleep Newton teens get and how much they need to be successful.

Studies show that an average adolescent needs between 8 ½ and 9 ½ hours of sleep per night to do their best in school and activities. According to recent surveys of our own students in Newton, 80% of Newton South High School respondents said they get less than 7 hours of sleep a night. Also, 80% of respondents said that lack of sleep affects their academic performance.

Over 70 school districts (1,000 schools) in the country have moved to a later high school start time. In the past 5 years, there has been increased conversation and consideration of start times across the country. In addition, the American Pediatric Association issued a recommendation in 2014 that middle and high schools should not start before 8:30 am.

Ruth Goldman of the Newton School Committee was also in attendance and discussed the ongoing work of the Later School Start Time Working Group. This School Committee working group is currently examining what a later high school start would look like in Newton and how it could be implemented.

#### **More Information About Later School Start Times**

Newton School Committee Later Start Working Group: [newton.k12.ma.us/Page/2553](http://newton.k12.ma.us/Page/2553)

Newton South School Council references and resources on later start, including this handout: [newton-southptso.org/school-info/school-council/](http://newton-southptso.org/school-info/school-council/)

*Topic Meetings, continued*

## **APRIL**

### ***Visioning a Better Washington Street & State Legislation on Transportation***

On **Wednesday April 13th**, LWVN Transportation co-chairs Alicia Bowman and Lois Levin described the committee's efforts to raise awareness of ways we can improve the quality of life in Newton by improving all transportation options -- pedestrian, bicycle, private vehicle and public transit. In particular, the committee is focused on reducing Vehicle Miles Traveled, in line with LWVMA's position. Fewer car trips and more pedestrian and bicycle trips – even just in tiny increments – lowers costs and improves health, safety, the environment for everyone. In particular, Bowman presented information about a study done for Newton by the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPO) and the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC). The study's proposal envisions a much friendlier Washington St., with a tree-lined median strip, more plantings against the Mass Pike side, better designed bus stops, and the addition of bicycle lanes. While there are no specific plans to implement this or any other plan to improve the street, the transportation committee hopes to raise awareness of the opportunities we have and build momentum toward change. After Bowman's presentation, LWVMA Transportation Specialist Lois Levin described several important bills making their way through the state house to protect "vulnerable road users," a category we all fall into some of the time: pedestrians, bicyclists, wheelchair users, stranded motorists, police, fire, ambulance, tow-truck, construction workers and so forth. One would require any vehicle traveling above 30 mph to leave 3 feet between the vehicle and the vulnerable road user; another would explicitly prohibit parking in bicycle lanes.

### **Newton Transportation Information**

1.5 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT) traveled daily: 50 VMT per household

Almost 2 million VMT per day within Newton's borders

- 31,295 households
- 86,241 people
- 53,307 cars
- 1.6 autos per household

Source: [newtonma.gov/gov/building/sustainable\\_newton/transportation.asp](http://newtonma.gov/gov/building/sustainable_newton/transportation.asp)

### **Washington St Corridor Study by CTPS**

Study of the Washington Street Corridor between West Newton and Newton Corner

*Prepared for the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) by the Central Transportation Planning Staff*

**Final Report:** [ctps.org/data/html/studies/highway/2015\\_washington\\_subregional/washington\\_subregional\\_priority.html](http://ctps.org/data/html/studies/highway/2015_washington_subregional/washington_subregional_priority.html)

See the presentation from this topic meeting: [Transforming Washington St: A community discussion document](#)

## Community Preservation: Comments on Proposals

Alice Ingerson  
Community Preservation Committee Program Manager  
Newton City Hall  
1000 Commonwealth Avenue  
Newton, MA 02459

March, 2016

Dear Alice:

Below are our comments on the two proposals before the Community Preservation Committee. Thank you so much for your efforts and for the opportunity to comment.

### ***Project: Nathaniel Allen Homestead—Phase II (also known as the Allen House)***

The League of Women Voters of Newton (LWVN) has reviewed this proposal and makes the following observations:

- This application is complete, thorough, and provides good support for the project.
- It appears to fit well within the CPA law, and also fulfills the basic goals set forth by the Newton CPA.
- Allen House and the described use are specifically noted in the 2007 Comprehensive Plan. It aligns well, establishing a cultural/performance space in a Village Center and supporting City economic development goals.
- NCA and NAH have secured additional help from the Junior League, which wants to use the house as a show house for its 2016 fundraiser.
- A full business plan is presented, created by working with SOAR55.
- Significant outside funding has been secured, and NCA has a plan for the remainder.
- NCA is planning to hire a private project manager for this phase of the work.
- The LWVN concerns in 2013 were the allocation of funds for an essentially private building. NCA is addressing this by applying for an historic restriction and with plans for extensive public access via performances and rentals.

