

Senior center (NewCAL): Program, budget, site

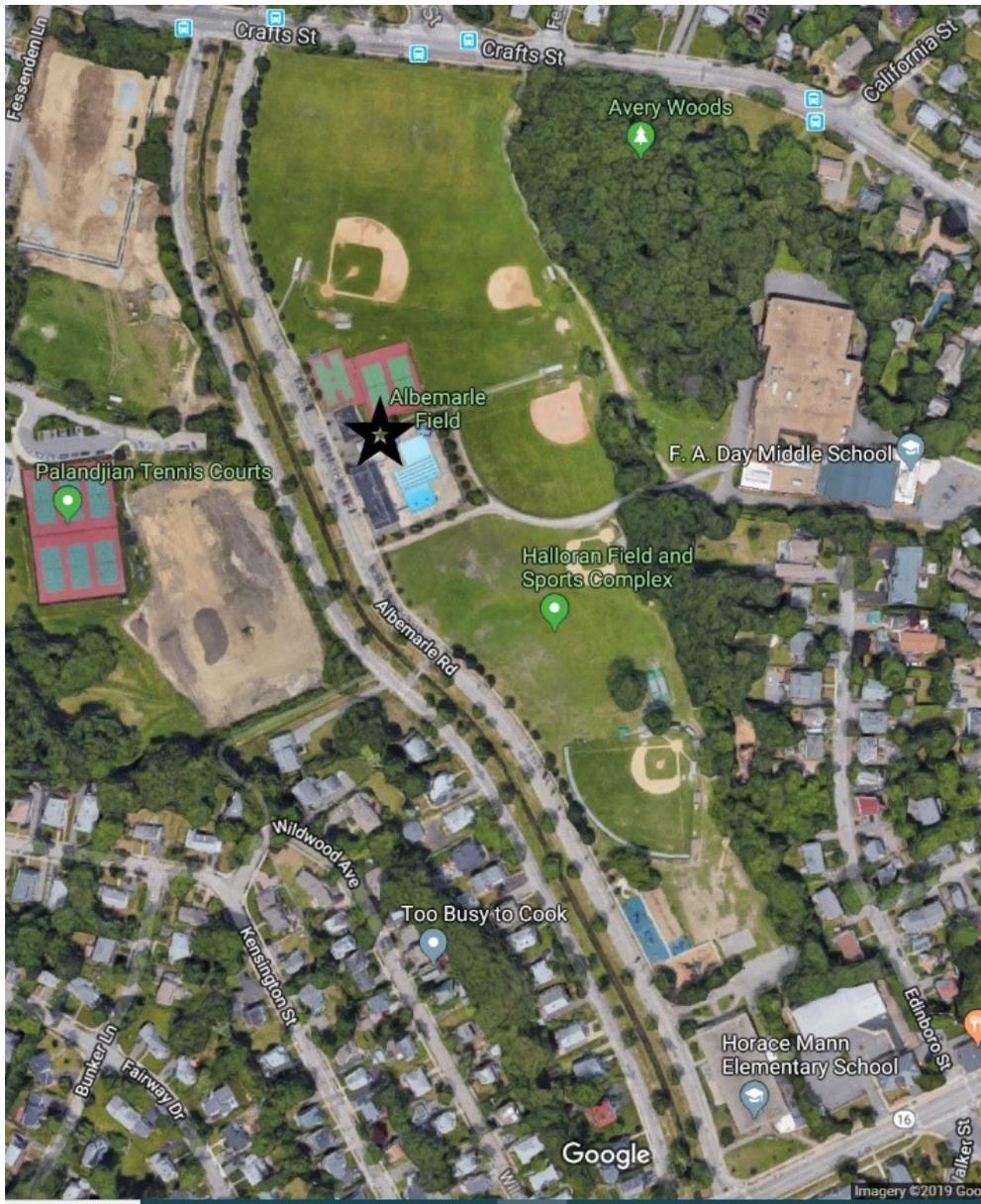
One out of three Newton residents will be 60 years or older by 2030. Seniors are the fastest growing demographic in the city, and the senior center can't keep up. Built in the 1930s as a branch library, it is inadequate in both scale and scope of programming. To be an all-age-friendly city, we need a new senior center.

As with all public buildings, there is an iron triangle between budget, program, and site. All three must fit together. Broadly, the administration's process considered program, then budget, then site. The mayor proposes:

Program: Four times the current size. Thirteen rooms with space for a library, art, kitchen & dining, performance, and health & human services. There would also be a gym and a walking track.

Budget: \$16 million

Site: Two acres of hardscape at Albermarle. On those two acres now are a pool, two tennis courts, a basketball court, and two buildings. There would not be construction on athletic fields or green space.



Advantages:

- Enough space and parking
- No land acquisition costs
- Renovation of leaky Gath into an indoor/outdoor pool

Disadvantages:

- Not in a village center or near good transit
- Not a convenient drive for the south side of the city

The city council will debate into 2020. Since this proposal (unlike others that were floated) is not building on green space, I'm open to it. However, I'll also be asking my colleagues and the administration to consider the senior center from a different angle: starting with a site, then looking at budget and program.

Site: What about the Newton Centre triangle parking lot? (The one across from Johnny's.) It is walkable, and it is convenient by car and transit. The village and the senior center would be symbiotic. Stores would get more foot traffic and seniors would be in the center of the city, not the periphery.

Budget: Could the city partner with a public or private housing developer? Building senior housing on top would generate revenue and deliver much-needed units. Undergrounding the parking in Newton Centre would be expensive, though.

Program: The 37,000 sf proposed could not fit onto the parking lot in Newton Centre. Could the main program be in Newton Centre, while Albermarle hosts the gym and the indoor/outdoor pool? The senior services staff is concerned about a dispersed program. I'd like to explore benefits and drawbacks further.