



# Belmont Citizens Forum

## There's No Quick Fix for Fresh Pond Traffic

By Will Brownsberger

There is some hope for improvement in a problem most readers of this newsletter are deeply familiar with: the congestion around Alewife and on Fresh Pond Parkway.

Let's go back to the beginning. In the late 1940s, there was serious talk of building an inner-belt superhighway, which motorists from the north and west would have reached via an

expanded Route 2. That expansion, known as the Northwest Expressway, would have plowed right through what we now refer to as the Silver Maple Forest and on through North Cambridge neighborhoods to join the inner belt north of Kendall Square.

Local activists defeated the plan, which was formally abandoned in 1972. This was a great victory for neighborhood quality of



Aerial view of Alewife MBTA station and Routes 2, 16, and 3. Alewife Brook Parkway terminates at the Concord Street Rotary. Fresh Pond Parkway (Route 16) continues around Fresh Pond to intersect with Mount Auburn Street.

life. The public entrepreneurs who jammed superhighways through urban areas in the 1950s and 1960s destroyed many vibrant neighborhoods, causing rot to radiate for blocks and blocks. Had that superhighway been built, Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge would not be such sought-after communities.

A less glorious legacy of neighborhood activism in the 1970s was the defeat of a proposal to extend the Red Line further toward Arlington and Lexington. Residents of those communities pushed back on the siting of stations and were concerned about the influx of outsiders that subway access might bring. Seeing

the renaissance of Davis Square and the high desirability of housing within walking distance of Alewife, it is obvious how sadly misguided that activism was.

Stopping the inner belt, other urban expressways, and Red Line expansion didn't eliminate the desired routes those projects were intended to serve. Traffic has continued to grow, and Alewife is now among the most congested areas in the state.

## Red Line Can't Fix Congestion

When I became a state representative in 2007, I started studying the problem and began pushing for improvement options. As a mass-transit enthusiast, I focused first on extending the Red Line. I learned of several major barriers to that concept:

- There is a generally accepted precedent for avoiding intrusion into the sensitive wetlands around Alewife.
- With the disused rail bed between Cambridge and Lexington rebuilt as the Minuteman Bikeway, assembling the right-of-way for a new subway line would be very difficult.
- The Big Dig put the state in a deep hole financially, and we are still trying to claw our way out.
- Few people with a full understanding of the state's maintenance backlog and financial condition are interested in starting mega projects.

Putting all those barriers to Red Line expansion aside, there's another reason not to focus on that dream. Evidence indicates that it would not really solve the local congestion problem. I was surprised to learn, as I talked to planners, that many of the drivers who clog those roadways would not be served by Red Line expansion. Studies of license plates entering and exiting the area show that commuters are driving through Alewife from Medford to Newton and from Watertown to Malden as well as from Concord and Lexington to Boston.

## Cambridge Park Drive Congestion

I began to think smaller and to ask how we could make the traffic more tolerable. One of the most egregious congestion points is the

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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. 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.

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intersection between Bertucci's and the Summer Shack property—where Cambridge Park Drive crosses the access road to the Alewife T station. Cambridge has allowed the development of a number of large buildings on Cambridge Park Drive, which is a cul-de-sac.

At 5 PM, workers leaving that area come in direct conflict with two other big traffic flows: subway riders exiting the Alewife parking garage and heading toward Fresh Pond, and surprisingly heavy eastbound traffic using the off-ramp from Route 2 into the station access area to circumvent the main Route 2/Route 16 intersection. Unruly drivers were causing intense gridlock, and tempers were flaring. In 2008, commercial interests on Cambridge Park Drive appealed to then senator Steven Tolman, who convened a huge multi-agency meeting to air the problem.

At that point, a study of options at Alewife had begun, and the Tolman meeting helped build commitment to the study.

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I was a member of the study team, which looked at the buses leaving from Alewife to see if we could move more drivers into buses. The answer was: not really. The existing bus routes are well designed, and the study didn't identify any others that could be expected to capture many new riders. The study also touched on expanding the Alewife parking garage and concluded that it would be unrealistic given



The Fresh Pond Parkway/ Mount Auburn intersection.

the extreme congestion on access routes to the garage.

The study team zeroed in on how to resolve congestion at the main Route 2/Route 16 intersection and on access routes to the garage. The team modeled a number of options, including a return to the original design of the Dewey-Almey rotary. Eventually, we arrived at an approach that will work mostly within the existing footprint of the intersection while making better use of that space.

### Improving the Route 2/Route 16 Intersection

The changes envisioned will take the intersection from being a four-phase light, where each of four flows sees green roughly 25% of the time, to a three-phase design where each flow will have more green time. It's hard to know exactly how much congestion will improve as a result of the changes—expectations are modest—but it will certainly be a step in a positive direction.

MassHighway has been moving forward with that concept and has taken it through the standard public hearing process. According to

Representative Dave Rogers, who now represents the Alewife area and has been staying close to the planning process, the project was going to bid as this newsletter was going to press.

## Fresh Pond Parkway Is Hard to Fix

No one has yet identified any remotely feasible way to improve the long stretch of Fresh Pond Parkway between the main Route 2/Route 16 intersection and Memorial Drive. That stretch includes many traffic signals, and Big Dig-type dreams aside, the real challenge seems to be keeping the lights as well timed as possible to maximize a steady flow of traffic. The city of Cambridge and the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation have worked together to do so.

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When the lights go out of sync, as they sometimes do, major traffic snarls inevitably occur. When the Rindge Avenue light became mistimed a year or two back, traffic queues jammed all of North Cambridge.

