



## Selectman Candidates Answer BCF Questions

Every year, Belmont voters elect one member of the town's three-person Board of Selectmen. This year, incumbent Daniel Leclerc, Anne Mahon, and Mark Paolillo are running. The Belmont Citizens Forum asked the candidates to respond to the following questions. The candidates were given 10 questions and limited to 1000 words total, or an average of 100 words in response to each question.

**1. The last tax override, for road repairs, failed. Some claimed the failure was the result of a lack of confidence in town government. What can Belmont officials do to counter accusations that Belmont's government is not trustworthy?**

### **Daniel Leclerc**

I do believe that, looking back, it was too big a package for voters to swallow. A \$2.5 million per year commitment was perhaps too ambitious. It's important to remember that the override lost by only 333 votes out 4911. Remember also, that some school supporters saw this program as competing with, arguably, just as urgent needs for schoolchildren. Having said that, the failure of elected officials to predict that lack of appetite for a perpetual roads program damaged public confidence. The lesson for the future is to do a better job explaining the reasons for the override and more accurately assess the ability of voters to shoulder certain tax increases.

### **Mark Paolillo**

The operative word, I believe, is not trustworthy but effective. There is a concern that tax dollars are not being spent as effectively and efficiently

as they could be. The best way to counter that is to do a better job of spending taxpayer money. Drawing on my experience as a national practice leader and partner at Deloitte, my years as a Town Meeting Member and my time on the Warrant Committee, and my professional training (MBA, Masters in Tax and CPA), I believe I can offer effective leadership. That's the principal reason I am running.

### **Anne Mahon**

Belmont's government needs to be more involved with the citizens of Belmont. If we had more interactive meetings with elected and appointed officials present to listen to questions and concerns of our citizens, heed advice, take the people seriously, and have thoughtful responses, we'd be so much better off. This would erase many suspicions from the private meetings last year that got us in trouble with the Massachusetts DA.

Belmont officials need to produce a track record of accomplishments and not be afraid to advertise successes. Wellington is going well, especially with the reduced cost of borrowing, and we should continue to keep that process transparent and very public.

Real damage occurs when elected and appointed officials do not support town staff or committees for their hard work when needed and deserved. This may make those who volunteer their time and talent less likely to contribute the next time around.

We can't make changes for change's sake in an effort to show voters we're doing something. The changes to be made have to show cost savings and increased productivity. At the same time, there are certainly revenue-generating options that need to get pushed through and not ignored for focus on the things that don't help the taxpayer.

Looking for what is perceived as wrong, pointing fingers, and turning on each other has been detrimental to the entire process. Celebrate successes and analyze why these efforts succeeded and carry those ideas forward as they apply to new challenges.

## **2. What opportunities do you see for cost savings for the town, and how much do you estimate each opportunity could save?**

### **Mahon**

Belmont has many buildings that are not utilized to their potential. These include the Electric Light Building, Benton Library, Homer Building and the Beech Street Center. Now that the Board

of Selectman has voted to allow rentals and one day liquor licensing, we should market ourselves for functions not only for the Belmont citizens, but also for the surrounding towns. Belmont is special and people would be willing to pay to have their events held in our town. We can also use consistently unused space as longer term rentals.

As far as towns go, Belmont truly is more efficient than most. For example, school comparisons of towns in our area show significantly less spending per student.

More electronic interactions would surely help. It is less labor-intensive [and] avoids postage and manual payment handling. Many town functions could even be back-office only.

### **Leclerc**

I think there are three significant opportunities for cost savings.

1. Internal administrative and work-function reorganizations, such as consolidating the town and school Human Resource functions [or] placing building and grounds maintenance functions under the Department of Public Works.

2. Public Safety Regionalization. This could result in costs savings through consolidation of police and fire chief salaries, central office administrative costs, savings resulting from equipment duplication, and consolidated 911. (I'm undecided whether 911 regionalization might contribute to delay in response and hinder the nuanced deployment of assets.) The turnaround time for completing this questionnaire was not sufficient for me to develop responsible and accurate cost savings.

### **Paolillo**

Ms. Muckenhoupt, I hope you and your readers will make allowances for the fact that this is a hard question to answer in 100 words. Broadly, I see opportunities through programmatic review, process improvements, 21st-century use of technology, regionalization, consolidation, and better organizational structure. Other organizations have realized savings, over time, of 10 to 15 percent from such innovations.

