

# Belmont Citizens Forum

Vol. 3, No. 4

A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

July 2002

## *Land Use Plan Discussed for Concord Ave. Area*

*By Sharon Vanderslice*

After more than a year of wrangling over whose capital project should be built first, members of seven key town committees have been told to come up with a joint land use plan for all the town-owned property that abuts lower Concord Avenue—by the end of the summer.

This new Cluster Planning Task Force, appointed by the Board of Selectmen, began meeting weekly in June. It is chaired by Michael Speidel of the Capital Budget Committee and includes members of the Warrant, School, Permanent Building, and Athletic Complex Building committees as well as the Council on Aging and the Library Trustees.

Working with Michael J. Dowhan, a landscape architect with Edwards and Kelcey, the seven-person group is conducting a “massing” study to determine where proposed buildings and athletic facilities could best be situated. The goal, said Speidel, is to create synergy between the capital projects advocated by various constituencies, so that “everybody gets more than what they have now.”

### **Fitting More on Existing Space**

The Library Trustees want a new main library building close to the center of town. The Recreation Commission wants a new ice rink, a new pool bathhouse with new pumping facilities, and additional ball fields. The Council on Aging wants a new senior center. The School Department wants a renovated high school library and improved soil and drainage on its athletic fields. All need more

parking than they have now.

The task force is studying several options, one of which is shown on page 10. That plan calls for removing the old White Field House and the private residence beside it, building a new main library on that side of the street, converting the existing library into a permanent senior center, building a new or renovated ice rink with locker and storage facilities for the high school’s athletic teams, possibly razing the existing bathhouse and building a new one on the hill above the pool, reconfiguring several athletic fields, adding two new parking lots (one on either side of Concord Avenue), and expanding the parking area at the west end of the high school.

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## Environmental Events Calendar

**Exotic Plants at Fresh Pond.** Take a walk through the Fresh Pond Reservation on **Saturday, July 27, from 1 to 3 p.m.** to investigate non-native plants that have taken root on the Reservation, and learn what about their impact on animals and other plants in the area. Meet in the Neville Place parking lot, 650 Concord Avenue, Cambridge. Offered by the Friends of Fresh Pond Reservation and the Fresh Pond Ranger Program. Call Chief Ranger Jean Rogers at (617) 349-4793 with questions. Or visit [www.friendsoffreshpond.org](http://www.friendsoffreshpond.org)

**Early Sunday Morning Bird Walk.** Beginners and experienced birders are welcome to participate in this walk around the Fresh Pond Reservation on **Sunday, July 28, from 7 to 9 a.m.** Binoculars and a bird guide are recommended but not essential. Meet at the Neville Place parking lot, 650 Concord Avenue, Cambridge. Call Chief Ranger Jean Rogers

### Belmont Citizens Forum Officers and Trustees

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Belmont Citizens Forum, Inc.  
is a not-for-profit organization that strives to maintain the small-town atmosphere of Belmont, Massachusetts, by preserving its natural and historical resources, limiting traffic growth, and enhancing pedestrian safety. We do this by keeping residents informed about planning and zoning issues, by participating actively in public hearings, and by organizing forums on key subjects. Our newsletter is published six times a year (January, March, May, July, September, and November). Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Letters to the editor may be sent to  
P. O. Box 609, Belmont MA 02478.

at (617) 349-4793 with questions.

**Rethinking Trapelo Road.** Belmont's main street could be much more attractive. The Citizens Forum's Planning & Zoning Committee has been meeting to develop a community-wide process to explore the possibilities for improving Trapelo Road. If you'd like to help, please come to our next meeting, on **Thursday, August 8, 8 p.m.**, at 109 Trapelo Road in Cushing Square. If possible, bring an idea, a suggestion, a photo of something you like or hate about Trapelo Road, or a recommendation of another street that could serve as a model. For more information, call Sue Bass (617) 489-4729.

**Fall Fungus Family Fun.** Puffballs! Turkey Tails! Stinkhorns! These are types of fungi found at the Habitat Sanctuary. Join the Habitat staff on a mushroom hunt on **Saturday, September 14, from 10 to 11:30 a.m.** as they look in the meadow, near the pond, even in the trees for these colorful wonders. You'll also learn how to identify some of the more common species. For registration information, call Habitat, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont, at (617) 489-5050. \$6 for members, \$8 for non-members. Children and adults welcome.

**Habitat Bird Walks.** Join this monthly, fun, hour-long ramble around various sections of the Sanctuary to see what birds are to be found. While there are no guarantees, there are always surprises. Non-birders and birders of all ages are welcome. No fee. No registration. Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. The next walk is on **Sunday, September 29, from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m.**

### Folk Music CD Available

*"Thank You for the Music: A Collection of Memories from the Belmont Folk Festival," assembled by local musician Peter Johnson, has been offered as a gift to anyone who makes a donation of \$50 or more to the Belmont Citizens Forum.*

*Please check the box on page 19 if you would like to receive a copy. Thank you!*

# Unsafe Streets to Get New Pavement, Sidewalks

By Rosemary Burke

On June 10, the Board of Selectmen held a public hearing on the major pavement management projects planned for the coming year.

Most of Brighton Street, all of Prospect Street, and the section of Concord Avenue between Pleasant Street and Day School Lane are to undergo full-depth reclamation beginning in the fall. White Street, Oak Avenue, Pine Street, and sections of Payson Road and Cushing Avenue are also to be done.

Full-depth reclamation is street reconstruction that requires the removal of the existing street surface to a depth of several inches, re-grading for proper drainage, and then complete rebuilding. The streets just mentioned will have granite curbing as well as sidewalks on both sides. Tom Gatzunis, Director of the Office of Community Development, reported that, even though the gutter lines will remain as they are, the streets will be narrowed at crosswalk locations to make crossing easier and safer for pedestrians. Crosswalks will adhere to the new international design standard, which specifies wide striping for improved visibility.

The choice of these streets represents a major

change in direction for Belmont's pavement management program. Whereas the town previously followed the Water Department's water-main replacement schedule and resurfaced those roads upon completion, the new approach, quite reasonably, will deal with roads that (1) meet specified disrepair criteria and (2) have safety issues that warrant attention, either because of high traffic volume, a sizeable number of pedestrians, or a school in the vicinity. As the Water Department continues its water-main replacement program, those streets will be patched rather than fully resurfaced. Oak Avenue, Pine Street, and Cushing Avenue do not meet the criteria for reconstruction because they do not have serious safety issues, but they were on the old pavement program and had been promised reclamation. Gatzunis believed that the town should be held to its word.

Residents of the Oak/Pine/Cushing area were pleasantly surprised to hear two of the selectmen (Dr. Solomon was not present) agree to install granite curbing instead of the bituminous concrete (black asphalt) previously selected for these streets. Gatzunis acknowledged that bituminous concrete

*continued on next page*



**Pavement Program**, *continued from page 3*

curbing wears away too quickly; the selectmen believe that an upgrade to granite is financially justifiable because the paving of several other streets on this year's list had to be delayed. Alexander Avenue, Leonard Street, and Moore Street will not be redone until decisions have been made about MWRA piping in the area. The possible relocation of the Belmont Center fire station will also affect the design of these roadways.