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Last fall, the light at the corner of Coolidge Hill Avenue and Mount Auburn went out of synch with the main light at Fresh Pond Parkway and Mount Auburn. This didn't affect Fresh Pond Parkway much, but inbound traffic on Mount Auburn backed up into Watertown and Belmont, and rush-hour riders of both the 71 and 73 experienced a noticeable decline in service.

The problem coincided with the start of Trapelo Road construction and the necessary shift from overhead-wire trolleys to diesel service on the 73 line to and from Waverley Square. Diesel service, while mechanically more reliable, is also more vulnerable to disruption by problems elsewhere in the bus system. Trolley buses serve only the 71 and the 73, but diesel

buses can go anywhere. As a result, diesel buses and drivers are often borrowed to fill gaps elsewhere in the MBTA system. When they're borrowed from the 71 or the 73, the result is fewer trips on those routes.

## Fresh Pond Parkway/Mt. Auburn Study

The light-timing problem was found and fixed, but the episode focused us on the problem of the intersection at Fresh Pond Parkway and Mount Auburn. Nearly 12,000 bus riders and another 19,000 vehicles cross that intersection daily. Even when the light timing is right, crossing often requires several cycles.

The area's legislative delegation convened a group of state and local planners in March to discuss that intersection. It was an exciting meeting that included all the right people, some of whom have studied traffic problems region-wide. Yet it slowly dawned on everyone assembled that no one had really studied how to improve the intersection. There were plenty of ideas in the room, and all agreed that the intersection does not use space or green light time nearly as well as it might.

Following the meeting, the concerned legislators—Representative Jonathan Hecht, Representative Rogers, Senator Pat Jehlen, and I—were successful in earmarking \$500,000 in the Transportation Bond Bill for a study of the intersection. The next step is to persuade the governor's office to release those earmarked funds. We're just getting started on that conversation, but we are optimistic.

So, bottom line? The congestion around Alewife and on Fresh Pond Parkway is here to stay. Regional and local development is likely to increase that congestion. However, work is underway at two major pinch points—the Route 2/Route 16 intersection and the Fresh Pond Parkway/Mount Auburn intersection. There is reason to hope that our efforts will make a noticeable difference.

Will Brownsberger is the state senator from the Second Suffolk and Middlesex District of Massachusetts and a Belmont resident.



# Do Homebuyers Value Recreational Paths?

By Vincent Stanton Jr.

Will homebuyers pay a premium to live next to a community path? Or will they demand a discount?

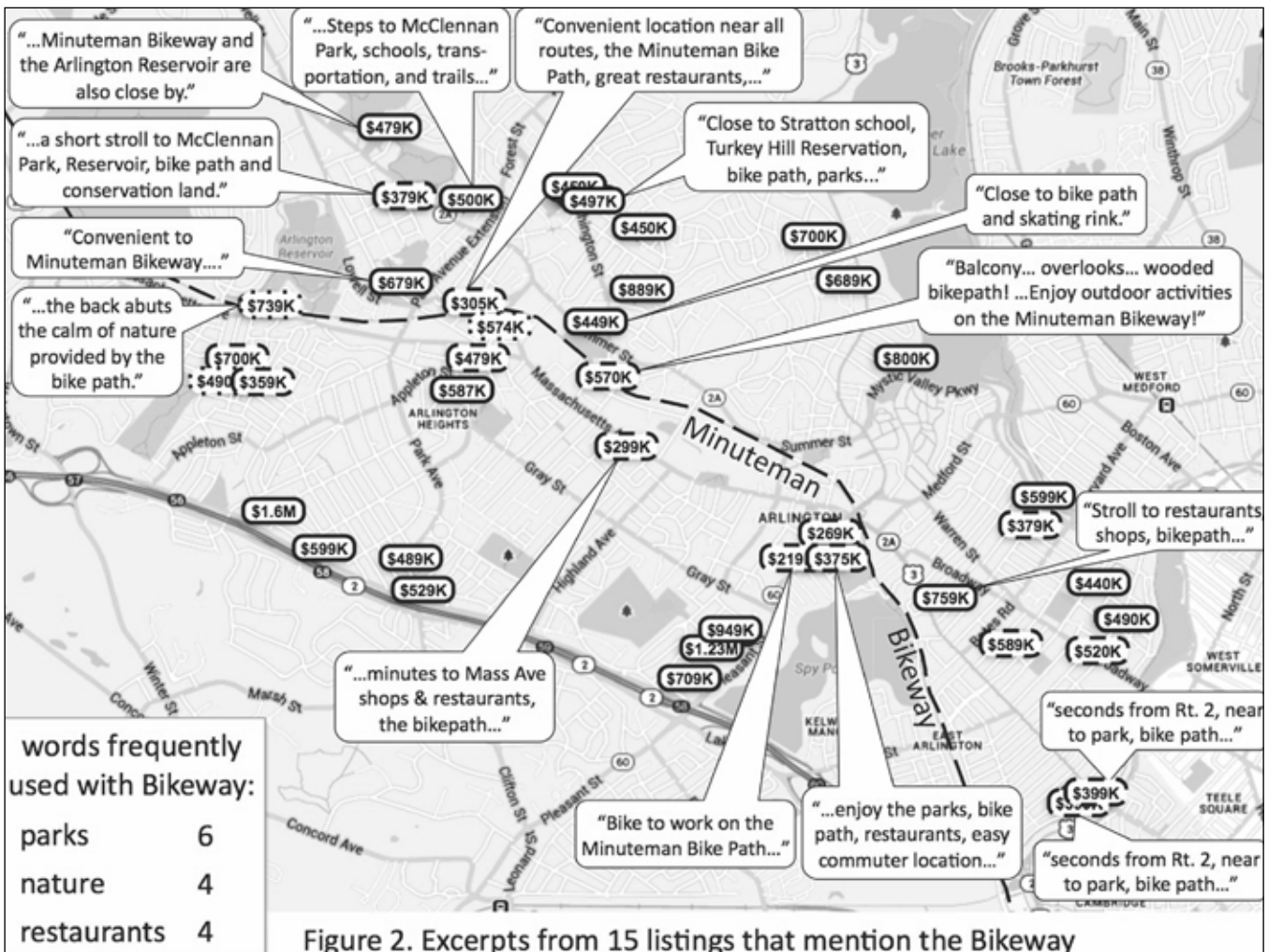
The answers may help Belmont decide where to locate its section of the Mass Central Rail Trail, which now ends on one side of Belmont, at Brighton Street, and will resume a couple of miles west, at Linden Street in Waltham.

