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Lakshmi Balachandra

Sustainability Questions for the 2021 Needham Select Board Candidates

1- Although climate change is a global issue, it has very real local impacts (e.g.: severe weather, air quality, and health). Where does our climate crisis rank for you on our Town's priorities? Please share your personal and and/or professional experiences working in this area, if any.

Extremely high. I was an Environmental Studies major as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago and wrote an undergraduate thesis on the Economics of Recycling for Non-Profit Organizations. My first job was with a recycling consulting firm (Corporate Conservation) that helped businesses implement recycling processes within office buildings and companies in the Boston area. I am committed to reducing my own carbon footprint and implementing energy efficiency anywhere I can in my daily life. I put my name on the waitlist to get a Prius – which I still drive. I believe as a community there is so much more we can do to expand the use of renewable energy sources and decreasing our carbon footprint wherever possible.

2- What specific measures will you advocate for in your first year on the Select Board, to continue Needham's great achievements like the [12-acre solar array on our capped landfill](#) and our [Green Community designation?](#)

I don't have specific measures in mind, as I'm learning the legislative process, but I would advocate for many more ways that the town could both pursue green energy solutions as well as mandate/require new construction to have renewable energy, low carbon footprint considerations and recyclable material sourcing – in particular for government buildings. For example, what 'green' requirements were put into place when building the new police station and fire houses in town? These are two town buildings that should be outfitted with the only green materials, considering the tax dollars being used to build these structures.

3- The Commonwealth has adopted aggressive plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Next Generation Climate Bill currently under debate on Beacon Hill ([S.13 - AN ACT CREATING A NEXT-GENERATION ROADMAP FOR MASSACHUSETTS CLIMATE POLICY](#)) would codify a roadmap to achieve net zero emissions by 2050, with 2030 and 2040 targets along the way. As a Select Board member, would you interpret this law as conferring any responsibility on our Town? How will you help Needham rise to meet the responsibility you see, if any?

Absolutely. There are many ways towns spend money and “emit” pollutants, like through town vehicles and the town buildings. We could perform an audit of town owned and/or operated buildings and fleets to review how we fare on the net zero considerations and then seek the requisite grants/support from the state to meet the new bill's considerations.

4- A number of our peer Towns (including Wellesley, Weston, Lexington, Newton, and Concord) have prioritized sustainability, developing Climate Action Plans and applying resources (committees, dedicated staff) focused on it. These communities understand that savings can help offset costs.



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A: Do you think the time has come for Needham to implement a similar structure to prioritize sustainability? If yes, what do you envision? Paid staff dedicated to sustainability? A standing Town committee?

100%. I have been working with Equal Justice in Needham (EJN) to obtain, review, and report on our public safety practices, and the number 1 lesson from our intense efforts in obtaining the data (we had to pay \$1100 to obtain public reports!) is the dire need for oversight. There is clear racial bias from our local police, and the operations are outdated and obviously lack transparency. Thus, EJN will be recommending a citizen's committee/commission on public safety to both ensure data is collected as well as reported and what modernization practices are being put in place. In a similar fashion, I would *strongly* advocate that a committee could be established to first take an audit of green metrics we could track and then implement to manage/review. We could seek town funding to support an administrator to oversee the management of these efforts. The benefits would far outweigh the costs, and there may be state and/or federal funding to financially support these expenses.

B: Would you support the Town of Needham formulating a Climate Action Plan?

I am astonished a community like Needham does not have one already. This is depressing to learn. A climate action plan is long overdue.

5 - Needham has an impressive capital plan for both renovating existing buildings and constructing new ones. Although the new Sunita Williams School has solar photovoltaic panels, those were added due to favorable construction costs - they were not incorporated into the initial design. Likewise, energy efficiency is part of the design for the new Public Safety buildings, but they are not designed to be "green buildings."

A: As our elected representative, will you actively support prioritizing sustainability best practices in our design, construction, and procurement processes, including for projects already in our capital plan? For example: Would you support requiring that solar PV be incorporated into the design for, and be installed on, all new municipal buildings where technically feasible?

ABSOLUTELY. This is embarrassing that we have not followed through on green energy building in these public buildings. As I mentioned earlier – this is an area that the town simply **MUST** be engaging in the latest and greatest environmental building materials. I would push hard to make sure such endeavors are not only proposed but are then implemented!! Solar panels on ALL the buildings would be my first goal, whether new construction or not...

B: Would you support a net zero energy use target for new municipal buildings?

100%. If we can't do this through example by the town's efforts, it is not reflective of our community's mindset. It's 2021 and climate change is a forefront concern for many Needham residents.

6- What role can the Select Board take to encourage or require sustainable design and construction for residential and commercial buildings? Please describe your vision.



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Any new construction should be required to have solar at the very least, and strongly supported to pursue non fossil fuel energy sources for heating/cooling. This seems like something we could mandate as well as fiscally support through the many state programs that support these efforts. I would certainly like to research this further, but it seems that the Select Board could certainly influence the requirements for renovation and construction accordingly. I do not know the answer to if this is possible, but I'm sure there are folks in your organization that would be able to guide this process and offer recommendations as to what measures could be crafted and enacted.

7- As the Town works to cut carbon emissions and help Needham residents adapt to the damaging effects of climate change, what can the Select Board do to ensure that the process is fair and benefits all residents regardless of income, race, or ethnicity?

This is tricky as there are many financial benefits in the longterm from installing renewable energy systems but the upfront costs can be challenging. Thus, the town could carve creative financial support systems – through grants and other cash incentives – for those who have financial challenges to meet a renewable mandate should such a measure be able to be passed. If green systems are the goal, the inherent costs cannot be a limitation for those with lower income. To ensure others are not “left out” we also need to widely communicate any programs the town creates to assist the implementation of green/higher cost practices. Such communication would be important to reach ALL residents as many are simply unaware of town grants/support offerings.

8 - Please address anything else you'd like to include or let voters know why voting for you is a vote for our sustainable future.

One of the biggest lessons I learned from being an Environmental Studies (with Economics) major is the role of policy in driving environmental policies.

Please return your answers to the questions to Michael Greis (mgreis@comcast.net) by **March 9th, 2021**. You may edit this document, create your own, or provide the (numbered) answers in the body of an e-mail. If you have any questions, please reach out to Michael by e-mail at mgreis@comcast.net or by phone at **781 559-4623**.

Thank you!