

Belmont Citizens Forum

Vol. 5, No. 6

A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

November 2004

MIT Students Envision Trapelo Improvements

By Marta Van Dam

On Thursday, October 14, 2004, area residents gathered in Belmont's Town Hall for a preliminary presentation by a group of MIT graduate students on the Belmont Street/Trapelo Road corridor. The students had many suggestions for improving this corridor but kept returning to a few themes: creating more mixed-use areas with both housing and business space, increasing access to green space, and making sidewalks safer and more attractive.

The students are enrolled in "Community Growth and Land Use Planning," a class at the MIT School of Architecture and Planning led by Professors Terry Szold and Eran Ben-Joseph. In this course, students explore the techniques, processes, and personal and professional skills required to manage growth and land-use change by working with a "real-life" subject; last year, the class focused on busy Needham Center.

The 30 students are divided into three groups, each studying a different area of the corridor: Harvard Lawn (Belmont Street from the Cambridge line to the start of Trapelo Road), Cushing Square/Palfrey Square (from Cushing Square to Beech Street), and Central Square/Waverley Square (Trapelo Road from the Beech Street intersection to the Waltham line). This study is a class project and was not commissioned by the town. The Belmont Citizens Forum has donated \$2000 to pay for the class's out-of-pocket costs.

While conducting the study, the students followed the Belmont Citizens Forum's Statement of Purpose on the Belmont Street/Trapelo Road corridor (see page 12). They summarized the goals as: (a) creating an identity or sense of place and promoting a sense of

community, (b) fostering street activity and economic vitality, (c) promoting traffic safety, (d) developing new and improved housing and zoning strategies, and (e) creating aesthetic streetscapes.

The following is a brief summary of the students' presentations.

Harvard Lawn Group

Busy feeder streets and the convergence of three towns (Belmont, Cambridge and Watertown) at the Belmont/Cambridge line give the area an uncertain identity. Belmont's town sign is so small that many students said they missed it when they first drove along the street. To remedy this, the students proposed marking the entry into Belmont in a more

continued on page 10

Table of Contents

Environmental Events Calendar . . .	2
Gardens Provide Wildlife Habitat. . .	3
O'Neill Wins Uplands Ruling	9
Fernald Wetlands Ready for Revival .	14
Do We Need a Wetlands Bylaw? . . .	20

**SPECIAL FEATURE:
SELECTMAN CANDIDATES
ANSWER QUESTIONS ... 4**

Environmental Events Calendar

By Michael Stratford

Autumn Bird Walk. Saturday, November 13, 9 am–11 am. As many as eight or nine species of ducks can be seen on Fresh Pond in November. We will also look for winter residents such as juncos, white-throated sparrows, and golden-crowned kinglets. We have binoculars to lend and will show you how to use them. Meet at Neville Place parking lot, 650 Concord Avenue Cambridge. Free. Please register; e-mail Elizabeth Wylde at friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com or call Chief Ranger Jean Rogers at (617) 349-4793 with your name and phone number.

Weeks Pond Community Service Day. Wednesday, November 17, 2:30 pm–4:30 pm. Join us for this FREE event on the final day of the Weeks Pond rejuvenation project. Learn about plants while becoming a steward of your local environment by removing invasive species, planting native ones, and pruning. Gloves, rakes, pruning tools, and refreshments will be

provided at Habitat Sanctuary. 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. Questions? Call (617) 489-5050.

Wildflowers in Winter. Sunday, November 21 1 pm–3 pm. An unusual way to enjoy a frosty fall or winter day is to identify wildflowers! The dried stalks and seed-heads of many species are easy to recognize. We will learn to use the *Winter Weed Finder* by Dorcas Miller. We have copies to lend or sell for \$4 each. Please dress for spending time outside and off-path. Meet at Maynard Ecology Center, Basement of Neville Place, 650 Concord Avenue Cambridge. To register, please e-mail Elizabeth Wylde at friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com, or call Chief Ranger Jean Rogers at (617) 349-4793 and leave your name and phone number.

Bear Hill Climb. Sunday, November 21, 2 pm. The Waltham Land Trust plans to close out the season with a walk to a unique viewing place: the south-facing cliff at Bear Hill. Sturdy shoes, walking sticks, and cameras are recommended for this brisk, one-hour climb. Parking is available at Harvey Industries, 1400 Main Street, across the street from our starting place west of Route 128. For more information or directions, call (781) 899-2844 or visit www.waltham-landtrust.org.

Caw of the Wild. Monday, November 22, 1 pm–2:30 pm. You've heard their raucous calls and seen their big, black, sleek-looking bodies. Now come and learn fun facts and fables about crows at Habitat Sanctuary. We'll even go outside to spy on some crows! Children three to five years old are invited with an adult partner. 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. \$6 for members, \$8 for non-members. Preregistration is required. Call (617) 489-5050 for more information.

Winter Solstice with Phyl Solomon and Boot Boutwell. Sunday, December 19, 10 am–12 pm and 1 pm–3 pm. Join us at either of two sessions celebrating the winter solstice, when the sun is at its lowest point in the sky in the northern hemisphere, making this the shortest day of the year. Hear a special solstice story, make luminaria to take home, and help decorate a tree for the birds. We will go to the upper meadow to officially welcome this event then return to the library for cider and cookies. Habitat Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. Each session is \$8 for members, \$10 for non-members. Call (617) 489-5050 to register.

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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
or to editor@belmontcitizensforum.org

Gardens Provide Crucial Wildlife Habitat

By *Evanthia Malliris*

“One backyard at a time.”

That’s the mantra of Nell Walker, long-time landscape designer and invasive plant expert. Nell, along with Gerry Kaye, a retired botany librarian and a self-described chronic beginning birder, spoke at the Belmont Citizen Forum’s September Friends Meeting on “Gardening for the Birds.”

Both advocate for and practice creating backyard habitats that support a wide variety of bird life, instead of the typical non-productive suburban lawn. Nell said “Habitat gardens are essential to our planet’s future.”



Wild Black Raspberry

Birds need food sources, shelter and nesting areas and a variety of trees, shrubs, and ground covers can provide these.