Surveys of homebuyers conducted by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) consistently show that walking and cycling paths are coveted amenities. However, the surveys don't ask specifically about houses that abut paths, where there may be a tradeoff between access and aggravation.

Two data-based reports on new housing developments document that homebuyers will

pay more for a house lot next to a path. (See sidebar "Case Study: Mountain-Bay Trail.") Furthermore, more than 20 opinion-based surveys show that owners of existing homes that abut paths overwhelmingly believe that proximity to a path has not hurt and may have raised the value of their property. (See sidebar "Homebuyer Surveys." Additional references are posted online.) However, there is little data on buyers of existing homes.

To deduce whether homebuyers value proximity to recreational paths, this article analyzes residential real estate listings in Arlington. It is based on the simple premises that house listings are designed to maximize house sales and that the real estate professionals who write them have figured out how to sell property. (Residential real estate is a trillion-dollar-a-year industry in the US. Techniques for



VINCENT STANTON, JR.

selling homes are carefully studied.) Given those two assumptions, advertisements that mention proximity to a recreational path are evidence that homebuyers value paths.

Almost all real estate advertisements are 80 to 120 words highlighting the most attractive features of a property. With little space and limited consumer attention (increasingly ads are viewed on mobile devices), only messages likely to attract buyer interest make it into the blurb. By mentioning a nearby recreational path, a broker is expressing the view that paths are a desired amenity; blurbs never mention dirty kitchens, cracked foundations, or heavy traffic.

### Arlington: A Case Study

Arlington is bisected by the Minuteman Bikeway. To investigate how homes are marketed

in Arlington, I searched the national real estate website [www.trulia.com](http://www.trulia.com) for all residential property listings on October 6, 2013. The search turned up 41 listings, including 23 single-family houses, 15 condominiums (mostly converted two-family houses) and three multifamily houses.

### Arlington Property Types and Price

| Property Type | Avg. Asking Price | Range         |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Single Family | \$677K            | \$440K-\$1.6M |
| Multifamily   | \$601K            | \$490K-\$739K |
| Condo         | \$416K            | \$350K-\$570K |

Sixteen of the 41 property listings (39%) mentioned the Minuteman Bikeway. To examine whether this was related to distance, I measured the shortest straight-line distance from each property to the trail using the Ruler applet in Google Earth. The properties ranged from 39 to 5,140 feet from the Bikeway. As the table below shows, there is a striking relationship between proximity to the Bikeway and mention of it in the marketing blurb. The practice of using the Minuteman Bikeway to promote nearby properties seems to be widely accepted.

The language in the blurbs illuminates the positive attributes associated with the Bikeway. The map on page 5 contains excerpts from 15 blurbs that mentioned the Bikeway. Words commonly occurring in the same sentence or

### Case Study: Mountain-Bay Trail

The Mountain-Bay Trail is a multiuse trail near Green Bay, Wisconsin. In 1998 the Brown County Planning Commission permitted a new housing development next to the trail. The Planning Commission tracked the prices of single-family house lots in the new development. They observed that house lots next to the trail sold for an average of 9% more than comparable house lots one or two blocks away. Lots next to the trail also sold faster than lots even one or two blocks away.

Recognizing what had happened, the realty companies decided to restructure the pricing. In the first addition to Highridge Estates, the average lot located along the trail was priced 26% higher than lots farther from the trail.

A similar pattern occurred in the Shepard's Vineyard housing development in Apex, North Carolina. The developers noticed that houses adjacent to a trail bordering the property were selling faster than other properties. They added \$5,000 to the price of 40 homes adjacent to the regional greenway—and those homes were still the first to sell.

### Listings Mentioning Bikeway by Distance

| Distance to Bikeway            | % of listings mentioning Bikeway |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Less than 100 ft               | 100%                             |
| 100-1,000 ft                   | 83%                              |
| 1,000-2,500 ft                 | 41%                              |
| More than 2,500 ft             | 7%                               |
| All listings within 2,500 feet | 39%                              |

## Bikeway Mentions by Broker

| Brokerage                                  | Total Listings | % Mentioning Bikeway |
|--|----------------|----------------------|
| Century 21 Adams                           | 9              | 44%                  |
| Coldwell Banker                            | 8              | 38%                  |
| Bowes Real Living                          | 6              | 50%                  |
| RE/MAX Leading Edge                        | 3              | 33%                  |
| Avenue 3 Real Estate                       | 2              | 50%                  |
| Friel Estate                               | 2              | 50%                  |
| RE/MAX Destiny                             | 1              | 100%                 |
| Gibson/ Sotheby                            | 1              | 100%                 |
| Charles Associates                         | 1              | 100%                 |
| All others (single listing per brokerage)* | 8              | 0%                   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                               | <b>41</b>      | <b>39%</b>           |

\* Each of these listings was more than 1000 feet from the bike path.

phrase as “Bikeway”: parks, nature (including specific locations), and restaurants.