## **Belmont Citizens Forum**

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### **Newsletter**

Meg Muckenhoupt, Editor, Production

**Belmont Citizens Forum Inc.** is a not-for-profit organization that strives to maintain the small-town atmosphere of Belmont, Massachusetts, by preserving its natural and historical resources, limiting traffic growth, and enhancing pedestrian safety. We do this by keeping residents informed about planning and zoning issues, by participating actively in public hearings, and by organizing forums. Our **Newsletter** is published six times a year, in January, March, May, July, September, and November. Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum. Letters to the editor may be sent to P. O. Box 609, Belmont MA 02478 or to [info@belmontcitizensforum.org](mailto:info@belmontcitizensforum.org).

**3. What is your vision for new development in Belmont's three major business centers? How dense should Waverley Square, Cushing Square, and Belmont Center be? For example, what should the maximum building height be?**

**Leclerc**

I am very excited about the potential for smart growth to revitalize all three of Belmont's centers. The careful articulation of design, material, and compactness promises to create an energetic mix of small plazas, residential, and commercial uses, which will enhance human interaction, decrease our carbon footprint, and encourage the use of public transportation.

**Paolillo**

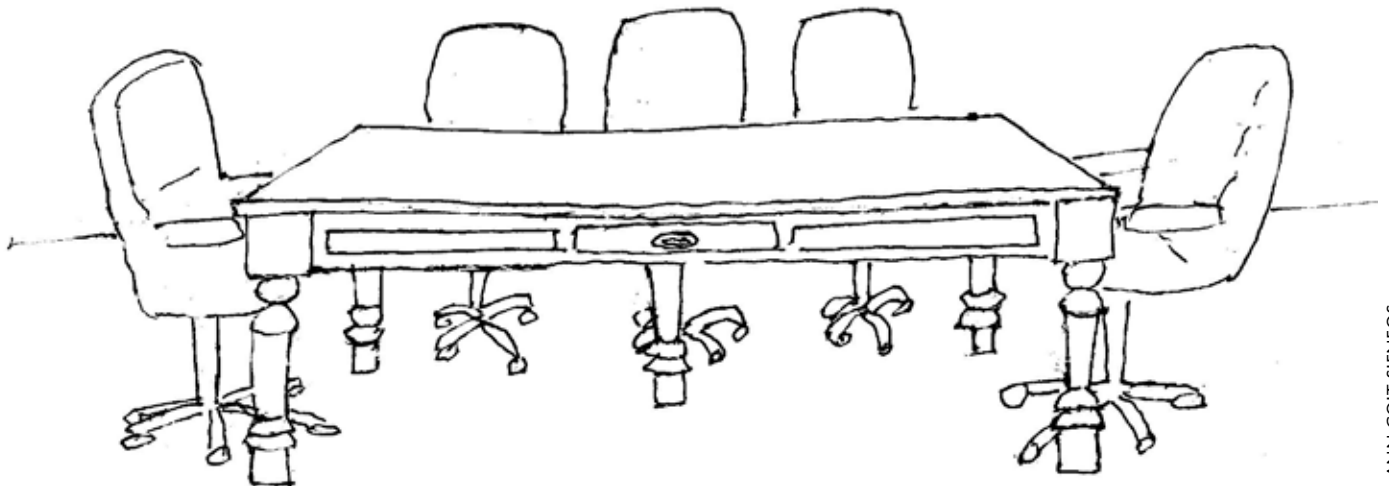
My vision is that we have three vibrant town centers, made so by development consistent with our town's character. That will certainly impose some limits on height and density and require potential developers to provide plans that are architecturally creative as well as financially sound. While this is an area of primary responsibility for the Planning Board, the Selectmen can

play a role by selecting Planning Board members who are sensitive to resident concerns, encouraging the Planning Board to remain open to all viewpoints, and ensuring that the financial benefits to Belmont are appropriately calculated and weighted.

**Mahon**

To a major extent, height should and does depend on a new development's proximity to residential neighborhoods and usage. Four stories may be fine in a mixed-use development and step down as it approaches existing homes. Mixed modes of transportation (car, walk, public) are key, as is attracting different segments (residents, neighboring towns, commuters).

