

Belmont Citizens Forum

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A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

July 2004

Plans for Fernald/Met State Concern Neighbors

By Gillian Webster

As the state moves forward with plans to redevelop its extensive land holdings in the area—pastoral sites formerly devoted to caring for the disabled—activists remain worried about the impact these changes will have on surrounding neighborhoods.

“Belmont’s Borders: Open Space or Suburban Sprawl” was the theme of a May 17 public meeting sponsored by the Belmont Citizens Forum. Diana Young, treasurer of the Waltham Land Trust, presented an alternative vision for development of the Fernald School land, while Kevin Johnson, president of the South Lexington Civic Association, gave an update on the AvalonBay development proposed for the former Metropolitan State Hospital land in Lexington.

Young explained that concerns about the state’s plans to close the Fernald School, an institution for people with mental retardation, and develop the 190-acre site prompted the Waltham Land Trust to partner with the Waltham Alliance to Create Housing, the Waltham League of Women Voters, and other local organizations to form the Fernald Working Group. “The concern was that if we didn’t have a plan, the state would go off and do what it wanted to do,” she said. Although the state’s plans for the site are uncertain—it has proposed various options, including selling the property to developers and using it as the site for a new Middlesex Court complex—the worry is that development will be motivated more by financial concerns than by what is best for the area and for current Fernald residents.

The Working Group has proposed that most if not all of the site’s current functions be retained: a facility for homeless and transitioning families, a recycling center, recreational areas, and a Tufts Dental Facility. The school’s current residents—there are about 275, most over 50 years old—would still live and receive services at Fernald, but their facilities would be part of a new expanded community. The proposed village would also include 800 mixed-income housing units (for a range of abilities, incomes, and family sizes) and small shops and

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Environmental Events Calendar

Canoe the Little River. Saturday, July 24, 9 am. Paddle with naturalist Stew Sanders up the Little River to Perch Pond and Little Pond in Belmont. Canoes and paddles provided. Sponsored by the Friends of Alewife Reservation. Meet at the far east end of the Bulfinch parking lot in Cambridge, just off Acorn Park Drive. Please call Stew (617) 489-3120 or Carl (781) 648-7682 to reserve a spot.

Work Day at Fresh Pond. Saturday, July 24, 9:30 am to 2:30 pm. Help protect tree roots and prevent erosion around Fresh Pond in Cambridge by installing water bars and spreading mulch on hillside paths. Meet at the gatehouse at Huron Avenue near Park Avenue. This event is organized by People Making a Difference through Community Service. To register, visit www.PMD.org.

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Belmont Citizens Forum, Inc., is a not-for-profit organization that strives to maintain the small-town atmosphere of Belmont, Massachusetts, by preserving its natural and historical resources, limiting traffic growth, and enhancing pedestrian safety. We do this by keeping residents informed about planning and zoning issues, by participating actively in public hearings, and by organizing forums on key subjects.

Our newsletter is published six times a year (January, March, May, July, September, and November).

Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

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

Friends of Alewife Reservation Picnic. Thursday, July 29, 6:30 pm. This annual event will be held at the picnic benches behind Wyeth garage. The benches are across from the Alewife T station and accessible from the bike path. Public canoe rides are available from the Bulfinch parking lot (east end of Acorn Park Drive). Call (617) 489-3120 for details.

Picnic in Prospect Hill Park. Saturday, July 31, 10 am to 2 pm. The Prospect Hill Park Advocacy Group and the Waltham Land Trust invite you to share fun and games with family and friends at Prospect Hill Park, accessed from 314 Totten Pond Road in Waltham, across from the skating rink. Please bring your own picnic lunch to campsite 12, the "summer house." Drinks and desserts provided at no cost. Call (781) 899-2844 for information.

Canoe the Mystic River. Thursdays, August 12 and September 9, 6 pm until dusk. Paddle along the Mystic River, starting at Blessing of the Bay Boathouse, 32 Shore Drive, Somerville, near Mystic Avenue and Route 28 (weather permitting). The August 12 outing is designated as the annual Fingerling Fling canoe trip, when "fingerlings" (juvenile alewives and blueback herrings) will be swimming in the river. Sponsored by Alewife/Mystic River Advocates, Boys and Girls Club of Middlesex County, and Mystic River Watershed Association. \$5 per person; space is limited. To make reservations, contact j_gillette@hotmail.com or call (617) 628-4665.

Trail Maintenance at Rock Meadow. Sunday, August 15, 9 am to 1 pm. Join the New England Mountain Bike Association for a morning of trail maintenance at Rock Meadow in Belmont. Meet at the parking lot off Mill Street. Please wear long pants and bring gloves, eye protection, and water. Tools and lunch will be provided. Questions? Contact David Kleinschmidt at dklo@comcast.net.

Monitor Bird Boxes. Summer 2004. If you enjoy bird watching, please consider helping the Friends of Alewife Reservation by volunteering to monitor one or more of the ten bird boxes on the Reservation this summer. Details are available at www.friendsofalewifereservation.org

Land Swap Proposal for Uplands Gains Ground

By Darrell King

Additional progress has been made in promoting the proposal to swap O'Neill Properties' Belmont Uplands parcel for the former MDC (Metropolitan District Commission) skating rink site. This swap would annex the environmentally significant Uplands to the adjoining Alewife Reservation, which belongs to the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). In return, it would put a 150-unit residential development on the rink site, now owned by DCR. The 150 units would occupy approximately the same number of square feet (242,500) that was previously approved by Town Meeting for a commercial building on the Uplands.

A petition supporting the land swap has now been signed by 150 Town Meeting Members as well as by several hundred other residents of Belmont and neighboring communities.

Advisory Committee Appointed

The Uplands Advisory Committee, appointed by the Belmont Board of Selectmen on April 26, was charged with exploring the land-swap option. The group has six official members: Fred Paulsen, an environmental attorney (the chair); Roger Colton, an affordable housing advocate; Martin Duffy, an economist; Mark Haley, an engineer; Douglas Matson, an abutter of Little Pond; and Roger Wrubel, the director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Habitat Sanctuary. Two members of the Planning Board, Karl Haglund and Deborah Emello, serve as liaisons to the committee.

Many other citizens have donated their time to assist the committee with such work as analyzing road access and flooding, drafting legislation authorizing the land swap, consulting with government authorities regarding permits and funding, and meeting with citizens and officials of neighboring Arlington and Cambridge.

