



Belmont Citizens Forum

Vol. 9, No. 4

Newsletter for Belmont Residents

July/August 2008

Three Challenges Target Uplands Builder

By Sue Bass

Efforts to prevent development of the silver-maple forest at Alewife are continuing on three fronts. The forest, which adjoins the state's Alewife Reservation, is the proposed site of a 299-unit apartment complex.

Most Belmont residents believe the forest is a bad site for housing because it is isolated from other parts of the community. Many would like to see the land permanently protected and added to the adjacent parkland.

The developer, O'Neill Properties, is using the state's "anti-snob" zoning law, Chapter 40B of the Massachusetts General Laws. This law allows builders to override local zoning laws if less than 10 percent of a town's housing is affordable by state definitions; Belmont has 3.2 percent.

detailed technical comments has been exchanged among the parties. Rachel Freed, acting section chief of the Wetlands and Waterways Program in the DEP's Northeast Regional Office, has sent the developer and the ConCom three requests for additional information, on February 19, March 28, and May 28. Those letters also commented on the information she had received so far: she agreed with some of the ConCom's positions and disagreed with others.

In response to Freed's comments, O'Neill has redesigned elements of the stormwater system, because flooding during heavy rains is a particularly difficult problem at the site. Though the silver-maple forest area is often called the Belmont Uplands, in fact the highest parts are

continued on page 4

Residents Support ConCom Decision

The greatest activity in recent months involves an appeal of the decision last December by the Belmont Conservation Commission (ConCom) that the project would violate the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act. O'Neill Properties appealed in January to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). A group of citizens from Belmont, Arlington, and Cambridge—including Sumner Brown, a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum—has intervened as legal participants in the case in support of the ConCom.

Since then, a thick pile of correspondence with

In This Issue

Environmental Events	2
CPA Money Could Help Rebuild Town . . .	8
Hiking Beaver Brook North	11
Little River Walk Reveals Past	16
Could I Bicycle to Work?	18

Environmental Events Calendar

Hardy Pond Boating and Picnic. Saturday, July 19, 5–9 p.m. Join the Waltham Land Trust and the Hardy Pond Association for a picnic and boating event on Hardy Pond. Bring a boat if you have one, though boats will also be available to share. Bring food to share as well. At 8:30 p.m., winning tickets will be drawn for the Ride, Row, Ramble raffle. Meet at Lazazzero Park, 7 Shore Road, Waltham. Information: jrose@walthamlandtrust.org, 781-893-3355, www.walthamlandtrust.org.

A Tour of the Water Purification Facility. Monday, July 21, and Monday, August 18, 6–7:30 p.m. Learn where Cambridge drinking water comes from and how it is purified and piped

through the city. Tim MacDonald, manager of Water Operations for the Cambridge Water Department, will describe the process, answer your questions, and give you a tour of the building. Meet at the Walter J. Sullivan Water Purification Facility, 250 Fresh Pond Parkway, Cambridge. Sponsored by Friends of Fresh Pond Reservation. Advance registration required. Information: friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com, 617-349-4793, www.friendsoffreshpond.org.

Mystic Film Screening. Friday, July 25, 7:30 p.m.–8:45 p.m. The Museum of Science, Boston and the Mystic River Watershed Association will sponsor “The Mystic River in Film: Issues, Answers and History,” a showing of documentaries produced for the course “Filmmaking and the Environment” at Emerson College. The films include State of the Mystic Benthos, which details the ecology at the benthic layer where the Mystic’s water meets the sediment; Missi-Tuk, a comprehensive history of the Mystic River showing how human activity has changed the ecology of the river and its watershed; and Green River, which details what people are doing, or not doing, to control the pollution flowing to the river. Free tickets are available in the museum lobby from 7:15 p.m. onwards. Information: contact@mysticriver.org, 781-316-3438, www.mysticriver.org.

A Northeast Sector Walkabout. Monday, July 28, and Monday, August 25, 6–8 p.m. Chip Norton, Cambridge Watershed Manager, will give a tour of Fresh Pond Reservation’s Northeast Sector, the beautiful new conservation and recreation areas recently opened for public use, and will outline the goals for this major restoration project. Meet at the Walter J. Sullivan Water Purification Facility, 250 Fresh Pond Parkway, Cambridge. Sponsored by Friends of Fresh Pond Reservation. Advance registration required. Information: friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com, 617-349-4793, www.friendsoffreshpond.org.

Belmont Citizens Forum Officers and Directors

Grant Monahon, President
John Dieckmann, Vice President
Mark D’Andrea, Treasurer
Evanthia Malliris, Secretary
Sue Bass Sumner Brown
David Chase Anne-Marie Lambert

Newsletter Editor: Meg Muckenhoupt
Artwork: Ann Coit Sifneos

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.

Our newsletter is published six times a year in 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

Summer Evening Mushroom Walk. Tuesday, July 29, 6–7:45 p.m. Join Habitat staff for a casual walk on the sanctuary to see a variety of fungi from puffballs to stinkhorns. Meet at the Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. Mass Audubon members \$12, nonmembers \$15. Sponsored by Habitat. Advance registration required. Information: Habitat@massaudubon.org, 617-489-5050, www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Habitat.