Gerry, a 16-year backyard gardener, has planted native species for 16 years to transform her suburban “desert” lawn in Arlington into a haven for regional birds. Using the principles of what’s now known as eco-gardening, she uses plenty of ground covers, shrubs, ferns, and moss. She allows the leaves that fall to decompose in place. This attracts earthworms, which attract robins. After years of trial and error, Gerry’s garden now hosts dogwood, junipers, blueberries, high bush cranberries, holly, bayberry, mountain laurel, and sweet pepper bush. Blooms span three seasons—spring, summer and fall—and nutritious berries last into the winter.

Members of the Menotomy Bird Club in

Arlington, both Gerry and Nell showed slides of birds feeding, nesting and on the wing. These included the familiar chickadee, titmouse, and white-breasted nuthatch, and the lovely cedar waxwing, Baltimore oriole and cardinal, which feeds its mate. Flickers, goldfinches, Carolina wrens, downy woodpeckers, blue jays, and grackles are also frequent visitors to the bird feeders that both gardeners use to supplement natural food sources. Gerry suggests spreading human hair near feeders squirrels from raiding them. To complete the feeding cycle, the smaller birds attract the hawks that live on Turkey Hill conservation land.

A note on planting native shrubs: some are *dioecious*, meaning that a male and female plant are needed to produce fruit. Gerry had the unfortunate experience of planting shrubs of the same sex, which means no blooms, no berries and—no birds. Not all flowering shrubs produce berries that attract birds. Nell Walker described and rated shrubs and trees in terms of how attractive their fruit is to birds. Sassafras berries have a high fat content, providing energy. Fox and frost grape attract 50 bird species, including wild turkeys. Trumpet honeysuckle is a magnet for humming birds. Avoid non-native oriental bittersweet, “a thug” of a vine. Viburnum berries, high in sugar, are highly desirable and go fast.

Flowers attract birds, too. Nell suggests visiting the New England Wildflower Society in Framingham, which sells native wildflowers. Wildflowers can be used to create a sheltering, sustenance-producing meadow at the edge of a wood. The “edge” between woodland and open space attracts all types of birds.

A note about trees: dead trees, or “snags,” are important habitats and food sources for birds. If they are not hazardous to buildings, there’s no need to remove them.

Gerry’s garden has been designated a “Backyard Wildlife Habitat” by the National Wildlife Federation. For more information about how to make your yard a wildlife habitat, see www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/.

Evanthia Malliris is a Precinct 2 Town Meeting Member, and a board member of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Candidates for Selectman Answer 8 Questions

Because of Selectman Anne Marie Mahoney's resignation on September 28, Belmont voters will elect one member of the town's three-person Board of Selectmen in a special election. On Monday, November 15, they will choose between Angelo Firenze and Rebecca Vose. The Belmont Citizens Forum asked the two candidates to respond to the following questions on planning and zoning issues. Each candidate was limited to a total of 800 words.

1. What are your budget priorities? Given the tough fiscal situation, would you support more layoffs or an operating override to get through the next fiscal year?

Firenze

I do not support a Proposition 2 ½ override. It is time to step back and evaluate all of our spending as part of a longer term comprehensive plan for Belmont. The two most important priorities for the town are education and public safety. We must ensure that the critical aspects of these activities are not compromised and are fully funded. We must focus on those critical activities which must be realized, and accept the fact that some of the "nice" but not so critical things will not get done.

Longer term, we desperately need to increase our commercial base, ideally through redevelopment. We must balance well intentioned idealism, which has cost us millions of dollars, with the practical needs of the town. We simply can not afford to lose money badly needed for education or public safety.

Vose

My priorities are quality of life issues. These include schools, infrastructure improvements and open space. Belmont needs to preserve open space, which is essential to sustaining the kind of community we all value. There is no quick answer to an override. As a new Selectman I want to know what information and budget numbers the Warrant Committee's needs assessment process yields. A decision to override Proposition 2 ½ should be reached only after the Warrant Committee completes the process of carefully balancing competing budget demands. Before supporting an override, I want to know the

conclusions and recommendations reached by the experienced and knowledgeable members of this committee.

2. Of the many capital projects under discussion, which should be done first? Should any be eliminated from the list?

Vose

I respect the hard work done by the so-called Megagroup, which engaged in a process of identifying then prioritizing capital projects. The Megagroup reached consensus on placing a new Senior Center at the top of this list. I applaud the thoughtful method used to arrive at this decision. As demonstrated by this process, careful study and full discussion is the most effective approach for arriving at difficult decisions. However, as the Megagroup recognized, these projects cannot be completed on a short timeline. As Selectman, I would support the existing intention to stagger these projects over several years to avoid over burdening taxpayers.

Firenze

There are five major capital projects under discussion, the Wellington School facility, the high school facility, the senior center, the library/pool complex, and the completion of the high school athletic/skating rink complex. There are also many other important, but not as large capital improvements which must be dealt with including: road reconstruction, sewer upgrade programs, and computer and communications upgrade. We need a long term plan and a realistic timetable for their development with a full understanding of how they are to be funded and how they will impact our taxes year by year.

The Wellington school facility needs to be addressed immediately. The high school also needs to be upgraded, but a more modest renovation proposal in line with our financial means is needed. I believe the same things apply to the pool/library proposal. Our seniors deserve a center, and the athletic complex should be completed, but we cannot afford to pay for these from our tax revenues in the foreseeable future. To complete these projects we need to seek alternative

sources of funding including actively soliciting private donations with appropriate recognition for contributors.

3. What is your position on development in the Belmont Uplands at Alewife?

Firenze

It would be fantastic if the Uplands could remain open space. However, we do not own the land and I am a proponent of landowner's rights. I believe there could be more desirable alternatives for both parties and we must work closely and in a non-adversarial way with the developer to find them. There is some development we do want in Belmont and maybe we can find one that is more attractive for them. The original proposal for an office park, which was accepted by Town Meeting, is not a bad option and the tax revenue certainly would help. I am opposed to housing of any type at this location.