Committee members have met with several state officials, including state legislators and representatives of the DCR, and also with municipal officials and neighborhood groups in Belmont, Arlington, and Cambridge. So far, they have consulted with the

Arlington Board of Selectmen and the Arlington Conservation Commission, the Spy Pond Association, the East Arlington Good Neighbor Committee, abutters of Little Pond, and residents of the Hill Estates. A meeting with the City of Cambridge Conservation Commission was also held.

Where to Put Floodwater

Opposition to the plan has focused on traffic and flooding concerns. Some Arlington residents are reluctant to see development on either Alewife parcel and argue that the rink site should be dedicated entirely to flood water retention. According to the draft report released in June by the Tri-Community Working Group (see page 11 for details), use of the rink site could provide a total of 17.3 acre-feet of flood storage—not enough to solve the area's flooding problems, but enough to make it worthwhile as part of a comprehensive flood control plan.

However, the Uplands Advisory Committee's Mark Haley, who is an environmental engineer, believes

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Uplands Land Swap, continued from page 3

that a substantial amount of the total flood storage (up to 10 acre-feet) could be built into the rink site as part of a 150-unit housing development.

Any development in the Alewife area will worsen traffic on nearby residential streets as well as on Route 2. But 150 residential units will generate less traffic than will 250 or 300, and much less traffic than the R&D complex that was approved in 2002.

Meanwhile, O'Neill continues to say that it has no interest in the land swap. Steve Corridan of O'Neill Properties made a brief appearance at a recent meeting of the Board of Selectmen to reiterate O'Neill's position. However, several Selectmen noted that this position is a bargaining stance, as Brian O'Neill, the principal of the firm, has more than once changed his mind about projects.

40B Proposal Declared Too Big

For now, O'Neill Properties is concentrating on the proposal it filed in April for a comprehensive state permit to allow housing on the Uplands under Chapter 40B of the Massachusetts General Laws. If the application survives the required rounds of state and local approval, the comprehensive permit could mean as many as 300 rental units on the environmentally sensitive site. However, the road to approval of a 40B project is likely to be long and hard, and O'Neill has said he wants to get the project built as soon as possible. He may decide to negotiate an agreement that would allow for a quicker turnaround.

Belmont's Board of Selectmen is opposed to the 40B project. In a June letter to MassDevelopment, the state agency that rules on such projects after examining the suitability of the site and the proposal's financial feasibility, the Board wrote that "the sheer size of the proposal is not in scale with the community." The five residential buildings would cover most of the upland area, leaving little dry land available for recreational amenities, stormwater management, or adequate fire access, the Board said.

"The Board does not support housing of any type at the so-called 'Belmont Uplands' site," the Selectmen wrote, "...[We] strongly believe that the best use of this isolated parcel is for open space, the next preferred option is for non-residential use and the least favorable option is for residential purposes."

According to the Belmont Housing Trust, this 40B project would actually be detrimental to the Town's overall housing goals because it would produce fewer affordable housing units than a similarly sized project built to comply with Belmont's Inclusionary Zoning Housing By-law. (The Town by-law would require 25 percent of the units to be affordable to families earning 80 percent of the area's median income, whereas O'Neill's 40B proposal would make 20 percent of the units affordable to families earning 50 percent of the median income. Also, the Town by-law would require these units to remain affordable in perpetuity, whereas the 40B proposal would keep them affordable for just 40 years.)

Housing, R&D, or Open Space?

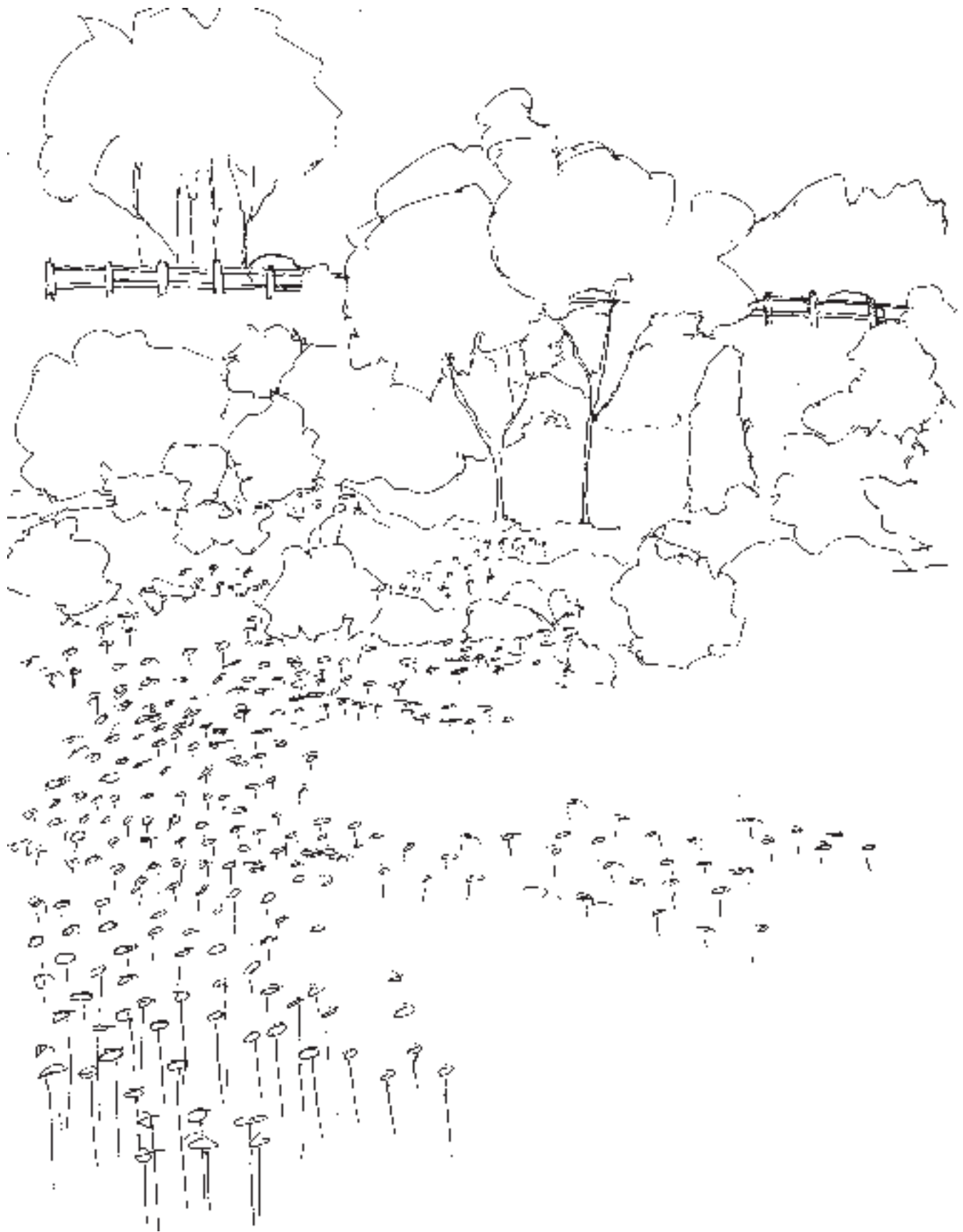
The Selectmen voted unanimously at their June 21 meeting to notify state environmental officials that the project proposed for the Uplands has changed, thus reopening the environmental review. O'Neill filed environmental impact reports for the R&D/office development it originally sought, but not for any of its housing proposals. The Secretary of Environmental Affairs warned O'Neill last October that if the firm decided on housing instead, it would be required "to file a timely Notice of Project Change." Such a notice can be filed by others if the developer fails to do so, and so the Selectmen have agreed to now file it.