Basics of Green Building. Wednesday, July 30, 6–8 p.m. This workshop covers the fundamentals of residential green building. Topics include fundamentals of life-cycle analysis, energy conservation as the foundation of green building, energy- and resource-efficient design details, the fundamentals of building-envelope design, more environmentally friendly alternatives to conventional building materials, water conservation, and design for durability. Suggested donation \$10. Class meets at the NEXUS Center, 38 Chauncy St., 7th floor, Boston. Sponsored by NEXUS. Please RSVP to Aaron Desatnik at aaron@greenroundtable.org. Information: nexus@greenroundtable.org, 617-374-3740, www.nexusboston.com.

Insects and Ice Cream. Tuesday, August 5, 6–7:30 p.m. Come on a bug treasure hunt. Sweep a net in Habitat’s meadow to see what wonderful creatures you can find! Listen for cicadas and crickets, look for grasshoppers and spiders. How many different kinds of beetles can we spot? After the meadow adventure, have a cold treat of ice cream. Meet at the Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. Mass Audubon member adults and children \$7, nonmembers \$9. Sponsored by Habitat. Advance registration required. Information: habitat@massaudubon.org, 617-489-5050, www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Habitat/.

Sustainable Belmont Meetings. Wednesday, August 6, and Wednesday, September 3, 7 p.m.–9

p.m. Join Sustainable Belmont to help develop ways to help Belmont become an environmentally responsible town. Flett Room, Belmont Public Library. Information: sustainablebelmont@gmail.com

Rock Meadow Walk: Butterflies, Dragonflies, and Other Fluttering Fauna. Sunday, August 10, 1–2:30 p.m. Entomologist Roger Wrubel will guide this free walk through Belmont’s Rock Meadow, part of the Western Greenway. Information: lstruz@walthamlandtrust.org, 781-893-3355, www.walthamlandtrust.org.

Energy-Conserving Design Details. Thursday, August 28, 6–8 p.m. This two-hour lecture will cover residential design features and choices that may help to conserve energy. The discussion will include building siting and orientation issues, building-envelope details, glazing, shading structures and devices, thermal mass and energy-conserving landscape elements, as well as how interior-space layout can affect energy efficiency. Sponsored by NEXUS. RSVP to Aaron Desatnik at aaron@greenroundtable.org. Information: nexus@greenroundtable.org, 617-374-3740, www.nexusboston.com.



BLUEBERRIES

Uplands *continued from page 1*

little more than 20 feet above sea level. Neighboring areas, including Route 2, are even lower and often flood during heavy rains.

Water pollution from stormwater runoff is another major concern. The Mystic River Watershed, of which Alewife is a part, received a grade of D for water quality in April from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. In its most recent letter to the DEP, the ConCom said that O'Neill's consultants have underestimated by 10 percent the amount of paved surface that will create runoff in need of treatment.

O'Neill's environmental consultant, Tetra Tech Rizzo, Inc., has not yet responded to the DEP's third request for information or to the ConCom's latest comment letters. O'Neill's attorney, Jim Ward of the Boston firm Nutter McClennen & Fish, said Tetra Tech Rizzo would reply within a few weeks, well before the DEP's early August deadline. Freed said the DEP would rule on the appeal within 40 days of having all information, which would likely mean a decision in September.

One concern is whether the Belmont ConCom

has had enough support in its defense of its decision. During the six months that it was considering O'Neill's application, the ConCom was assisted by Scott Horsley of the environmental consulting firm Horsley and Witten, at the expense of the developer. Horsley has not participated during this appeal, however. The ConCom's technical comments have been written by ConCom members and by Belmont Conservation Commission Agent Mary Trudeau. Trudeau said it was unclear whether the town would have been able to continue to hire Horsley at O'Neill's expense, but the ConCom would certainly have liked his help. She said town counsel was also not involved in the appeal in a major way. Angelo Firenze, chairman of the Board of Selectmen, said the selectmen were not asked for town funds to assist the appeal.

Coalition Files Tidelands Appeal

The second current effort to fight the O'Neill development is being conducted by both the Coalition to Preserve the Belmont Uplands and Winn Brook Neighborhood and a group of 15



A map of the proposed Uplands development. Potential sewer lines are the thin gray lines connecting the Uplands location to Garrison Street in Belmont and Acorn Park Drive in Cambridge. The graphic is adapted from a map by Tetra Tech Rizzo, Inc.

Belmont residents. These groups are also filing an administrative appeal within the DEP, like the wetlands case, but this one involves a different law—a state law involving waterways that were once affected by daily tides but have now been filled.

This appeal pits two experts on that law against one another: Tom Bracken, attorney for the residents, who won an important tidelands case in February 2007 in Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (SJC); and O’Neill’s attorney, Michael Leon of Nutter McClennen & Fish, who helped draft the legislature’s amendment of state tidelands law in response to the SJC decision.

Last fall, Bracken asked the DEP to rule that the former channel of the Little River was a filled tideland. The February 2007 SJC decision would limit development in such a location. The Little River now runs through the state’s Alewife Reservation but formerly ran between the Uplands development site and Frontage Road, in a spot where O’Neill is planning to put utility lines. If the former channel is covered by the law, the utility construction might be subject to challenge.