Greater density—and more vibrancy—in some places throughout the town allows for less density in other parts of town and increased revenue for businesses that locate here. We would encourage developers to have attractive business and living space, green space, reduced impact on the environment, traffic concerns in mind, comfortable commuter space, and an open and continuing dialogue with the neighbors.



ANN COIT SIENIOS

**4. Who is ultimately in charge of town capital projects like the senior center and fire stations? How could we change the system so that there is better accountability for projects?**

**Paolillo**

It's clear that we need to have accountability during both the construction phase and with respect to ongoing operating costs and maintenance. In the short term, I would focus on ensuring that we have the best possible mix of talents and capabilities within the existing system of building committees; when the results are good, accountability is less of an issue. Over the longer term, we need to learn from the experience of comparable towns and see if there is an alternative system that provides better results.

**Mahon**

This is a real problem—it is never clear who is in charge. A building committee, appointed

by moderator, is independent. Greater transparency—having frequent reports to BOS on-camera is a good step. The Wellington Building Committee (WBC) does this and maintains a web site to keep the public informed. This formula should be adopted for all projects.

**Leclerc**

Ultimately, it is the town moderator, through the vote of the Town Meeting to appoint building committees. The actual day-to-day responsibility is assumed by the specific building committees. A new innovation sponsored by the Board of Selectmen is that of appointing a liaison to the building committees who reports regularly to the Board of Selectmen to assure that building is properly constructed using methods and materials that are appropriate and cost-sensitive. Joseph Barrell is currently assuming that function for the Board of Selectmen as our liaison to the new Wellington School Project.

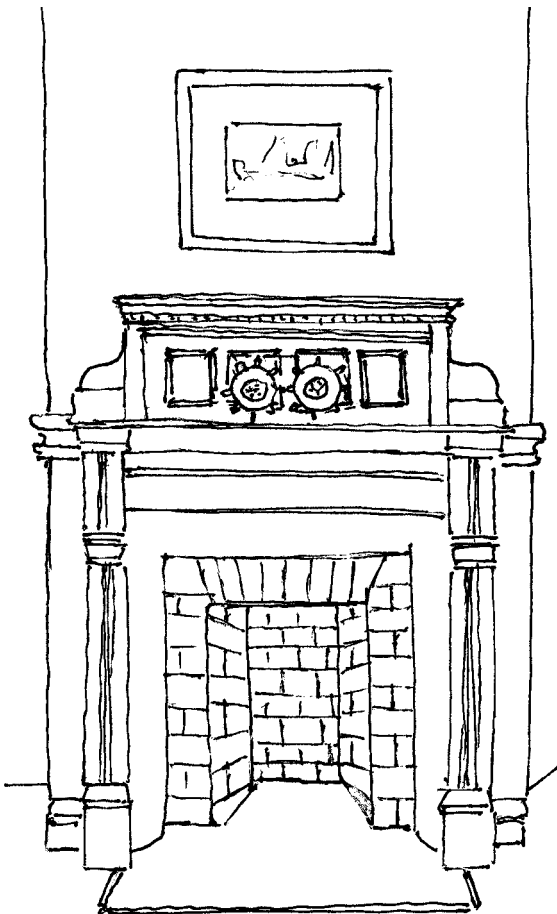
**5. The Conservation Commission has praised the Silver Maple Forest at the Belmont Uplands for its open space and flood storage capacity. If a reasonable offer is accepted, would you support Belmont's contributing to purchase the property?**