On June 28, the Arlington Board of Selectmen voted unanimously to oppose development of any kind on either the Uplands or the rink site. However, the land swap plan remains an option for the state.

In another turn of events, O'Neill and its representatives were noticeably absent from the May Planning Board meeting, to which yet another O'Neill proposal had been continued. That proposal—to rezone the Uplands from R&D/office to permit 250 condominium units—was effectively killed (at least for the moment) when the board voted unanimously to close the hearing. A number of Planning Board members noted that the 40B application superseded the previous residential proposal, making any further discussion meaningless.

More information on the land swap proposal is available at www.uplandsalternative.info.

Darrell King is a Precinct 1 Town Meeting Member.



The former skating rink site at the intersection of Route 2 and Lake Street could accommodate a housing development along with flood storage facilities, according to Mark Haley of the Uplands Advisory Committee.

businesses. To minimize the impact on area traffic, the Working Group has recommended establishing a shuttle to Alewife and to Waverley Square, building sidewalks and bike paths, and providing Zipcars for neighborhood residents. Last year the legislature created a Land Reuse Committee to develop a plan for the site; a continuing debate over its membership reflects the conflict between the Working Group's proposals and the state's desire for more extensive development at Fernald.

Kevin Johnson focused on how the AvalonBay project at Met State will affect surrounding towns. In May, the Lexington Town Meeting approved a proposal for 387 housing units (down from the 430 originally proposed): 109 one-bedroom, 254 two-bedroom, and 24 three-bedroom units. The South Lexington Civic Association (SLCA) negotiated with AvalonBay to mitigate the impact of the additional traffic that will result. The developer has agreed to provide, in perpetuity, a commuter shuttle to Alewife and an annual donation of \$35,000 to the town's Lexpress shuttle bus system (both programs are subject to a five-year review by Lexington). Based on projections from a similar program at Windsor Village, Johnson estimates that the shuttle will reduce AvalonBay traffic during peak hours by 10 percent—a significant benefit for Belmont, which is expected

to receive 40 percent of the traffic from the future development. The SLCA is still advocating for additional traffic-calming measures, which could cost as much as \$1 million, for the intersections at Concord Avenue and Winter and Mill Streets.

Johnson noted that the Met State development is only one of several announced for the area and suggested that Belmont, Waltham, and Lexington could make a case for a comprehensive regional traffic study. His suggestion was well received; the two subregions of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council that represent the three communities have formally requested a traffic study by the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) to assess the effect of growth on their borders. Meanwhile, several civic organizations from the three communities supported the request in a June 4 joint letter, asking the MPO to suggest appropriate solutions without compromising “the historic country roads that are such an important part of the character of our neighborhoods.” The letter was signed by the Waltham League of Women Voters, the Belmont Citizens Forum, the South Lexington Civic Association, the Waltham Council of Neighborhood Advocates, and the Trapelo Neighborhood Association. The Belmont League of Women Voters has since voted to endorse the request.

Gillian Webster is a Belmont resident and the copy editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum.



Citizens Forum Settles McLean Sewer Dispute

By Sue Bass

The Belmont Citizens Forum has settled its dispute with Northland Residential Corporation—the designated developer of the Woodlands at Belmont Hill, a proposed 121-unit townhouse condominium—over Northland’s application for a state sewer-connection permit and related issues. The appeal brought before the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) by the Citizens Forum and 16 individual petitioners has now been withdrawn.

The terms of the settlement will not be made public until Northland closes on the purchase from McLean Hospital of the development site, but the Citizens Forum and the petitioners are pleased that these important issues have been addressed in a manner that will have long-term benefits for the development and the town.

No Decision on Junction Brook

In other legal issues, no decision has yet been made by James Rooney, the state administrative judge considering the fate of Junction Brook. The brook runs down a steep slope on the McLean campus, enters a culvert under Pleasant Street near the Shaw’s Market, and then merges underground with Wellington Brook, which eventually empties into Clay Pit Pond.

The question is whether Junction Brook is an intermittent or perennial stream (as defined by the Massachusetts Rivers Protection Act). If it is ruled perennial, development will be barred within the first 100 feet of the brook and severely restricted in the second 100 feet. American Retirement Corporation (ARC), the designated developer of the senior complex at McLean, has told the Belmont Conservation Commission that the current plan does not meet the requirements for buildings in the second 100 feet. Presumably, ARC would need to redesign and possibly even reduce its development. In addition, Belmont ValueRealty Partners, the designated developer of the research and development complex at McLean, would likely be required to move its garage.

Judge Rooney ruled on May 2, 2003, that the lower 200 feet of the brook, which had been

observed to run dry, was intermittent, but that the upper 600 feet or so—the portion that would affect nearby development—might still be perennial. In September 2003, he heard two days of testimony from hydrology experts and other observers of the brook. The parties filed briefs in November and have since been waiting for a ruling.

O’Neill’s Uplands Appeal

The Citizens Forum is also waiting for a ruling in a case involving the Belmont Uplands. In June 2003, the Conservation Commission denied a request by O’Neill Properties to specify the conditions by which the developer would have to abide during construction of an office/R&D complex, ruling that O’Neill’s application was premature and incomplete—in part because O’Neill had not filed an application for site plan approval with the Belmont Planning Board. Though such “orders of condition” are sometimes granted early in the planning process—and were granted early to McLean Hospital—the law requires the ConCom to wait until all obtainable permits have been applied for. That would seem to include site plan approval from the Planning Board.

