

# Belmont Citizens Forum

Vol. 6, No. 1

A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

January 2005

## *State Plans to Sell Off Vital Greenway Link*

*By Roger Wrubel*

A high quality, historic 54-acre open space in Waltham and Lexington may be auctioned off by a state agency for development in the next few months, even though it is an essential part of the Western Greenway, a regional resource of more than 1000 acres of linked open space in Waltham, Lexington, and Belmont.

Over the objections of area legislators and the staff of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, the state Division of Capital Asset Management (DCAM) plans to declare the 54-acre parcel, formerly part of the Middlesex County Hospital, as surplus and sell it at auction to the highest bidder.

The development of this parcel will sever the only connection between the open space of the former Metropolitan State Hospital, now under the protection of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), and the open space surrounding the campus of the former Middlesex County Hospital recreation land along historic Bow Street. Cutting this link would end the hope of creating a 12-mile loop trail through protected open space in the three communities.

The threatened parcel is in the northwest corner of the Greenway and provides the link between the northern ring of the greenway, which runs northwest from the Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary to Met State before turning south along Chester Brook, and then south to the Storer Conservation Land and Lyman Estate in Waltham. It would then be possible to use an abandoned railway right-of-way to return east to the Beaver Brook Reservation and then north into Rock

Meadow and the McLean open space.

DCAM, which holds unassigned state property, used to give other state agencies and local communities the right of first refusal to surplus property. But in 2003, in reaction to the state's fiscal crisis and the slow pace of state surplus property sales, DCAM was given essentially unchecked authority to declare state properties surplus and sell them. Since then, DCAM has been rapidly auctioning off state property to raise money before its authority expires at the end of June 2005.

Local citizens and organizations, including the Massachusetts Audubon Society and the Belmont Citizen Forum, have been meeting with municipal officials and legislators to develop a strategy to protect the threatened parcel. The site is known as Lot 1 because it is the largest of six parcels created when

*continued on page 9*

### **Table of Contents**

Environmental Events Calendar . . . .	2
Allen Donates Land Restriction . . . .	3
Flood Forum Gives Residents Hope . . .	5
Homeowners and Stormwater . . . .	7
Trapelo Road Forum . . . . .	13
Why Does the Sidewalk End? . . . . .	20

# Environmental Events Calendar

*By Michael Stratford*

**Freshwater Fishes of Massachusetts: the Mystic and Beyond.** Wednesday, January 12, 7pm. Karsten Hartel will explore the various groups of Massachusetts fishes and review what we think is still in the Mystic. The talk will be based on his recent book "Inland Fishes of Massachusetts." Community Room, Robbins Library, 700 Massachusetts Ave, Arlington Center. This free talk is part of the Mystic River Watershed Association's annual Winter Speaker Series. For information call (781) 316-3438, e-mail [janet@mysticriver.org](mailto:janet@mysticriver.org) or check our website at: [www.mysticriver.org](http://www.mysticriver.org)

**Owls and Breakfast.** Saturday, January 22, 5:30 am–8 am. Discover why winter is the best time for "owling." Listen and search for owls when the traffic is light, do some early morning birding, and finish with a light breakfast at the sanctuary. Meet at Habitat, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. \$16 for members,

## **Belmont Citizens Forum Officers and Directors**

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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](mailto:editor@belmontcitizensforum.org)

\$20 for non-members. Preregistration is required. Sponsored by Habitat. Please call (617) 489-5050 for more information.

## **Seasonal Adaptations of Animals to Winter.**

Sunday, January 30, 1 pm–3 pm. Learn the secrets of how wild animals survive when the temperature plummets. The Friends of Fresh Pond is hosting this free program at the Maynard Ecology Center in the basement of Neville Place, 650 Concord Avenue, Cambridge. Dress warmly. Contact Elizabeth Wylde at [friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com](mailto:friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com) or Chief Ranger Jean Rogers at (617) 349-4793 to register. The recommended reading for this class is Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival (2003 edition) by Bernd Heinrich.

## **Reframing the Environmental Debate: National Security, Jobs, and Environmental Protection.**

Monday, February 14, time TBA. This panel discussion by local environmental leaders will feature Kevin Knobloch, president of the Union of Concerned Scientists; Mindy Lubber, executive director of CERES; and Jim Gomes, CEO of the Environmental League of Massachusetts. The panel will be held at the National Heritage Museum, 33 Marrett Road, at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Route 2A, Lexington. Sponsored by Lexington Reads. For more information, see <http://ci.lexington.ma.us/lexreads/> or contact Kay Tiffany at (781) 862-4726 or [ktiffany@rcn.com](mailto:ktiffany@rcn.com).

## **Panel Discussion on the Future of Alewife Reservation and Its Environs.**

Thursday, February 24, 7 pm. Lesley University, Miller Room. Topics will include the Bulfinch marsh restoration program, Cambridge-MWRA stormwater management, wetlands restoration, Alewife flora and fauna highlights, and the Friends of Alewife Reservation Urban Wild perspective on the area. See [www.friendsofalewifereservation.org](http://www.friendsofalewifereservation.org) for more information, or call Ellen Mass at (617) 547-1944.

## **Judith K. Record Memorial Conservation Fund**

**Concert.** Sunday, March 6, 3 pm. In its annual concert, the Record Players will present classical chamber music with string ensemble and voice. Tax-deductible donations are welcome at the door. Contact Kit Dreier for more information at (617) 489-4727.

# *Allen Conservation Restriction is Belmont's Fifth*

*By Sam Knight*

Last June, Anne Allen donated to the Belmont Land Trust a conservation restriction consisting of nearly five acres on two parcels of land along Concord Avenue. This restriction will preserve scenic and historic vistas, protect a historic boundary marker delineating the towns of Watertown, Cambridge and Waltham, and safeguard a greenhouse that has been used by the Belmont Garden Club for many years. Thanks to this gift, Belmont now has five fully approved conservation restrictions and two more still under negotiation.

The earliest restriction in Belmont was granted to the town itself in 1981, as part of a special permit for cluster housing in a development of the Wellington

estate called the Commons, located between School and Common Streets. This restriction, which covers 1.45 acres, protects the original lawn of the estate from further development. After that, Belmont saw no new conservation restrictions until 1995, when the late Lee Bradley placed a development restriction on an acre of his land abutting the Massachusetts Audubon Habitat sanctuary.

In 1999, the Belmont Land Trust was formed to acquire conservation restrictions as well as outright gifts of land for conservation purposes. Since then, the Land Trust has received three restrictions that together cover more than 17 acres of land. Tom

*continued on page 4*



*A large copper beech guards an old brick wall on Anne Allen's property. The wall is the last remnant of the residence of Katharine Wrisley Atkins, Allen's grandmother.*

## Conservation Restriction *continued from page 3*

Shapiro and Emily Kline were the first to donate a conservation restriction to the Land Trust. Their December 2001 gift preserved nearly two acres of open fields and woodlands as well as part of a prominent stone wall along Concord Avenue. A year later, the Ogilby family donated an agricultural restriction (a variant of the more common conservation restriction) covering over ten acres of farm and forest lands which had been commonly known as the Sergi farm. This farm, which has been continuously owned by the same family since the property was granted by King Charles II in the 17th century, is now under permanent protection from development pressures, and will continue to provide locally grown produce to the residents of Belmont. The Land Trust's third conservation restriction, Anne Allen's land, abuts the original conservation restriction on the Shapiro-Kline property, increasing the conservation and scenic values of both restrictions.