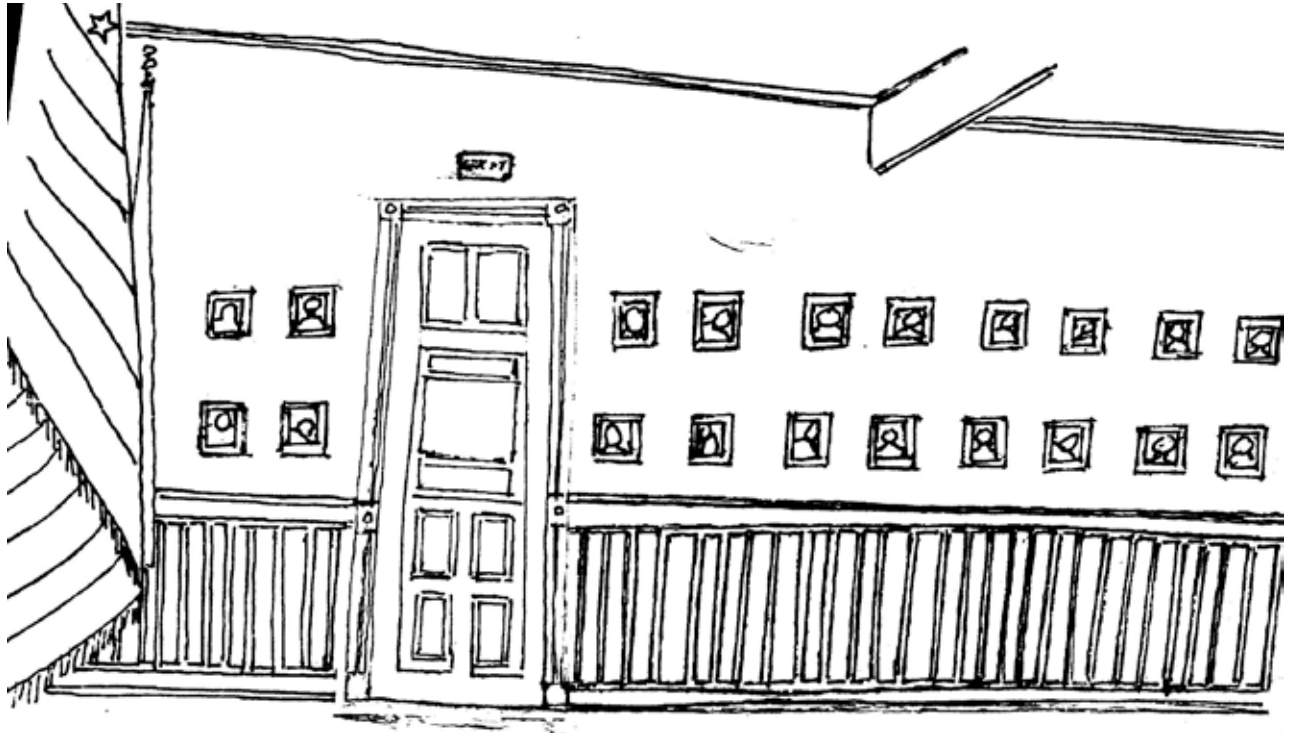
**Mahon**

This would cost a lot of money, which we do not have. A modest development which increases the tax base [and] preserves much of the space but does NOT place a burden on the schools might be the best way. It is better to have some control than none (e.g., 40B).

**Paolillo**

I strongly support conservation and environment responsibility. Conservation land is an excellent resource for families with young children and part of our responsibility to preserve the environment. But based on my extensive experience as a business negotiator, I believe responding to this question in detail would not be helpful to the town. Describing a strategy for support would telegraph an offer range to the O'Neill negotiators, and that is not in the town's interest at this point.





ANN COIT SIFNEOS

#### **Leclerc**

I think a permanent conservation of the Silver Maple Forest is the most desirable outcome for that property. I would support asking the town for a debt-service override to support such a purchase but, at the same time, carefully assess the average voter's appetite for such expenditure, particularly as it competes with other pressing needs such as the badly needed renovation of the high school, a new police station, and library.

#### **6. What practical strategies do you see for increasing the accessibility and use of public transportation?**

#### **Paolillo**

Public transportation is largely a state and MBTA responsibility, and the MBTA is in its deepest financial crisis since its creation. But one specific thing the town could do is make better use of Federal grant money. Last year, for example, Belmont chose to use its \$135,000 federal grant to do a study of whether we should have one or two commuter rail stations in Belmont—at a time when MBTA doesn't have money to build any new stations. Had we instead used that money to create wireless access, improve lighting, or provide better schedule information at our rail and bus stop[s], the town would be further ahead.

#### **Leclerc**

The Board of Selectmen have asked [town administrator] Tom Younger and [town engineer] Glenn Clancy to design an experimental initiative in which selected spaces along the Watertown side of Belmont Street from Brigham's down to the Cambridge line would be made available to commuters at a reasonable price for all-day parking. Other similar stretches of road, such as Concord Avenue on the Belmont High School side could be looked at if the first experiment proves successful. Strategically placed bike racks near train and bus stops and the possibility of a cooperative cross-town bus service with Watertown and Arlington might serve to support public transportation.