O’Neill appealed the ConCom’s denial of an order of conditions to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). A site visit was conducted last September by the DEP, and legal memos were filed in October with Rachel Freed, the wetlands analyst in charge. Freed wrote the Town to confirm that O’Neill had not applied for site plan approval, but felt the town’s answer was ambiguous. She has been awaiting clarification of the issue from O’Neill or Belmont since February.

While this appeal is pending, O’Neill’s application to build a 40B residential development on the Uplands site may be ineligible.

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



Proposed Regs Would Weaken Wetlands Law

By Sue Bass

The board of directors of the Belmont Citizens Forum voted last month to oppose new wetlands regulations proposed by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). In comments filed June 28 with the DEP, the organization said the regulations represent “near-total surrender to the developers of office parks and other large developers of open space . . . [and] would erode the effectiveness of the Wetlands Protection Act and the Rivers Protection Act. . . . The proposed regulations would make it harder for conservation commissions to control development near wetlands and rivers and would limit the ability of abutters and interested citizens to appeal issues related to these laws, reducing the chances that a violator would get caught.”

Buildings Closer to Water

The Wetlands Protection Act currently requires review by local conservation commissions of any activity within 100 feet of a wetland. But during consideration of new proposed regulations, a game of bait and switch was played on the DEP’s advisory committee. According to members of that committee, the group was first persuaded by DEP staff to accept accelerated review for the second 50 feet of this buffer zone in return for total protection for the first 50 feet. Then the DEP switched the offer: the new proposed regulations virtually eliminate review of the second 50 feet and allow a number of activities in the first 50 feet. Another feature of the proposed regulations that concerned the Citizens Forum was a provision allowing the construction of new accessory buildings and the expansion of houses by up to 20 percent in riverfront areas and in the 100-year floodplain—without any review or permit. “We are struggling with the consequences of vast overbuilding in our floodplains now. Why should the state invite more?” the Citizens Forum asked.

Other provisions criticized were:

- ⊔ Elimination of the right to appeal variances. Variances permit more wetland filling and construction in riverfront areas than the performance standards normally allow, and are usually issued for

large public projects like highway or railroad expansion projects. “Such projects require more oversight than others, not less,” the Citizens Forum said.

- ⊔ Elimination of the requirement for a site visit by DEP environmental analysts considering appeals of Conservation Commission decisions. Those visits are important for the analyst and are also the only opportunity for concerned citizens to express their views in person.

- ⊔ Allowing the DEP commissioner to appoint anyone as a presiding officer to hear appeals, replacing the administrative law judges who have years of experience and a knowledge of the complex precedents that govern the state’s environmental laws.

The rationale for some of these proposed changes was to eliminate what the DEP called “frivolous appeals.” However, Heidi Ricci, a senior policy specialist for the Massachusetts Audubon Society who served on the advisory committee, says the committee repeatedly asked for specific examples of such appeals but was never given any.

“As an organization that has occasionally participated in appeals under the Wetlands and Rivers protection acts, we assure you that we have never done so lightly,” the Citizens Forum commented. “It is expensive and difficult already for citizens’ groups to find lawyers and raise money to dispute the arguments of developers. If you make it more difficult, the result will be the destruction of still more wetlands.”

Many other environmental organizations filed comments on the regulations. Mass. Audubon, for example, introduced its nine pages of detailed recommendations by saying the regulations would “significantly weaken the existing standards for environmental protection under the Wetlands Protection Regulations and reduce opportunities for public participation in permitting or other review processes.”

The Belmont Citizens Forum seeks volunteers for its Technical Advisory Committee to help analyze and prepare comments on proposed regulations, environmental impact reports, and other similar documents. For more information or to volunteer, please call Sue Bass at (617) 489-4729.



MIT To Study Trapelo/Belmont Street Corridor

By Evanthia Malliris

A group of 20 second-year graduate students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology will spend three and a half months this fall studying the Trapelo Road/Belmont Street corridor in Belmont. The corridor has been chosen as a course project for the Community Growth and Land-Use Planning graduate course led by Professors Terry Szold and Eran Ben-Joseph. The Belmont Citizens Forum will be the client for this project.

This practicum graduate course requires students to perform a thorough market analysis; pro-

vide zoning, design, development, and funding recommendations; and give two public presentations in Belmont. The class usually divides into four teams and produces four reports, which are then submitted to the town. This gives the town a wide variety of ideas to consider.

MIT has been involved with study projects in other local communities, such as Needham and West Newton, and at international sites in Barcelona, China, and Chile.

“Our involvement with local towns and communities—places like Springfield, Burlington,

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Spy Pond in Arlington is in the Alewife sub-watershed, a part of the larger Mystic River watershed, which empties into Boston Harbor through the Charles River Dam. Spy Pond is connected to Little Pond through a culvert under Route 2.

Group Recommends Ways to Mitigate Flooding

By Aram Hollman

A new report on flood control in the Alewife watershed marks the first time that Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge have collaborated at the municipal level to address the severe flooding problems that plague portions of all three communities.

While the Alewife area has always been flood-prone, residents of East Arlington, North Cambridge, and the Winn Brook neighborhood in Belmont have endured increasingly frequent floods in recent years for reasons that are not always clear. Until two years ago, each community tried to address this issue on its own. But after a “Flood Alert” forum in March 2002, cosponsored by the Belmont Citizens Forum and the Mystic River Watershed Association, the three communities began to work together. They authorized the formation of a Tri-Community Working Group composed of municipal officials and concerned residents to consider possible causes of surface flooding and sewage backups and to recommend a variety of public and private actions to mitigate these problems.

On June 15, 2004, the group released a draft Progress Report, which is available for review and comment via the Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge municipal websites.

The group, which is chaired by Belmont Selectman Will Brownsberger, has also drafted an environmental joint-powers agreement that, if approved by the Massachusetts legislature, would create an Arlington/Belmont/Cambridge Stormwater Flooding Board, a formal organization that could apply for grant funding and authorize regional hydrology studies of the Alewife Brook area.

“The Great Swamp” Paved Over

Three hundred years ago, the flat land at the bottom of the Alewife watershed was known as “the Great Swamp,” and was surrounded, as it is today, by relatively steep hills. Since that time, the swamp has been almost completely drained and replaced—first by farmland, and then by industries, businesses, and residences. This has severely impaired its ability to absorb rainfall. The surrounding hills, paved and

built upon, also retain much less water than they did in the past and send much more of it down to the floodplain at the bottom of the watershed.

During major storms, both storm and sanitary sewers overflow into Alewife Brook, polluting the floodwaters. At such times, Alewife Brook stops flowing into Mystic River and instead flows backwards, further trapping the floodwaters.

In 1996, 1998, and 2001, the area experienced severe floods, of a strength normally expected only once every 25 to 50 years.