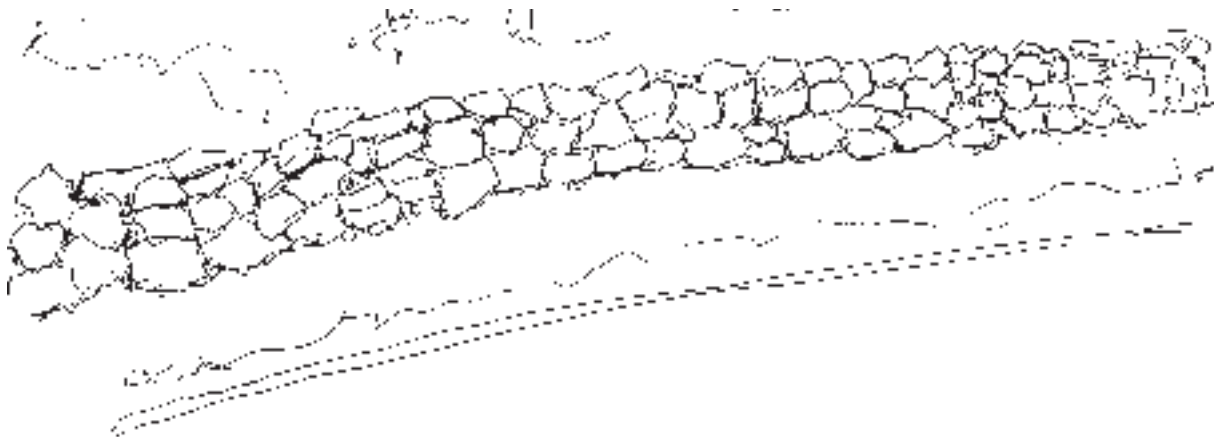
Two more potential conservation restrictions in Belmont have been under negotiation for several years without resolution. They cover the cemetery and conservation land along Concord Avenue due to be donated to the town by McLean Hospital. These restrictions are expected to be held by The Trustees of Reservations (see sidebar), which will hold the various parties to the agreed uses established by the McLean District Zoning Bylaw and Memorandum of Agreement.

*Sam Knight is Treasurer of the Belmont Land Trust.*

## What is a Conservation Restriction?

Conservation restrictions - known as "conservation easements" outside of Massachusetts - are the transfer of negotiated development rights to a non-profit organization or governmental body. They have become the single most widely used tool in the U. S. to protect land permanently from future development. Nationwide, the number of easements and the acreage they protect have been growing for the last 15 years at an exponential rate. At least 18,000 conservation easements are now in existence, and the total number of acres under protection is doubling every four years. The largest conservation restriction in the U.S. is held by the New England Forestry Foundation, and prohibits development on over 760,000 acres in Maine. In densely developed communities, restrictions can cover less than an acre.

The original land trust in the U. S., The Trustees of Reservations (TTOR), was founded by Charles Eliot in 1891. Today, TTOR holds 224 conservation restrictions throughout Massachusetts. Since TTOR was established, local, state, and national land trusts have preserved more than 34 million acres of land in the U. S., an area larger than the combined acreage of all the national parks outside of Alaska.





# Flood Forum Gives Residents New Hope

By Sue Bass

Every few years, there is a flood in the Alewife basin. Lawns are covered with sewage-tainted floodwaters, especially in the Winn Brook and Hittinger Street areas of Belmont and in nearby East Arlington and North Cambridge. Basement plumbing backs up. Clay Pit Pond overflows. Acorn Park Drive and the parking lots of the former Arthur D. Little

Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge, the group is made up of government officials, volunteer experts and community activists working to reduce flooding.

The waterways in the Alewife basin are polluted with sewage and contaminated street runoff, so flooding is more than just an inconvenience to residents and motorists. It's a health hazard, according to Will Brownsberger, a Belmont selectman and chairman of the ABC Group. When contaminated floodwa-

ter backs up into people's basements or spills onto their lawns, it has the potential to spread illness. That puts public health at the top of group's agenda, he said.

Pisano recommended lowering the water levels in Spy Pond and Clay Pit Pond when heavy rains are expected. The ponds would then fill up with the rain and runoff, preventing flooding from the medium-sized storms whose waters they could contain, he said.

But the ABC Group has not reached a consensus in favor of lowering the ponds, Brownsberger said in a follow-up discussion at the ABC



complex fill with water.

This frequent flooding from what hydrologists term five-year and ten-year storms might not have to happen. Though not much can be done to prevent floods in enormous hurricanes on the scale of Diana in 1955, the runoff from smaller storms can potentially be controlled, according to Bill Pisano, a professional engineer and a member of Belmont's Sewer and Stormwater Drainage Committee. Pisano represented that committee at a November 16 2004 public forum sponsored by the Tri-Community Working Group. Also called the ABC Group, for

Group's December meeting.

"There is significant potential for stormwater management in those ponds," commented Owen O'Riordan, Cambridge's city engineer. "But there are other community issues."

Rats, for instance. Some fear that rats would tunnel into the newly uncovered banks of those ponds. If the rains came as predicted, no problem: the rats would leave as their tunnels filled with water. If the weather prediction was accurate, the banks would only be

*continued on page 6*

## **Flooding** *continued from page 5*

uncovered for a couple of days. But “there’s always a problem of guessing wrong” about the size of the storm, Pisano conceded.

The group's current recommendations include improving data collection, exploring storage alternatives, considering low-impact development, and improving maintenance. At the December 7 2004 meeting, the group met with Roy S. Socolow, a hydrologist with the US Geological Survey, who explained how monitoring gauges on Alewife Brook and the Mystic River could help determine whether changes in the operation of the Amelia Earhart Dam could reduce flooding upstream at Alewife.

The group is also analyzing data on stream flow available from gauges operated by Cambridge and the state Department of Conservation and Recreation



*Camellia*

(DCR), planning letters to the DCR and the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) recommending maintenance improvements from those agencies. The ABC group is also discussing maintenance improvements each community could undertake itself, like better street sweeping to keep silt from being carried off with rainwater. Silt is now so deep in Blair Pond that the pond no longer can hold much runoff to prevent floods. Silt is also deep in Alewife Brook, remarked Carolyn Mieth of Cambridge, a member of the ABC Group, and the Alewife Brook silt is seriously polluted.

In a ten-year storm, Pisano said, the Alewife basin is about 80 acre-feet short of the amount of flood storage that it needs. But Belmont, Arlington, and Cambridge together could provide about 143 acre-feet of storage. Lowering Spy Pond one foot in anticipation of a storm could provide 100 acre-feet. Lowering Clay Pit Pond a foot could add 15 acre-feet, and two projects in Cambridge could provide another 28 acre-feet.

Complicating such calculations as these is the uncertainty about what exactly is a ten-year or hundred-year storm. After four major floods in a decade – October 1996, June 1998, March 2001, and April 2004 – residents of the Alewife basin have been understandably suspicious about how frequently 25-year and 50-year storms seem to occur.

The rating system currently in effect is based on 1982 studies that set the 100-year flood level for the basin at 8.2 feet above Boston Harbor. New studies by ENSR, a Westford hydrology firm, for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) put the new 100-year flood elevation at 10.6 feet, an enormous increase that will put much more of the basin into the 100-year flood plain. ENSR’s report has not yet been issued, so members of the ABC Group do not yet know what the flood levels will be for ten-year, 25-year, and 50-year storms.