#### **Mahon**

The 73 bus is one of the most used in the entire MBTA and my husband and neighbors use it regularly. Some "friendlier" bus shelters would be more appealing to shelter riders from bad weather. Cambridge has done this at many stops. Perhaps companies would sponsor them. Parking near commuter train stops is definitely an issue. We should review ways to encourage people to get on [a] train or bus at Waverley Square instead of driving down Trapelo Road and Belmont Street.

## 7. Do you support Sustainable Belmont's "Cool Community" initiative?

### Paolillo

I supported the Climate Action Plan at Town Meeting and would continue to do so as Selectman. We need at the same time to be careful not to impose burdensome regulation on local businesses or expensive requirements on

### Electric Meters at the Library

Belmont residents can borrow a pocket-sized electric meter from the library. They come with instructions and are easy to use. You can, for example, unplug your refrigerator, plug the meter into an outlet, and then plug the refrigerator into the meter. The meter can tell you how much power was consumed since the meter was reset, how many amps or watts are going through the meter at any instant, and how much it costs to run an appliance for a year.

So I tried it. When I measured our 30-year old refrigerator on a cold winter day when our house was chilly, I calculated energy costs of about \$80 per year. Then I cleaned the heat exchanger, also called the condenser or the coils, at the bottom of the refrigerator. After cleaning, the cost per year dropped to about \$78. I expected a more significant effect after removing a thick blanket of dust. I also learned that to cook two eggs in a microwave and to toast two slices of bread costs a bit more than a penny, about \$5 for a year of breakfasts.

The meters were donated by the Belmont Municipal Light Department. Pick one up today to learn about your home's energy demands and how to reduce costs through conservation and efficiency.

—*Sumner Brown is a Director of the Belmont Citizens Forum*

households unless a majority of voters support this.

### Mahon

I absolutely support the Cool Community initiative. The effects have both immediate cost savings and longer-term strategic and climate savings. Our Butler PTA was proud to endorse Sustainable Belmont for such a worthwhile project grant.

### Leclerc

I enthusiastically support this initiative as a way to organize the community into small, neighborhood-based eco-teams to work on reducing the carbon footprint of residential communities. Bringing in the support of various houses of worship, nonprofit organizations such as the Farmers' Market, and government agencies is a powerful way to unite the community and create pride and cohesion.

**8. Belmont sidewalks are frequently uncleared and hazardous following snowstorms. How do you suggest ensuring safety of adult pedestrians and children who walk to school when residents block sidewalks with snow thrown from their driveways, and street plows block sidewalks with plowed snow?**

### Leclerc

This nagging problem can only be solved with strict enforcement of the residential bylaw prohibiting such behavior, and just-in-time public crews assigned to the clearance of such safety hazards. Such a solution has obvious financial implications which need to be researched along with the appropriate allocation of funds.

### Mahon

Both the Wellington project and Walk-to-School initiatives of the past three to four years (thanks to Anne Paulsen and others) have raised awareness of pedestrian issues. Belmont has a much denser, urban feel than many in town claim. Other dense towns have regulations for snow. Perhaps it's time to try, once again, to convince Town Meeting to support this. The old

days of the town plowing sidewalks are long gone because of revenue constraints. My view: clearing your sidewalk is an obligation for owning property, just as maintaining your property is. For those who are physically unable to do this, Alice Melnikoff has coordinated BHS students for shoveling as part of the community service program.

#### **Paolillo**

One of my campaign commitments is to get the Board of Selectmen out of micromanagement. So I would ask the head of DPW to determine the extent of the problem, investigate alternatives, and propose solutions, understanding that there are limits on what the town can afford and what many elderly residents are able to do.