Serious pedestrian safety issues in the Butler school area have given priority to the reconstruction of White Street between Trapelo Road and Belmont Street. Traffic calming measures being discussed for this street are "neck downs," or narrowing of the roadway at strategic locations, and the restriction of parking to one side of the street.

In response to questions, Gatzunis said that healthy trees would not be removed to make way for sidewalks. The Town's tree warden will examine each street to determine whether there are any dying trees in need of removal.

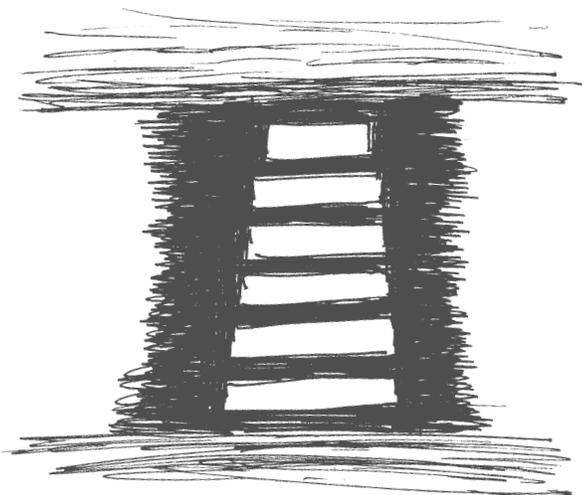
Generally, the Town owns the seven feet of land from the gutter line on each side of the roadway. The Americans With Disabilities Act requires that

new sidewalks be at least four feet wide, and the town intends to add a three-foot tree lawn. (A tree lawn is a grassy strip between the sidewalk and the curb.) The town can and will narrow these standard dimensions, when it is necessary, to avoid disturbing trees, stone walls, and other immovable objects. In places where a large tree has grown into the sidewalk area, one panel of the concrete sidewalk will be replaced with a section of asphalt. Residents with concerns about individual properties are invited to get in touch with Mr. Gatzunis at the Office of Community Development to discuss them. He said that once the reconstruction work is complete, it cannot be torn up for at least five years, so residents who wish to install new cable or gas lines underground should do so *now*.

A few residents were distressed by the expected brightness of white concrete sidewalks and suggested the addition of a darkening agent. They also asked why a sidewalk was necessary on both sides of a given street. Gatzunis said that the cost of a darkening agent would be half again as much as the cost of the sidewalk. This additional expense would require the town to reduce the number of streets during each repavement cycle. He also explained that the town is legally obligated to provide a sidewalk "if there is a destination," such as a store or a school, that can be traveled to on foot. Selectman Will Brownsberger agreed that the town's policy is to provide sidewalks for pedestrians on both sides of those streets where a single side only might endanger pedestrians.

Although full-depth reconstruction of these roads may present residents of these neighborhoods with major disruption, the result should be safer streets for all concerned.

*Rosemary Burke is a Town Meeting Member from Precinct 2 and a resident of Prospect Street.*



*This map of Belmont Center, right, shows the number of legal parking spaces currently available. The map was prepared by BSC Group.*

# Parking Options Considered for Town Center

By Sharon Vanderslice

At its regular meeting on July 8, the Board of Selectmen reviewed eleven ways to increase the number of parking spaces in Belmont Center. Among the possibilities, ten of which were described by a town consultant, Tom Houston of Edwards and Kelcey, were the reconfiguration or expansion of the present Alexander Avenue and Claflin Street municipal lots, the closing of Claflin Street to through traffic between Channing and Alexander, and the construction of a one- or two-story parking deck.

Joel Mooney, chair of the Town Hall Complex Building Committee, pointed out that parking could be expanded by anywhere from 20 to 310 spaces through means ranging from simple re-striping to “decking” the Claflin Street lot and installing pass-throughs from there to Leonard Street similar to the ones in Lexington Center.

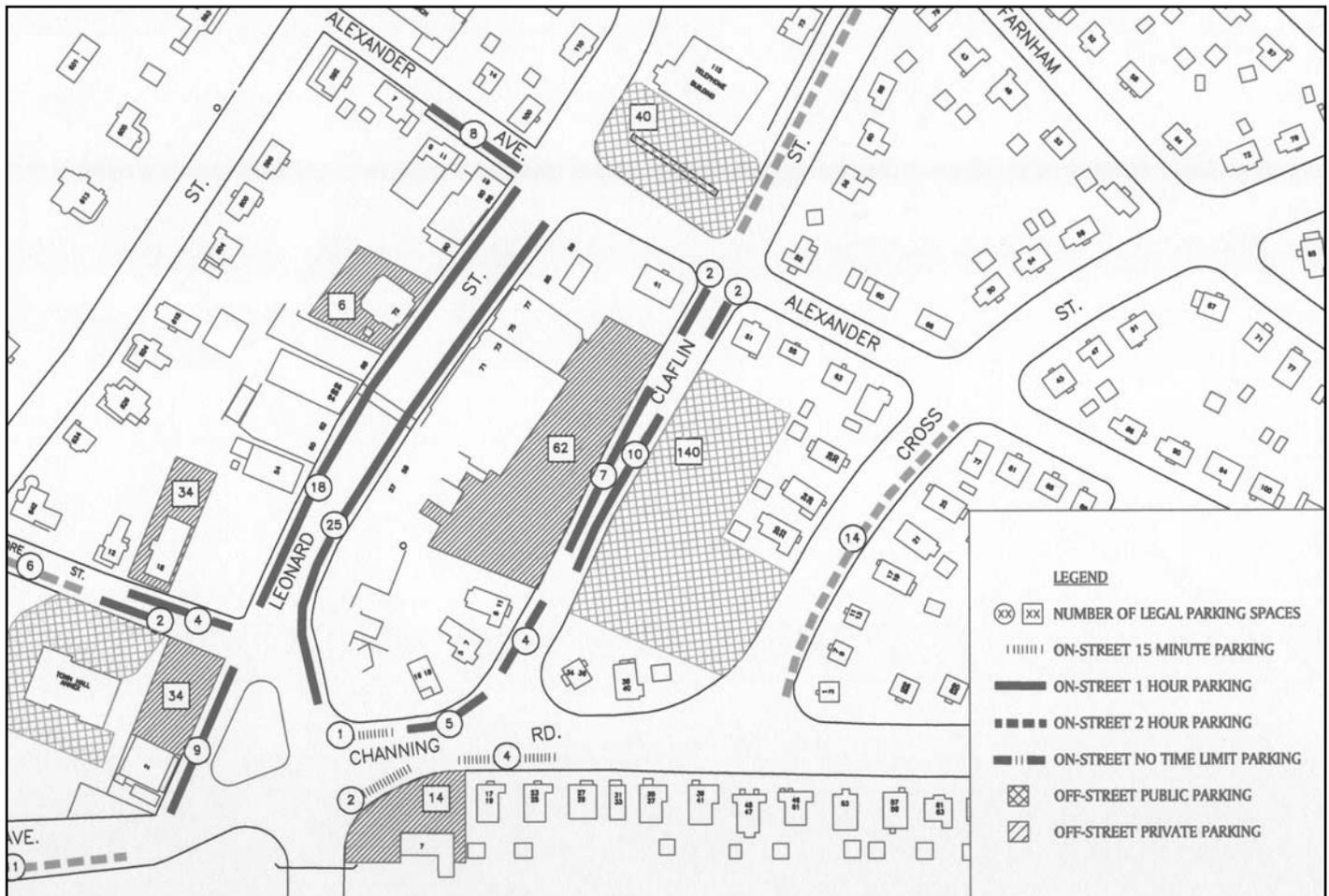
Area merchants have been clamoring for more parking for years. Customers who find it difficult to park near the local stores will take their business elsewhere, putting at risk the financial health of the town. The parking woes in the center are complicated by commuters who park their cars, for the whole day, close to MBTA train or bus routes. The district is also expected to absorb overflow parking for town employees, because the Town Hall lot is not large enough to accommodate all the workers, including some from the Fire Department and the School Department.