Steve Kaiser of Cambridge, an ABC Group member and an engineer who has studied flooding, attributes the change to more accurate weather information, errors in the 1982 FEMA studies, and increased runoff from additional development. Since the Alewife basin is the site of what was once known as the “Great Swamp,” development of its wetlands and floodplains is the major cause of flooding.

The ABC Group was started by the Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA) after a March 2002 Flood Alert! forum, sponsored by MyRWA and the Belmont Citizens Forum. The ABC Group, which has been meeting for more than two years, issued a written progress report in June 2004, presented its findings orally on November 16 to about 60 people, and began work on its next steps on December 7. It will meet again on January 18 at 6:30 p.m. in the Selectmen’s Meeting Room in Arlington Town Hall. The meetings are open to the public.

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

# Homeowners Can Stop Stormwater Pollution

By Dara Olmsted

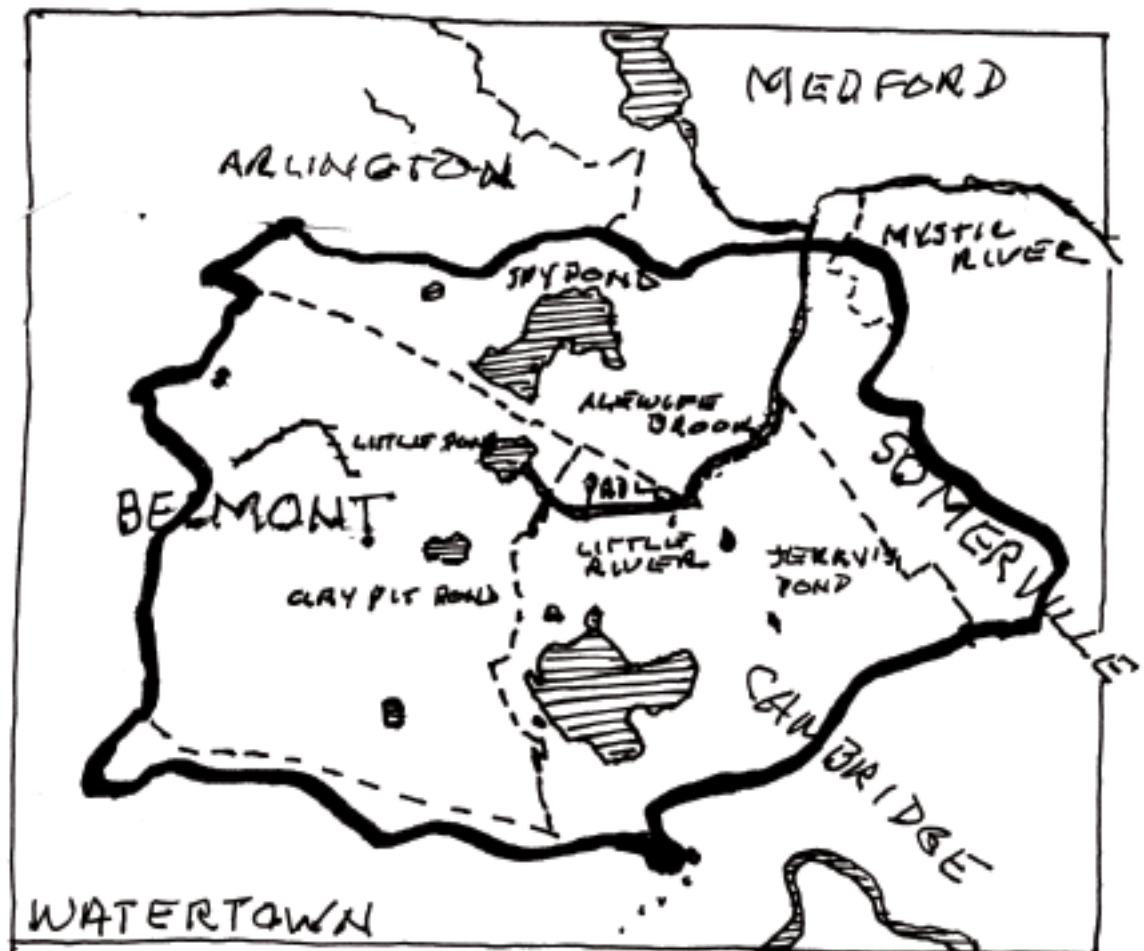
Most people think of storms as little more than a nuisance. They create puddles that can ruin your favorite shoes, cause baseball games to be canceled, and force you to stay inside all day. But storms do much more than that. Stormwater also flows over lawns, roads, and roofs, picking up pollutants, which it then washes into rivers, lakes, and the ocean.

This stormwater pollution is called “nonpoint source pollution” because it comes from many dispersed sources rather than from a single big facility. Nonpoint sources are now the major source of pollution in the US’s bodies of water, which means that reducing stormwater and nonpoint source pollution is more important than ever. Unfortunately, nonpoint source pollution is hard to control, because so many people have to take responsibility for the impact of their actions.

Stormwater runoff can contain fertilizer nutrients, oil, grease, viruses, bacteria, toxic metals, sediment, and salts, and contamination from leaking cars, road salt, fertilizers and pesticides, discarded oil, and animal waste. These pollutants can be harmful both to human health and to our fragile ecosystems. As many Belmont residents have experienced, stormwater can also cause flooding, degradation of habitats, sewage backups, and erosion. As more land is developed and

covered by impervious surfaces such as pavement, stormwater can no longer soak into the ground and instead becomes runoff. As a result, problems related to stormwater runoff are increasing.

Homeowners can do many things to reduce polluted stormwater runoff. For instance, you can redirect your downspouts, pick up pet waste, reduce fertilizer and pesticide use, drive less, and not dump in storm



*A map of the Mystic River Watershed*

drains.

To prevent water from your gutters from flowing onto impervious surfaces (driveways, sidewalks) and on into storm sewers, redirect your downspout so that the water goes to vegetated areas. Allowing your roof runoff to soak into the ground will reduce runoff while at the same time renewing the groundwater. You can purchase gutter attachments at your local



## **Stormwater** *continued from page 7*

hardware store to redirect roof runoff to a lawn, garden, or gravel bed.

Pet and animal wastes carry bacteria, the most prevalent water pollutant in the Mystic River Watershed, which can spread disease. Picking up after your dog keeps bacteria out of the water system, protecting the health of both your family and your neighbors. You can also help reduce the amount of bacteria that enters lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams by not feeding geese.

Overuse and improper application of fertilizers is common and is another serious cause of water pollution. Fertilizers contain nutrients, such as



phosphorus and nitrogen, that cause overgrowth of algae in lakes and streams. These algae absorb oxygen, leaving little for fish and other marine life. This often leads to fish kills. Fertilize only when necessary and never before a storm, as the fertilizers will wash off your lawn before the soil can absorb them. Better yet, use all-natural alternatives to fertilizers, like compost. Pesticides, many of which are toxic to humans and animals, are also frequently found in stormwater. Reduce pesticide use and never apply pesticides before a storm.

Cars contribute many pollutants to stormwater, including gasoline, oil, toxic organic chemicals, and heavy metals. These pollutants come from worn brake pads, tire rubber, antifreeze, exhaust, gasoline,

motor oil, and grease. One study found that 75 percent of the copper in lower San Francisco Bay came from cars and other vehicles. Drive less and check your car frequently for leaks.