Vose

Ideally, the Uplands should be protected from development. If we cannot achieve this result through the land swap which some residents are pursuing, we have to be realistic. Should O'Neill Properties continue to pursue a Chapter 40B permit for the Uplands, the town's Zoning Board of Appeals has the authority under state law to negotiate with O'Neill the

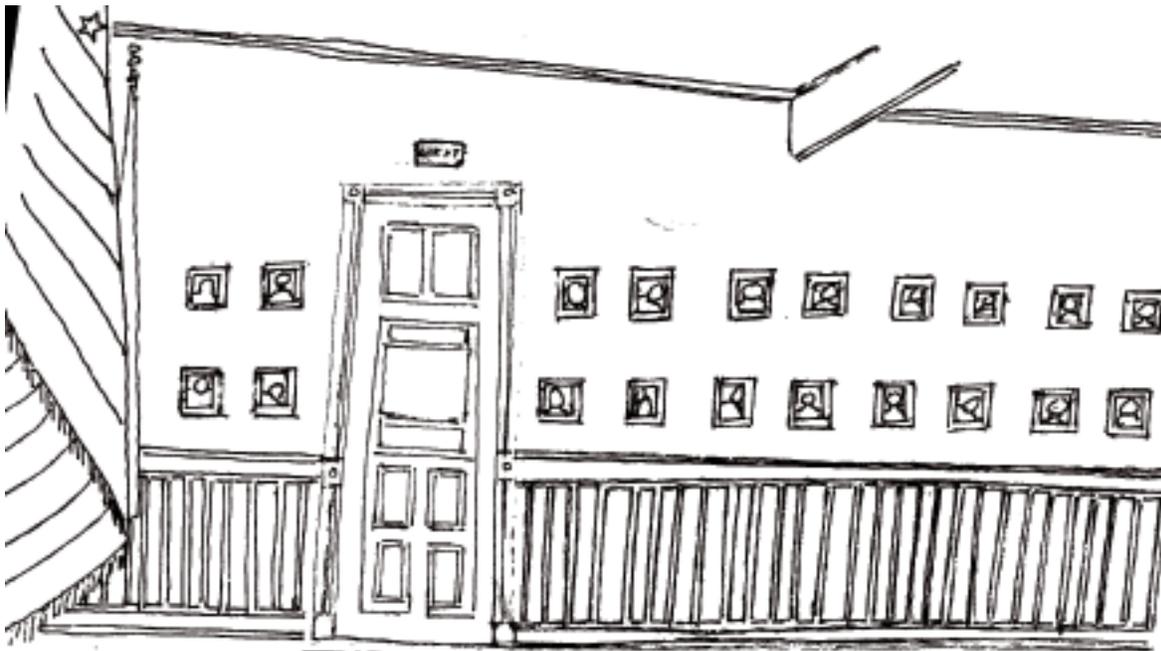
terms of its development plan. This process is fluid with give and take by both parties. My service on the Board of Appeals gives me tremendous confidence in its members to represent and protect the town's interests in a Chapter 40B process. I view Belmont's gain in affordable housing units through 40B as a positive outcome, albeit at the price of losing valuable open space.

4. How can open space get "a full seat at the table" in town planning?

Vose

The town has for too long neglected short- and long-term planning for future needs. Consequently, the legitimate concerns of many groups, including advocates for open space, have been ignored. Fortunately in recent years, our Selectmen have instituted a disciplined, systematic approach to planning in several areas. I believe that to achieve the best planning, all interested constituencies should be involved in the process. This is how the town will arrive at consensus on both shared values and how best to protect and promote them. The town needs a Selectman who, like me, has an open attitude toward all interested parties. Only with maximum participation can Belmont derive maximum value from any planning process.

continued on page 6



Firenze

I am not sure exactly what is meant by “full seat at the table” in this context, but I believe that the voice of proponents of open space has always been heard. The remaining open space in Belmont is all too precious, not to receive full consideration in any town planning effort. I fully support all reasonable ways of maintaining it.

5. What is your position on traffic calming and pedestrian safety improvements along Trapelo Road and Belmont Street and in other parts of town? Should the Trapelo Road/ Belmont Street corridor be narrowed to one lane in each direction, with turning lanes at major intersections?

Firenze

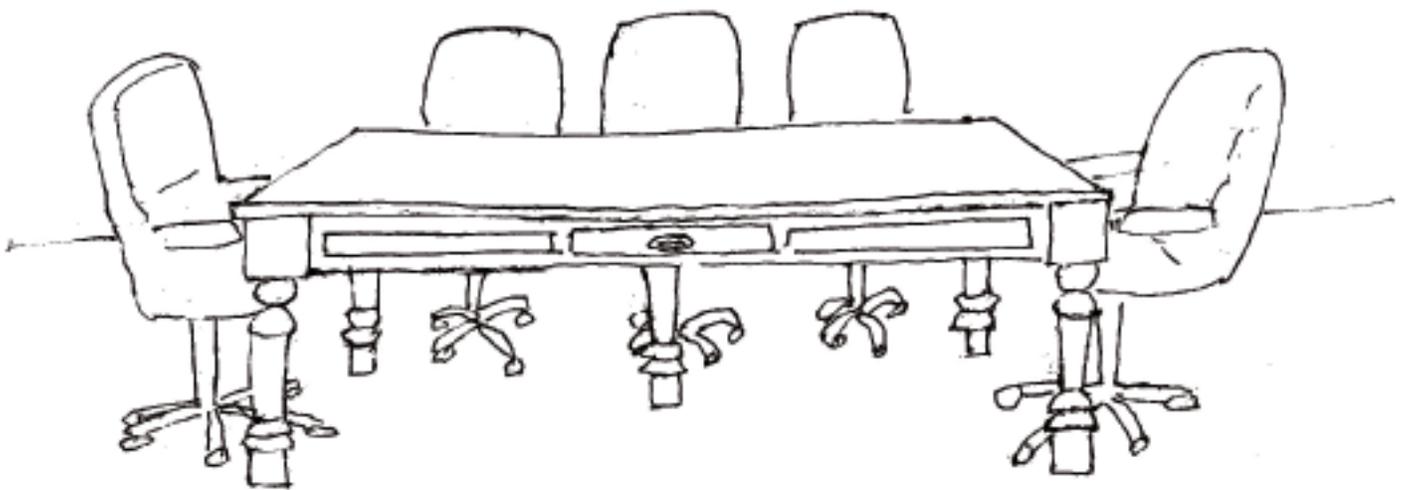
Although I have no particular expertise in traffic planning, I do believe that we must be relentless in exploring, evaluating and implementing all available mitigation alternatives. On the surface, I support the “one lane” restriction on Trapelo Road and have some thoughts on how we might evaluate its impact. The

road could be lined for the desired traffic pattern. Low cost rumble strips, as we see ground into the surface on the edge of highways, could be added to further ensure lane discipline. I am concerned about additional bump outs without clear lane markings along the entire route.