Photographs are also an important marketing tool. Several Arlington listings included photographs of the Bikeway from the marketed property. A Trulia advertisement (available at [www.belmontcitizensforum.org](http://www.belmontcitizensforum.org)) features a photo of the listed property (a \$589,900 townhouse condo) from the Bikeway.

### Most Brokers Mention the Bikeway

If proximity to the Minuteman Bikeway enhances residential property values in

## Home Buyer Surveys

In 2013 the National Association of Home Builders Economics and Housing Policy Group published *What Home Buyers Really Want*, a report based on a nationwide survey of 3,682 recent and prospective home buyers. One part of the survey asked homeowners to select which amenities would “seriously influence” their choice of community.

Walking/jogging trails were the most popular amenity, chosen by 60% of homebuyers, followed by parks, chosen by 54%. Similar NAHB surveys in 2007 and 2004 also found walking/jogging trails and parks the two most highly valued amenities.

Trails are even more highly valued by older home buyers. A 2014 poll of home buyers over 50 by national real estate consulting firm RCLCO found that walking paths were the most popular amenity, chosen by 83% of respondents. Bicycling was rated important by 51%.

For a complete chart of NAHB survey amenities and survey results, please see [www.belmontcitizensforum.org](http://www.belmontcitizensforum.org)

Arlington, all Arlington brokers should mention the trail when listing a property within several blocks. To see if this is the case, the 41 properties were sorted by listing broker (see Bikeway Mentions by Broker chart, this page) Altogether, 17 brokerages had at least one listed property within 2,500 feet of the Bikeway.

The 15 listings that mentioned the Bikeway were associated with 15 agents at nine brokerages.

### Results Match Marketing Advice

How-to articles about marketing residential real estate recommend mentioning recreational trails. A trulia.com article titled “12 Ways to Supercharge Your Home’s Online Listing,” notes:

“It’s all about location, location, location, so talk about your ‘hood. Can you walk to public transportation? Are there outdoor amenities nearby like hiking trails, bike paths, or a community pool?”

An MSN Real Estate website article titled “Say the right thing: 6 things your home listing should include,” suggests:

“Tout lifestyle. Buyers are also motivated by emotion . . . How will they enjoy the home and its features? . . . If a community has great

amenities such as a neighborhood pool or nearby walking or biking trails, mention them.”

In summary, the people who sell real estate for a living are convinced that proximity to a trail is a selling point for a house.

Additional figures and references for this article are available on the Belmont Citizens Forum web site, [www.belmontcitizensforum.org](http://www.belmontcitizensforum.org).

Vincent Stanton Jr. is a Belmont Citizens Forum board member. He lives across the street from a possible community path route in Belmont.



DAVID MUSSINA

## Silver Maple Forest Day Energizes Advocates

More than 100 participants from Cambridge, Arlington, Belmont, and beyond were energized at the June 28 Silver Maple Forest Day of Action.

Speakers included state Senator Will Brownsberger and Belmont Selectman Andy Rojas, who described the challenges of trying to preserve this forest. Other speakers addressed the forest’s important

function in mitigating area flooding caused by rising sea levels and severe storms.

The rally was sponsored by the Belmont Citizens Forum, Friends of Alewife Reservation, Coalition to Preserve Belmont Uplands, Sustainable Belmont, Belmont Land Trust, and many others. For more information, visit [silvermapleforest.org](http://silvermapleforest.org).



# Historical Society Honors Anne-Marie Lambert

By Sue Bass

Anne-Marie Lambert, a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum since 2007, was hailed as a “rising star” of Belmont by the Belmont Historical Society at its annual meeting on May 14. The Society lauded her work in educating the community and promoting planning and policies for preservation and environmental quality. Lambert was presented one of three David R. Johnson Preservation Awards by the Society’s president, Emilio E. Mauro Jr.

Lambert was nominated for the honor by Michael Baram on behalf of the Belmont Land Trust. In the nomination form, Baram noted Lambert’s work organizing and leading “Little River Nature Walks” and her presentation to Sustainable Belmont on the history and significance of the Belmont Uplands and the Alewife area and Reservation. That presentation included the history of the Huestis farm, the relocation of the Little River, the construction of Route 2, and the ecology of the Uplands and its Silver Maple Forest. Baram also cited her work on stormwater issues in Belmont, including her cofounding of the Belmont Stormwater Working Group. Lambert is a Town Meeting member from Precinct 8, the Winn Brook neighborhood.