The storm drains that line the sides of roads are designed to collect stormwater runoff and take it to local water bodies. These drains discharged untreated stormwater directly into rivers and lakes, so you should never dump anything in them. That includes used oil, antifreeze, paint and paint thinners, household cleaners, and pesticides. For advice on how to dispose of these materials, check out Belmont's excellent guidebook "Recycling in Belmont" (available on the town website at [http://www.town.belmont.ma.us/Public\\_Documents/BelmontMA\\_Highway/solidwaste](http://www.town.belmont.ma.us/Public_Documents/BelmontMA_Highway/solidwaste)) or call the Health Department at (617) 484-4601. Residential waste oil can be dropped off at the Highway Yard (see [http://www.town.belmont.ma.us/Public\\_Documents/BelmontMA\\_Highway/hazardous](http://www.town.belmont.ma.us/Public_Documents/BelmontMA_Highway/hazardous) for more information).

Another source of stormwater contamination is the sewage that leaks out of town sewer lines in poor repair. Sewer problems are generally "out of sight and out of mind" until a major problem occurs, and repairs to the town's sewers are long overdue. The town government has an important effort underway to investigate and correct sources of sewage pollution, and needs your support. Please cooperate if you are contacted about a possible illegal connection from your home, and support the budget allocations needed to bring Belmont's sewers up to par. To find out more about what the town is doing, contact the Sewer and Stormwater Drainage Committee or the Highway Department.

Stormwater pollution is an important problem, but together we can help make a difference. Start by making the changes suggested here. Then learn more about stormwater runoff and help spread the word. For additional information, check out the Mystic River Watershed Association ([www.mysticriver.org](http://www.mysticriver.org)), the Natural Resources Defense Council (<http://www.nrdc.org/water/pollution/storm/stoinx.asp>) or the Center for Watershed Protection ([www.cwp.org](http://www.cwp.org)).

*Dara Olmsted is an intern at the Mystic River Watershed Association and a graduate student in Tufts University's Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning Program.*



## Western Greenway *continued from page 1*

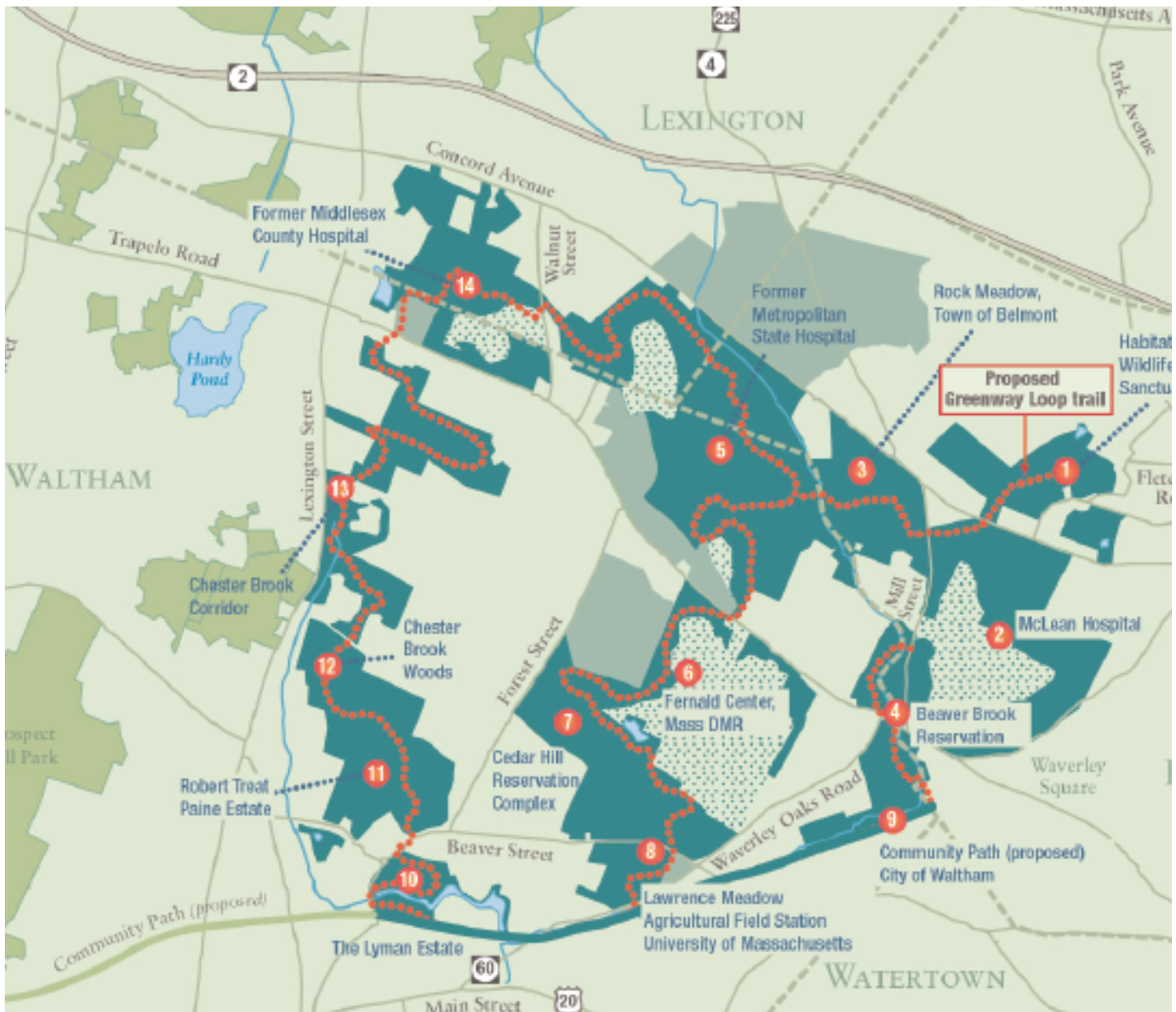
the former Middlesex County Hospital land was subdivided in 1996.

Last November, the Waltham City Council passed a resolution asking the Mayor to acquire the 6.5 acres of Lot 1 that are in Waltham. Lexington citizens plan to put a question on this spring's Town Meeting warrant asking their Selectmen to prevent the sale of Lot 1, of which 47.5 acres are in Lexington. DCR staff members are working to convince their agency's leaders that DCR should fight to acquire the parcel and protect it permanently.

Representative Tom Stanley of Waltham and other

state legislators will work in the coming legislative session to repeal DCAM's empowering legislation, but DCAM officials say that the Romney administration will ask the legislature to extend DCAM's broad power to sell off unassigned state surplus property.

The prospect of obtaining a high price for Lot 1 is surely the motivating factor in DCAM's enthusiasm to push the sale of Lot 1 forward. Another hospital parcel adjacent to Lot 1, of less than seven acres, recently sold for \$5.3 million. Lot 6, adjacent to the threatened parcel, was auctioned off by DCAM last August for \$5.3 million, for less than seven acres.



*Map of the proposed Western Greenway. Lot 1 is located on #14, the Former Middlesex County Hospital site. Illustration provided by Roger Wrubel.*

While Lot 1 is less valuable per acre because it includes many wetlands, it would likely sell in the tens of millions of dollars. However, raising money for the budget by disposing of the state's assets is akin to selling your house to pay your credit card bills.