LWVN reviewers did express the following concerns.

- The total CPA request (\$2 m) is large and may place limits upon other City opportunities.
- The strong team of partner organizations no longer includes the commitment of a tenant who will cover some portion of the ongoing expenses in the form of rent.
- Given the size of the city's contribution to this project, LWVN would like the proponents to consider making space available for the community. For example, a future Area Council will need a place to meet, and this location would be ideal. Rental fees would need to be waived for such a purpose, however.
- In 2013, our reviewers worried about the adequacy of 26 parking spaces, given that the Allen House plan is for performances and other events, and suggested that NCA look into sharing spaces in nearby lots. This continues to be a concern today.

**In evaluating all these points, LWVN recommends support of this application.**

### ***Project: Crescent Street—Affordable Housing and Community Park (Site Assessment)***

*CPC Comments, continued*

This proposal falls within two categories of eligibility for use of CPA monies: Recreation Land and Community Housing. It also fits well into the City's Recreation and Open Place Plan Update--2013-2019. Sec. 1, Plan Summary. Additionally it is consistent with the Newton Comprehensive Plan, Sec. 7: Open Space and Recreation, Sec. 3: Land Use, and Sec. 5: Housing.

LWVN reviewers note the following:

- A strength of this proposal is that this is a joint, interdepartmental effort between three city departments: Planning, Public Buildings, and Parks and Recreation.
- Alex Varcare and Josh Morse are to manage the project. Their competency is reassuring.
- Thinking forward to get site and environmental information before construction is the best professional process.
- There are three community contacts listed, two of them local residents who were very involved with the Robinhood Park proposal, and Beth Wilkinson of the Newton Conservators. There are no optional letters of support, but the three community contacts are likely representative of neighborhood and community interests.
- While the application is complete, thorough, well written and clear, LWVN readers were confused by p. 3, as it seems only to mention the market-rate housing, not the four units of affordable housing. Is this an oversight?

**LWVN strongly recommends support of this proposal.**

Many thanks, again, for your time and effort.

Sincerely,

Susan Flicop  
President, LWVN

**League of Women Voters of Newton**

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## **Polling Locations: Letter to the Election Commission**

Chairman John P. McDermott  
Members of the Election Commission  
1000 Commonwealth Avenue  
Newton, MA 02459

March 17, 2016

Dear Chairman McDermott and members of the Election Commission:

Polling locations are something the League of Women Voters cares deeply about -- anything that affects the ease or convenience of voting is high on our list of concerns.

We applaud the Election Commission for their valuable work to evaluate the effectiveness of our current polling locations, and heartily endorse the commonsense criteria they selected for that evaluation. However, we believe it would be helpful to have a public conversation and exchange of ideas on the general topic of polling locations before any change is made. In particular, we are interested in gathering public input on the desirability of keeping polling locations in schools.

Of Newton's 32 polling locations, 16 are currently in schools. There are a number of drawbacks to using schools as polling locations in general, but there are also a number of important benefits. We would like to see a broad community discussion about these pros and cons to give the Election Commission a better understanding of community sentiment to use as a baseline in making any future recommendations or decisions.

Issues raised about polling in schools include: the safety of students; concerns about parking and traffic; concerns about the suitability of the space that is available; and conflicts between school activities and election activities on voting days.

Some of the benefits of the longstanding American tradition of locating polling places in schools are:

- Our system of neighborhood schools means that using schools can keep voting within easy walking distance of more voters, potentially encouraging voting as well as decreasing traffic and parking issues.
- Voting in school buildings reinforces the idea that these facilities are a valuable community resource, paid for by all the taxpayers in the city.
- Voting at community schools brings people of all ages back into the school buildings and reinforces their status as stakeholders in the education of today's children.
- Children who see voters coming and going, as well as candidates' supporters holding signs, are watching democracy in action and see role models for their own future activities.

The LWVN thinks an open public discussion around these issues would be of real benefit to the city. Given our interest in the topic, we would be willing to organize such a forum along with the willing cooperation of the Election Commission and other community organizations.

Sincerely,

Susan Flicop  
President, LWVN