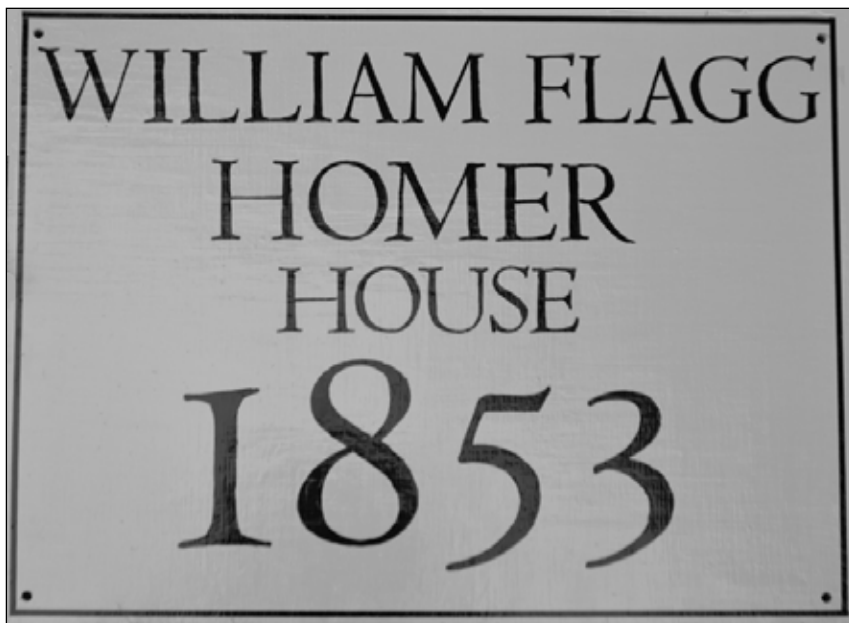
The Historical Society also presented Johnson Awards to Peter and Peggy Guinness of Concord and to All Saints’ Church. The Gunnesses were cited for their nearly 50 years of work preserving Wellington Cottage, their former residence at 641 Pleasant Street, and for their efforts in creating the first historic district in Belmont in 1971. The district was originally known as the Wellington Historic District but has now been expanded and renamed the Pleasant Street Historic District. The church was praised for its maintenance of the historic 1896 shingle-style structure at 69 Common Street, despite the difficult financial circumstances that face nonprofits.

David R. Johnson, an architect, officer of the Belmont Historical Society, and longtime resident of an historic house on Oak Avenue, died in 2010 at the age of 91.

Joe Cornish, a past president of the Society, outlined a new historic plaque program for buildings that are 50 years old or more, well preserved, and still exhibiting integrity of design. To acquire a plaque for their homes, residents must research the structure in town and state records (something Historical Society members will help with) and pay a small fee: \$100 for members, \$125 for nonmembers, and \$75 for people who already have a plaque but just want to use the newer ones.

Five initial plaques were awarded at the meeting: to Sheila and David Flewelling for the Reverend Daniel Butler house at 36 Sycamore Street, built about 1853; to the Belmont Woman’s Club for the 1853 William Flagg Homer house at 661 Pleasant Street; to All Saints’ Church; to Bill and Nelie Dunham for the 1922 Viola E. McNeil house at 36 Harriet Avenue; and to George Packard for the 1930 Tobey-Packard house at 26 Tobey Road.

Sue Bass is director emerita of the Belmont Citizens Forum and a Town Meeting member.



JOE CORNISH

The Belmont Historical Society historic plaque for the William Flagg Homer House, 661 Pleasant Street.

# Waltham Prepares to Purchase Fernald Site

By George A. Darcy III

*A version of this article appears in the Waltham Land Trust newsletter.*

There has been significant movement in the past few months concerning the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center at 200 Trapelo Road, Waltham. On May 1, the Massachusetts Division of Capital Asset Management (DCAM) offered to sell the Fernald site “as is” to the city of Waltham pending state legislation.

The Fernald properties include the Walter E. Fernald Regional Center parcel and the Shriver parcel. The two parcels comprise 195 acres of land, improved with 66 structures totaling approximately 1.35 million square feet. The entire Fernald site is listed on the National and State Registers of Historic Places.

The purchase price is \$3.7 million dollars, which amounts to approximately \$18,974 dollars per acre, a very modest amount by today’s standards. However, for 127 years the city of Waltham has provided many municipal services to the Fernald, including fire, emergency, and some street, utility, and police services, with no compensation. It is easily argued that the city of Waltham deserves a very modest purchase price.

The Fernald land never generated much tax revenue. The state acquired the land from Waltham farmers during the latter part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th century.

The state’s proposed deal includes a revenue sharing plan. If Waltham sells or leases any portion of the Fernald site, the state will be entitled to a share of the revenue, between 30 and 50%, the exact amount depending upon whether redevelopment incentives are met.

Should the deal be consummated, the state would lease back from the city four buildings totalling just over 170,000 square feet.

The Waltham City Council unanimously voted in favor of the Fernald acquisition at its May 12 council meeting. The legislation authorizing the deal must now be approved by the state Legislature.

The Fernald is the oldest school in the western hemisphere for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Originally established

in South Boston in 1848, the state moved the facility in 1887 to the then-bucolic Waltham countryside.

The Fernald sits at the foothills of the Wellington Hills on gently rolling terrain within the Beaver Brook watershed. Notable landscape features include Owl Hill, a 250’ promontory that overlooks the magnificent Boston skyline, and Fernald’s landscaped front lawn with specimen trees. The lawn itself is on the National Register of Historic Places.

## Site Has Environmental Challenges

According to the DCAM-funded Environmental Assessment Draft Report dated August 6, 2009, several environmental problems exist on the site including, most notably, asbestos contamination in the steam tunnels and a few structures, oil contamination around the power plant, and an oil plume approaching the property from the west. Unknown materials are located in a former refuse dump at the southern edge of the property. Any potential reuse or redevelopment must take into account City Council’s rezoning of the entire Fernald site conservation/recreation (CR), the most restrictive zoning district in the city.

The combined open spaces along the Trapelo Road corridor, adjacent to Fernald, in North Waltham represent one of the largest protected areas of green space near Boston and within Route 95/128—approximately 1,000 acres of contiguous conservation land if Belmont and Lexington are counted. This beautiful if accidental wilderness region is frequented by herds of deer, flocks of turkeys, and flora and fauna of all shapes and sizes. The protection of Fernald’s open space would only enhance this beautiful green corridor.