## New Fire Station Would Eliminate Spaces

The location of a proposed new fire station will also affect parking.

Acknowledging that Belmont’s three aging fire stations must be replaced, the selectmen agreed in

*continued*



# *Parking Deficit Is Bad for Business, Study Says,*

*Continued from page 5*

May to restructure the department into two new stations: a headquarters on Trapelo Road, near the site of the former Volkswagen dealership, and a substation in the Belmont Center area. At its August 6 meeting, the Board of Selectmen will make a final decision on the location of the substation.

The Fire Station Consolidation Committee has recommended that it be built on the rear portion of the Claflin Street municipal lot, with access and egress via Cross Street. The committee's second choice of location, according to Bob McLaughlin of the town's Permanent Building Committee, is a station on the municipal lot at the corner of Leonard and Alexander, across from Filene's.

Business owners, led by Kevin Foley of Locatelli Properties, which owns most of the business block on the east side of Leonard Street as well as the parking lot just behind it, have said that there should be no fire station in the center unless there is a plan that would make up for the lost parking spaces and add others. Foley, along with his consultant, John Connery, presented an eleventh option for expanding parking in the center. It involves construction of a one-story parking deck on a portion of the public lot on Claflin Street, surface parking on the portion of that lot that abuts Cross Street, and a new fire station on the corner of Leonard and Alexander. This would add a significant number of spaces, Connery said, without having to close Claflin Street to traffic, and would still maintain the character of the town. Connery reminded the selectmen that a parking deck, if it is properly managed, could be "revenue-neutral"; that is, it would pay for itself over a period of years through parking fees.

## **Pedestrian Safety Concerns**

Citing the need to make Leonard Street (1) more attractive to pedestrians and (2) more narrow in the years to come, McLaughlin told the selectmen that he considered the Cross Street location the best site for a fire station. Either location would offer good response times, thereby meeting the Fire Department standards, he said.

Tom Gatzunis, the town's director of Community Development, said that no matter which site is chosen, Leonard Street would have to remain wide enough to accommodate a third travel lane down the middle of the street for emergency vehicles, such as fire trucks. Either way, he said, the street could be made at least ten feet narrower than its current width, if the selectmen decide to make the change in the future.

## **Parking Deficit of 192 Spaces**

A study of parking in the town's three business districts, conducted last winter, concluded that the Belmont Center district north of the railroad tracks is short by 145 spaces and the Town Hall Complex by 47. These figures, reported by the BSC Group, consultants to the town, are based on the minimum recommended parking requirements specified in Belmont's zoning by-law for individual businesses. In reality, the deficits may be lower because shoppers often do several errands—visiting the bank, the drugstore, and the dentist, say—all in one trip. Joel Mooney believes that an additional 100 spaces might well handle the demand for the foreseeable future.

The BSC Group reported that the Claflin Street lot is over capacity between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.; that is, every space is filled and drivers park illegally and dangerously in fire lanes and other such spots. A parking deficit of this magnitude naturally has an adverse effect on the neighborhood. When parking is not readily available, said the BSC report, "customers circulate the streets in the center, exacerbating traffic congestion." A pedestrian was struck in a crosswalk there two years ago by a distracted driver who was concentrating on finding a parking space.

According to BSC, the lack of adequate parking can adversely affect "the viability of the business districts and the town's revenue from property taxes." Drivers who come to shop often leave the area frustrated and defeated.

The BSC report recommended that town employees should be denied permission to park all day on Moore Street and Concord Avenue. Instead, all-day employee and commuter parking should be

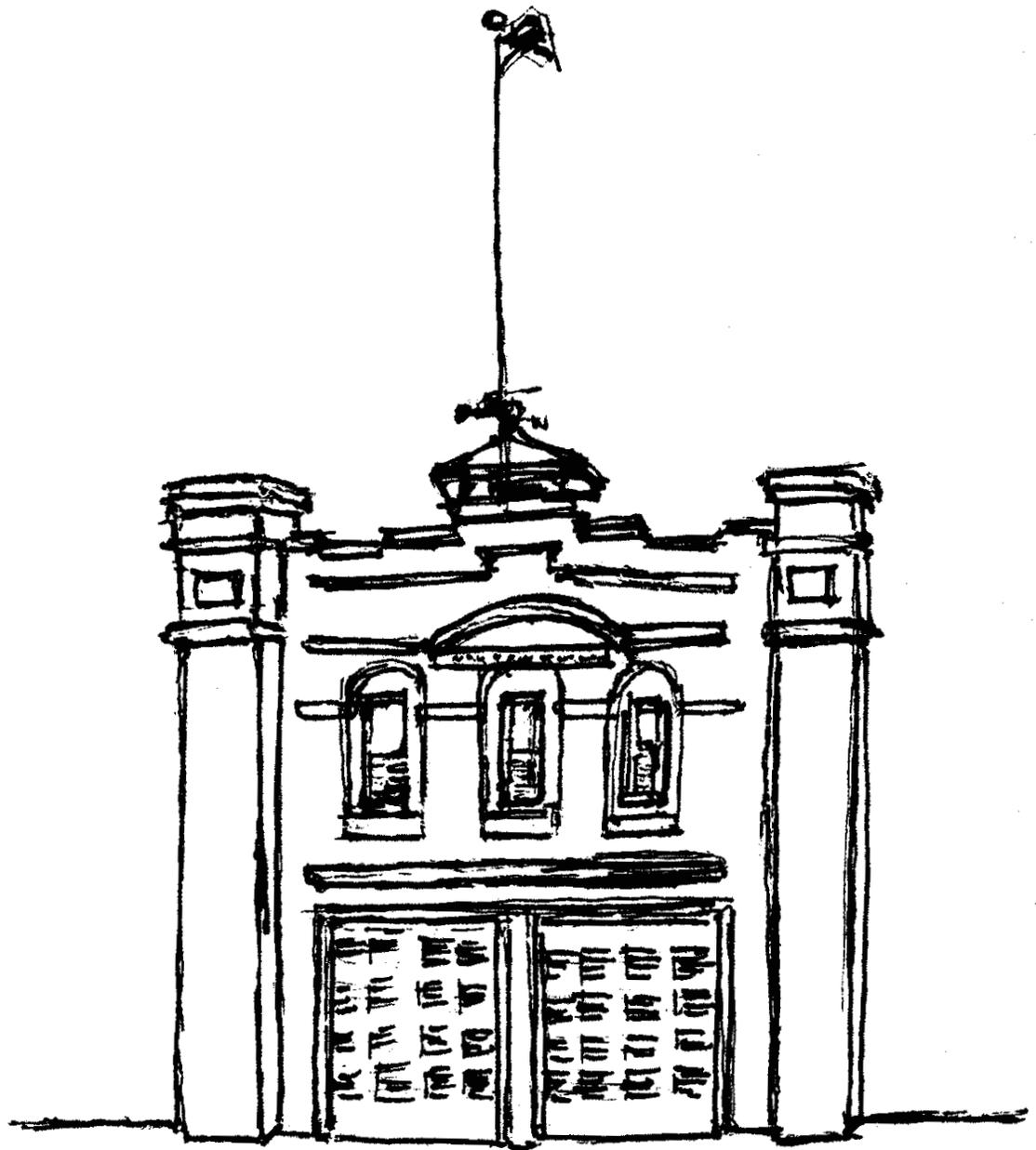
# *More Spots Needed for Shoppers & Commuters*