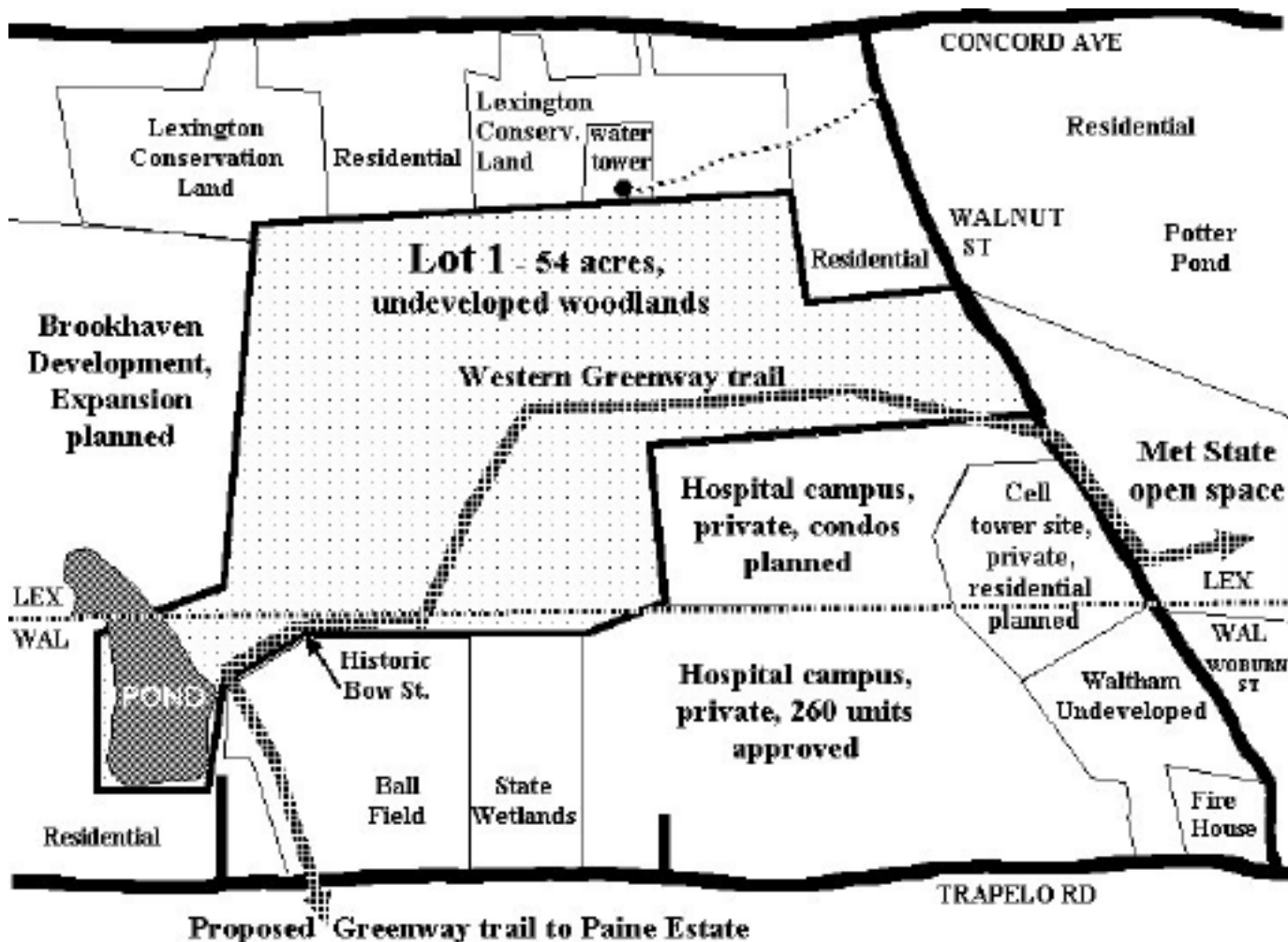
Lot 1 is prime conservation land. Its long history of agricultural use is apparent, but it shows no evidence of degradation from industrial or municipal activity. The ruins of former farmsteads sit beside an old colonial road, Bow Street, which was the main east-west byway before wetlands were filled to create Trapelo Road. Stone walls in surprisingly good condition remain along Bow Street and on the boundaries of former farms and pastures.

Lot 1 has two meadows and some healthy stands of pine and oak/hickory forests similar in quality to the woods of Mass Audubon's Habitat Sanctuary, McLean Hospital, or Met State. Along the western edge of the property near the Brookhaven retirement complex is an unusual series of wetlands

pools, some of which qualify for certification as vernal pools because they are home to species that can breed only in temporary ponds with no fish to gobble their eggs.

A few weeks ago, at the height of fall season, I bushwhacked through the woods to a spot just below Scott Road in Lexington and perched on a glacial erratic, a big rock. Before me were an open, mature oak/hickory forest and a stone wall that runs west and then turns south. It is a neat, secluded, calming spot. Birds were abundant. As I sat quietly in light filtered through tree branches, I saw flickers, downy woodpeckers, tufted titmice, chickadees, nuthatches, cardinals, and a whole host of other birds flittering through the woods. This peaceful place is not what I think of as "surplus land."

Other portions of the Greenway have remained interconnected because local citizens succeeded in limiting new development mostly to previously developed land. Examples include the residential projects



*Schematic map of Lot 1. Illustration provided by Roger Wrubel.*



approved at Met State, McLean and the Middlesex County Hospital. But the sale of Lot 1 would violate all the principles of is not an example of “smart growth,” that is, redeveloping built parcels but preserving open space, which is supposed to be the policy of the Romney administration, and includes redevelop built parcels while protecting open space. Lot 1 has never been developed beyond farming. In addition, Lot 1 It is far from any transportation hub or any town center, other components of “smart growth”. The sale of the property to the highest bidder will preclude any significant affordable component. A DCAM official has proposed that half the land be sold for 36 single family homes.

It is smart to allow dense development on previously developed sites and to preserve neighboring high quality open spaces for all to enjoy. It is not smart to promote shortsighted actions that have producing one-time gains with long-term irreversible consequences.

Last August, DCAM was chastised in a *Boston Globe* editorial (Rushing Land Sale, 8/31/04) for selling a 28-acre parcel with high conservation value in Hampshire County to a developer rather than allowing Mass Audubon and the town of Williamsburg time to raise money to buy the property. The *Globe* commented, “...[T]he state lost a chance to work with the town and Audubon on an alternative that would have kept the parcel completely preserved. It is bad enough that the state has cut back drastically on its use of the environmental bond bill to protect open land. It should not be hurrying to sell open land it already owns.”

*Roger Wrubel, director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary in Belmont, has been a leader in efforts to protect the Western Greenway. Portions of this article also appeared in the Habitat newsletter and the Belmont Citizen-Herald. Sue Bass assisted in the preparation of this article.*



*Aerial view of Lot 1. Illustration provided by Roger Wrubel.*

### **Tell the State What You Think about DCAM's Lot 1 Auction**

To express your views on the auction of Lot 1, you can write, call, or e-mail your legislators and any of the following state officials:

**David Perini, Commissioner,**  
Division of Capital Asset  
Management, 100 Ashburton  
Place, Boston, MA 02108, (617)  
727-4050, e-mail:  
[dcam.info@state.ma.us](mailto:dcam.info@state.ma.us).

**Douglas Foy, Secretary, Office of  
Commonwealth Development,** 100  
Cambridge Street, Suite 1010,  
Boston, MA, 02114, (617) 573-  
1380, e-mail:  
[ocd@massmail.state.ma.us](mailto:ocd@massmail.state.ma.us).

**Katherine Abbott,**  
Commissioner of the Department  
of Conservation and Recreation, 20  
Somerset Street, 5th Floor, Boston,  
MA 02108, 617-722-5500, e-mail:  
[kathy.abbott@state.ma.us](mailto:kathy.abbott@state.ma.us).