The Known and the Unknown

The goal of the Tri-Community Working Group was to achieve consensus on what is and is not known about surface flooding and sewage backups, and to recommend further action.

The report has an executive summary, followed by sections on surface flooding, sewage backups, and actions that affected residents can take to prevent or mitigate flooding. A series of appendices provide additional details on the history and mathematics of flooding in the area, information on flooding from third-party sources, and content upon which the group could not achieve consensus.

The Working Group did reach at least one consensus on flooding: more and better data is needed regarding exact circumstances. For instance, how high does the water level rise and how long does it take to rise and fall? The report recommended that certain sites be evaluated for their stormwater storage potential, that existing drainage systems be properly maintained, and that the water level of Spy Pond and Clay Pit Pond be lowered just prior to major storms.

The group also agreed that during major storms, the inflow of stormwater from adjacent storm sewers overwhelms the sanitary sewers. Sewage backs up into people’s basements and/or overflows into Alewife Brook, contaminating surface waters. Better metering of the sewer system is needed and an upgrade of its downstream pumping capacity should be considered.

The report’s final section discusses how resi-

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Flooding Caused by History of Overbuilding and

Continued from page 11

dents can deal with flooding and sewage backups. Some measures are preventive, like installing sump pumps and adding shutoff valves to basement toilets. Others are reactive, like learning how to clean and disinfect homes and property after a flood.

The report also says that residents need to take responsibility for reducing stormwater runoff and contamination from their own properties by using permeable pavement, draining rainwater into dry wells instead of into sewer drains or nearby catch basins, disposing of hazardous waste at designated collection sites, limiting the use of pesticides, and picking up pet waste before it washes into the street.

Points of Controversy

Because the draft is a consensus report, there is no major opposition to its conclusions from within the Working Group. However, to achieve that consensus, some controversial opinions and matters of disagreement had to be “watered down” or eliminated altogether.

During the two years that the group met, there were two groups of participants with consistent dif-

ferences of opinion. One consisted of appointed and elected municipal officials, along with various professionals who regularly consult on flooding issues. They tended to view flooding primarily as a “pipes and plumbing” problem, one best solved by technical fixes to the physical infrastructure that deals with the flow of water and sewage.

The other group consisted of citizens, often affected by flooding but generally without professional expertise. They tended to view flooding primarily as a consequence of overbuilding, particularly in or near the floodplain, and felt the best remedy was additional regulatory restrictions on what can be built, in particular through zoning changes and conservation bylaws.

One persistent problem was a lack of good data, and all participants agreed that more and better data was needed. There was also disagreement on the reliability of data collected by citizens affected by flooding. This included photographs and testimony as to which areas flooded and as to the quantitative and qualitative extent of property damage and health hazard. Residents placed great store in such accounts, while professionals discounted such information, saying that it was an inadequate basis on which to draw conclusions, much less base policy.

Inadequate Maintenance of Storm/Sewer Pipes

There were also significant differences over the measurements of flood elevation. Appendix F of the draft report gathers together these different measurements in a single table.

No Consensus on Floodplain Development

As a condition of its participation in the Working Group, the City of Cambridge insisted that the role of real estate development, particularly near or in the floodplain, be excluded from the discussion. Since it is well known that creating additional impervious surface in watersheds contributes to flooding, this restriction became the elephant in the room, whose presence no one could openly acknowledge. Appendix L of the report lists seven proposed development projects in the Alewife area, all but one of which is near or in the floodplain. Taken together, these parcels (some of which are properties slated for redevelopment) total approximately one square mile.

While the group favored “smart growth” and “low-impact development” principles (i.e., redevelopment of existing properties is better than new development of open land, and site selection and building design should minimize environmental

degradation), it did not reach a consensus on the proposition that development in floodplains was undesirable. Nor was there a consensus that municipalities lacking local conservation bylaws should adopt them.

Despite these differences, members of the working group view the report as an important first step in the regional conversation on flooding, and hope that action will result—first to acquire data and then to act on it.

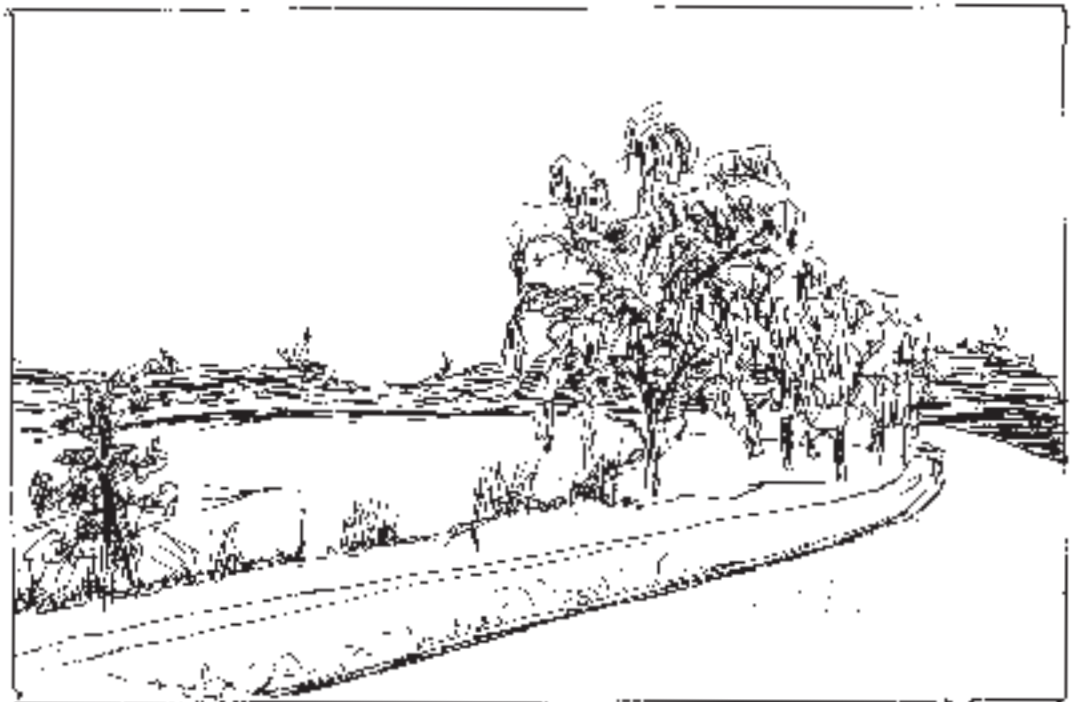
Public Comment Sought

Comments on the draft report are welcomed. You can read it at www.town.belmont.ma.us/Public_Documents/BelmontMA_Bcomm/BOS/tricomm/toc. Comments should be sent by September 8 to Belmont Selectman Will Brownsberger at will@willbrownsberger.com.