permitted on the north side of Royal Road and in leased space at church lots on Common Street and Concord Avenue. This would free more spaces for business customers and visitors to town offices. To meet the demand in the center, however, structured parking will have to be built.

A survey was sent to Belmont Center businesses and homeowners on July 11 to determine which site the public prefers for a parking deck as well as for a new fire station.

Will Brownsberger, chair of the Board of Selectmen, said the board is committed to expanding parking in Belmont Center and will certainly choose a site for the fire substation this summer. An article to appropriate design funds for the fire stations will come before Town Meeting this fall.

*Sharon Vanderslice is a Town Meeting Member and a resident of Pleasant Street.*



# McLean Updates

## Traffic, Stormwater, Wetlands Eliminated From MEPA Studies

By Jim Graves

On July 1, the office of the Secretary of Environmental Affairs issued a statement saying that the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) submitted for the McLean development project “adequately and properly complies with the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act [MEPA].” This decision is a significant disappointment for many Belmont residents because the FEIR failed to address numerous concerns about stormwater, traffic, and historic buildings that McLean had previously been told to address.

The Secretary wrote: “At the time that the Environmental Notification Form was filed, the town of Belmont had applied for financial assistance from the Commonwealth (in the form of a Public Works Economic Development [PWED] grant) for traffic mitigation measures associated with the project, which would have provided MEPA with full scope jurisdiction. It is my understanding, however, that the use of Commonwealth funding is no longer being considered; consequently, MEPA jurisdiction is limited to the subject of state permits.”

Thus, the scope of the state environmental review no longer includes traffic, stormwater, and wetlands, according to the letter from Secretary Robert Durand. The state sewer permit being sought does grant Durand’s office jurisdiction over historic preservation and archeological concerns, and he required McLean to provide expanded information on those issues.

It is a mystery, however, how Durand concluded that “the use of Commonwealth funding is no longer being considered.” The PWED grant application to signalize and widen Pleasant Street between the proposed new McLean driveway and Trapelo Road is still pending, according to Belmont’s Director of

Community Development, Thomas Gatzunis. The MEPA files contain no explanation either, and MEPA officials declined to explain.

In addition, while the McLean filing was being considered, Durand and the same MEPA analyst, Janet Hutchins, also were studying the MEPA filing on the Pleasant Street reconstruction. At the public hearing on Pleasant Street, it was revealed that that project involves about \$600,000 of state money to mitigate stormwater problems in the area, mostly from McLean. That seems clearly to be another example of state financial assistance to the McLean development.

The failure to acknowledge this state funding prevents EOEA from requiring remedies for the negative environmental impacts of the McLean development. To give just one example, the construction of a long winding driveway down the granite hillside across from the Star Market will require clear cutting a wide swath of mature trees, when there is no evidence that a new driveway is necessary to handle the projected traffic volume.

Many improvements in the McLean development had been required in the previous letter from Secretary Durand, on September 14, 2001, in response to McLean’s Draft Environmental Impact Report, including substantial efforts to reduce traffic. Those requirements were ignored in the Final EIR, leading a number of environmental organizations to ask Durand to require a Supplemental EIR. He decided instead to narrow the scope of the environmental review.

The need to preserve historic structures *is* mentioned in the Secretary’s approval notice. It requires that McLean provide additional information about alternatives to the current plans to demolish the historic cottages at McLean. The Secretary’s decision specifically lists Hope Cottage and the Superintendent’s Residence as structures that could be saved from demolition through further negotiation.

The Secretary’s decision concludes with what may be unintended irony: “I suspect that local oversight of the redevelopment of McLean Hospital will continue to be the main mechanism for ensuring that the project meets the highest standards of environmental protection.” The irony is that without state enforcement of good environmental protection and historic preservation, large developers will continue

to run roughshod over local boards and citizens, who do not have the resources or the legal means to require further concessions. Despite two rounds of detailed comments by citizens to point out specific deficiencies in the McLean plans, very little has been done to stop the environmental devastation currently proposed for the property.

## Testing Underway at Junction Brook

McLean Hospital has agreed to allow ground-water measurements and dye tests to be performed in the area of Junction Brook, a small stream that originates on the hospital's property near Waverley Square. Twenty Belmont residents originally appealed to the DEP in June, 2001, asking that the brook be declared "perennial," meaning that it flows year-round except in times of severe drought. The Rivers Act severely limits development within 200 feet of a perennial stream. Current plans for the property call for a setback of only 100 feet. The appeal is supported by the Belmont Citizens Forum and is being paid for by over 80 Belmont families.

This hydrological research will help to determine the sources of the stream's water and whether some of the water is being diverted from the

streambed. Permission to conduct these tests, now scheduled to be completed in July, was originally sought more than a year ago, when the matter first came before the Belmont Conservation Commission.

McLean has repeatedly claimed that the stream-related research would disturb its patients, but this claim is undercut by the years of disturbance that will result if commercial developers are allowed to proceed with the over one million square feet of development that is proposed. This construction will involve blasting of ledge rock and daily use of heavy construction equipment.

McLean finally agreed to the testing after a pre-hearing conference before an administrative law judge with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. The hospital has refused to allow one form of testing: a smoke test that would help to locate connections between the drainage system and the sewer system on the McLean campus. Water that would ordinarily flow through the drainage system into Junction Brook may actually be diverted into the sewer system, causing Junction Brook to run dry several times per year. The petitioners have filed a motion to compel this additional testing. This motion is being reviewed by the DEP judge and may still be granted.

The hearing on the appeal before the DEP is expected to take place in November 2002.