A key benefit of the city of Waltham acquiring the Fernald property is that the city can control redevelopment at the site instead of just reacting to private development. Trapelo Road, an old single-lane country road, is already overloaded with traffic and has very poor levels of service at several intersections.

The majority of Waltham residents wish to retain as much open space at Fernald as

possible, preserving the fields and forests with limited redevelopment of some of the more historic buildings. Residents have spoken about preserving the original Fernald campus, creating nature trails (including connections to the Western Greenway), creating some general-use recreational fields, restoring the former farm fields, and renovating some of the historically significant buildings for limited housing.

The most practical and strategically important project is the restoration of filled-in wetlands in the northwestern quadrant of the Fernald site where the Cardinal Cottage complex sits. (See “Fernald Center Wetlands Ready for Revival,” Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter*, November/December 2004.) The filling of these wetlands has reduced overall flood storage volumes in the Beaver Brook watershed and has contributed to significant annual flooding downstream at both Waverley Oaks Road and Linden Street.

The filling of some of these wetlands occurred after the state’s passage of the Wetlands Protection Act in 1972. To the author’s knowledge, no compensatory wetlands or flood storage was ever created at Fernald to compensate the filling of these wetlands. The obliterated wetland resources included two sizable ponds, associated bordering vegetative wetlands, and

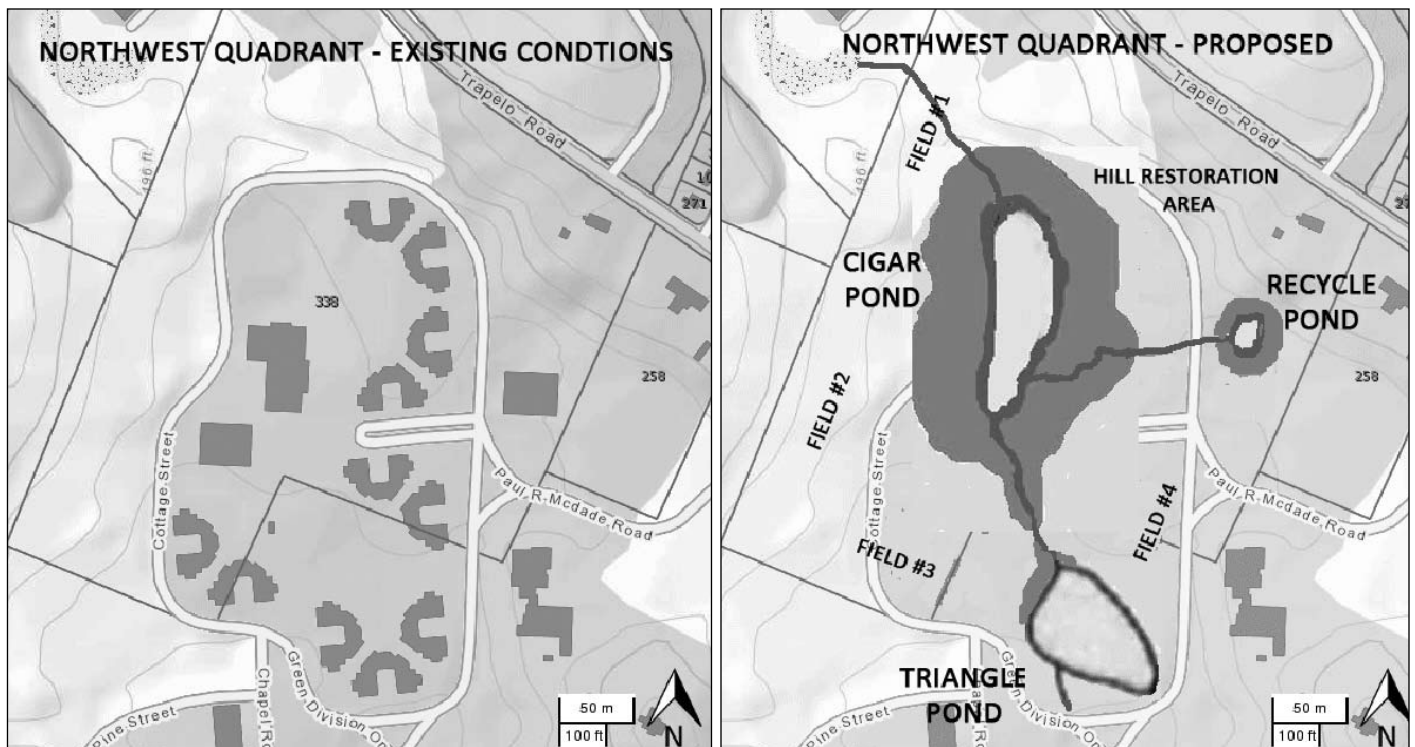
an interconnecting stream. It is estimated that at least 2.4 million gallons of stormwater were at one time retained in these wetlands.

Waltham Ward 4 Councillor John McLaughlin recently submitted a City Council resolution whose resolve is to create a Fernald Use Committee similar to the former Fernald Reuse Committee created in 2004 and chaired by Mayor Jeannette McCarthy. This new committee would solicit, review, and recommend reuse proposals that best serve the residents of Waltham. It would also take into consideration the Fernald Reuse Committee’s 2009 report.

The city of Waltham is poised to acquire the entire Fernald site. The city will have the historic opportunity to restore wetlands and critical upstream flood storage, and to conduct public planning sessions for the eventual reuse of this valuable, very large and beautiful parcel of land.