The Working Group plans to reconvene on September 21 to evaluate the comments submitted, incorporate them into a final report, and arrange a public forum on flood control.

Arlington resident Aram Hollman is an active participant in the Tri-Community Working Group.

Lowering water levels in Belmont's Clay Pit Pond (right) and Arlington's Spy Pond just before major storms could create more flood storage capacity.



Concord-Alewife Study Paves Way for Higher-

By Stash Horowitz

Early next year, the Cambridge City Council is likely to rezone a 180-acre area in the vicinity of the Alewife T station to allow higher-density, mixed-use development through a special permitting process. The proposed rezoning would encourage the kind of “smart growth” advocated by the state’s executive branch, but would not mandate the infrastructure improvements or public amenities that neighborhood residents say are necessary to make this kind of build-out desirable.

What are needed, neighbors say, are provisions for handling excess stormwater in this flood-prone region, specific proposals for managing the projected 15,000 additional vehicle trips per day, and guarantees that the development will include a sufficient supply of housing.

Formal study of this area began three years ago

when this portion of Cambridge, just over the Belmont border, was chosen by the Boston Society of Architects as a case study for a charrette (an intensive architectural design study) at Northeastern University on transit-oriented development and smart growth. These planning concepts are very much in favor with Governor Mitt Romney’s administration as a way to control suburban sprawl and create nodes of mixed commercial and residential development near public transportation.

The charrette was organized by Larissa Brown, then chair of the Cambridge Planning Board, and David Dixon, a principal of the Boston planning firm Goody, Clancy & Associates. The Planning Board subsequently recommended that a planning study be done for the Alewife area, and the City Manager appointed a 12-member Concord-Alewife Study Committee. Half of the committee members are residents who live on Blanchard Road or in the

This map, prepared by Goody, Clancy & Associates as part of the City of Cambridge’s Concord-Alewife Study, shows areas designated for low-, medium-, and high-density development. The darkest areas would have the tallest buildings.



Density Development at the Belmont Border

Cambridge Highlands neighborhood, and half are landowners and business people from the area. The Committee was told at the outset that its role would be advisory and that any zoning recommendations would come from consultants and/or staff of the Cambridge Community Development Department.

Goody Clancy is the project consultant.

In addition, one of the area's larger landowners, who is also a member of the study committee, commissioned a private master plan from Bluestone Associates.

Area Divided Into Three Parts

For study purposes, the Alewife area was divided into three parts (see map left). The largest is the "Quadrangle," bounded by the small Cambridge Highlands residential area to the west, Concord Avenue to the south, the Shopping Center area straddling Alewife Brook Parkway to the east, and the Fitchburg MBTA commuter rail line to the north. The other two areas, which are likely to be rezoned for even higher density development, are the Shopping Center and the "Triangle," an office/R&D park on Cambridgepark Drive, the street on which the Alewife T stop is located. The former Arthur D. Little property and the Martignetti-owned bowling alley and motel north of the Little River and south-east of Route 2 were not included in the study because they had already been rezoned in 2002 to allow for further office and housing development.

The Concord-Alewife Study Committee has met monthly for the past year and reviewed presentations by consultants, Cambridge city staff, and the general public. The group looked at potential retail development, traffic circulation patterns, and a design for a new mixed-use mini-city with a wide central avenue in the Quadrangle. It also considered adding housing and office space to the existing shopping center, which is currently anchored by Staples, Toys "R" Us, and Whole Foods Market.

Foot Bridge Recommended

The study group discussed at length a possible at-grade crossing or bridge over the MBTA railroad

tracks and a potential new commuter rail stop. The group concluded that a second car and truck bridge over the commuter rail tracks, connecting the Quadrangle and the Triangle, would be too expensive and require too much ramping. A bicycle and foot bridge, which would provide more convenient pedestrian access to the Alewife T, was recommended instead. Group members considered it highly unlikely that the MBTA would add another commuter rail stop between the Porter Square and Belmont Center stations, given the presence of the Red Line stop at Alewife. Unfortunately, there was no discussion of adding more levels of parking to the Alewife T garage, and only a cursory discussion of shuttle bus service.

Heights Up to 120 Feet

Proposed changes in density and building height are designed to encourage landowners to gradually replace many of the light industrial buildings in the Quadrangle with housing, office/R&D space, and a small amount of retail development. Density bonuses would encourage the development of more housing and office space in the Shopping Center and Triangle areas too. By Special Permit of the Planning Board, density and height could increase significantly—in some areas, the base zoning may double, allowing heights up to 105 feet in the eastern Quadrangle and 120 feet in the Shopping Center.

In an attempt to be fair to those landowners with properties furthest from public transportation (e.g., the western third of the Quadrangle), the Cambridge Community Development Department plans to recommend an unconventional transfer of development rights (TDR) as a zoning add-on. These landowners would be able to sell the right to build additional square footage to property owners in the Triangle, the Shopping Center, and the eastern end of the Quadrangle. The former will keep their original development potential, while the latter may use the TDR to exceed the Special Permit's upper limits on height and density.

When the area is fully built out (a process that is estimated to take 20 years, depending on the ups