Vose

Pedestrian safety is of paramount consideration in a road narrowing decision. This concern and the effect on businesses on Trapelo Road are what I would weigh in my analysis of the question. The planning process should determine whether narrowing the street makes it a less attractive route to pass through commuters. If more and better parking result, narrowing could have the effect of attracting more destination shoppers to Trapelo Road. As Selectman I would want to see a design process in which all redesign issues, including these, are properly and thoroughly vetted.

6. Is historic preservation a high priority for you? For example, should we take care in rezoning the Trapelo Road/Belmont Street corridor not to create incentives to tear down such



landmark buildings as the Winter's block? Or should we rezone for greater density to raise more revenue regardless of the consequences?

Vose

I would want to preserve as much of Belmont's historic quality as possible. The specifics of how we might accomplish this along this corridor are under consideration now. It would be useful to look at how towns similar to Belmont have protected historic properties while meeting current economic development needs. But, the inescapable fact is that Belmont is a town of homes. Some taxpayers mistakenly believe that Belmont can reap significant tax relief for homeowners by attracting more business to town. Nevertheless, there are several good reasons why Belmont should be a business-friendly municipality. First, homeowners will enjoy some tax relief the more businesses that thrive in town. Also, the quality of our community life is enhanced by a greater variety of retail and service businesses we can patronize. Lastly, local businesses employing Belmont residents allow them to simplify their lives with shorter commutes and engage more in community life.

Firenze

Reasonable historic preservation is a high priority for me. I still lament the loss of the Olive Block in Belmont Center and the Winter's block should be preserved. We should never rezone for greater density to raise more revenue regardless of the consequences.

7. Do you favor the air rights proposal for building housing, shopping, and a garage in 60-foot-high structures over the train tracks in Waverley Square? What changes do you recommend for Waverley?

Firenze

Any proposal for commercial redevelopment should be encouraged and evaluated. However, I would only approve such a project after having had the opportunity to expose it to complete and extensive review and evaluation. Having said this, my initial reaction is that 60-foot buildings anywhere in town are much too high.

Vose

This raises complicated planning questions which

require more study. My sense is that a 60-foot-high structure would be out of character with Waverley Square. However, all stakeholders in Waverley Square, most especially residents and business owners, should participate in redesign and planning discussions. The more inclusive that process is, the better the resulting plan will be. I am confident that I have the skills to bring people into the conversation and encourage an open and honest exchange of opinion.

8. What zoning changes do you advocate in the next few years? For example, what's your position on teardowns?

Vose

This is another pressing planning issue which must be answered based on thoughtful, thorough study. However, Belmont needs to implement zoning which will protect the character of our neighborhoods from overbuilt lots.

Firenze

I believe it is time for a complete review of our special permitting process and all zoning bylaws. We have had too many instances where undesirable structures are built "by right" and some of the tear downs are a good example of this. On the other hand, occasionally, the bylaws are unrealistic impediments to desirable projects. I believe rezoning is appropriate to encourage specific desirable development, for example, in the lower Pleasant Street area.

Correction

In the September 04 issue, an article titled "New Crosswalks Improve Pedestrian Safety" stated "The Citizens Forum funded the first two [international style] crosswalks in 2002 in an effort to promote the safety benefits of the new design." In fact, the BCF gave the town a gift of \$2500, which funded five crosswalks. These new crosswalks were installed at Concord Avenue at Watson Road, Concord Avenue at Orchard Street, Concord Avenue in front of the post office, Lexington Street at Burnham Street and Lexington Street at Sycamore Street. *- Editor*



Regional Flooding: Arlington, Belmont & Cambridge Report

A Public Meeting

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 7-9 pm

**Arlington Town Hall
730 Mass. Ave.
Arlington Center**

Storm flooding, sewage backups - what can we do to control these problems in the Alewife area and surrounding neighborhoods?

The Tri-Community Working Group - engineers, citizens and officials from Belmont, Arlington, and Cambridge - has been formulating answers to these critical questions over the past two years. The group will summarize its draft report and answer questions.

For more information, call:

Arlington Selectman Kathleen Dias (781) 646-0441

Belmont Selectman Will Brownsberger (617) 489-2612

Cambridge Assistant Commissioner for Engineering Owen O'Riordan (617) 349-4845

O'Neill Wins Ruling on Belmont Uplands

By Sue Bass

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has ruled in favor of O'Neill Properties and against the Belmont Conservation Commission on the Belmont Uplands. The DEP stated that Belmont failed to provide the state with information to support the ConCom's position that O'Neill's application was premature and incomplete. This ruling means that O'Neill has won a round on technical issues. The DEP decision has been appealed administratively by both the town and the Belmont Citizens Forum. The Citizens Forum will continue to review this appeal in order to determine how it can more effectively proceed with this action.

In June 2003, the ConCom denied a request by O'Neill for an Order of Conditions to build the 245,000-square-foot R&D complex for which it has zoning permission. An Order of Conditions is a list of requirements that a developer must obey as it develops near wetlands and other protected natural resources and amounts to a green light for a particular project. The ConCom cited, among other reasons for its denial, O'Neill's failure to file an application with the Planning Board for site plan review. To make certain that conservation commissions reviewing a project have all the relevant information before them, the state Wetlands Protection Act requires developers to apply for (not necessarily to receive) all obtainable permits. O'Neill appealed the ConCom's denial of the Order of Conditions to DEP's Division of Wetlands and Waterways, which on September 30 overruled the denial.

