

U-CHAN (UNITING CITIZENS FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN NEWTON
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April 13, 2020

Deborah Crossley, Chair
Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP)
Newton City Hall
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton, MA 02459

RE: FY 21-25 Consolidated Plan and FY 21 Annual Action Plan

Dear Ms. Crossley,

It is my understanding that ZAP will be asked to ratify the FY 21-25 Consolidated Plan and the FY'21 Annual Action Plan (the "Plans"). By and large this will be a perfunctory exercise given the need to submit the Plans to HUD by May 15th. Despite that U-CHAN would like to highlight several shortcomings in the Plans. We are of the opinion that even though the expenditure of these funds are within the total prerogative of the Mayor, you the city council should be concerned about the housing and human services needed by the citizens of Newton, especially the most needy.

1. FY 21-25 Consolidated Plan
 - a. Citizen Participation Plan –

- i. In recognition of past failures to include the voices of low-income residents of affordable housing, we commissioned a survey of low-income residents in Several subsidized housing projects, public housing Units and units created by inclusionary housing in Newton. Results of that survey are included in the survey results and letter to the Planning Department transmitting those results. – *the results of those survey are not included in the plan.*
- ii. Public notices are to be sent to TAB; it is not clear that TAB will be published long term – *alternate notice method should be included.*
- iii. Access to drafts only online – *at least five copies should be placed in Newton library with at least 3 available for limited circulation.*

b. Needs Assessment

i. Human Services

The attached survey mentioned above, identified two areas of need most identified by the low-income residents were housing supports and services related to increasing their economic status such as help with preparing cover letters, Resumes and interviewing skills i.e. pathways to economic mobility – *this need was not included in Newton's Strategic Plan section of the plan.*

ii. Housing

The assessment identifies those individuals and families who are most housing cost burdened are those with incomes below 50% of the AMI – *Newton does not prioritize its use of federal funds for this population.*

FY'21 Annual Action Plan

1. Citizens Participation Plan

a. The Newton Housing Partnership (NHP) is mentioned as playing a central role in review of CDBG, HOME funds and activities – *with respect to housing proposal, the NHP's advice should be sought earlier in the vetting process.*

b. Written communications to Planning Department will receive written response within 15 days – *that process in not being followed.*

2. The City Council is the final citizen policy board to review and take action – *the timing of the submission is too late for meaningful input; they should receive interim reports so they are in a position to make knowledgeable decisions in a short period of time.*

3. Human Services

The plan shows the ESG funds are awarded to many sub recipients but not broken down by community – *quarterly reports from sub recipients should include data by community including race and ethnicity and amount Awarded or what purpose.*

4. HOME Funding for Housing

No plans shown for use of funds in Newton – *HOME funds should be used for tenant based rental assistance program with economic mobility funding.*

In closing, U-CHAN believes that the City Council has among its numerous responsibilities; the care of its citizens, especially the most vulnerable, even if that care is being paid for by federal funds as opposed to Newton taxes.

Therefore, we recommend that the City Council request the Planning Department make a detailed and comprehensive report to ZAP

(housing) and the Programs and Services committee (human services) over the next several months to address the shortcomings above and others. It is possible for the Plans to be changes by a process called “Substantial Change”; if it is determined that changes should be made to better serve the needs of Newton’s low and moderate income citizens.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. They are especially important now in light of the devastation that is being inflicted upon the low income population by COVID 19.

In the recently passed CARES ACT congress appropriated additional CDBG and ESG funds specifically to assist persons whose housing is impacted as a consequence of the virus. The City of Newton will receive additional funds at the same rate it currently receives for those funds.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Josephine McNeil
Co-chairperson of U-CHAN

Cc: Mayor Ruthanne Fuller
Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Development
Amanda Berman, Manager of the Housing Department
Peter Doeringer, Chair of the Planning and Development Board