Please feel to contact me for more information on the Fernald site at [gadarcy@gmail.com](mailto:gadarcy@gmail.com).

George A. Darcy III is a lifelong Waltham resident, former chairman of the Waltham Conservation Commission, cofounder and director of the Waltham Land Trust, and current Waltham City Councillor.



GEORGE A. DARCY III

Existing conditions at the northwest quadrant of the Fernald Center parcel (left) and a proposed wetland restoration for the site (right).

# Rail-Trail Effect Helps Sustain Communities

By Matt Heid

*A longer version of this story was first published in AMC Outdoors, the Appalachian Mountain Club's magazine. For the full story, go to [outdoors.org/railtraileffect](http://outdoors.org/railtraileffect).*

Just outside of Boston, the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway runs 10 miles from the quiet suburban town of Bedford to the bustling edge of Cambridge. I ride the length of this paved rail-trail nearly every weekday to work and back again—more than 6,000 miles to date, and counting. Beneath shady woods, alongside tranquil meadows, past landmarks of the American Revolution, the journey is a daily highlight—and one enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

In many ways, this multiuse path, and my activity on it, exemplifies the tremendous power of the nation's more than 20,000 miles of rail-trails. Beyond exceptional recreational resources, rail-trails are economic engines for local communities. They reduce traffic, cut global warming emissions, improve public health, and protect green corridors of car-free tranquility and wildlife.

In short, rail-trails come close to being an absolute good. It's a fact demonstrated in communities across America, and one that has driven significant rail-trail growth in recent years. Yet rail-trails often remain a secondary consideration in regional planning—a nice but non-essential add-on to America's car-centric culture—rather than an integral and hugely beneficial component of transportation infrastructure that planners should embrace and expand.

Let us count the reasons why this attitude should change.

## The Minuteman Bikeway

Rail-trails follow the routes of former railroads, transformed from tracks and ties to packed earth or smooth asphalt for walking, biking, jogging, and any number of other self-powered activities. The Minuteman Bikeway was once the route of the Middlesex Central Railroad, which chugged

commuters from Bedford into Boston from 1873 until 1977. It became the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway in 1991, and in 2008 it was one of the first trails inducted to the Rail-Trail Hall of Fame by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), a national nonprofit advocacy group.

My regular journey along the Minuteman starts in Bedford at a restored railroad depot (complete with parked rail car alongside). Here I leave the world of automobiles behind and quickly roll beneath the sheltering boughs of oak and maple trees. I soon enter neighboring Lexington, where the bikeway travels the length of the town. Along the way, I pass through the town center, alongside buildings that predate the Declaration of Independence, and within eyeshot of the Lexington Battle Green, where colonists faced off against advancing Redcoats at the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

## The Money Rolls In

The Minuteman is popular indeed. During the warmer months, Saturday trail counts in Lexington Center have routinely documented more than 4,000 trips (or "user visits," as the parlance goes) and around 2,000 on weekdays. Add in neighboring Arlington and Bedford and annual estimates for the entirety of the trail easily approach at least a half-million trips—more than six times the combined population of the three towns it passes through en route to Cambridge. It's easy to imagine how such visitation can boost the local economy as trail users spend money on food, drinks, souvenirs, and other offerings.

## People Magnets

No robust economic study has been done for the Minuteman Bikeway, but its effects are readily apparent along Massachusetts Avenue, the primary artery through Lexington's town center. Here the Ride Studio Cafe, a hybrid bike shop and coffee bar, has occupied a prominent storefront since 2010. "So many people come up here because of the bikeway," says coowner Patria Lanfranchi. "Economically it's awesome. Most businesses are extremely in favor of it. It was definitely a factor in setting up shop here."



That's a sentiment reinforced by a novel experiment in summer 2013, when the town temporarily converted two street-side parking spaces along Massachusetts Avenue (a stone's throw from the bikeway) into the state's first "parklet." A protected enclosure, the parklet featured shaded tables, flowers, and room for approximately 25 bikes. It proved extremely popular, and a follow-up study by the Lexington Economic Development Office revealed a 5 to 10% increase in sales from local businesses while the parklet was in place.

Beyond the direct benefit to local businesses, rail-trails can also play a crucial role in attracting new companies to the area. It's easier to entice potential employees, especially skilled younger workers, when the surrounding area features amenities that give employees increased options for off-road biking, exercise, and commuting.

## Removing Roadblocks to Progress

It wasn't always this way. Twenty years ago, when rail-trails first began to appear in rising numbers, many communities feared the worst. "When they were new, we heard lots of horror stories about how they would lead to increased crime and decrease property values," Laughlin says. "But it turns out the opposite is true. And as more trails have been built and more people have a personal experience with them, the horror stories melt away. These days we spend much less of our time fighting opposition and more trying to meet the demand for help. Everybody wants them now."

Everybody might want them, but towns, states, and the federal government have been hard-pressed to effectively answer the call. "Budgets have been in decline for infrastructure investment at a time of pretty serious fiscal constraint, and we've seen that trickle down to state and community levels as well," Laughlin notes. "But, at the same time, I would say you can do a lot more with available dollars by investing in rail-trails rather than by expanding existing roads. You get a lot more bang for your buck, and at a fraction of the cost."

Laughlin remains optimistic that the myriad benefits of rail-trails will become steadily more appreciated over time, and ultimately result in greater support and funding for their growth and

maintenance. "As the benefits of rail-trails have grown, so too has the base of support for them," he concludes. "The rail-trail movement is getting more exciting every day."