Excited about  
the new  
possibilities for  
Trapelo Road  
and Belmont  
Street?



*Would you like to help  
make them  
**REAL?***

Join the  
Belmont Citizen Forum's  
**Planning/Zoning Committee**

Next meeting is Tuesday, January 18, 7:30 pm

For more information, please contact Sue Bass:  
(617) 489-4729 [MerrFilms@aol.com](mailto:MerrFilms@aol.com)



# Trapelo Road Forum Offers Street Solutions

By Sue Bass

“Run for your life!” That’s how a group of MIT students characterized the fast-moving stretch of Belmont Street near Grove Street. “Pedestrian issues are serious. Someone is likely to get hurt here,” said Heather Richardson.

Traffic calming to improve pedestrian safety was an important part of a presentation December 2 by 26 graduate students from MIT’s School of Architecture and Planning, but their reports also covered economic development, zoning, and parking. The students have been studying the Belmont Street/Trapelo Road corridor for the past three months. Introducing the program to about 100 residents of Belmont, Watertown, and Waltham in the auditorium of Beth El

Temple in Belmont, student Karla Solheim remarked, “It has been exciting for us to practice planning in a real-life situation. We hope that by looking at the corridor with fresh eyes, we’re able to offer some insights.”

The students’ goal was to slow traffic to make the road safer for pedestrians, but to keep the road’s current capacity to carry vehicles. For Belmont Street, they recommend two lanes at the Cambridge line, three lanes from Grove Street to School Street, and four lanes from School Street to the Trapelo road intersection. Along Trapelo Road, they recommended three lanes, with the middle one a turning lane. The entire corridor could benefit from wider sidewalks and many more trees, the students said. They also

proposed adding one-foot green berms to line the road in residential neighborhoods and such “street furniture” as benches, trash cans, bus shelters, and bicycle parking in business districts.

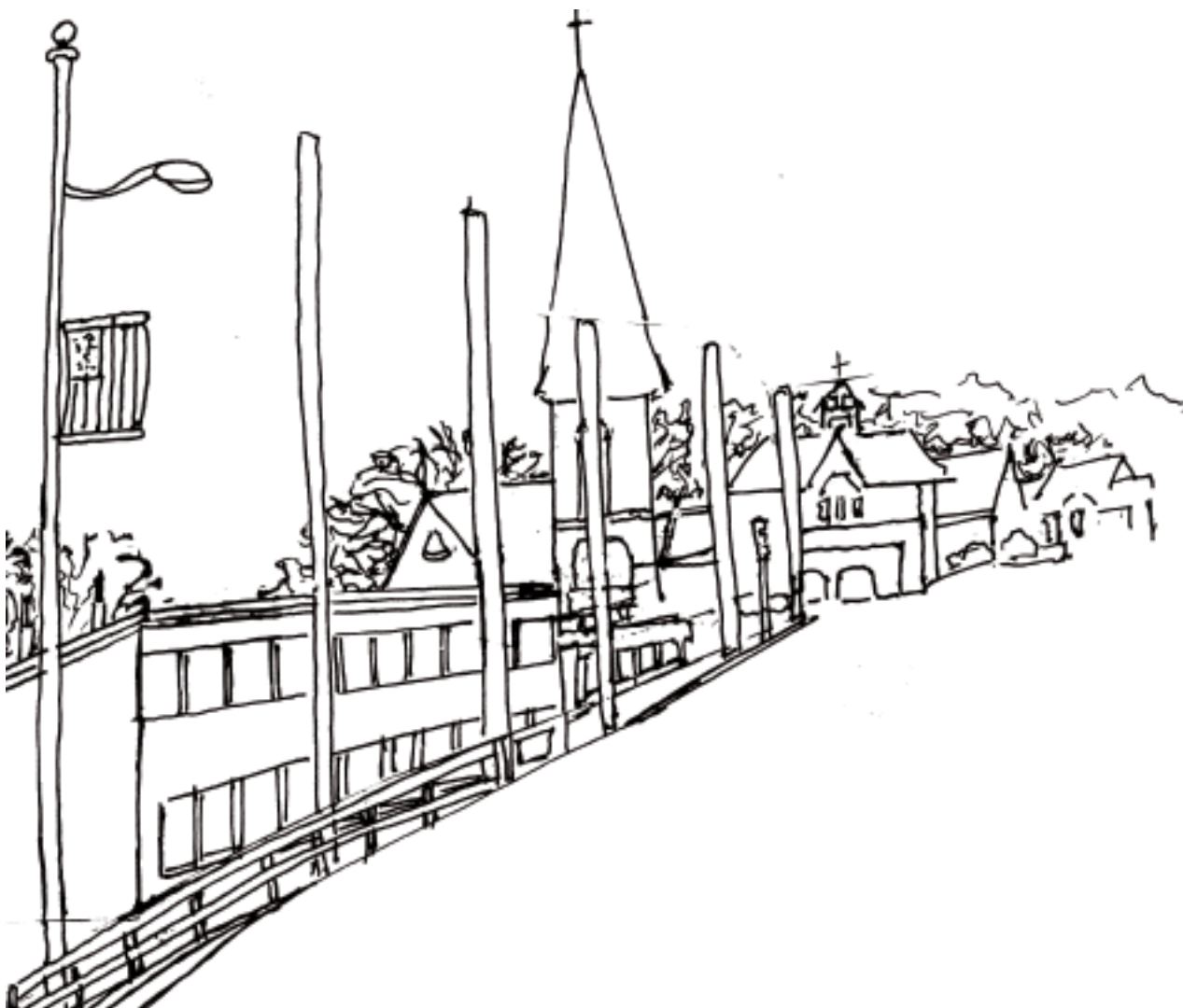
One major recommendation is zoning changes: new Town Square Incentive Districts in every area now zoned for business. In those zones, property owners would be eligible for increased density – up to three stories high, for housing as well as office space – by special permit if they met certain requirements, such as preserving existing historic buildings.

Other proposals were specific to particular sections of the corridor. For Harvard Lawn, which the students called “Belmont’s next great neighborhood,” they suggest textured crosswalks and pedestrian islands at the Grove Street and School Street intersections, with marked bicycle and turning



*Illustrations of an ideal streetscape on Trapelo Road. Reproduced from the final report by students in MIT class 11360.*

*continued on page 14*



**Trapelo Road** *continued from page 13*  
lanes to improve safety; increased parking in the School Street area by allowing business parking in the first 100 feet of side streets; and a bylaw amendment to control the reuse of the Our Lady of Mercy Church property.

They said the town would gain the most control over redevelopment of the four parcels now owned by Our Lady of Mercy if Town Meeting amends Belmont's School Building Re-use bylaw so that it also applies to church properties. If the land is not rezoned, the students said, the land will probably be redeveloped under the state housing law known as Chapter 40B, with greater density.

The School bylaw would allow multi-family buildings on the church land, which is now in a single-family zone. Under the reuse bylaw, Belmont could preserve the architecturally significant church and rectory buildings, putting six housing units in the church and two in the rectory, the students said. They suggested replacing the parish hall with a new two-

unit building and building a new three-unit structure on the site of the parking lot on Belmont Street. Those 13 new units could provide attractive senior and affordable housing on the streetcar line.