In March, DEP’s Waterways Regulation Program ruled that the Little River formerly “was not subject to the daily ebb and flow of the tide, and instead influenced only by tides that exceeded mean high tide, such as monthly spring tides.” The decision noted that one of the principal sources cited by the neighbors, a 1904 report by John R. Freeman, said, “The influence of the ordinary harbor tides is said to be almost unnoticeable [in the area of the proposed development] but the higher spring tides, just after each full moon and new moon, change the level perhaps an inch or two as far as Little Pond.”

In the residents’ appeal of that decision, Bracken notes that “almost unnoticeable” means that the ordinary daily change in water level was, in fact, noticeable. He argues from other evidence that it would have been at least two inches even in 1904. Further, he notes that most of the 14 bridges across Alewife Brook and the Mystic River were built before the 1904 Freeman report and were likely to have already changed the historic natural tidal flow in Little River.



The parties expect an adjudicatory hearing within the DEP on the tidelands case. In such a hearing, both sides present evidence, mostly in writing, and the witnesses are available for cross-examination. It is intended as a speedier practice than an appeal to Superior Court. Motions must be filed next month, with responses to them in September. A hearing is scheduled for late February.

Suit Challenges Zoning Board

The third legal effort to prevent Uplands construction is a lawsuit filed by the Coalition to Preserve the Belmont Uplands and Winn Brook Neighborhood. This suit challenges a decision by the Belmont Zoning Board of Appeals to allow the development under certain conditions. So far, Bracken said, the Land Court judge has postponed action on that case pending decisions on the DEP issues.

A major argument in the Land Court case is the damage that O’Neill Properties would cause to Belmont’s broken sewer system by adding nearly 51,000 gallons of sewage a day. Recently, however, O’Neill has been discussing with Cambridge’s

continued on page 6

Uplands *continued from page 5*

City Engineer, Owen O’Riordan, the possibility of putting the development’s sewage in Cambridge instead, into an existing pipe under Acorn Park Drive. O’Riordan said the city laid out its mitigation demands—the same demands it made more than a year ago—but does not know whether O’Neill is willing to meet them.

O’Neill Could Still Build Offices

O’Neill has yet another option for developing the silver-maple forest. The land is zoned for an office park or research-and-development facility of 245,000 square feet plus a large garage. Not long after O’Neill persuaded Town Meeting to approve that zoning in 2002, the company announced that there was no market for such a development and it would prefer housing instead. When the Belmont Planning Board rejected another rezoning, O’Neill filed for a 40B development to override local zoning.

However, O’Neill retains the option of building its office park. The DEP approved its applica-



If these legal challenges become too burdensome, would Brian O’Neill of O’Neill Properties consider selling the silver-maple forest to the state and others interested in preserving it? His attorney said that would depend on the price. “He’s not going to discount it,” Jim Ward remarked.

tion to build under the Wetlands Protection Act, overruling the Belmont ConCom. That permission was to expire this spring, but the DEP extended it for one year, until May 2, 2009.

Is \$6 Million Enough to Save The Uplands?

If these legal challenges become too burdensome, would Brian O’Neill of O’Neill Properties consider selling the silver-maple forest to the state and others interested in preserving it? His attorney said that would depend on the price. “He’s not going to discount it,” Ward remarked.

Efforts are continuing to provide funds if the land becomes available at an affordable price. Thanks to state Representative William Brownsberger and state Senator Steven Tolman, the Environmental Bond bill currently making its way through the legislature includes \$6 million for the state to help purchase the Uplands.

Discussions in Belmont about local adoption of the state’s Community Preservation Act regularly mention that CPA funds earmarked for open space might be pledged to support a bond for the purchase; money from Cambridge’s CPA funds and from private donors might also be available.

—*Sue Bass is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.*

Citizens Forum Forgoes Sewer Appeal

The Belmont Citizens Forum board of directors has made the difficult decision not to appeal a ruling against us in our current McLean sewer case. As reported in the May/June 2008 issue of this newsletter, a regional director of the Department of Environmental Protection, filling in after the DEP commissioner recused herself, recently affirmed a permit to allow 83,000 gallons a day of sewage to be added to the Belmont system by two new developments on the McLean Hospital land.

After waiting 11 months for this disappointing decision and reviewing the current legal and market situations, the board unanimously concluded that an appeal now has almost no chance of influencing McLean to take further steps to compensate the town. The board is grateful to the many people who generously donated and pledged financial

support for such an appeal and was confident that the necessary funds could have been raised. However, the likelihood of the appeal's success seemed so small that we could not justify spending supporters' money in this way.

The board is proud of the role the Belmont Citizens Forum has played in getting the town to recognize that its sanitary sewer system is inadequate and in the steps the town is taking to improve the system. Belmont has already spent several million dollars to make improvements; April's Town Meeting approved spending \$11.6 million more. This expenditure will mean fewer sewage backups and cleaner water in our streams and lakes. As Belmont sends less clean water into the regional sewer system, the town and its ratepayers will also be rewarded by bills reflecting the lower volume.

—Sue Bass



State Money Could Help Rebuild Belmont

By Meg Muckenhoupt

Belmont residents could soon have the opportunity to take control of state funding for affordable housing, open space, and historic preservation—if they agree to raise property taxes for matching funds. On June 17, Belmont’s Community Preservation Act Study Committee held a public forum on the act to explain what this legislation does and how it could affect Belmont if the town’s voters approve it.