It's a sentiment I share every time I ride the Minuteman— a profound appreciation for the healthy and deeply satisfying lifestyle that this rail-trail, like so many others across the country, makes possible. It is, without doubt, an absolute good in my life, and a potent symbol of how rail-trails across the nation are helping to build a more sustainable future for us all. Ride on.

Matt Heid is the author of AMC's *Best Backpacking in New England*, 2nd ed., and writes regularly about gear in his *AMC Equipped* blog.

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Mr. Brown,

I know you didn't intend it this way, but your page 11 heading that reads "Running Lights Make Biking Safer" (Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter*, April/May 2014) is a contradiction. I've noted here in Belmont, and primarily amongst adults, not kids, bicyclists seem to think it's OK to ignore traffic regulations. Frequently, too frequently, I've observed them "running lights" and ignoring stop signs as well.

Frankly, adult cyclists scare the hell out of me!

Maybe it's time that the bicyclists [be] chastised as opposed to drivers!

Bob Young

Oak Avenue, Belmont

*Summer Brown responds:*

My headline about bicycle daytime safety lights, "Running Lights make Biking Safer," had an unfortunate and unintended double meaning. "Bicycle Running Lights Improve Safety" would have been better.

My personal rules for riding in traffic are:

- Safety first.
- Don't annoy drivers.

I hope that people who read the Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter* also have common sense.

## Environmental Events

### Fungi in the Field

**Sunday, July 20, 1–3:30 PM**

Explore the Drumlin Farm sanctuary looking for fungi, learning about the crucial and sometimes astonishing roles these fascinating life forms play in ecosystems, and discovering methods for identifying mushrooms and other fungi in the field. Fe\$25 New England Wild Flower Society and Mass Audubon members, \$29 non-members.

Registration required. [www.newenglandwild.org](http://www.newenglandwild.org), (508) 877-7630. 208 South Great Road, Lincoln.



KIRSTEN BUCHANAN

### Welcome Kirsten!

The Belmont Citizens Forum is pleased to announce that Kirsten Buchanan will be joining the Forum as an intern this summer. Kirsten is a Belmont resident and a rising sophomore at Framingham State University, where she is majoring in environmental science.

Kirsten will gather stormwater and water quality data for sites around Belmont. We look forward to publishing the results of her research.

### Mystic River Paddling Tour with author Rick Beinecke

**Monday, July 21, 6–8 PM**

Join the Mystic River Watershed Association to explore the Mystic River with Rick Beinecke, author of *The Mystic River: A Natural and Human History and Recreation Guide*. Limited to 15 people. Bring your own boat and PFD. Heavy rain cancels the event. Registration required. [mysticriver.org](http://mysticriver.org), [Beth@MysticRiver.org](mailto:Beth@MysticRiver.org), (781) 316-3438. Upper Mystic Lake Dam, Mystic Valley Pkwy, Medford.

### Insects and Ice Cream

**Wednesday, July 30, 6–7:30 PM**

Enjoy ice cream, then head out on a bug treasure hunt to sweep-net in Habitat's meadow to see what wonderful creatures live there. Mass Audubon members \$7, non-members \$9. Registration required. [www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org), [habitat@massaudubon.org](mailto:habitat@massaudubon.org), (617) 489-5050. Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont.

### Community Water Chestnut Removal

**Saturday, August 9, 9 AM–1 PM**

Help remove an invasive plant from the Mystic River! Volunteers will head out in canoes to hand-pull water chestnuts from the river or stay on land to help put the chestnuts in the dumpster to be composted. All supplies are provided. Registration required. [mysticriver.org/water-chestnut-removal-project](http://mysticriver.org/water-chestnut-removal-project). Blessing of the Bay Boathouse, 32 Shore Drive, Somerville.

### A Night at the Pond

**Wednesday, August 13, 6:30–8:30 PM**

August is a great time to visit the Habitat ponds. Join Habitat staff to explore them with ponding gear and nets to see what you can catch. Mass Audubon members \$6, non-members \$8. Registration required. [www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org), [habitat@massaudubon.org](mailto:habitat@massaudubon.org) (617) 489-5050. Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont.

### Meet Belmont!

**Tuesday, August 26, 6–8:30 PM**

Come learn about Belmont's community groups

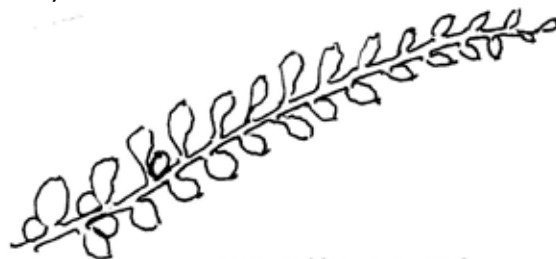
including the Belmont Citizens Forum and Sustainable Belmont. [www.belmont-ma.gov/vision-21-implementation-committee](http://www.belmont-ma.gov/vision-21-implementation-committee). Chenery Middle School, 95 Washington Street, Belmont.

time, relay your experience around sustainable activities in Belmont. [www.sustainablebelmont.net](http://www.sustainablebelmont.net). Flett Room, Belmont Public Library, 336 Concord Avenue, Belmont.

## Sustainable Belmont Meeting

**Wednesday, September 3, 7–9 PM**

All Sustainable Belmont meetings are open to the public. Active members will share progress on various initiatives; discussion and planning will ensue. Attend, share your expertise, volunteer your



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Join us in helping to maintain Belmont's small-town atmosphere.

- Writing or editing for the Newsletter
- Community path work
- Newsletter mailings
- Event organizing

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