# Proposed Plan Would Put A New Library, Rink,

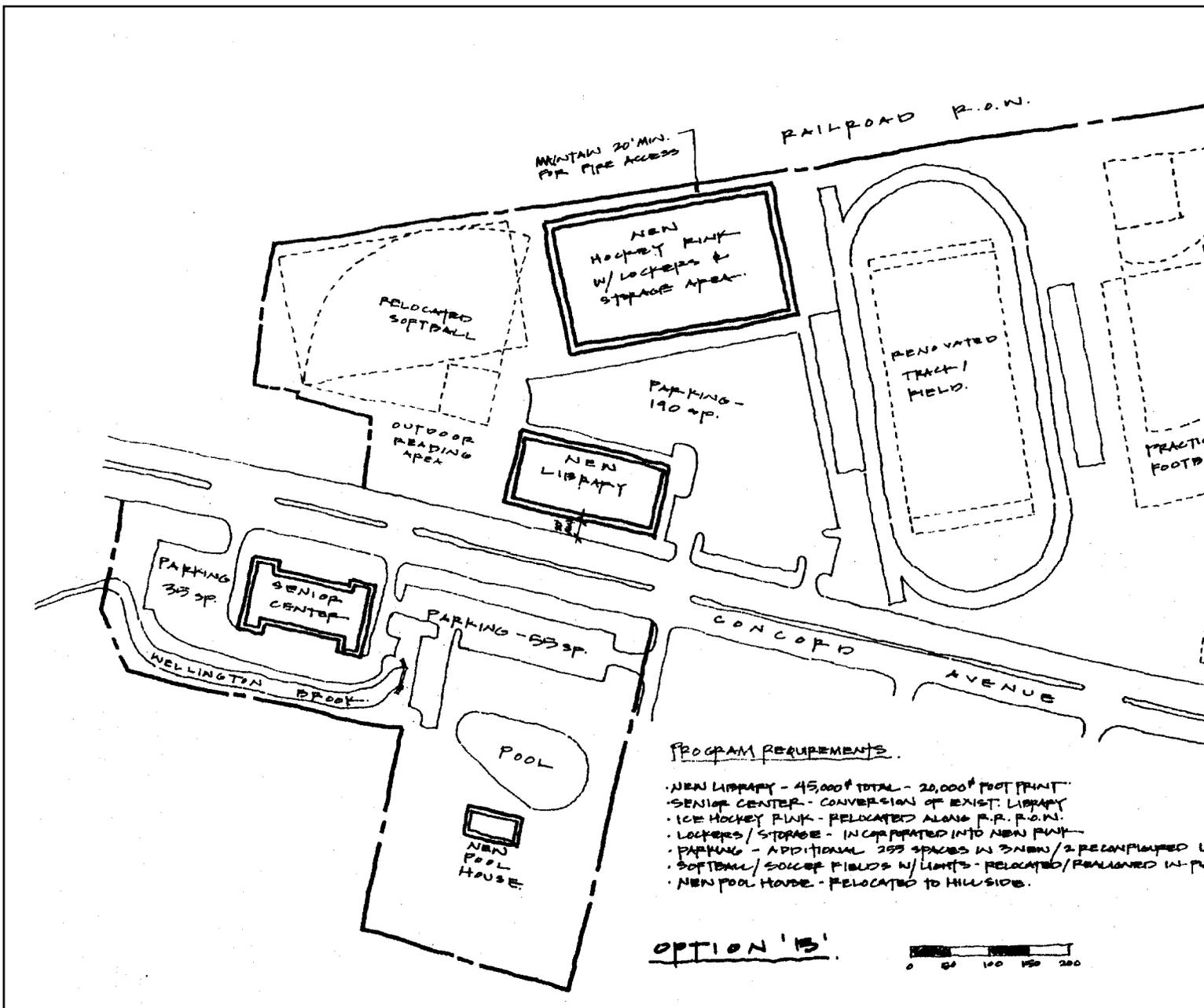
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The plan would provide 255 more parking spaces for library patrons, senior citizens, swimmers, skaters, field house users, and spectators at various athletic events. It would also relieve congestion on nearby side streets during high school football games and other major contests.

The other plans being considered show different field configurations, a different site for the rink, and a smaller number of parking spaces.

If one of these plans were approved by the selectmen and the Town Meeting, it would be completed in stages. Even if the town could afford to build all these facilities at once, it does not have the staff to supervise that many projects simultaneously, nor the space to relocate all the displaced people and equipment.

Speidel emphasized that the committee's Concord Avenue work is only a prelude to the larger job the Capital Budget Committee must undertake: prioritizing all proposed projects town-wide, includ-



# Senior Center, and Bathhouse on Concord Ave.

ing a new building for the Wellington Elementary School. The selectmen want to see a list of priorities by the end of 2002.

## Mixed Reactions to Plan

At a task force meeting on July 11, representatives of the affected town departments were invited to comment on rough drafts of the Concord Avenue land-use plans.

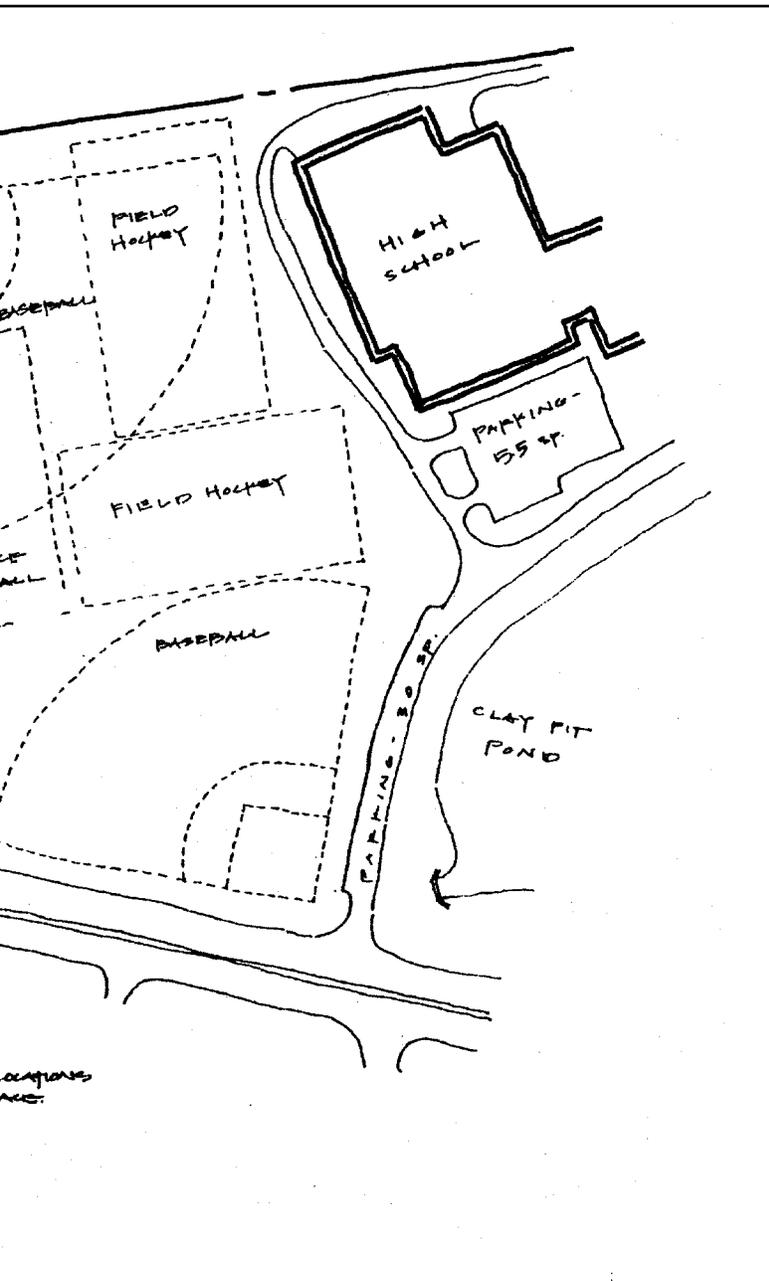
**Council on Aging.** Nava Niv-Vogel, Director