Several mysteries surround this issue. One is what material the town was supposed to submit that it failed to supply. DEP's ruling says that the town did not confirm that O'Neill had failed to apply for all obtainable permits. However, the town submitted a letter dated Feb. 2 from Glenn Clancy, then assistant director of the Belmont Office of Community Development saying that O'Neill had not filed for site plan review (as required by the zoning for the Uplands,) and the town counsel had previously ruled that site plan review was among the approvals that were obtainable. It may be that DEP overlooked the town counsel's letter or that another letter from town officials would have clarified any ambiguities.

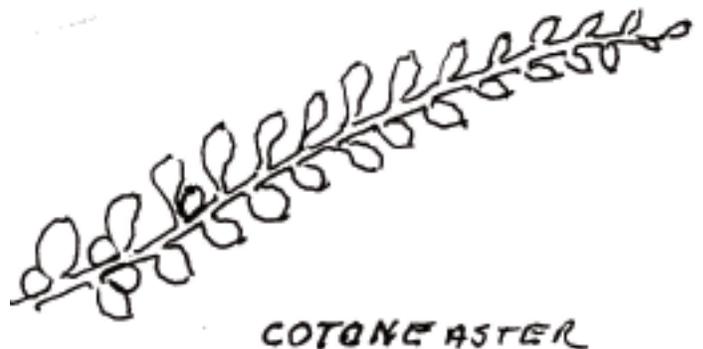
Another mystery is why O'Neill requested an

Order of Conditions for a development that it does not intend to build. Long before it approached the ConCom for this Order of Conditions, O'Neill had announced that economic conditions made it impractical to build R&D at the Uplands. The developer has applied for a comprehensive permit to build affordable housing there. So why ask the ConCom for a green light to build R&D?

Speculation about O'Neill's motives centers around the flood plain delineation. The Order of Conditions may have the effect of retaining the flood plain delineation based on 1982 data, which was accepted by the ConCom in 2000, until the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) formally issues a new flood plain delineation. FEMA is now re-examining the flood plain in the Alewife basin, and preliminary studies suggest that the flood plain is so much larger than in 1982 that it will put substantial limits on development at the Uplands. However, it may be several years before FEMA formally promulgates its new flood plain delineation. It is possible that O'Neill's move is intended to keep the ConCom from using the preliminary data to change the flood plain lines, either for the R&D, if the market improves, or for the housing project O'Neill is now seeking.

O'Neill's attorney, Jim Ward of Nutter McClennen & Fish, refused to explain the developer's motives. "Do you think I'm going to talk to you about what our points are?" he asked.

Sue Bass is a Precinct 3 Town Meeting Member and a board member of the Belmont Citizens Forum.



Trapelo/Belmont Corridor *continued from page 1*

monumental fashion. They also agreed that Belmont should work in concert with Cambridge and Watertown to coordinate zoning and design regulations to improve the area as a whole.

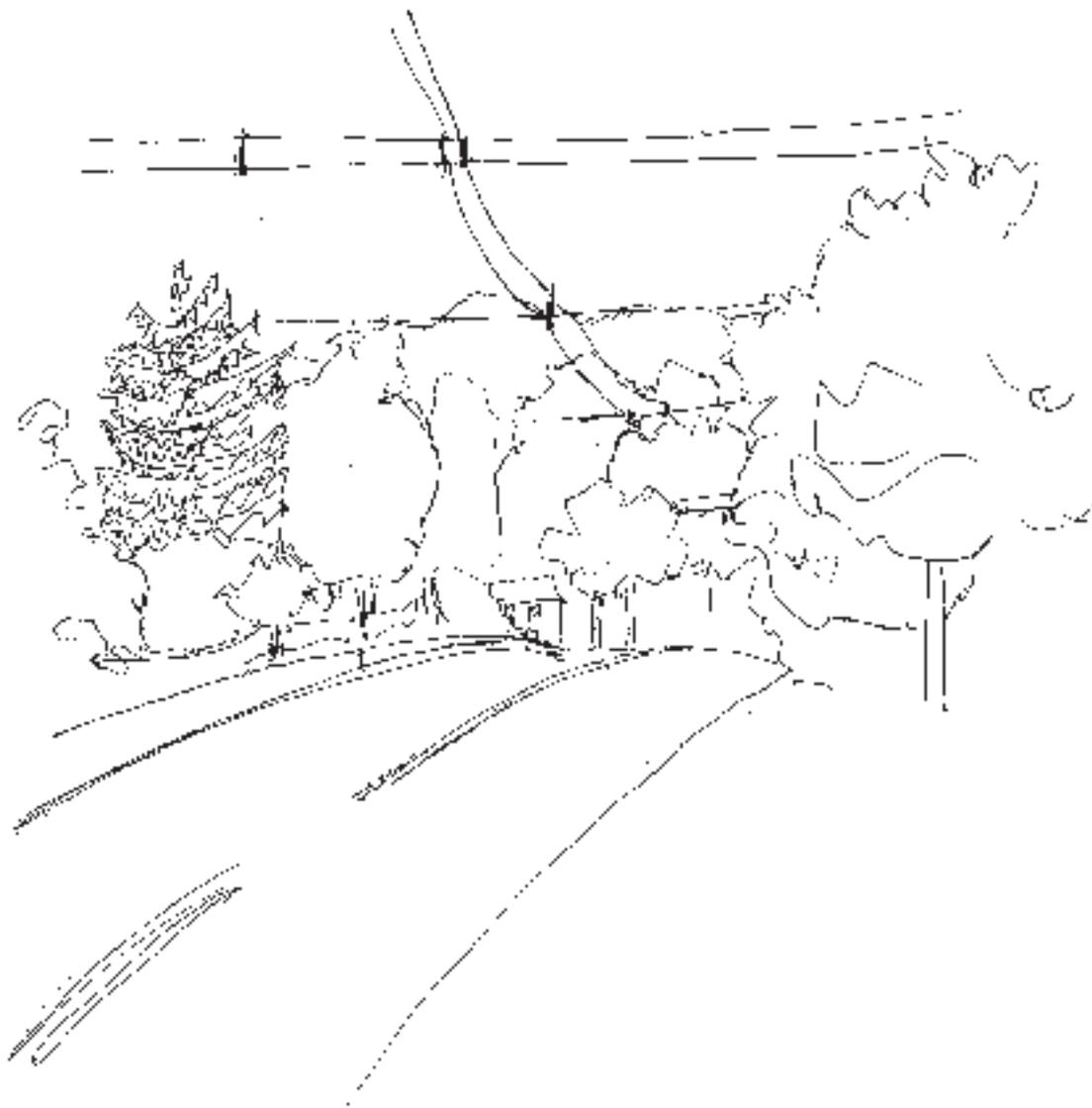
shops. This additional housing space would increase economic vitality by providing residents, businesses and their employees with incentives to shop and eat in the area. The students suggested that this vitality might also be achieved through a collaborative effort