Belmont could potentially get matching funds from the state to rebuild the Underwood Pool; to pay for the local share of a bike path built mainly with federal funds; to help buy the silver-maple forest at Alewife; and to support an array of affordable-housing opportunities on sites scattered through town, according to members of the study committee.

The Community Preservation Act (CPA) is a state law that allows communities to levy a

surcharge of up to 3 percent on property taxes. That surcharge must be used for just four types of projects: affordable housing, open space, historic preservation, and recreation. Supporters of the CPA observe that those categories are often town-budget orphans—things that everyone would like to have for their towns but that never seem to get funded. Roads, safety, and schools are always a higher priority. “The purpose of the CPA is local control over the funding,” said Adam Dash, chair of Belmont’s Community Preservation Act Study Committee. As of June 1, 133 Massachusetts towns had adopted the CPA.

To encourage towns to adopt the CPA, the state has provided 100 percent matching funds to every town that collects CPA money since the CPA was passed in September 2000. These matching funds come from a \$10 fee charged for every Registry of Deeds transaction. “People from Belmont are going to the Registry of Deeds,

CPA Funds for Belmont

Below is a table of monies the Community Preservation Act would provide for Belmont, including local and state funds, given different property-tax surcharges and levels of state matching funds.

State Match	1% Surcharge	1.5 % Surcharge	2% Surcharge
65 %	\$864,131	\$1,296,196	\$1,728,262
75 %	\$916,502	\$1,374,753	\$1,833,005
100%	\$1,047,431	\$1,571,147	\$2,094,862

The data are based on level assessments from fiscal year 2008 plus a 2.5 percent increase to estimate the fiscal 2009 data, with an estimated tax rate of \$11.27 percent and an exemption for the first \$100,000 of assessed value. Data provided by the Community Preservation Act Study Committee.

putting money in, and getting nothing out,” said Dash, because Belmont has not passed the CPA. As more and more towns pass the CPA, the state may not be able to provide 100 percent matches in the future. So far these fears have been unfounded, but the Massachusetts Department of Revenue has estimated that for 2008 it will only be able to provide a 65 percent match to the communities with the lowest surcharge, with a larger match going to the 71 communities that adopted a full 3

“People from Belmont are going to the Registry of Deeds, putting money in, and getting nothing out,” said Dash, because Belmont has not passed the CPA.

percent surcharge.

The CPA law has three major parts: what it can fund, how the CPA is approved in a community, and how a town can decide what to spend the money on. At least 10 percent of a town’s yearly CPA money must be spent on each of three areas: affordable housing, historic preservation, and open space. The remaining 70 percent of funds can be spent in any amount on those three categories or on recreation—or kept in the CPA account until a worthy project appears.

To enact the CPA, a town must put the CPA on the ballot as a referendum in a regular election. The referendum can be put on the ballot via a majority town-meeting vote or by a citizens’ petition signed by 5 percent of the town’s voters; in Belmont, that would be around 750 signatures.

The CPA referendum must specify the amount of the surcharge, typically between 0.5 and 3 percent. In the past year, most towns that adopted the CPA approved surcharges of 1.5 percent. These referendums also specify exemptions from

the CPA surcharge. Many towns exempt low-income households plus the first \$100,000 of assessed value of all homes.

Once the referendum is approved by a majority of voters at the polls, a community sets up a Community Preservation Committee (CPC) to take applications from local departments, community groups, and residents for the funds. The CPC makes recommendations to the legislative body of the town (in Belmont’s case, Town Meeting) for how the CPA funds should be spent; Town Meeting must approve the final CPA budget. “It’s a democratic town-controlled process,” said Dash.

Once the CPA has been approved by the town’s voters, the town is committed to levying a CPA surcharge for five years, but after that the CPA can be repealed by a referendum. If the CPA surcharge seems too onerous, the town’s voters can reduce it by referendum without a waiting period—theoretically to almost nothing. “There’s a ceiling [of 3 percent],” said Dash. “There is no floor.”

CPA Funds Can Attract More Money

Although CPA money is often used to buy

continued on page 10



CPA *continued from page 9*

land or restore buildings, CPA funds can also be used for studies, plans, surveys, or consultants—or as seed funds for larger projects. Many federal and state grants require local matching funds. The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation’s grants for trails require a 20 percent local contribution, and federal funds for rail trails (multi-use paths on former railroad beds) require a 10 percent local match.

CPA funds can also be used as collateral for bond issues. A bond is most likely how Belmont would contribute toward purchase of the silver-maple forest. If the developer agreed to sell, the state would likely pay part of the cost directly. The rest could come by pledging part of the town’s open-space funds under the CPA to support a bond issue. Since part of the silver-maple-forest land lies in Cambridge, which has already adopted the CPA, that city might be persuaded to help buy the silver-maple forest from its open-space funds.

Belmont’s CPA Wish List Is Lengthy

Belmont has plenty of projects that could use CPA money. Affordable-housing funds could be used to convert existing housing to affordable units or to finance affordable units in the town’s overlay districts: the Oakley Neighborhood overlay district, Belmont Center, or Cushing Square. CPA money could also help finance

improvements in Belmont Housing Authority sites and to fund housing consultants.

In addition to the silver-maple forest, Belmont could use CPA open-space money to purchase park or conservation land as it comes on the market. The town could also buy conservation restrictions, paying landowners to give up the right to develop their land.