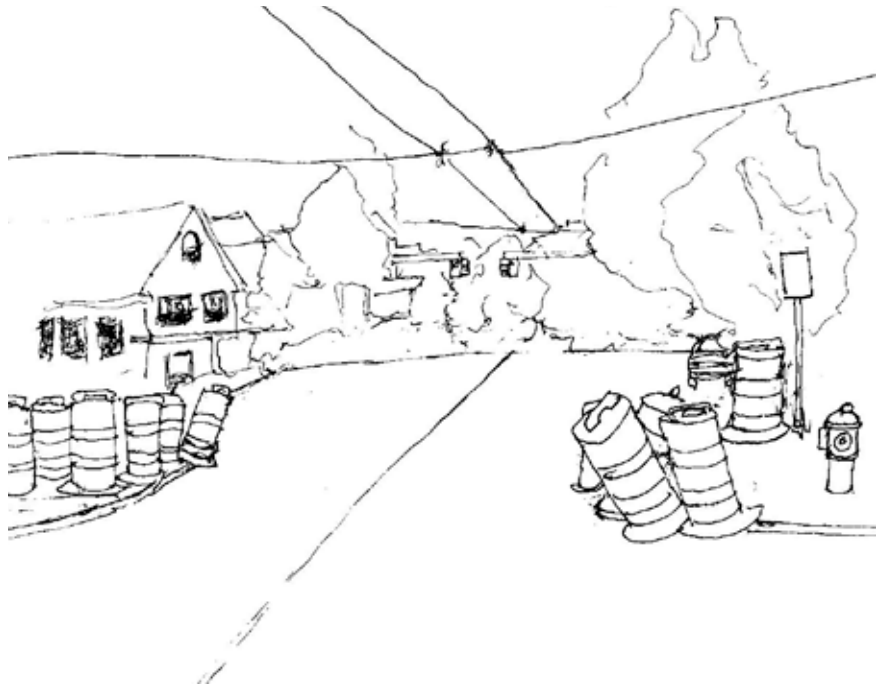
#### **9. The new Alewife-to-Brighton Street community path will be complete by next fall. What do you see as the main challenges to providing safe pedestrian/bike passage from that path to Belmont Center?**

#### **Leclerc**

This outcome will depend on the ability of town leaders and the owners of the stretch of land owned by the Citizens Forum to create a well-designed and secure barrier between the path and the Channing Road neighborhood. This will require patient listening and negotiations between these two entities in order to accomplish the goal of providing all the citizens of Belmont with a safe, attractive, and environmentally appropriate path from Belmont Center to Alewife.

#### **Mahon**

A more inviting “entry” at the Alewife end similar to the design in Arlington center. Lighting is a good first step and an attractive and safe interchange at Brighton Street would help, as would decent development at Purecoat. Experience in East Arlington (Lake St – Alewife) is quite successful.



ANN COIT SIFNEOS

#### **Paolillo**

This is a prime example of an issue where there are important equities that need to be balanced and where “life-cycle costing,” which takes into account the costs of maintenance and upkeep needs to be considered. For most Belmont residents, their home is their largest single investment, and we need to take their interests very seriously. Since the proposed path is part of a regional agenda, we need to be clear on its benefits and costs for Belmont.

#### **10. What do you think has been the most interesting result of Belmont’s Comprehensive Planning process thus far?**

#### **Mahon**

The Comprehensive Planning process has been highlighted by involvement of both residential and business members of the community from all areas of town. The process has pulled together several principles including the desires of residents, the interests of developers and business, the manner by which we can increase the tax base and reduce the burden on homeowners, and short-and long-term effects of development on those residents near projects. By undertaking this long-overdue planning effort, the town will be able to move forward to make decisions to positively impact our general welfare

in all areas grounded in the accumulated data and the community sentiment.

### Leclerc

The broad-based public conversation that has stimulated an understanding and appreciation for the many reasons citizens enjoy this community, its small-town feel, access to public transportation, excellent schools, compactness, and walkability. It also has generated many creative ideas as to how to create more synergies between residential, commercial, and governmental entities, as well as looking forward to a hopeful future in the potential implementation

of the principles of “smart growth,” green design, and village-scale development.

### Paolillo

Evaluating the results would be premature, but the process to date has focused attention and involved stakeholders in issues of growth and development and that has been very valuable.

The Belmont Citizens Forum thanks the selectmen candidates for their responses. Election day is April 5.