with the adjacent towns to expedite permitting and promote business welfare through the formation of merchants' associations and tax incentives.

Students in all three groups were concerned about traffic safety and calming. Several alternatives were suggested that would not only slow traffic, but also reduce congestion, provide guidance for drivers, and reduce accidents: raised crosswalks, neck-downs, and narrower streets (accomplished by reducing the number of lanes and increasing the size of sidewalks). Bump-outs at busy intersections could also be used to increase safety and provide seating areas.

The students stated that streetscape improvements should be a crucial part of any makeover of the corridor. In its current state the street is aesthetically unappealing to both residents and businesses hoping to attract customers. Suggestions included trees, flowers, benches, wider sidewalks, and better lighting. Businesses with outdoor seating areas should be encouraged, in order to draw people into the area.

continued on page 12



The class also suggested expanding mixed-use opportunities in the easternmost part of the corridor. There is a lot of open space there, including the parking lots of Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Mercy, two Catholic churches slated by the Archdiocese of Boston to be closed this fall. These lots could be replaced with a combination of residential and commercial space. Housing also could be added as a second level over many of the single-story retail



We've all got a big stake in Belmont's "Main Street."

Hear MIT's report on how to make it better.

The Trapelo Road/ Belmont Street corridor is uninviting, dangerous, and doesn't produce optimal tax revenue for Belmont. That's why the Belmont Citizens Forum asked MIT Urban Planning graduate students to study the corridor and make recommendations about rezoning and redesign. The students presented their preliminary ideas to the public in October and solicited citizen comments and questions.

Now, hear their final recommendations for a more attractive and productive "Main Street."

Thursday, December 2, 7:30 pm
Beth El Temple, 2 Concord Avenue, Belmont
Parking lot entrance is around the corner on Blanchard Road

Sponsored by the Belmont Citizens Forum
617-484-1844

Statement of Purpose

The goal of the Belmont Citizens Forum's Trapelo Road/Belmont Street project is to help residents and businesses in Belmont create a vision for how one of Belmont's main streets can become a more pleasant place to live and work.

As a committee, we envision: (i) a street that's designed so traffic will move smoothly but more slowly, where pedestrians can cross safely and residents can get out of their driveways; (ii) a street lined with trees and with public amenities such as benches, bus shelters, and public artworks; (iii) a lively mix of housing and well-planned retail areas with enough public parking; (iv) provision for bicycles and other alternatives to driving; and (v) retention of landmark buildings and other good features of the street, like generous setbacks and landscaped front yards.

The Belmont Citizens Forum's Planning/Zoning Committee aims to get residents and business owners to join actively in creating this new vision. We will sponsor public presentations of the issues and will create opportunities for public discussion of potential improvements. We believe our efforts will complement those of the town-sponsored groups working on some of the same issues. Our goal is to see that Belmont's new vision for Trapelo Road and Belmont Street expresses the spirit and imagination of our entire community.

Trapelo/Belmont Corridor continued from page 10

Cushing Square/Palfrey Square Group

Cushing Square is perhaps the most pleasant area along the corridor, with residential areas and an interesting commercial/mixed-use square. The students thought that the town should consider setback and zoning modifications to create an overlay district, which would allow a mix of additional office/business and residential uses. Many single-story retail spaces could be converted to mixed-use through the additions of extra levels for office or residential space. By modifying design guidelines, the town could also create incentives for new housing.

The group thought that the streetscape in Cushing and Palfrey squares could be greatly improved by adding benches, trees, plants, and new paving. This would also create a better pedestrian environment. In addition, the students considered changing traffic-lane configurations to calm traffic, ease congestion, and make the area more pedestrian friendly. At the meeting, they presented drawings of two-, three- and four-lane configurations.

The students suggested building a decked parking lot on the site of the current municipal parking lot. They also noted that modified metering and diagonal parking could help slow down the traffic and would provide much-needed parking spaces.

All three groups discussed maximizing open green space. Pequossette Park is a hidden gem, its Trapelo Road entrance known only to locals. The students recommended that the town highlight that entrance and suggested changes that would make the park a bigger draw. "Daylighting" the brook that currently runs through a culvert under the park is one such possibility.

Central Square/ Waverley Square Group

The students found Central Square to be an effective concentration of businesses and residential spaces due to the multi-storied development that has flourished there. However, further west, most of the retail businesses become one story, the street widens, and the sidewalks remain narrow. The Belmont Cinema is a vital economic cornerstone that could anchor an exciting array of complementary businesses, such as restaurants, cafés, ice cream

parlors, bookstores, and friendly retail shops to browse in. The group suggested using an overlay zoning district to encourage more diverse housing and commercial uses and more flexible permitting standards.

In Waverley Square, the students praised the economic vitality brought by Shaw's, the Belmont Car Wash, Wheelworks, and the buses and trains of the MBTA. Unfortunately, most of the area is paved over and there is little green space. They suggested a town green in the center of the square, perhaps with a restaurant that offers an outdoor seating area. Space above the railroad lines could be reclaimed for either residential or commercial use.