CPA money for historic preservation could restore the Underwood Pool, the first public swimming pool in the United States; the brick barn at Rock Meadow; the old Municipal Light Building; or the police station. The town could survey Belmont’s townwide historic resources and also scan and store the town’s historic documents electronically.

CPA recreation funds could help pay for bike paths and for other projects, though Dash warned that many recreation projects would not be entitled to a state match. Generally, the law permits construction of recreational facilities with CPA money only on land that was purchased with CPA funds.

Belmont’s Community Preservation Act Study Committee is currently accepting public comments on the CPA and expects to issue recommendations to Town Meeting this fall. For more information see the committee’s web page on the Belmont town site, www.town.belmont.ma.us.

— *Meg Muckenhoupt is Editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum newsletter.*



Beaver Brook North Offers Hikes Near Home

By Dan Lech

It's a beautiful weekend afternoon, and the clan is deciding how to take advantage of the day. A hike is suggested and accepted by all with great enthusiasm (with the possible exception of the 11-year-old). But where to go? The White Mountains? The Blue Hills? Vermont? With gasoline prices hovering around the \$4 mark and everyone watching carbon footprints, a local option might be a better choice. Maybe a stroll around Fresh Pond or Habitat is in order? Excellent choices. But if you're in the mood for someplace different, consider the Beaver Brook North Reservation (BBN).

Beaver Brook North is a 254-acre piece of green space right here in Belmont, with an unusual history, bountiful plant and animal life, and diverse terrain. The name may not be familiar, or it may be confused with the more visible Beaver Brook Reservation on Trapelo Road.

BBN is the former grounds of the Metropolitan State Hospital, which sits at the intersection of three communities: Belmont, Lexington, and Waltham. It is bounded by Concord Avenue to the northeast, Trapelo Road to the southwest, and Beaver Brook to the east/southeast. Beaver Brook North boasts diverse natural habitats including red maple swamp, oak and hickory forest, and upland meadow. The easiest way to reach the reservation is through Rock Meadow, which has a parking lot on Mill Street. In fact, if you've ever crossed the footbridge over Beaver Brook from Rock Meadow, you've visited BBN!

History Is on View

Some of the more interesting aspects of this property are the visual reminders of our local and state history. The first known use of the property was as hunting and gathering grounds for the Pequossette Indians. Artifacts from their activities have been unearthed on properties bordering BBN.

During colonial times, it became farmland.

The remains of stone walls demarcating long-forgotten property boundaries can still be spied through the trees. The property stayed in the hands of private landowners (including General Nathaniel Bridges, a personal friend of George Washington) until 1915, when the state of Massachusetts purchased the land in order to build a hospital for the mentally ill.



Metropolitan State Hospital Administration Building. Photo by Dan Lech

The hospital project was in limbo for some years, but ground was finally broken in 1927 and the hospital completed in 1930. The Metropolitan State Hospital, conceived with the best intentions of treating the mentally ill in a bucolic setting, was eventually plagued by overcrowding and underfunding. It remained in operation until 1992.

The state classified the property as surplus land and planned to sell it off to the highest bidder, seeing the potential for attracting a major corporation to this desirable site. The three communities that shared the land were given short notice to put in their two cents on its uses, but they formed a committee and used the safeguards of Chapter 7 of the Massachusetts General Laws to their advantage to convince the state to put site planning in local hands. Those provisions of Chapter 7 were enacted in the 1970s to keep politicians from making back-room deals with

continued on page 13



Beaver Brook North trail map. Broad carriage paths are shown by thick white dotted lines; thinner lines indicate smaller walking trails. Detail of a map of Beaver Brook North Reservation and surrounding areas prepared by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR); used by permission of the DCR.

Beaver Brook North *continued from page 11*

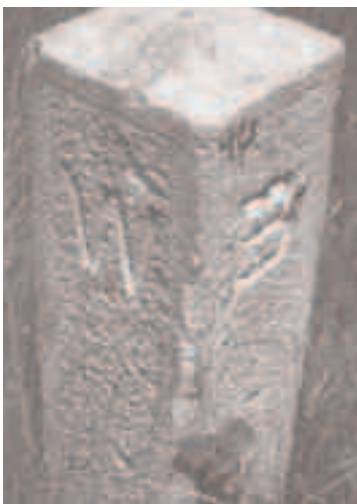
private individuals who coveted public lands. (For more details about Massachusetts surplus land laws, see “Towns Seek to Control Local Surplus Land,” Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter, September 2007.)

The three communities worked together to keep the land out of the hands of developers but had divergent plans for their individual portions. Waltham planned a nine-hole golf course for its parcel, though that has been reconsidered and may not be built; Lexington authorized an apartment development; and Belmont chose to have its portion become a public reservation.

Evidence of the hospital’s tenure on the property is part of what makes BBN an interesting walk. The trail splits after the Rock Meadow bridge; the main trail is an oval loop, so whichever direction you choose, you end up back at the bridge. The leftmost trail gently curves to the right until you come to the hospital graveyard.

This burying ground, enclosed by a stone wall, was used for patients who were too poor to afford other arrangements. The small headstones that protrude from the well-kept grass have no names, only numbers to identify those at rest. One can’t help but feel a somber stillness around this gravesite in the middle of the woods.