of Belmont's Council on Aging, and Barbara Miranda, the new chair of the Council on Aging, said many older residents would prefer a permanent senior center on the site of the former Kendall Center for the Arts, which burned down three years ago. If the senior center is to move into the existing library, renovations couldn't start until after the new library is built, and some elderly citizens who have been advocating a permanent senior center for the last 20 years may not live to see their dreams become reality. Niv-Vogel reminded the task force that the town's lease on the Our Lady of Mercy Parish Hall, where the senior center is temporarily housed, expires shortly. With extensions, the center can remain there for no more than four years.

Niv-Vogel also had questions about the Concord Avenue location. Miranda said previously that seniors "would prefer a location facing a residential street rather than a major road." Niv-Vogel and Miranda were not sure that a renovated building would meet their program needs as effectively as a new building, where all the rooms could be on one floor.

Speidel said that the library could be redesigned to the council's specifications. A large assembly room could replace the existing periodicals room, for example. He urged the council to have its architect draw up renovation plans over the next two weeks so that they could judge for certain whether the building would suit their needs. While acknowledging that Concord Avenue is a busy road, he said that the cluster plan proposes that a traffic light be installed at the intersection of Concord Avenue and Cottage Street. Seniors would exit onto Cottage Street from a new parking lot in front of the pool, instead of pulling out into heavy traffic on Concord. As for the timing of the project, he said he did not know whether a senior center at the Kendall site could be built any sooner than one on Concord Avenue.

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*One possible land-use plan for the town and school properties adjacent to Concord Avenue. Drawing by Edwards and Kelcey of Boston.*

# Plan Requires Removal of White Field House

*Continued from page 11*

**School Department.** School Committee Chair Kathy Miller, reviewing a blueprint that combined a girl's softball field with a junior varsity soccer/lacrosse field, said that "reducing field space is an issue." Committee member Scott Stratford noted that more than half of all high school students now satisfy the Physical Education requirement by playing on a team. Demand for athletic fields will increase even more in the next three to five years as the children of the second baby boom reach high school. There will soon be three or four lacrosse squads looking for field space, Stratford noted. The Superintendent of Schools, Peter Holland, said he believes that "trading athletic fields for parking is not a plus for the high school."

Speidel countered that the current JV

soccer/lacrosse field next to the rink could be replaced with a new one, with better soil and drainage, at Hittinger Field, for no net loss of field space. This alternative, however, would require the removal of four existing tennis courts that now abut Hittinger Field. Two of these courts would have to be relocated elsewhere, perhaps on the adjacent parking lot or at the Winn Brook School.

Other members of the Cluster Planning Task Force felt that additional parking on school property was more of a benefit than Holland realized. Night games on the new synthetic turf field will draw more spectators than day games, noted Mark Haley. Barbara Miranda, a resident of Myrtle Street, confirmed that the existing lack of parking on school property was "a huge problem for the neighbors."

**Recreation Department.** Jim Fitzgerald of the Athletic Field Study Committee reminded the task

*This 1914 photograph, provided by the Belmont Historical Society, shows the original, bungalow-style bathhouse at the Underwood Pool. Construction of a new bathhouse on the hill to the left has been discussed.*



force that some of the demand for field space would be met by a new soccer field proposed for MDC land that is encircled by the Route 2 off-ramp at Lake Street. That soccer field, on the site of an old ice skating rink, will be surrounded by a “woody walking track,” he said, and will be paid for by the private Belmont Hill School, in exchange for exclusive use of the field before 5 p.m. on weekdays. Town teams from Belmont, Arlington, and Cambridge will have use of the field after 5 p.m. and on weekends.

Fitzgerald said that the private Belmont Soccer Association currently spends between \$20,000 and \$25,000 per year to upgrade and maintain Belmont’s soccer fields (a cost that would otherwise be borne by the taxpayers).

The ice rink, however, has not benefited from the same level of maintenance. Lee Barber, chair of the Recreation Commission, described it as a ‘time bomb.’ The pipes underneath are failing. “We’ll be lucky if we make it through another year,” he said. The 25-year-old rink, originally designed as an outdoor facility with a shed roof, was built to last for only 20 years. Someone donated the old metal walls, which were added later. Asked about renovation possibilities, Barber said: “In my opinion, there is so much wrong there, it would be wiser to build a new one.”

A new rink would include locker and storage facilities for the football, hockey, and track teams, which now use the White Field House.

Complicating the task force’s decision-making process is an offer from a private donor to fund construction of an expanded boys’ locker room on the back of the existing rink. This would include lockers, showers, lavatories, and a coach’s office. Gerry Missal, Finance Director for the School Department, pointed out, however, that because such an addition would sit on school property, it could become a “Title 9 issue.” This means that any improvements to boys’ facilities must be matched with improved facilities for girls.

Barber said private money could probably also be raised to improve the bathhouse and pump at the Underwood Pool. The pumping system, which is now located below grade, often malfunctions because it is periodically flooded by groundwater. It needs to be put above ground to avoid pool closures like those that occurred at the beginning of the 2002

swimming season. He estimated that a “Friends of the Pool” group could raise \$100,000.

**Library Trustees.** Library Director Maureen Connors and Trustee Jil Westcott were thrilled that the cluster plan would give them a new library surrounded by green space in a central location, including an outdoor space for story hours. A much larger parking area would also be a welcome addition.

Representatives of the Library and the School Department had discussed the idea of merging the high school library with the town library, leaving only a computer room with Internet access in the school. But Connors said that proposal had many problems. Schools have stricter security requirements, and school librarians must act *in loco parentis*, keeping an eye on students who use their facilities. A town library, however, cannot require patrons to check in or check out. All have a right to open access to the stacks. Also, the salary structures are different. Certified school librarians get paid more than town librarians, she said.

### **Recommendations Due by Summer’s End**

By the end of August, the Cluster Task Force must present its recommendations for the Concord Avenue properties to the Board of Selectmen. The Capital Budget Committee will take them into account when it produces what Speidel calls “the grand plan,” a prioritized list of all of the town’s proposed capital projects (those with a defined scope, location, and cost estimate). This plan is to be presented to the Board of Selectmen by the end of the year.

The members of the Cluster Planning Task Force are Pat Bruschi, Mark Haley, Barbara Miranda, Joel Mooney, Mike Speidel, Scott Stratford, and Jil Westcott.

Citizens who wish to look at the plans at any stage may do so in the Office of Community Development on the second floor of the Town Hall Annex.

*Sharon Vanderslice is a Town Meeting Member representing Precinct 2.*



# **The Great Swamp**

**of Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge**

By Sheila G. Cook

\$15.00

This local history of the Alewife area, written by a Cambridge activist, Sheila G. Cook, traces the topographic and economic history of the Great Alewife Swamp, which formerly covered almost 1,000 acres of Cambridge, Arlington, and Belmont (reduced to about 100 acres today).