In the 1930s, there were four large commercial greenhouses in the area of Waverley Square. Five old buildings around the square have retained their historic uses. The students suggested that the town

take this into account when planning new development in the area.

Additional information on the students' preliminary presentations as well as outlines, photos and illustrations can be found on-line at: <http://web.mit.edu/11.360/www/>. The students welcome any questions, input, or suggestions at 11.360@mit.edu. The groups will present their final reports to their professors and to Belmont townspeople on at 7:30 pm on December 2 at Temple Beth El, 2 Concord Avenue, Belmont.

Marta B. van Dam is a partner at the law firm of Gadsby Hannah LLP in Boston and a Belmont resident.



ANDROMEDA

Fernald Center Wetlands Ready for Revival

The Fernald Center's streams are a case study in how waterways persist. The wetlands on the grounds of the Fernald Center have been buried, covered, culverted and distorted for decades, yet streams are still breaking free of their culverts to return to their original paths. The ecology of the place can be partly restored by bringing streams out of concrete pipes and out into the open ("daylighting"), and letting wetlands develop where they naturally, and inevitably, will.

- Editor

On an 1896 map, the United States Geological Survey documented a stream originating at the current site of the National Archives & Records Administration building on Trapelo Road. The stream ran southeast and downhill through what is now the Fernald Development Center and on to Lawrence Meadow, at the intersection of Waverley Oaks Road and Beaver Street. Several streams from the uplands of North Waltham and Belmont drain into this area. The 1896 map also indicates the presence of wetlands along the stream near the western border of the Fernald Center.

An aerial photograph from 1952 confirms the presence of the wetlands and stream in this area. In fact, in the 1950s, Fernald staff dammed the stream every winter to form a skating pond near the Greene Building at 200 Trapelo Road, Waltham. Neighborhood children used to play in the farm fields and woods near the wetlands, and remember seeing wetland plants such as cattails and marsh marigolds.

In the 1960s, the federal government built the National Archives & Records Administration building on top of the spring-fed swamp and buried the stream in a culvert. The stream now emerges from that culvert on the edge of the federal property and continues along its original pathway until it reaches the boundary line between the National Archives and the Fernald Center, where it goes into a collapsed culvert. About 150 feet southeast and downhill from this culvert is a remnant of the original wetlands.

Much of the wetlands area was filled in by the Massachusetts



*This stream runs between the National Archives and the Fernald Center.
Photo provided by Marie Daly.*

After History of Disruption and Neglect



This remnant of the filled-in Fernald wetlands is located across from Site 7 in the cottage complex. Photo provided by Marie Daly.

Department of Mental Retardation in the mid-1970s, when a complex of single-story cottages – now called “Site 5” and “Site 7” – were built as residences for people with developmental disabilities. During construction, a gradually sloping hill was gouged out and some ten feet of soil removed. The stream was channeled into a culvert. Currently, the stream emerges near the chapel, and from there runs down the steep hill, past the power plant and into Lawrence Meadow. In addition, water from the nearby woods and wetlands pours into a storm drain located opposite light pole #29. The drain has been marked with white paint and a yellow arrow, as if to identify the problem.

The environmental disturbance occurred just before wetlands laws were passed, but the state now

has an opportunity to remedy this disturbance in its future plans for the Fernald Center. At the very least, the storm drain should be fixed, the stream opened up to the air, and some of the wetlands restored.

The woods and wetlands are part of the Western Greenway, a swath of land that stretches from Belmont Hill south and west to Lexington and Waltham through Rock Meadow, the former Metropolitan State Hospital (now a state reservation), the Fernald Center, and the Beaver Street properties of the Patriot Trail Girl Scout camp, and Lawrence Meadow (a University of Massachusetts property).

Marie Daly is Vice President of the Waltham Land Trust

Letter

To the Editor:

I read with great interest Meg Muckenhoupt's article on the Concord/Common/Leonard intersection, and will take this opportunity to suggest that the town has been looking in the wrong direction for many years.

First, two pieces of history:

1. Years ago, with traffic at that intersection rapidly becoming a nightmare, Dan Needham suggested to the police that they try not controlling the morning rush hour traffic to see what happens. They did, and traffic improved remarkably. Of course, volumes were much lower than now, but at that volume, the drivers were able to "work it out" to everyone's advantage.

2. Several years ago, I was one of the victims of the attempt by the Selectmen to reduce traffic turning East onto Concord Avenue from the right-hand lane, having just voted at Town Hall and being therefore forced to be in the right lane. Sure, that attempt was a nightmare, but what is most instructive and very frustrating is that the town made no attempt to follow up on that effort - not even a sign to say "No Left Turn," from the right lane, or "Right Turn Only," a sign that surely would have gotten a lot of attention from drivers, given the impact, and for some of us a very expensive impact, of that trial.

Much thought and effort has gone into the improvement of this intersection, and other spots in town. What I mean by "the wrong direction" is that the Town should finally give serious attention to reducing the volume of traffic moving through Belmont. The greatest increase in volume, if I remember correctly, started with the reconstruction of the Route 2 bridge. The town threw up its hands, saying "it's out of our hands," an attitude that has been maintained to this day.

Even now, unless things have changed, the town has not done anything to reduce speeds on Concord Avenue during the morning commute. I say that with confidence, since from 1976 through 2002, Concord Avenue was my commuting route, and I often drove the route several additional times a day. All too often,

there was radar at 10 in the morning, not 8:30. Since that time, I have not seen the beginnings of radar surveillance.

During the current rebuilding of Prospect and Clifton streets, a principal path into and through Belmont, the Town did nothing to install signs to dissuade drivers from coming through town, despite requests to do so.

I firmly believe that if we can reduce volume, a major component of inadequate intersection configuration will disappear. Some residents, of upper Prospect, unable to persuade the town to install chicanes or other mitigation methods, have considered morning parking on their street to slow speeds. This should be done there and in all similar locations, and frequently enough to be meaningful.