Another piece of history is the site of the hospital’s administration building, which is now boarded up and abandoned. It can be found by



Waltham/ Belmont
Boundary Marker, BBN

continuing past the graveyard and veering left off of the main path toward Trapelo Road. This building sits in Waltham and not in Lexington, so it was spared conversion; the rest of Met State’s buildings were either torn down or converted into part of the new Avalon at Lexington Hills apartment

complex. Coming out of the woods and seeing the administration building’s Gothic Revival architecture juxtaposed with the rest of the complex gives you the before-and-after view.

Between the administration building and the apartment complex, there is a small field with a stone marking the intersection of Belmont, Lexington, and Waltham. It’s a fun photo op. Kids love it.

Still, a hike through the reservation is not all about man-made structures. More than 225 species of plants have been cataloged on the property. More than 146 bird species have been sighted. See if you can spot a blue-winged warbler or a rose-breasted grosbeak. Mammals are also well represented—red fox, coyote, and woodchucks among them. I came across a full-grown female white-tailed deer as I crossed Rock Meadow on the way to BBN. After a brief staring contest, I fumbled for my camera and the doe hightailed it.

Other interesting natural features include vernal pools, brooks, streams, and glacial eskers (small hills). If you’re heading back toward the bridge on the eastern side of the main loop, there are smaller trails to the left that bring you to the top of an esker. A path runs along the top of the hill and then back down to the main trail. It’s an interesting and elevated diversion.

On a warm, late-spring Sunday afternoon, I spent about an hour and a half touring the site and encountered four other humans (and their dogs), about a thousand chipmunks, and my deer friend. BBN is not a crowded park with well-known trails but an underused resource awaiting exploration.

The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, which manages the land, has plans to set up a visitor center at the reservation. The center would offer maps and information, but at this point its construction is not imminent. In the meantime, may I suggest forgoing the long car ride and hiking at the Beaver Brook North Reservation, a local gem.

—Dan Lech is a ten-year Belmont resident, wine professional and musician who is attempting to think globally and act locally.

Little River Walk Reveals Waterway's Past

By Lowry Pei

In the 19th century, the area west of Fresh Pond, extending to Little Pond in Belmont and Spy Pond in Arlington, was still known as the “Fresh Pond Marshes.” Around 1860, according to *Birds of the Cambridge Region* by William Brewster, “the meadow grass which covered them was regularly cut and drawn off in hay wagons.” The water in the marsh’s streams was clear and drinkable. It was possible to canoe from Fresh Pond up the Little River, through the marshes, to Little Pond and Spy Pond without once getting out of one’s canoe.

I’ve been exploring the Little River pretty regularly since September 2007—if “exploring” is the word for visiting a place so many people have set foot in before. There is a newness that waits to be found every day, and not many people go into the Alewife Reservation, compared with the number who whiz by it on Route 2 or Fresh Pond Parkway.

The Little River as we know it today flows out of Little Pond near Hill Estates; soon thereafter,

Wellington Brook enters it at a wide place in the stream known as Perch Pond. The Little River continues on an almost straight course to the Alewife T stop, where it flows under Route 2 and its name changes to Alewife Brook.

It is fascinating to compare the area as we know it today to a map of Fresh Pond and its surroundings circa 1866, drawn in 1906 by Charles D. Elliot. The present-day Alewife T stop is in a spot that, in 1866, had marsh on three sides, with two clay pits to the southeast (the local brick industry was in full swing) and beyond them a “Wooded Island” (about where Cambridge’s Danehy Park is today). See page 20 for a copy of Eliot’s Fresh Pond map.

To the south of the T stop was a “Maple Swamp” (currently Fresh Pond Shopping Center); to the southwest and west were a “Glacialis or artificial ice pond” and “Pine Swamp” (mostly offices, warehouses, stores, and small factories today). To the northwest of the T stop was all marsh, with the Little River running through it. Today that area is office parks, industrial and

high-tech firms, and the Alewife Reservation. The Route 2 of today crosses what was a “Cart path shaded by willows” and the “Site of former Heronry of Night Herons, also of Robin Roost.”

People have been engineering this watershed for many years, by digging ditches to drain fields, re-channeling streams, damming Alewife Brook, and so on, for different reasons at different times. As population and industrialization grew in the late 19th century, the marshes (and the water supply of Cambridge and part of Belmont) were



View through the back fence of the Susse Chalet. Photo by Lowry Pei.



View of the Faces nightclub from the rear. Photo by Lowry Pei.

subject to multiple types of pollution. The worst offender was a slaughterhouse, built north of Fresh Pond in 1878, that dumped its waste into the wetlands. Cambridge and Belmont traded accusations about whose sewage was polluting the area. Malaria was rampant around the marshes.

By 1900, local conditions had become a recognized crisis. The *Cambridge Chronicle* of August 4, 1900, ran an article headlined “Wellington Brook Must Be Purified,” subtitled “Petitioners Declare That Its Condition Is Offensive and a Menace to Public Health—Thursday’s Hearing at City Hall.”

