



October 10, 2023

Dear Councilors Bowman, Danberg, Crossley, Downs, and Ryan and Candidates Bixby, Gaynor, and Sweet:

Thank you for your letter dated October 10, 2023, which was e-mailed to the four Neighborhood Area Councils, among others, this morning at 8:02am. We are responding promptly to your letter and the concerns you expressed therein about the upcoming candidates' debates sponsored by the four Neighborhood Area Councils.

As you are aware, the Open Meeting Law prohibits us from convening Area Council meetings without 48 hours advance publication. Therefore, this letter is sent on behalf of the working group for Area Council debates and the undersigned individual Presidents / Vice President of the four Area Councils.

The numbered paragraphs below correspond to those in your letter.

1. You have highlighted political contributions by Area Councilors and have asked that they disassociate themselves from the debates.

The four Area Councils have conducted candidates' debates with great success over the past twelve years. We believe that the integrity of the upcoming debates is fully assured by procedures that are in place, as described below.

Area Councilors who work on organizing the candidates' debates are involved in an administrative and logistical function. Their work consists of securing a venue, engaging technicians to livestream and record the debates, publicizing to members of the community that they have the opportunity to submit questions, confirming availability of candidates to participate in the debates, inviting candidates to submit introductory statements, and assembling an extensive list of potential questions to provide to the debate moderator based upon questions that are submitted by the public as well as questions that arise in public discussions (such as at public hearings, discourse among City Councilors and members of the public, as well as those that are raised at Area Council meetings, etc.).

Importantly, all questions used in the debates are selected exclusively by the debate moderator. Whether the moderator elects to use a question from that list, use a modified form of a question from that list, or create his/her own question is entirely within the moderator's discretion. None of the candidates nor any members of the Area Councils—nor anyone else—know in advance what questions will be asked of the candidates.

In our view, this “firewall” procedure ensures that the questioning is handled with impartiality and according to applicable ethical standards.

2. You requested that seat selection and the order of questioning be determined by a flip of a coin or other random process.

Historically, seats have been selected by the candidates themselves when they come up to the dais. On occasion, candidates have been asked to exchange seats, but *only* if their height or girth is such that they would obscure the livestream audience's view of the other candidates given camera angles. In the past, no candidate has declined such a request. We hope that the candidates will understand and cooperate again this year with any technical issues relating to their seat selections.

Historically, the moderator has decided which candidate will receive the first question, with other candidates given the opportunity to respond to the same question thereafter. The moderator rotates mechanically among the candidates, giving each a sequential chance to be the first to respond to a question followed by the other candidates' responses.

Your suggestion of using a random process for determining the candidate who will receive the very first question is a good one. Because a coin flip is not a practical option for debates involving three candidates, dice will be used to determine who gets the very first question. The moderator will continue to use the above-described practice of a mechanical rotation among the candidates thereafter.

3. You have asked for confirmation that introductory statements that comply with the 45-word limit will be read as submitted by the candidates.

This is the procedure that will be followed. Please be aware that the recitation of these statements will be prefaced by an announcement that the statements were provided by the candidates and have not been fact checked.

4. You have asked that all questions be asked in a neutral manner and that all candidates receive an equal opportunity to provide an answer to each question.

As you know, Marjorie Arons-Barron has been the moderator for Area Council debates for years. We are fortunate that she has once again agreed to moderate all of the debates this year. Ms. Arons-Barron is a renowned journalist, a 3-time New England Emmy Award winner, former Editorial Director of WCVB-TV, Channel 5 Boston (for 20 years) and was the professional producer of many of the station's political candidate forums. In addition to her 3 Emmys, she is a 5-time recipient of the National Award for Excellence in Television Editorials from the National Broadcast Editorial Association. In 2019, she was inducted into the Massachusetts Broadcaster's Hall of Fame. She has also been a resident of Newton for over 20 years. We rely on Ms. Arons-Barron's reputation for integrity and professionalism, including her ability to frame questions in a neutral and objective way. We are satisfied that she will do an excellent job as moderator.

The objective will be for all candidates to have an equal opportunity to answer each question. Achieving this goal, of course, will depend in part on the candidates complying with the ground rules concerning the time limits on their responses.

5. You have asked that we clarify the role of the moderator.

The moderator will announce the ground rules and, with the candidates' cooperation, attempt to enforce them, as well as ask the questions.

We are fortunate to have a moderator who, in addition to being a consummate professional, is familiar with Newton and the issues confronting the City. While she may not be able to fact check the responses in live time, it is in her discretion to ask follow-up questions as she deems fit to better clarify the candidates' positions for the benefit of the listening public.

6. You have asked us to clarify the process for timing candidates' responses, including requesting that there be verbal announcements when the candidates' response time has elapsed.

In the preliminary debates, a yellow/red card system was used to give candidates a 15-second warning and notify them when their time had expired. Your suggestion of adding a verbal announcement of the 15-second warning and the expiration of time is a good one. We will add it to the process.

7. You pointed out that there was a technical glitch with the recording of one candidate's closing statement during the preliminary debates. You also suggested that we should have edited out the closing statements of all candidates because of that unfortunate glitch.

The Area Councils engaged an outside vendor to livestream and record the preliminary debates in order to provide Newton residents remote access to the proceedings. There was an unanticipated and very unfortunate electronic failure that occurred toward the end of one of the preliminary election debates. We apologize to Candidate Bixby for the electronic failure that occurred. However, to maintain objectivity, the Area Councils do not edit debate content in any way.

Your letter also raises a question about Ms. Getz continuing her affiliation as the elected President of the Waban Area Council while running for the position of City Councilor. Ms. Getz has recused herself from, and has had no role, in the preparation of the upcoming debates. We see no conflict in the fact that she serves as President of the Waban Area Council while she is a candidate for election to the City Council.

Last, your letter lists campaign contributions made by members of the Area Councils and expresses your concerns about their potential impact on the objectivity and fairness of the upcoming debates. As explained above, the role of Area Councilors in the preparation for the debates is purely administrative and logistical. There is an absolute “firewall” between Area Councilors and the moderator’s selection of the questions that are asked at the debates.

We hope this letter responds to and allays your concerns. We look forward to your participation in the upcoming debates which the Area Councils have successfully sponsored for many years and have proven to be of extraordinary value to the community.

Because this letter sets forth details about the upcoming debates, as a matter of transparency and fairness we are providing a copy of this letter to all participants in the general election debates.

Respectfully submitted,

Four Area Councils Debate Working Group Members:

Jennifer Bentley
Barbara Darnell
Jeremy Freudberg
Carolyn Jacoby Gabbay
Chris Pitts
Harvey Young

Four Area Councils Leadership:

Jeremy Freudberg, Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council President
Jennifer Bentley, Newtonville Neighborhood Area Council President
Jeff Riklin, Upper Falls Neighborhood Area Council President
Megan Meirav, Waban Neighborhood Area Council Vice President

Letter to: Councilors Bowman, Danberg, Crossley, Downs, and Ryan and Candidates Bixby, Gaynor, and Sweet

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cc: Randall Block
Stephen Farrell
Rena Getz
Lisa Gordon
Alan Lobovits
David Micley
City Council
Newton Highlands Neighborhood Area Council
Newtonville Neighborhood Area Council
Upper Falls Neighborhood Area Council
Waban Neighborhood Area Council
Jonah Temple
Carol Moore