When English settlers arrived in the region in the early 1600s, this enormous basin, carved out by departing glaciers during the last ice age, stretched from what is now Pleasant Street in Arlington to Concord Avenue and Blanchard Road in Belmont to Observatory Hill and Avon Hill in Cambridge. Its picturesque marshes and lagoons served as a drainage area for Belmont Hill and Arlington Heights. From here, rainwater and spring water made its way to the Mystic River and into Boston Harbor. Alewife and herring swam up from the Mystic to spawn, and settlers reported that Little Pond and Fresh Pond were “seething” with fish every autumn.

The soil was unsuitable for farming, mostly sandy gravel and clay. Early farmers first used the land for pastures, then gradually ditched and drained it for orchards. In the 1820s, when the ice cutting business boomed at Fresh Pond, other industrial uses followed. Railroad tracks were laid to carry the large blocks of ice, packed in sawdust, to the Charlestown wharves. Farmers who formerly drove livestock to Brighton now left their animals at Alewife slaughterhouses, where the meat could be refrigerated with Fresh Pond ice. Tanneries and glue factories opened to use the hides and hooves.

As demand for brick increased, clay pits were dug all over the area to extract the blue clay left behind by the glaciers. Clay was dug by immigrant labor and sent by rail to brick factories, where it was pressed into molds and baked in kilns. The bricks

for Trinity Church and many other Back Bay buildings came from the Great Swamp.

Because the area is only about two feet above sea level (the water in Alewife Brook is lower than high tide in Boston Harbor), these clay pits eventually filled with ground water. Belmont’s clay pit, in front of the high school, became a dump and then a pond. The three Rindge Towers and the Fresh Pond Mall in Cambridge were both built on used-up clay pits. Other former pits, Jerry’s Pond, Blair Pond, and Yates Pond, were used for skating and swimming until the late 1970s.

Conservation efforts in the area date to the 1890s, when Charles Eliot Jr., landscape architect for the newly formed Metropolitan Parks Commission, recommended that the area be turned into a park. He envisioned it as part of the Emerald Necklace of parks and waterways that surround the city of Boston. Unfortunately, this plan died with Eliot a few years later, and development continued in the area, even though much of it was now under the jurisdiction of the MPC (later the MDC).

In 1902, when Alewife Brook Parkway was constructed, the brook itself was buried in a culvert and, from Arlington on, channeled through a narrow concrete ditch to the Mystic River. Construction of the Craddock Dam in Medford stopped much of the annual fish migration. And what used to be called Pond Street was turned into a four-lane surface road, Route 2.

Toxic waste began to accumulate in the area, as iron works and steel fabricators moved in, followed, in 1954, by W. R. Grace Asbestos.

In 1952, Arthur D. Little, Inc. (ADL) purchased the last farm in Cambridge and erected office buildings within 15 feet of Little River. The company also secured a long-term lease on 5.7 acres of MDC land, which it paved over for use as a parking lot.

By the late 1950s, Alewife had become a shopping district. Movie theaters, restaurants, hotels, gas stations, and nightclubs moved in. With no brook and no park in sight, the Alewife Brook Parkway no longer lived up to its name.

A greater insult loomed. In 1948, Governor John Volpe had proposed that Route 2 be expanded into an eight-lane highway. His plan would eliminate forty houses and eleven acres of Spy Pond in Arlington, and would slash a canyon through the

*continued on next page*

## The Great Swamp, *continued from page 15*

granite hills of Arlington and Belmont. Two members of the Arlington Conservation Commission, objecting to the loss of parkland, went to court to save it and won. But Volpe filed emergency legislation at the State House, saying that a new Route 2 would be an important evacuation route during nuclear attack. The freeway was completed as planned in 1968.

At this point, the Great Swamp had been reduced to a small fraction of its former size, hemmed in by roads, rails, and commercial buildings.

Mother Nature rebelled. Back-to-back hurricanes in 1955 flooded local streets and basements with sewage-filled storm water, runoff that in an earlier time would have been absorbed by the swamp.

Meanwhile, commuter traffic on Route 2 continued to increase. In an effort to ease traffic congestion and avoid building new highways through Cambridge, federal funds were secured to extend public transportation via the Red Line out to Route 128. But citizen opposition in Arlington and Lexington forced the subway to end at the Cambridge border. This meant a large terminal with a parking garage in the Alewife area. The City of Cambridge did not want to use income-producing private property for this purpose and the town of Arlington did not want a station located on nearby Thorndike Field. By default, the station was built



on what little remained of the MDC's Alewife Reservation.

More storms and floods occurred in 1996, 1998, and 2001. "ADL was forced to use sandbags to keep its tallest building from toppling into Little River," Cook says.

To prevent any further encroachment on the Reservation, a down-zoning petition was submitted to the Cambridge City Council by a local citizens group, the Coalition for Alewife, in 1999. The petition proposed a height limit of 35 feet for all new buildings north of Little River. But the City Council, apparently eager to encourage commercial development near the T station, instead approved a height limit of 85 feet for these properties.

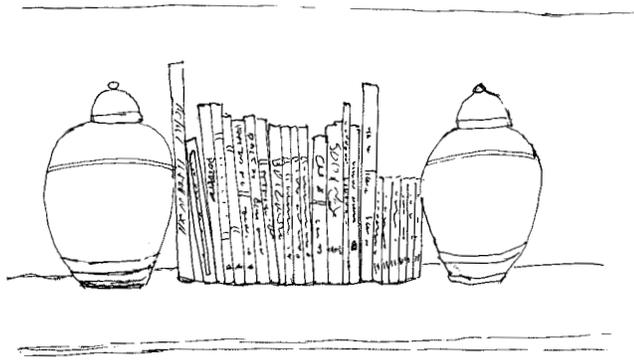
This development, added to the buildings south of the river on Cambridge Park Drive, "will turn the slender Reservation parkland into mere landscaping for the adjacent commercial buildings," Cook says.

Currently, she is opposing the construction of yet another encroachment on the Alewife Reservation: a 3.7-acre stormwater retention pond designed to handle overflows from the recently completed sewer/stormwater system that drains the commercial district around Alewife Brook Parkway. While the worst of the sewage would be filtered out, oil, chemicals, and salts would not. According to Cook, these would simply seep into the surrounding parkland and further contaminate the soil and ground water, posing a hazard to wildlife.

Given its history, it's amazing that there is anything left of this urban wild. "Seldom has an area been so trashed," the author concludes. Yet it appears she has not given up hope. Quoting Frederick Law Olmsted, she says, "For every thousand dollars judiciously invested in a park, the dividends to the second generation possessing it will be much larger than the first; the dividend to the third much larger than the second."

*For information on purchasing copies of this 55-page book, complete with maps and historic illustrations, write to Sheila G. Cook, 34 Follen Street, Cambridge MA 02138 or send email to [Sheilagamble@attbi.com](mailto:Sheilagamble@attbi.com)*

*--Sharon Vanderslice*



### **Branch Libraries**, *continued from page 20*

She prefers the closeness of the Waverley branch, and the personal service she receives from the librarian. “Elisabeth knows what I like,” Murphy said, referring to the long-time branch librarian, Elisabeth Strachan.