Today’s Little River is in fact a new channel that was dug in response to the public-health crisis. We owe it, and indirectly the whole Alewife Reservation, to a project authorized in 1903 “for improving the sanitary and drainage conditions of Alewife Brook” and the marshes, “under the joint action of Arlington, Belmont, Cambridge and Somerville.” Once again, it was necessary to re-engineer the watershed to fix problems humans had brought on themselves. By 1908, the state had taken the land that is now the Reservation, heeding the advice of John R. Freeman, civil engineer, that “The cleanliness and care of the banks of this drainage channel ought to be protected by public ownership of a strip of land on both

its sides.” Originally all of that land was known as Alewife Brook Parkway.

In March of this year, I decided to see what I could find of the original Little River, which ran to the north of the current channel and entered Alewife Brook at a slightly different point (Alewife Brook then flowed out of Fresh Pond). Interestingly, a remnant of the old Little River is shown on at least one map that seems to date from the 1970s, even though by then the new channel had existed for 60 years. Behind a motel by the side of Route 2, formerly the Susse Chalet, I saw water through the back fence. To the left of the Susse Chalet is a newly built office building called Discovery Park and its parking lot.

This looked more than promising. Next to the motel is the ruin of the nightclub known as Faces (its decrepit sign is still there), deserted for years now. Nature is visibly reclaiming its parking lot; moss is growing on it, and grass is coming up through big cracks in the asphalt. It won’t be too long before this space is overgrown. The building is a wreck, and behind it is a wetland; despite roadways and parking lots, these are still the Fresh Pond Marshes. According to Elliot’s map, this is also about where the Little River used to flow. From what may once have been the riverside,

continued on page 16



Marshy area near the Faces nightclub. Photo by Lowry Pei.

Little River *continued from page 15*

there is a picturesque view of the ruins.

Along Acorn Park Drive, there's more left of the Fresh Pond Marshes than one might imagine while driving by in a car on Route 2.



*View across the road from the silver maple forest.
Photo by Lowry Pei.*

I took another picture across the road from the tract now known as the “silver maple forest,” where developers hope to build a 299-unit apartment complex.

That parcel of land may partially owe its current status as a potential building site to the re-routing of the Little River. It still borders a wetland, however, and this is one of the strongest arguments against developing it.

A definite current of water was flowing out of the ultra-manicured bit of stream beside Discovery Park, under the roadway, and emerging on the other side. From this point, the water flows west alongside Acorn Park Drive and into a marsh that drains into the present-day Little River. The living continuity, from the wetland behind Faces to the present-day river, matters to me; it feels as though the landscape preserves a faint memory of the Little River that once was.

It never hurts to know a little more history. In the past 150 years, there have been losses and gains on the Fresh Pond Marshes, some of which are obvious and some of which are not. Looking

at the map of the area circa 1866, one can't help but regret the loss of a “cart path shaded by willows”; but at the same time, slaughterhouses no longer dump their waste products into the local water supply. A proposed subdivision that was on a 1903 map next to Perch Pond (street names and all) was never built; the Metropolitan Park Commission prevented that by taking the land. The fact that malaria was once a threat here is not obvious to us today.

My wanderings up and down the Little River tell me that today the Fresh Pond Marshes area is mostly ignored. Some homeless people live there, some people who live nearby go there to enjoy it, most people rush by. But it's still there, and though it's not nature primeval, it is nature. Its history says that it is both open to being shaped by human interventions and persistently itself. The area through which the Little River flowed in the 19th century is still a wetland for a reason. We can't change the fact that water goes where it needs to go. We're steadily moving away from the worst excesses of 19th-century industry and



Stream beside Discovery Park; roadway is visible on the upper right. Photo by Lowry Pei.

simultaneously creating excesses of our own, like our dependence on cars and our level of consumption. Our standards of public health are superior to those of a century ago and still evolving. I hope that our notion of public health, our notion of our own self-interest, will once again come to include the health of the Little River and the local marshes, Wellington Brook, Blair Pond, Perch Pond and all the rest of the ponds and waterways named and unnamed. I don't think this is a sentimental idea. It certainly was not in 1900, when the public demanded action before the Board of Health.

People get used to everything, and the human time horizon is very close in. We tend to think that the way things are today "just is." But the way

things are today is a history of decisions, some good and some rotten, the outcome of a chronicle of consequences intended and unintended. There's no way we're going to "just leave nature alone" around here; it's centuries too late for that. The arrow of time only points one way, and we have one choice: let go of the past. But letting go of it does not mean forgetting it.

Soon enough, we will be someone else's past. We'll leave behind our own legacy of decisions. Let's hope they are as good as some that were made a century ago.

—Lowry Pei is an English professor at Simmons College. He is currently writing a book about *water and our relationship with nature*.



Fresh Pond Wetland, May 13, 2008. Photo by Lowry Pei

People Are Asking

Could I Bicycle to Work?