The students also recommended rezoning the Harvard Lawn area near the Cambridge line to allow multi-family housing, creating a signature space or monument to signal the entry into Belmont, enhancing the pedestrian links to nearby green space like Payson Park and the Grove Street playground, and coordinating plans with Watertown, which expects to rezone the Belmont Street area in 2005. They recommended a School Street commercial zone,

**Belmont Cable will broadcast the Dec. 2  
Trapelo Road/ Belmont Street presentation  
on the following dates**

**January 14, 15, 16: 8 pm**

**January 17: 1 pm**

**January 25/February 8: 8 pm**

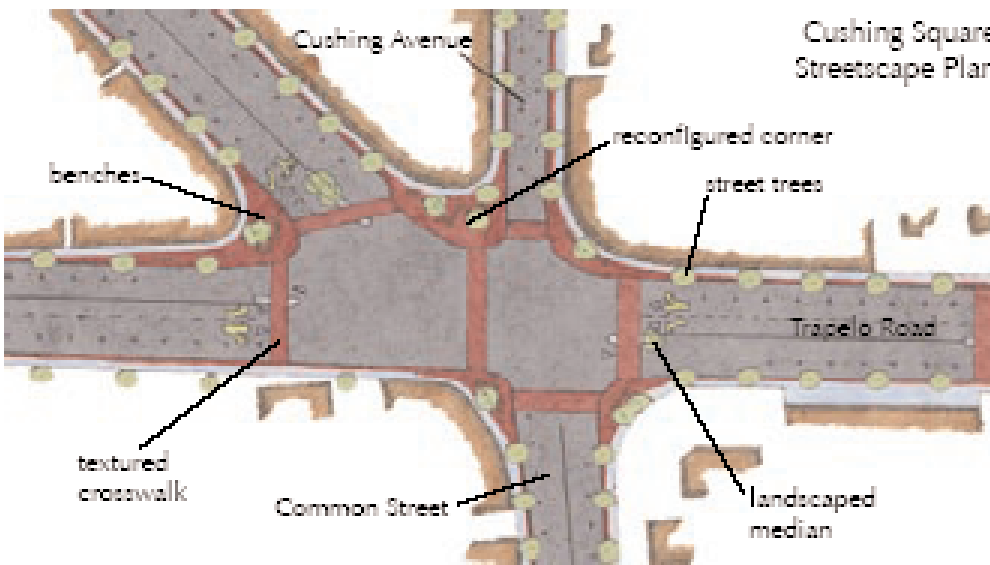
with mixed-use zoning – storefronts on the ground floor with housing above.

A second group of students concentrated on Cushing Square and Palfrey Square. In Cushing Square, they suggested, rezoning to provide Town Square Incentive Districts could allow the addition of two floors of housing above the one-story Real Estate 109 building at the corner of Common Street and Trapelo Road. The addition could be designed in a way that maintains the look of the current building and reduces the visual impact of the seven-story apartment building next door at 125 Trapelo Road. They also recommended creating a new Cushing Square overlay zoning district, which would allow the town to be involved with the design of such properties as the old CVS on Common Street. Such

districts normally set standards that property owners must meet in order to take advantage of additional zoning privileges. For the old CVS site, the students suggested below-grade parking, street-level retail stores, and two floors of housing above the stores.

The Cushing municipal parking lot is another promising site. The students recommended two or three stories of decked parking with a shallow building façade along Trapelo Road. If neighboring landowners got involved, the parking/retail possibilities could also absorb the parking lots of Starbucks and the old CVS and even a couple of nearby houses, with “a small pocket park to buffer the complex from adjacent residences” on Horne Road, the students said.

Palfrey Square is underdeveloped. Even with the new CVS complex, only 20 percent of the non-residential parcels now support active retail businesses, the students found. That area is a prime site for new development that will encourage pedestrian traffic. Eliminating unnecessary curb cuts in that area would improve the appearance of the sidewalk and make it safer for pedestrians.



*From top: plan showing reconfigured intersection at Trapelo Road and Common Street; rendering of intersection after improvements. Reproduced from the final report by students in MIT class 11360.*

The Cushing-Palfrey group also urged using landscaping to connect Pequossette Park to Trapelo Road. The students said the most feasible option - if not the best one - would be simply to extend the green space to the portion of the VFW parking area west of the VFW building. They recommended major improvements in the passive recreation areas in the park, including replacing the chain-link fence with shrubbery, while maintaining the current amount of space for playing fields. They also recommended

*continued on page 16*



*From top: existing Beech Street intersection; rendering of Beech Street with improvements including street trees. Reproduced from the final report by students in MIT class 11360.*

“daylighting,” or uncovering Wellington Brook, which begins in Pequossette Park but is buried in a culvert.

The students concentrating on Waverley and Central squares highlighted the area’s train station – “an 18-minute ride to downtown Boston!” said Sean Sacks – and streetcar line, as well as its proximity to Beaver Brook Reservation and the McLean land, and its historic buildings. However, they bewailed the lack

of attention to pedestrian safety. For example, their written report notes, “One crosswalk on Trapelo Road at Moraine Street would save pedestrians the hassle of crossing five crosswalks” to get to the supermarket. They also suggested adding a crosswalk at the Congregational Church, slimming the Hawthorne Street bumpout to accommodate just three lanes of traffic, and realigning Waverley Street so it meets Trapelo Road at a right angle, promoting safer turns for motorists and shorter crossing distances for pedestrians.

They recommended a zoning change to allow buildings up to 45 feet high – four stories – along South Pleasant Street and in the center of Waverley Square with a limit of 32 feet or three stories further east. If this new Transit Overlay Zone is compatible with the state’s Smart Growth legislation passed in 2004, Belmont would be entitled to additional state aid. The students also recommend working with Shaw’s to build a 325-

car garage on the site of Shaw’s current parking lot to serve commuters as well as shoppers. The students said that a garage over the train tracks is not economically feasible.

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

**The MIT students’ written report – Trapelo Road and East Belmont Street: A Corridor Study in Belmont, Massachusetts – contains many fascinating details of their study. It is available electronically at <http://web.mit.edu/11.360/www/Dec2FinalPresentation03.pdf>. To obtain a hard copy, please send a check for \$10 to the Belmont Citizens Forum, PO Box 1844, Belmont, MA 02478. If you can, add a donation to provide copies to other town officials. The Citizens Forum would like to make the report widely available, but reprinting enough copies for Town Meeting Members, even in black and white, will cost more than \$2,000.**



## Belmont's Streets Were Once Quite Peaceful ...



... and could be again.

## How does traffic calming work?

A “30 mph” sign won’t slow cars if the street is designed for 45-mph traffic, even if there’s a police officer on every corner. So what can control traffic? Can we maintain the flow of cars on busy streets like Trapelo Road or Belmont Street, while still letting school children and shoppers cross safely? Can neighborhood streets be more comfortable for pedestrians and bicyclists? Can better design make streets safer?

**Cara Seiderman has answers.**

Cara Seiderman, Transportation Program Manager for the city of Cambridge, is a nationally known expert on traffic calming. She was trained in urban planning at Harvard, Berkeley, and the Royal Danish Academy of Architecture.

**Thursday, Feb. 10, 7:30 pm**

**Chenery Middle School Auditorium**

**Oakley and Washington streets in Belmont**

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**South Lexington Civic Association**

**Trapelo Neighborhood Association (Waltham)**

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**Watertown Citizens for Environmental Safety**

**For more information, call (617) 484-1844.**

## **Sidewalks** *continued from page 20*

time].” Sidewalks were made with different materials, and sometimes there was confusion as to who owned which sidewalks. Castanino says that back then builders and developers adhered to fewer regulations, installing utilities, roadways, and sidewalks at will. Some builders kept roads (and their possible sidewalks) private, but over time, it became more convenient for developers to leave roads and sidewalks to the town, which was then responsible for their care and maintenance. The town still remains exempt from preserving these private roadways, which total nearly eight miles.

