January 19, 2022

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller
City Council President Susan Albright
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

Dear Mayor Fuller and Council President Albright,

The League of Women Voters of Newton writes to urge you to convene and fund a consultant to work with a Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee, in FY 23, in order to review and update the City’s Comprehensive Plan.

Newton’s current Comprehensive Plan was adopted on November 19, 2007, more than 14 years ago. The process for reviewing and approving the plan that was adopted in 2007 took five years. One change has occurred since the initial drafting of the plan. In 2011, the Mixed-Use Amendment was added. Despite this amendment, the time to complete a review and update could mean that it will be 2027 before Newton has an updated comprehensive plan - 20 years since the last approved plan.

Many things have changed globally, nationally and locally, since 2007. Climate change concerns, advancements in technology, changes to methods of transportation, are just a few of those changes. In order for the city of Newton to better plan for its future, and for its Comprehensive Plan to be relevant and effective, it is crucial that we have a Comprehensive Plan that is current.

The Comprehensive Plan itself specifically states that best practice is to review and update comprehensive plans every five years (see the section from page 11-3 of the Comprehensive Plan quoted below). It is more than time for the City to update its Comprehensive Plan.

Sincerely,

Marcia Johnson

Marcia Johnson
President, League of Women Voters
“Keeping current. It is often noted by planners that the half-life of a comprehensive plan is on the order of five years. Comprehensive plan updates each five years are mandated by many states, and has been proposed by those seeking reform of Massachusetts planning law. The legislation for the Cape Cod Commission’s highly effective Regional Policy Plan requires five-year updates, which each time have produced thoughtful and consequential dialog and revision building on experience. The American Planning Association’s landmark model for state planning legislation calls for a five-year major review of comprehensive plans and their complete replacement after ten years. Five year updates are required for two of the foundation documents for the CPAC Plan. Five year updating of the Consolidated Plan for housing and community development is both required and funded by HUD. Five-year updating of the Recreation and Open Space Plan is a requirement for grant eligibility through MA EOE. Considering the gestation period for the CPAC Plan, arguably the City is overdue to begin work on an update even before the original is complete. Implementation should reflect the reality that to be relevant and effective comprehensive plans need to be current. Updating elements serially, land use this year, transportation next year, is sometimes used as a way of addressing that concern, and sometimes is appropriate. However, doing so comes at the expense of real comprehensiveness, the essence of which is the ability to act on, for example, land use and transportation conjunctively. THE APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION SHOULD REFLECT THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING THE PLAN CURRENT, PERHAPS BEST WITH A FIVE-YEAR CYCLE FOR MAJOR UPDATING, BUT ACCOMMODATING PARTIAL UPDATING WHENEVER SUGGESTED BY CIRCUMSTANCES INCLUDING LEARNING FROM EARLIER IMPLEMENTATION EFFORTS. A concrete way of encouraging implementation of that approach in the absence of state legislation obliging periodic updates would be for the action of the Board of Aldermen in adopting this Plan to prominently call for a cycle of Plan review and revision, perhaps even including a “sunset date” for the Plan in its then-present form.