By Sumner Brown

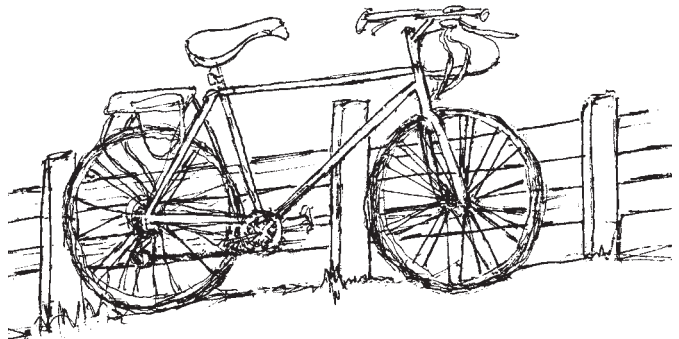
Most American children enjoy bicycles but forget about bicycling as soon as they get their learner's permits. This amnesia is starting to wear off: bicycling for recreation is booming, and bicycle enthusiasts routinely spend a few thousand dollars for a bicycle every few years. A tiny portion of the U.S. population even bicycles to work. With the consequences of America's energy policy showing at the pump, people are changing their view of those who bicycle to work from crazy to lucky.

Bike Paths Make Commuting Easier

Bicycling could be a substantial part of our transportation system. In Europe, where gas prices commonly reach \$9 a gallon, deliberate political leadership in many countries has produced more bicycling and less driving. Intersections, signals, and rules of the road have been modified to make cycling more attractive. In some cases, urban traffic signals have been synchronized to bicycle speeds. Much of Europe has a network of bike paths, so many bicycle trips are more pleasant and

more convenient than driving. Some American cities are further along the bicycling pathway than others.

Massachusetts is developing a bicycle infrastructure that can provide both recreation and transportation. The Minuteman Bikeway, which runs from Bedford through Lexington, Arlington, and into Cambridge to the Alewife T station, is a wonderful example of what happens when a bike path is available: it gets used heavily. On a Saturday last September, observers counted 204 people per hour on the Minuteman Bikeway in



Lexington Center from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. About 70 percent of users were bicyclists; the rest were runners or walkers. The bikeway gets so much use that Arlington cleared snow from its part of the path this last winter just as it plows roads. On workdays, over 250 bikes are parked at the Alewife T station at the end of the Minuteman Bikeway. Demand for bike parking is so high that the MBTA is building a "bike cage" with camera surveillance to provide secure parking for another 50 bicycles.

If you take the Minuteman Bikeway to Alewife, you can continue on the Linear Park bike path to the Davis Square T station and a bit beyond. There are also bike paths beside the Charles River. More bike paths are planned, including one from the Alewife T to Brighton Street in Belmont: construction of this short path (under a mile) could begin this fall. Some roads in Cambridge and in Belmont have painted bike lanes. When reconstruction of Route 60, Pleasant Street, in Belmont is finished, it will have painted bike lanes. We should thank Anne Paulsen, who championed legislation that requires new state roads to have bike lanes.

Governments Supporting Bicycling

Denmark's network of bike lanes
www.copenhagenize.com

Paris's bicycle-rental program
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14429468

Seattle's bicycle master plan
www.ci.seattle.wa.us/transportation/bikemaster.htm

Portland, Oregon's bicycle programs
www.portlandonline.com/transportation/index.cfm?c=34772

We need you.

If you can volunteer even a few hours a month, you can make a difference. You do not need to be an expert—just a person who cares about our town.

I can devote time to:

- Archaeology & Historic Preservation
- Environmental Protection
- Planning & Zoning
- Traffic & Transportation
- Mailings
- Newsletter
- Web site

I can help pay for this newsletter:

It costs about \$4000 to publish each issue of our newsletter. Please donate for this purpose:

\$25 \$50 \$100 \$250

Name _____

Address _____

Phone/E-mail _____

If you have questions, please call (617) 484-1844. The Belmont Citizens Forum is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Your donation is deductible from federal taxes to the full extent provided by law.

Make checks payable to Belmont Citizens Forum and mail to Belmont Citizens Forum, P.O. Box 609, Belmont MA 02478. Thank you!

Could you bicycle to work? It's easy to enjoy riding a bicycle on the Cape Cod Bike Path on a sunny day. But to bicycle to work without a bike path requires superior bicycling skills. You must be able to follow a precise path through potholes while traffic moves past you and makes right-hand turns in front of you. You must stay clear of parked cars whose doors might be opened without warning. You must know how to make a left-hand turn in heavy traffic. You must be constantly aware of traffic. You must be able to bicycle in unpleasant conditions and look professional when you get to work. You must be able to go under the Belmont Center railroad underpass and turn onto Concord Avenue in rush hour traffic. Then there is the exhaust.

In short, biking to work without a bike path is no fun. But if you live in Arlington or Lexington, and if you work near the Minuteman bike path or the Linear Park path, you can commute with healthful pleasure. Health, financial considerations, and our nation's sustainability point to a future with more bicycling.

—Sumner Brown is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Boston Area Bike Paths and Organizations

Minuteman Bikeway
minutemanbikeway.org

Charles River Bike Path
www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/metroboston/maps/bikepaths_dudley.gif

Boston Bikeways and Trails
www.massbike.org/bikeways/indexb.htm

Bicycling in Boston
www.cityofboston.gov/transportation/bike.asp

Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition
www.massbike.org

LivableStreets Alliance
www.livablestreets.info

Belmont Citizens Forum
P. O. Box 609
Belmont, MA 02478

Nonprofit Org.
U. S. Postage Paid
Boston MA
Permit No. 56393

Address Service Requested

Where is the Little River now? Lowry Pei explores Belmont's historic waters, p. 14.



Fresh Pond and its Surroundings about 1866. William Brewster; The Birds of the Cambridge Region (1906). Cambridge Historical Commission