Effective radar enforcement can be used to create the certain knowledge that Belmont is seriously interested in its own welfare.

Dix Campbell
Prospect Street



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Save the World ... one little piece at a time.



Join the Environmental Committee.

The Citizens Forum's Environmental Committee is resuming work.

To discuss possible projects to improve our environment, please attend the next meeting, **Wednesday, Nov. 17, at 7:30 pm**, in the Flett Room on the ground floor of the Belmont Memorial Library.

For more information, to get notices of future meetings, or with questions or suggestions, please call Christine E. O'Neill at (617) 489-4456 or christineoneill@hotmail.com.

Wetlands *continued from page 20*

reptiles, amphibians, mammals, insects, fish depend on wetlands. Wetlands provide food, shelter, breeding, spawning and nursery areas. Many wildlife require both upland and wetland habitats for survival.

Plant habitat—Wetlands provide habitat for many plant species, including rare and endangered species.

Recreation—Wetlands offer passive recreationally opportunities, such as fishing, bird watching, canoeing and kayaking, and hiking.

Cultural value—Wetlands offer open space and opportunities for research and education.

Aesthetics—Wetlands offer natural beauty.

How Are Wetlands Protected Now?

Massachusetts uses a combination of overlapping federal, state, and local laws to protect wetlands. The major protection of wetlands in the state is through the state Wetlands Protection Act (Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 131, Section 40) which requires a permit for activities that may affect a

wetland. In Massachusetts, local communities, rather than state agencies, have the primary responsibility for protecting wetlands.

The Belmont Conservation Commission is a volunteer board appointed by the Board of Selectmen that administers the Wetlands Protection Act (WPA) for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. All construction, demolition or landscaping projects in or within 100 feet of wetlands, or within 200 feet of streams must come before the Commission for formal review. The Commission meets on the first Tuesday of the month.

Why a bylaw?

A wetlands bylaw would allow Belmont to offer greater protection of wetlands than the WPA. The WPA currently does not protect vernal pools or other isolated wetlands not linked to water bodies. That law also does not protect as a “resource” upland areas adjacent to wetlands and floodplains that act as a buffer to the wetlands. Furthermore, the law does not include plant habitat, recreation, and cultural values, and aesthetics as factors in determining whether wetlands should be protected.

A bylaw would allow the Conservation Commission to more thoroughly review large or high-impact projects by giving the Commission the authority to have the developer pay for engineering and consultant services necessary to review the project. A bylaw could also increase the town’s ability to enforce the wetlands regulations. At the same time, the bylaw could include provisions for waivers, such as allowing existing single family dwellings more flexibility than new construction, which would need to meet minimum setbacks.

How is a bylaw enacted?

The Belmont Conservation Commission would develop a draft wetlands bylaw in conjunction with the town attorney and in accordance with the Home Rule authority of the Massachusetts Constitution, Article 89, which grants the people of every town “the right to self-government in local matters....” The bylaw would need to be approved at Town Meeting, and the Massachusetts Attorney General would review and give final approval of the bylaw. All



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appeals of decisions made under the local bylaw would be through the civil court system. By contrast, WPA appeals are made to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

Why does it matter?

The importance of having a bylaw has recently been demonstrated by a decision on the Mugar site bordering Rte 2 in East Arlington. The case involved judging the limits of the “100-year flood elevation,” the area that would be inundated by a flood having a one percent chance of occurring in any given year.

The WPA relies on Federal Emergency and Management Agency (FEMA) maps under the National Flood Insurance Program to delineate the 100-year floodplain. The FEMA maps in the Alewife area date to 1982. In Arlington the Mugar team sought the Commission’s approval of the 1982 map. The Commission determined that the floodplain elevation in the area was likely higher than the FEMA elevation of 8.2 feet above sea level, but that not enough information was available to determine the most appropriate elevation. The developer appealed the Commission’s decision, first to the Massachusetts Superior Court and then to the Massachusetts Appeals

Court. The Appeals Court recently upheld the Conservation Commission’s decision.

In Belmont, in the absence of a bylaw, the town is forced to use the outdated FEMA elevation of 8.2 feet. To underscore the importance of this finding, a recent Boston Globe article states that preliminary updated FEMA maps of the Alewife area show that the floodplain may be as much as 2.5 feet higher than what is reflected on the earlier maps, or 10.7 feet above sea level. If the floodplain in Belmont were delineated in accordance with this reality, development in the area could be significantly affected.

For more information, contact the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions. The MACC has now posted electronic versions of a total of 78 wetland bylaws and ordinances, 47 sets of related regulations, and 5 wetlands policies at: http://maccweb.org/bylaws/bylaws_frameset2.html . The MACC’s Main Office is located here in Belmont at Habitat, 10 Juniper Road.

Peg Velie is an Associate member of the Belmont Conservation Commission. The opinions expressed in this article are her own and do not reflect the views of the Belmont Conservation Commission.

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Beth El Temple, 2 Concord Ave

People Are Asking

Does Belmont Need a Wetlands Bylaw?

By Peg Velie

Belmont could better protect our town's wetlands and floodplains with a wetlands bylaw. The current state law protects most, but not all wetlands, and most, but not all of their unique functions. The state law is a minimum set of standards to protect the water resources of the Commonwealth. Almost half of the towns in Massachusetts have adopted a bylaw to help protect additional wetlands and wetland features that are not protected by the state law, including Arlington, Lexington, Lincoln, and Watertown.

Wetlands are areas where water is at or just below

the surface of the ground. They are transitional areas between water bodies and uplands and frequently border streams and ponds, although isolated wetlands such as vernal pools also exist. Their functions include:

Increasing water quality and water supply—Wetlands naturally purify and store water. They trap nutrients, sediments and contaminants. Wetland vegetation stabilizes banks and captures sediments.

Stormwater and storm damage prevention—Paved areas cannot absorb water. Wetlands slow and store floodwaters, dampening the effects of flooding. By slowly releasing water back to streams and ponds, they help prevent floodwaters from rising rapidly and threatening lives and property.

Wildlife and fish habitats—Many birds,

continued on page 18