The branch librarian, who works mornings at one branch and afternoons at another, admits that she is pretty familiar with the collection. She orders every new book herself, and has known the patrons for years. “I remember what they’ve already read, so it’s easy for me to recommend other books I think they’d like.” Most of the collection is fiction, because that’s what most of the patrons enjoy, she reports. Children’s and young adult titles make up forty percent of the collection. Because the hours at both branches are so limited, many regular patrons are either retired residents or parents of preschoolers. Family day care groups sometimes attend the storyhours. And, at Waverley, she gets “latchkey kids” from the Butler School who come over at the end of the day. “It’s important for children in the neighborhood to have a place to go,” says Strachan.

### **Less Crowded, More Cozy**

Sarah Ellison, who regularly uses the Benton branch on the corner of Oakley Road and Old Middlesex, remembers wandering over there as a child from Stults Road to do her homework. She now makes the five-minute walk with her two young children, a four-year-old and a second grader. “One of the wonderful things about the Benton branch is the individualized attention,” she said recently. “I can ask, ‘Do you have a book about the

Trojan War that’s appropriate for a four-year-old?’ and Elisabeth will find it. It’s a little more old-fashioned, in a sense. I feel that I’m not bothering anyone when I ask questions.”

Having both the adult and children’s titles all in one room is an advantage, according to one Benton branch patron, Ellen Solari, because it allows parents to browse for books for themselves while keeping an eye on their youngsters. She reports that her eight-year-old can now go there alone on his bike. “It’s a rite of passage for him.” Solari, an art teacher, often reserves materials over the Internet and has them sent to Benton. “If they don’t have what I need, I can get it through interlibrary loan.”

Linda Resnick, a frequent Waverley branch patron, says she and her two boys, aged 1½ and 3½, prefer walking to the neighborhood branch. “It’s a very welcoming environment. The books are more accessible; there’s a nice play area with kid-sized chairs; the toys are out.” She said her older son’s experiences at the library—attending storyhours and playing with other children—have helped him overcome his shyness. “Elisabeth’s storytimes are wonderful,” she remarked. The main library, more than a mile away, is too far for her little ones to walk to, says Resnick. “Even if we made it there, we’d be too tired to make it back.”

### **Most Patrons Walk**

More people reach the Waverley branch by foot than by car. The librarian said that a significant number of people in the neighborhood don’t own cars and would have a tough time getting to the main library. “There’s no crosstown bus,” lamented library patron Grace Taylor. “How do they expect us to get there?” Taylor said she has walked to the Waverley branch for 55 years.

In addition to providing the traditional resources, the neighborhood libraries are pleasant places in which to escape the heat of summer and the cold in winter. Retired residents often drop in to read current periodicals. Internet access is also an attraction; one-on-one computer training is available to those who request it. Both branches have well-attended sing-alongs with Julie Goetze and offer the popular storyhours for two- to five-year-olds.

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**Branch Libraries**, *continued from page 17*

Benton also holds a bi-monthly book discussion group for adults.

Part of the appeal of the branches, each housed in a historic building, is the comfortable and old-fashioned atmosphere. The sturdy oak tables, chairs, and bookcases have served generations of readers.

The Waverley branch, which opened as a reading room in 1910, is in the original Daniel Butler

School, now the Waverley fire station, at the intersection of Trapelo Road and Waverley Street. Its high ceilings, oversized windows, and thick moldings give it a spacious feeling, even though the floor space is limited to about 2500 square feet.

The Benton branch, on part of the former Cushing estate, was built in 1892 as a chapel for the Belmont School for Boys. After the school closed, Colonel Everett Benton purchased the property, and the Payson Park Congregational Church and the Belmont Methodist Church each held services in the



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chapel before acquiring church buildings of their own. In 1930, Benton's family gave the chapel to the town with the stipulation that it serve as a library for at least fifteen years and it has filled that role ever since. A historical survey of the town, carried out by Boston University in 1980, noted that this library is the only unaltered pre-1900 building in the precinct. Expertly crafted of rubblestone in "an informal country style," it displays stucco and half-timbered detail and "simple, but elegant, wrought iron work." Many patrons who walk into the building through the massive wood-plank door, with its wrought iron strap hinges, have the fleeting experience of entering a medieval monastery.

Circulation at the Benton branch has increased in recent years, from about 8,000 in 1997 to 10,200 in 2000. (The figure dipped in 2001, when the library was closed for roof repairs.) Circulation at the Waverley branch has remained constant at about 7300 items per year. Each branch is open just 15 hours a week at different times between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekdays. Until 1980, each was open two evenings a week as well as all day on Saturday, and circulation was four times higher, around 61,000 items a year.

Library Director Maureen Connors recently said that closing both branches would eliminate only

\$14,000 from her operating budget, or the cost of utilities. The only other costs associated with the branches are the materials purchasing budget of about \$6500 per year per branch and the salaries of the branch librarian and her eleven-hour-per-week assistant. These costs would not be eliminated, Connors said; they would simply be allocated to the main library, to cover the resulting increase in demand there.

But branch library patrons say that expanded staffing at the main library could never make up for the loss of what they have now. Strachan said that when the idea of closing the branches was first mentioned by the selectmen last spring, there was "an outpouring of appreciation, dismay—total shock."

"This library is an institution," said Grace Taylor, who described the closing of the branches as a tragedy. "What does that say about a town, that they would close a library?"

Ellen Solari agreed. "They closed a lot of branches in Newton so that the city could build a big new library. . . and it's not the same. There are some things that can't be measured in dollars and cents."

Sarah Ellison was even more emphatic. "If they need somebody to raise the money to keep them open, I'll do it."

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*People Are Asking*

## **Does Belmont Need Its Branch Libraries?**

*By Sharon Vanderslice*

If the financial planners in town have their way, Belmont's two branch libraries may go the way of the neighborhood drugstore. In an effort to cut costs and free funds for new capital projects, the selectmen are considering whether or not to close the branches for good. According to Library Director Maureen Conners, a public hearing on the subject will be held in late August or early September.

The two libraries, one near Waverley Square and the other in the Payson Park area, were set up as delivery stations in 1891 and 1905, respectively, for residents who found it difficult to get to the main library in Belmont Center. For people without easy access to a horse (or, later, a car), these stations

were the only practical way to borrow reading material on a regular basis. Borrowers would select titles from an alphabetized list distributed to all town residents and then wait for their choices to be delivered to Mr. J. H. Kendall's dry goods store on Trapelo Road or to the principal's office at the old Payson Park School on Oakley Road.

Now, a hundred years later, the branches still claim a small and devoted group of patrons, some of whom have relied on these libraries since childhood and are heartbroken at the thought of losing them. Even those who have the option of driving to the main library say they prefer the cozy atmosphere and friendly service that the branches provide.

"I don't like the main library," said Peg Murphy, a library user for 40 years who stopped going to the main library when it moved from what is now the School Administration building on Pleasant Street over to a new building on Concord Avenue. "You go there and wander around."

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