



Programs & Services Committee Report

City of Newton In City Council

Wednesday, January 7, 2026

Present: Councilors Krintzman (Chair), Malakie, Farrell, Charm, Micley, Oliver, Bixby, Baker

Also Present: Councilors Wright and Gordon

City Staff: Chief Community Service Officer John Rice, Assistant City Solicitor Jonah Temple, Director of Cultural Development Paula Ganon, Director of Economic Development Lauren Berman, Deputy Director of Economic Development Cheryl Lappin, Mayor's Chief of Staff Dana Hanson

All agendas and reports, both past and present can be found at the following link:
<https://www.newtonma.gov/government/city-clerk/city-council/council-standing-committees/programs-services-committee>

For more information regarding this meeting, a video recording can be found at the following link: <https://youtu.be/dgKfeSFxWtc?si=ykeUfvkqgRbazMBf>

#32-26 Reorganization plan to create a new Arts and Culture Department

HIS HONOR THE MAYOR submitting, pursuant to Section 6-2 of the City Charter, a reorganization plan for the establishment of a new Arts and Culture Department. The proposed reorganization includes ordinance amendments to Chapter 2 to insert a new Article VII, beginning at Section 2-249, to create the department and set forth its functions and structure, as well as amendments throughout the Revised Ordinances to rename the Department of Parks, Recreation and Culture to the Department of Parks and Recreation

Action: **Programs & Services Approved 7-0 (Councilor Baker not voting)**

Note: The Chair opened the meeting by explaining that, under the City Charter, the reorganization to establish a new Arts & Culture Department requires the Programs & Services Committee to allow public comment on the proposal.

Chief Community Service Officer (CSSO) John Rice emphasized the value of creating a standalone Arts & Culture Department to better support cultural organizations, local businesses, and community engagement. He noted that discussions with cultural groups during Mayor Laredo's time as Council President informed the administration's decision to establish the department early in Laredo's mayoral term. The department aligns with Mayor

Laredo's priorities of fostering a vibrant community and supporting local businesses, with successful models found in cities like Boston, Cambridge, and Lowell.

Meryl Kessler, as Mayor Laredo's appointee for Director of Arts & Culture, spoke about her experience with community groups in the city such as Newton Community Pride/Spark Newton. Ms. Kessler shared with the committee a memo of priorities for a new Arts & Culture Department. The priorities were organized into six categories: to support, promote, and leverage our deep bench of local talent; develop a local, creative economy; build organizational capacity; broaden range of programs offered; identify, explore and pursue additional funding sources for arts and culture; and celebrate Newton's arts and cultural heritage. Ms. Kessler listed several ways in which the City can support and encourage cultural engagement through concerted efforts. Ms. Kessler also mentioned coordination with members of the Economic Development Commission to create synergy between Newton's cultural and economic potential.

The Chair opened the meeting to public comment at this time on the creation of an Arts & Culture Department.

Gloria Garvis, Chair of Spark Newton, supported the creation of an Arts & Culture Department. Ms. Garvis spoke about the long history of an independent culture department in Newton that existed for several decades before cultural responsibilities were placed in the Parks and Rec Department during Mayor Fuller's administration. Ms. Garvis also voiced her support for Ms. Kessler's nomination as Director.

Anne Marie Stein, Co-Chair of the Newton Cultural Council, spoke about integrating and sharing resources more effectively for art-based and cultural programming. Ms. Stein supported Ms. Kessler's nomination and expressed excitement that Newton's strong cultural environment could receive increased support.

Julie Fox, member of the Newton Cultural Council, spoke about difficulties that artists face when looking for information on grants and connecting with other members in the artistic community. Ms. Fox was in favor of the reorganization and said she believed it would alleviate many issues facing Newton's artists.

Christopher Pitts, member of the Waban Area Council, and was in support of more focused support of the arts in Newton and suggested looking at other municipalities for examples of how to generate new streams of revenue.

Sachiko Isihara, Executive Director of Suzuki School of Newton, spoke about integration of economic development between city villages and was in support of creating an Arts & Culture Department and Ms. Kessler's nomination.

Joan Belle Isle, President of the Newton Council on Aging, talked about loneliness and isolation facing Newton's aging population. Ms. Isle was in support of efforts that would develop more community events which would be easily accessible for older residents.

President Oliver motioned to end the public comment which passed by a voice vote.

A councilor asked about funding and staffing for the proposed department. CSSO Rice stated that the Director position would be the only cost through the City's FY2027 budget discussions, ending July 1, at a cost of \$65,000. He added that the department is expected to include one to three employees.

In response to a question about funding, CSSO Rice said the funds would come from Parks & Recreation and would be requested by the Administration upon approval of the Arts & Culture Department. The \$65,000 would cover Ms. Kessler's salary through July 1.

A councilor expressed interest in developing a 501(c)(3) organization for arts and culture in Newton and raised questions about compliance requirements in funding agreements with cultural organizations. The councilor also inquired about the amount of City funding, including Community Preservation Act funds, allocated to local arts and cultural groups in recent years, and emphasized the importance of arts education in Newton's schools as a key component of an Arts & Culture priority list.

A Councilor spoke about the support of creating a new department, such as utilizing grant funding, non-profit partnerships, and creation of metrics to measure economic impact of cultural programming. Ms. Kessler replied that her efforts will result in measurable outcomes and Arts & Culture would be conscious of the economic reality of the department budget.

