

Bike Newton Candidate Questionnaire

Housing, transportation and climate are inextricably linked together to create healthier, people-centered cities, yet these issues are often addressed separately. This Candidate Questionnaire was adapted from the Vision Zero Coalition for Mayoral and City Council candidates in Boston, Somerville and Cambridge. Bike Newton would like to understand your approach to these interconnected issues. Survey responses will be posted onto the Bike Newton website, and a link will be shared with our email distribution list of over 1750 people.

Name: Meryl Kessler

Question 1)

Improved bicycle infrastructure will increase bicycle use and increase safety. A proposal for a Bicycle Network Plan was developed in 2012, but Newton has yet to adopt or implement most of its recommendations. If you believe Newton should have an official Bicycle Plan, please list the concrete steps you will take to create one or summarize why you do not think a plan is necessary.

Newton needs an official Bicycle Plan to increase bike safety, promote bicycle ridership, decrease auto congestion and pollution, and meet our climate action goals with the development of a connected and continuous bike network. I was heartened to recently learn that the mayor has allocated \$80,000 of ARPA funding for an initial investment in a Bicycle/Pedestrian Master Plan. This is a great first step, but more needs to be done. A Bike Plan should integrate input from stakeholders and neighborhoods throughout the City, provide for contiguous multimodal access to popular Newton destinations (especially schools), and ensure that access to safe bike infrastructure is equitably distributed citywide. If elected, I will be a strong voice for such a plan on the Council and will work closely with my most bike-centric colleagues, Alicia Bowman and Andreae Downs, to make a Newton Bicycle Plan a reality as soon as possible.

Question 2)

Newton's Open Space and Recreation Plan, Climate Action Plan, Comprehensive Plan, I, Complete Streets Policy, Newton 2040: A Transportation Strategy, the Transportation Advisory Group, Safe Routes to Schools and Bike Newton all recommend providing mobility options that reduce dependency on motor vehicles. Do you agree with this recommendation? If so, please identify steps you would take to help make it happen, including criteria.

I wholeheartedly agree with providing more mobility options for Newton residents to reduce our dependency on motor vehicles. A thoughtfully conceived Newton Bicycle/Pedestrian Plan, as discussed above, will synthesize these many prior studies and create an action plan for implementation that should include the following community goals: traffic safety for both car and non-car travel, equitable impact on different neighborhoods, reduction in vehicle miles travelled, congestion reduction, public health, improved mobility for non-drivers, energy conservation, and emissions reductions.

Question 3)

Improving bicycle and pedestrian safety may involve streamlining roadways for automobiles so that bicyclists will be able to safely negotiate roads and intersections. Would you support compromises for bicycle infrastructure, even if that results in lower speeds for cars, reduced parking in certain locations and reduced auto lanes in some places? Please explain your rationale for this response.

Complete Streets and Slow Streets philosophies dare to imagine streets shared equitably and safely by all users – motorized, bicycle, and pedestrian. We in Newton need to embrace this fully and take all necessary steps to put it into action. As a regular walker and a recreational cyclist myself and with active cycling family members, I worry about distracted, speeding, and harried drivers and support all efforts to protect cyclists and pedestrians. All too often I regularly hear about bicycle injuries and deaths caused by motor vehicles that are wholly avoidable. I have been fortunate to travel to other cities in the US and around the world and, having seen their infrastructure dedicated to safe and complete streets, conclude that we simply are not trying hard enough in Newton to make our streets safe for all users.

Question 4)

Would you support multi-modal access to popular destinations within Newton, such as village centers, schools, shopping, transit and municipal buildings? If so, please suggest ways Newton could fund the implementation of contiguous infrastructure to access our city via walking, cycling, scooters, cars, and the like.

Multi-modal access should definitely be provided to all of our Village centers, our schools and municipal buildings, and transit. Contiguous infrastructure is key for effective utilization. Too many of our bike lanes are truly bike lanes to nowhere.

One example of contiguous infrastructure that could be implemented immediately with very little cost is the creation of the Commonwealth Bikeway, reimagining and repurposing six contiguous miles of the Commonwealth Avenue Carriageway for the 21st century with nothing more than street signs and road paint. The City has moved too slowly in my view to implement this highly cost-effective and visible opportunity to provide a safe and protected cycling opportunity across the entire city. Future network development should emphasize contiguous north-south connections with this primary east-west bikeable spine.

As mentioned above, the mayor has committed \$80,000 of ARPA funding to a Bicycle/Pedestrian Plan. Additional funding from the City's \$63 million of ARPA funding should also be used to fund initial improvements to provide safe and contiguous multi-modal access to high traffic community nodes.

Question 5)

In 2020 the Newton City Council unanimously passed a Vision Zero resolution which states that our city goal is to have no roadway deaths or injuries. Would you support this as a newly elected councilor, or continue to support if re-elected?

I fully support not just the Vision Zero resolution but more importantly its actual implementation to ensure that we truly have no roadway deaths or injuries in Newton.

Question 6)

Children in Newton walk, bike, take the bus, or use another form of non-auto transport such as scooters in order to get to school. Do you think the current balance is correct? If not, what do you think should be changed?

Although many children do walk, bike, or take the bus to school, large numbers of children still arrive at school in cars. We have work to do not only to encourage students to use non-auto methods for getting to/from school, but also to provide safe routes for them to walk and bike and travel by wheelchair. I recently participated in Safe Routes to School Day which laid bare the absence of safe routes in so many critical places. (In fact, later that day, I submitted a 311 request for a sidewalk around a blind curve on the route to the Peirce School.) We need to create a non-auto culture with school-based walking groups, biking groups, and bike training in primary grades ([like in Denmark!](#)). We need to support a non-auto culture with appropriate education and infrastructure. Again, we must try harder.

Question 7)

Automated enforcement (using cameras) has reduced speeding and improved safety in states where it has been implemented, but there are privacy and constitutional concerns, as well as fears of inequitable ticketing and punishment. If the Commonwealth of MA passes automated enforcement legislation that allows cities and towns to opt-in to a speed or red light camera program, would you support doing this in Newton?

The advantages of automated enforcement with traffic cameras need to be balanced against privacy and constitutional and other legal/administrative concerns. Speeding, texting, and distracted driving are all too prevalent throughout the Garden City—and all of these behaviors pose a danger to pedestrians, cyclists, and other drivers. There is lax enforcement of our citywide (but generally unobserved) 25 mph speed limit, and the City's historical resistance to traffic calming measures like speed bumps and speed tables has meant that there are few physical impediments to speeding. Newton should be known as the City that takes its speed limit seriously. The City needs to take a multi-pronged approach to the problem of speeding that should include better enforcement of the speed limit as well as greater utilization of traffic calming measures. Automated enforcement with traffic cameras could be part of this mix, but care needs to be taken to use best practices for identifying locations for installation; equitable enforcement; public education; data collection and security; and so forth. Revenues from speeding fines could be allocated directly to fund bicycle infrastructure improvements.