According to Town Historian Richard Betts, “nobody’s really responsible” for the lack of sidewalks in parts of town. Says Betts, “If the homeowner didn’t want to pay for [the sidewalk], it didn’t get done.” Betts recalls a movement to install sidewalks near McLean. This proposal, however, was quickly dismissed due to the cost of establishing sidewalks on the banked areas on the sides of the road.

Betts is unaware of any former or present town policy mandating the installation of new sidewalks where none exist. “I don’t believe that ever happened,” he adds, except perhaps in school zones.

Roads under construction are administered by the town’s Pavement Management program, which is overseen by Glenn Clancy, director of the Office of

Community Development. Pavement Management is a process of ranking roads in need of repair and repaving those roads. Clancy says most streets under construction “are in need of sidewalk repair and [installation],” and it is generally difficult to pave a road while preserving any accompanying sidewalks in the process. According to Clancy, “the focus right now is on major roads or ‘connector’ roads” that have

**Belmont Walks/ Bikes is working to make biking and walking safer and more pleasant in our town. The next meeting will be in late January. For more information, please call Heli Tomford (484 0170) or Anne Paulsen (484 1965).**

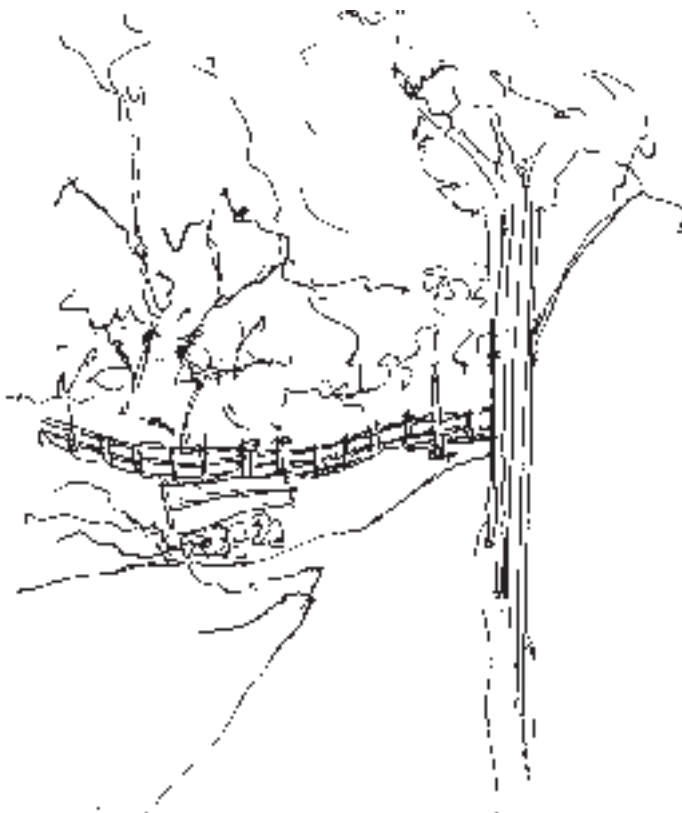
heavy traffic and link different parts of town.

The DPW is responsible for the 75 miles of public roadways in Belmont. Castanino says there are no sidewalks along some of these public roads because there is “no demonstrated powerful need for sidewalks [in those places].” He asserts that omitting sidewalks from these locations poses “no compelling ... safety [or] pedestrian” issue.

Castanino concedes that some people feel even “one pedestrian walking on the street” is one too many, but questions whether that one pedestrian warrants the massive cost of installing a sidewalk on an entire road. He notes that accomplishing this is unrealistic.

“We generally don’t have enough money to repair even the existing sidewalks,” Castanino says. Therefore, installing new ones is not a top priority. “We have to decide where the money would be best spent” in both the repair and installation of sidewalks. The DPW keeps a permanent, prioritized list of “requested repairs” from residents, which totals “about 600 to 700 requests right now.”

As for areas with no sidewalk, Castanino suggests that “if you live on a public way and want a sidewalk” installed in front of your property, “the



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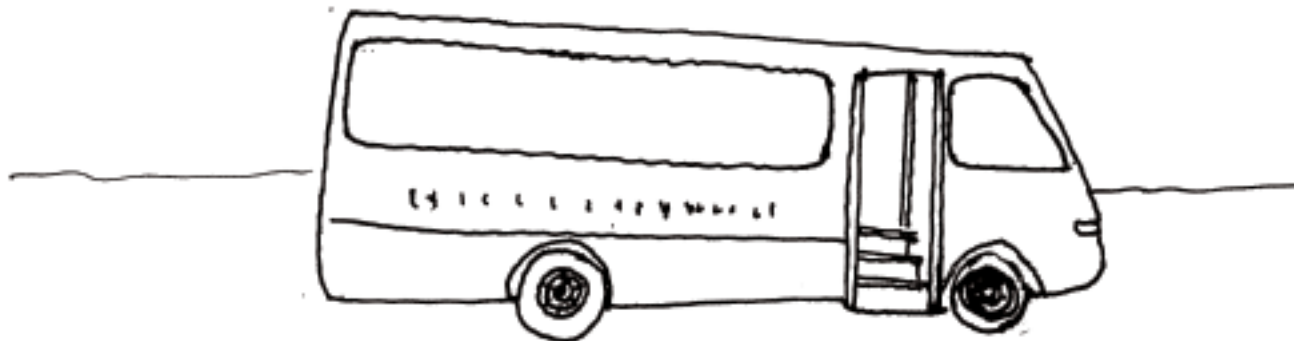
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town will pay half and the owner will pay half.” After the initial installation, the town takes over the care and maintenance of the sidewalk.

All requests for sidewalk installation must be approved by the Board of Selectmen before they are directed to the DPW, a process that can take several months. In addition, Castanino points out that the

DPW tends “to do a street at a time rather than individual sections.” The internal ranking system is based partly on “streets with a lot of requests,” with special considerations given to busy pedestrian areas, places of worship, businesses, and schools.

*- Michael Stratford is the Belmont Citizens Forum’s intern, and a student at Belmont High School.*



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How does traffic calming work?  
Thursday February 10 7:30 PM  
Chenery Middle School

### People Are Asking

## Why Does the Sidewalk End?

*By Michael Stratford*

The sidewalk stops here.

This is how Belmont pedestrians abruptly end their early morning walks, nighttime jogs, and weekend bike-rides along some streets. Sections of Pleasant Street before Shaw's Market and of Concord Avenue near Habitat lack sidewalks on both sides of the roadway, creating an inconvenience and a safety hazard for pedestrians and drivers alike. A few other heavily traveled roads, like Mill Street in front of McLean Hospital, and a handful of side streets also are also missing sidewalks, and have no defined barri-

er between pedestrians and vehicles traveling upwards of thirty miles an hour.

The town generally pays for maintenance and replacement of sidewalks. Building sidewalks where there are none is a different process, though. That's why there are 83 miles of paved street in Belmont, but only 54 miles of paved sidewalk. Peter Castanino, director of Belmont's Department of Public Works (DPW), says he's not positive why there are sidewalks in some areas of town and not in others, but after 23 years on the job, he has begun "to put together the bits and pieces of information."

In the 1950s and 1960s, when the town was becoming more developed, sidewalks were put in occasionally, but not always. Explains Castanino, "I'm not aware of a constant policy [during this

*continued on page 18*