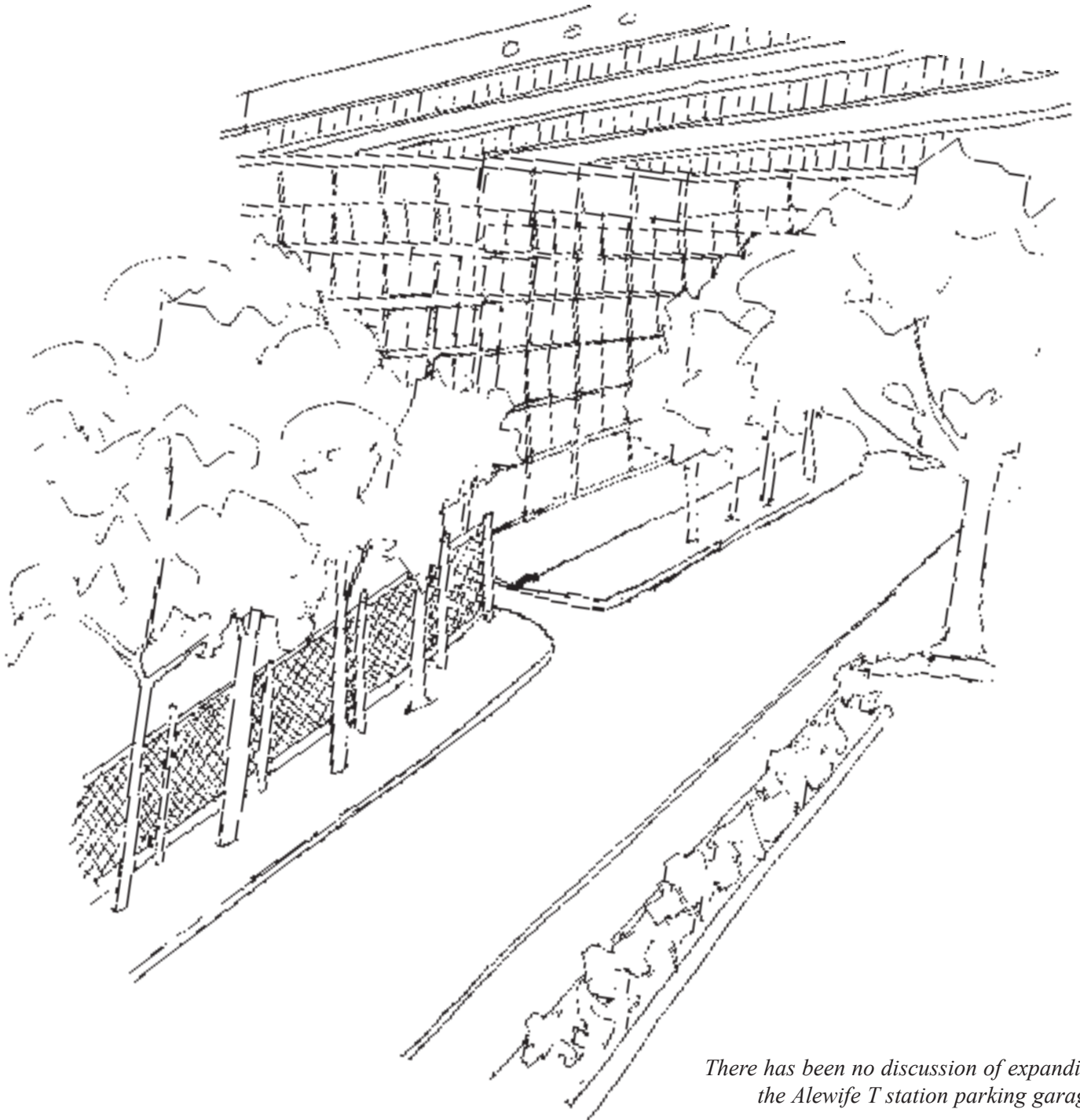
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Cambridge Development, *continued from page 15*

and downs of the business cycle), it could have as many as 5,000 additional parking spaces and produce up to 15,000 additional vehicle trips per day. These are the findings of an analysis by traffic engineer Steve Kaiser for the Association of Cambridge Neighborhoods, an umbrella group representing neighborhood associations citywide.

Given the congested highways that already bisect the site, this additional burden on the transportation infrastructure might one day limit development of the study area, especially if the Shopping Center's retail area is expanded.

The city's consultants claim that increasing the value of the properties for the landowners will result in an attractive, mixed-use, urban landscape, with parks, wide central boulevards, walkable mini-com-



There has been no discussion of expanding the Alewife T station parking garage.

munities with shops, and pedestrian and bicycle traffic. While it is true that more square footage for office, R&D, and perhaps housing will be built over time, there is no guarantee that the Special Permit process will include the public benefits listed above as preconditions for these permits. Indeed, the history of Cambridge Planning Board permitting for projects in North Point and East Cambridge suggests otherwise.

Public vs. Private Value

Opposition to the rezoning is expected from neighborhood advocates who believe that the City of Cambridge is putting the cart before the horse by granting development rights before planning for infrastructure improvements. They also believe that a high percentage of the developable land should be set aside for housing. So far, the proposed rezoning is designed to increase the value of the Alewife properties by offering more density, height, TDR, and structured parking. Planners presume that this increased value will somehow result in a model transit-oriented development. But as yet no workable plan has been presented to handle the extra traffic, additional employees, and increased demands for flood storage.

Citizens who wish to comment on the proposal still have time. The Concord-Alewife Study Committee will meet once or twice more, and then Goody Clancy will submit a draft report to the city. The report may be edited at that time, and then zoning recommendations will be drafted for a city-sponsored Concord-Alewife Zoning Petition.

There will be at least two opportunities to comment on the petition: at a Cambridge Planning Board public hearing and at a City Council Ordinance Committee public hearing. The Cambridge City Council will likely take its final vote on the rezoning in early 2005.

More detailed information on the zoning changes and hearing dates can be obtained by calling John Moot, President of the Association of Cambridge Neighborhoods, at (617) 491-8120.

Stash Horowitz is Vice President of the Association of Cambridge Neighborhoods and Co-Chair of the Cambridgeport Neighborhood Initiative.

Calming Traffic on Blanchard Road

By Grant Monahon

The Concord-Alewife Planning Study Committee, spearheaded by the Cambridge Community Development Department, held a meeting on June 15 at Temple Beth El to discuss proposed methods for “calming” traffic on Blanchard Road between Concord Avenue and the railroad tracks. Susanne Rasmussen, from the Cambridge Community Development office, explained that the city wants to narrow this stretch of roadway to help reduce vehicle speeds. It also plans to add a slight curvature to the road at the intersection of Blanchard and Colby Street, where the curbing would be bumped out to create a greensward. This reconstruction would be timed to coincide with the replacement of the street’s water main.

Fifty or so residents from Cambridge and Belmont attended the meeting. Most agreed that speeding automobiles and trucks, particularly heading north toward the railroad tracks, were extremely dangerous and noisy. They questioned, however, whether the proposed improvements would be effective in slowing traffic. They also worried that on-street parking for residents would be reduced.

Residents of Blanchard Road who live between Concord Avenue and Grove Street noted that the traffic calming proposals do nothing to address safety issues on the other end of the road, which has long been used by drivers trying to avoid congestion around the Fresh Pond rotaries.

“Not only is the volume high and getting higher, the speed is unbelievable,” Belmont resident Mollie Crawford-Volk remarked later. “Our neighbors’ fences are taken out regularly.” One SUV was going so fast, she said, that it flipped over onto a car parked in a driveway, causing serious injuries.