A Councilor asked Deputy City Solicitor Jonah Temple about the proposed ordinance language to create the Arts & Culture Department and its ability to accept gifts and donations. Attorney Temple replied that the City can accept gifts and the proposed ordinance language should satisfy the new department's functions but would investigate clarifying the ability to accept gifts at the departmental level.

A Councilor highlighted successful cultural investments in Newton and stressed that the new department should build on past investments and pursue new funding with a positive return for the City. CSSO Rice cited Friday night events in Newton Highlands that tripled business at a nearby pizza restaurant and noted that pairing economic development resources with an Arts & Culture Department could better connect local programming to economic growth.

A Councilor asked about receiving an update on potential funding sources for an Arts & Culture Department before the City's budget season begins. CSSO Rice responded that the Laredo Administration could examine the financial plans of the department after its official creation and transfer of funds from Parks & Rec.

President Oliver motioned to approve which passed 7-0 with Councilor Baker not voting.

#25-26 Appointment of Meryl Kessler as the Director of Newton's Arts and Culture Department

HIS HONOR THE MAYOR appointing Meryl Kessler as the Director of Newton's Arts and Culture Department pursuant to Section 3-3 of the City Charter. (30 Days: 01/31/2026)

Action: **Programs & Services Approved 8-0**

Note: Appointee Meryl Kessler talked about her pedigree in arts and cultural programming and experience in organizing community events.

Councilors offered Ms. Kessler more opportunity to discuss her appointment, but she declined and referred back to her statements from the previous agenda item to express herself on the topic.

President Oliver motioned to approve which passed unanimously.

The Chair asked Committee members on a preference in planning future Programs & Services meetings as it relates to in-person, hybrid, or virtual modes of participation. The Committee agreed to try and maintain a physical presence for Committee meetings moving forward with the Chair planning to review the topic at a future date.

The committee adjourned at 8:10pm.

**Respectfully Submitted,
Josh Krintzman, Chair**

PRIORITIES: CITY OF NEWTON ARTS & CULTURE DEPARTMENT

Mission: Working with diverse stakeholders, the City of Newton Arts & Culture Department will drive the strategic development of a vibrant arts & culture sector that celebrates creative expression, builds community, showcases local artists and arts groups, and supports economic development.

Support, promote, and leverage our deep bench of local talent:

- Develop better **regular channels of communication** between the City and local arts orgs, businesses, and artists and creatives
- Organize an **Annual Arts Summit** to bring together City, arts & culture nonprofits, and creatives to strategize, collaborate, and problem-solve
- Expand City communications about Newton's many cultural assets, including:
 - Launch **dedicated arts & culture website**
 - Create **interactive map of cultural assets**
 - Redesign **arts & culture calendar**
 - Publish **listing of arts & culture organizations and businesses**
 - Provide **resources for arts & culture organizations and creatives**
 - Promote community arts & culture programs/events in **newsletters/social media**
 - Create **arts & culture kiosks**

Develop a local creative economy: Decades-long research shows that arts and culture create jobs, produce tax revenue, and stimulate business activity. A 2021 Heller School report concluded that the arts and culture sector contributes over \$19 million to the Newton economy. Still there is much more that we can do to leverage arts and culture to support the local economy and support and attract local business, and I have already started brainstorming and coordinating ideas with Lauren Berman and Cheryl Lappin in Economic Development:

- **Art works for Newton!**
- Use arts and culture to get "feet on the street" in our village centers:
 - Rotating village music nights with live painting and late night shopping
 - Dancing in the parks (samba, line dancing classes)
 - Pop up arts market
 - Arts or sculpture walks
 - Murals
- Arts events that partner with local restaurants and businesses
- Placemaking and branding: Artist-created banners and signage for our village centers

Build organizational capacity: Put in place *structures and processes* to improve efficiency, increase reach, and infuse arts & culture into various city departments:

- Establish **Public Art Commission** to commission and accept artwork citywide (work with Law Department to create legal framework, launch, and manage as staff liaison)
- Apply to become an **MCC-designated Cultural District** (initiate and administer program)
- Review and possibly expand the role of the **Newton Cultural Council** (manage as staff liaison)
- Work across City Departments (e.g., the Library, Historic Newton, NPS, Cemetery) to maximize **impact and avoid duplication of efforts**

PRIORITIES: CITY OF NEWTON ARTS & CULTURE DEPARTMENT

- Review the City's **fee, insurance, and rental requirements** to remove obstacles to using City spaces
- Inventory/publicize **performance and display space** throughout City
- Develop **standard guidelines for partnering** with local groups

Broaden range of programs offered: To meet people where they are—both figuratively and literally—we need to offer a range of programming that embraces a range of disciplines in a range of venues, especially our public spaces. Some ideas for new programming (in addition to existing programs like Artful Pianos, Performances in the Park, and Festival of the Arts):

- Poet Laureate program that includes poetry workshops, poetry slams, poetry in concrete (and perhaps partnering with Spark Newton on Haiku Newton)
- Artist-in-residence program (possibly including youth workshops or summer program)
- Bus Stop Art
- Guest curator series
- Arts speaker series
- Sculpture and arts walks/mural program

Identify, explore, and pursue additional funding sources for arts and culture:

- State and federal grants
- MAPC technical grants
- Percent for Art Program
- c3 fundraising arm

Celebrate Newton's arts and cultural heritage:

- Katherine Lee Bates, America
- Samuel Francis Smith, My Country 'Tis of Thee (First Baptist Church)
- John Krasinski
- BJ Novak
- Matt Leblanc
- Jack Lemmon
- Aiofe O'Donovan
- Nancy Schon
- Tracy K Smith
- Roger Kellaway