Bob Simha, a Cambridge resident, suggest-

continued on page 18

Blanchard Road, continued from page 17

ed that the city of Cambridge reinstate the truck ban on this stretch of road, install sidewalks and raised crosswalks so residents can safely walk to nearby bus stops, and redesign the dangerous and confusing intersection where Blanchard meets Grove, Bright, and Washington Streets.

Glenn Clancy, acting Director of Community Development in Belmont, and Mary Jo Frisoli, Chair of the Belmont Traffic Advisory Committee, were present to respond to questions about the coordination of planning for Blanchard Road, which sits on the Cambridge/Belmont line.

Unfortunately, neither Cambridge nor Belmont officials addressed the fact that the proposed rezoning and redevelopment of the Quadrangle area in Cambridge will materially increase the amount of traffic in the vicinity. Most Belmont residents remain unaware of the cars that will head their way when commuters and shoppers converge on this development just over the border along Concord Avenue.

Grant Monahon is President of the Belmont Citizens Forum. Sharon Vanderslice contributed to this article.

Corrections

In the May issue, the article “No Resolution Yet for Belmont Uplands Site” incorrectly said that citizens from East Arlington and North Cambridge were among the organizers of the Uplands Alternative Group, which is promoting a swap of the former MDC skating rink site for the Belmont Uplands.

Also in the May issue, in the article “Trapelo Road Planning is Already Underway,” the statement that the town is planning a study on parking options that will be partly funded by the MBTA was incorrectly attributed to Andrea Masciari. The Citizens Forum regrets the errors.

Pleasant Street, continued from page 20

few places where the bank is too steep, the installation of guard rails near the Clark Street Bridge and the Shaw’s supermarket, the removal of dozens of trees, and the planting of some new trees and shrubs. As part of the project, the Belmont Municipal Light Department will be moving all of its primary distribution wires underground, although transformers carrying secondary distribution and individual house lines will remain on poles for now.

The storm drainage system is also scheduled to be upgraded, particularly along South Pleasant Street, which has experienced severe flooding and road closings during major storms. Finally, the sanitary sewer system will be extended to the base of Snake Hill Road so that houses on that street can be hooked up to the town’s sewer system in the future.

Glenn Clancy said it’s likely that Pleasant Street will be rebuilt in segments, and that the first construction phase will tackle a stretch between Concord Avenue and Trapelo Road. The entire project is expected to take between 18 and 24 months.

Except for a section near McLean Hospital where new turning lanes will be added, the width of the rebuilt road will be uniform along its 1.8-mile length. This means that the roadway will be narrowed on the stretches closest to Route 2 and widened in the Pleasant Street Historic District, where large trees will have to be taken down to make room for the extra pavement. A new one-meter shoulder on either side of the street accounts for the additional width.

Some members of the Historic District Commission remain unhappy with this plan. “This street will be dramatically changed—I think for the worse,” remarked Rick Pichette, who is also a resident of the Historic District. “Especially when you take into account the widening of the road in the Historic District and the fact that there will be more cars, and more that are likely to go faster.”

Unfortunately, the Footprint Roads Program, a new state road improvement program designed to preserve character-defining features of historic districts, appears to have been put in place too late to save trees along Pleasant Street.

For better or worse, the Pleasant Street reconstruction project will begin before the year is out.

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Trapelo Road Study, continued from page 9

Lawrence, and Belmont—is of great value and importance to us,” said Ben-Joseph. “After all, MIT and our department are integral parts of this greater community, and we would like to help as much as we can.”

Ben-Joseph and Szold are impressed by how much work the town has already done on the Trapelo Road/Belmont Street corridor and are eager to have their students complement this work during their course project. In the last year, Andrew McClurg—a member of the Belmont Planning Board who is a professional traffic planner—has done an extensive study of the roadway design, conducting numerous public meetings, in which the Belmont Traffic Advisory Committee also participated. The town’s Office of Community Development obtained a grant for a study of the corridor by the Cecil Group, a Boston urban planning and design firm. The Historic District Commission has photographed the entire corridor and identified important landmark buildings. And the Waverley Fire Station Re-use Steering Committee has developed a plan for re-use of this historic station.

“Since there’s so much fine work to build on, the Citizens Forum has asked MIT to concentrate on zoning and other issues that have not yet been

addressed,” said Sue Bass, who chairs the Citizens Forum’s Planning/Zoning Committee, which will be coordinating this project. “Studying some of those issues is very expensive. We hope that this project will produce work that saves the town a considerable amount of money.”

The Belmont Citizens Forum will provide a \$2,000 stipend to the class to cover students’ supplies, photocopying, and local travel.

This is the second group of students recruited by the Citizens Forum to study the Trapelo Road/Belmont Street corridor. In the spring of 2003, five students from the Boston Architectural Center worked on projects within the corridor, developing proposals for Waverley Square, Cushing Square, Pequossette Park, and the Waverley fire station. Their ideas were exhibited at the MacPhail Architectural Collaborative’s art gallery in Cushing Square (now dEmios gallery).

The Citizens Forum Planning/Zoning Committee has begun to compile the data the MIT students will need—maps, reports of previous studies, descriptions of particularly important challenges along the corridor—and would welcome help. Call Sue Bass at (617) 489-4729 for more information.

Evanthia Malliris is a Town Meeting Member from Precinct 2.

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People Are Asking

When Will They Ever Fix Pleasant Street?

By Mark D'Andrea and Sharon Vanderslice

Those who pine for the days when Pleasant Street was a backcountry road may actually be happy about the street's current condition. Motoring over its washboardlike bumps, blowing out bicycle tires in its jagged-edged potholes, and leaping over its mud-puddled shoulders on a walk to town have become par for the course. The street has been in disrepair for so long, in fact, that some cut-through commuters have found other routes to take to work.

No major maintenance has been done on the roadbed for years, in anticipation of a full-scale, state-financed reconstruction that seems to always be just around the corner. Acting Director of Community Development Glenn Clancy said recent-

ly, "I won't state an expected period of time for activity. But we are close." On June 28, Selectman Will Brownsberger said he expected construction to start within two months.

Planning for the reconstruction of this street has been in the works for at least a decade. As Pleasant Street resident Linda Nickens remarked this summer, "My daughter was in the fourth grade when this all started; now she's 22."

The water mains on the street have already been replaced—in 1999 and 2000—and the gas main was replaced in 2002. The Massachusetts Highway Department, which is paying for the reconstruction with a combination of state and federal funds, opened bids for the job this past May and has since signed a contract with Roads Corporation for \$7.8 million.

This money will pay for full-depth reconstruction of the road right down to the dirt, new granite curbing for the entire length of the street from Route 2 to Waverley Square, sidewalks everywhere but a

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