## Belmont Historical Society Calls for Preservation Award Nominations

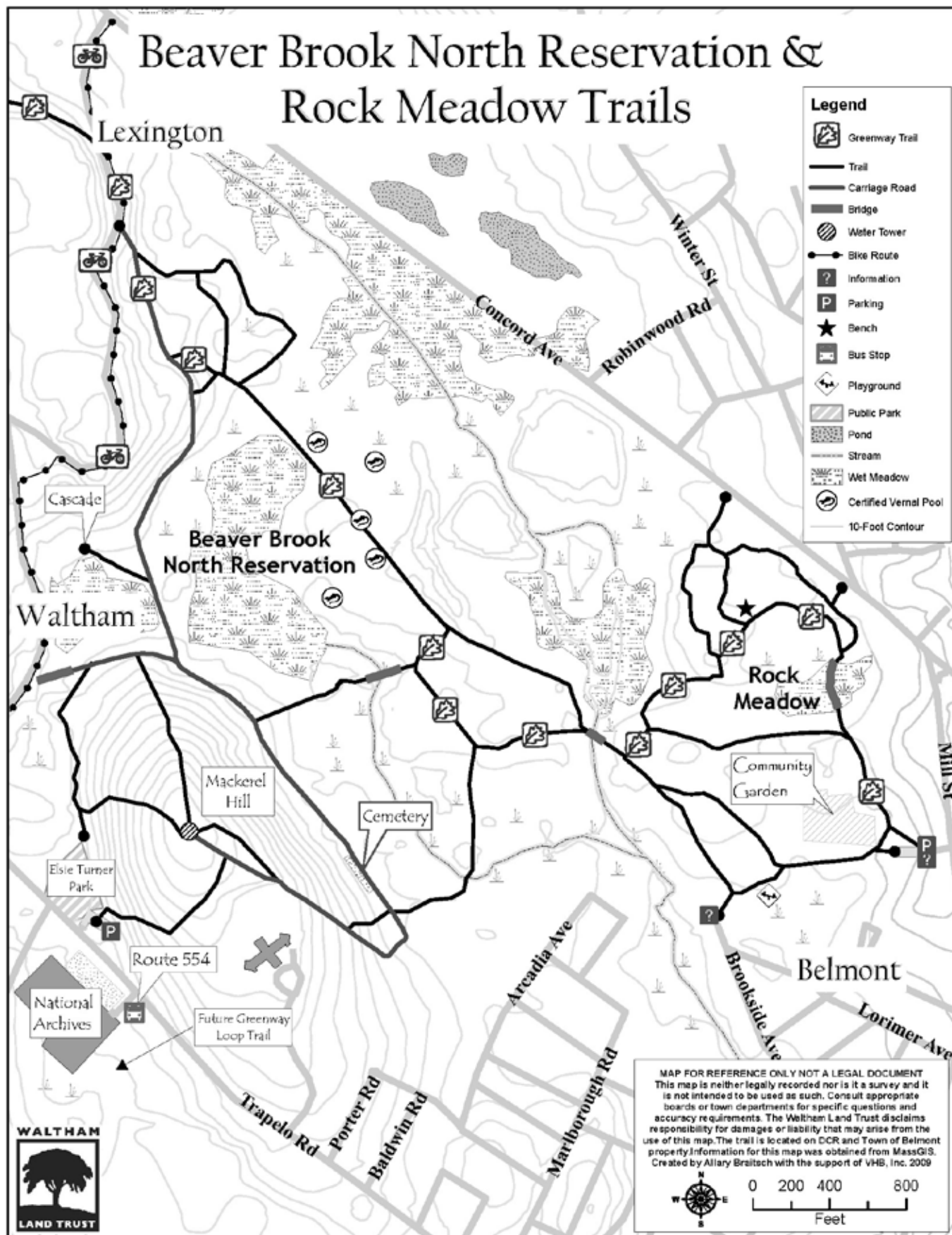
The Belmont Historical Society invites community members to nominate projects in Belmont for a Preservation Award. Awards for projects that have furthered the preservation effort in Belmont will be presented at the Belmont Historical Society's Annual Meeting on May 19.

Properties throughout town, not just in the historic districts, are eligible. Categories for this nomination are:

- Private residences
- Commercial properties
- Publicly-owned properties

- Properties owned by nonprofit institutions
- Landscape projects
- Preservation of open space and land conservation
- Individuals, companies, or institutions that have made significant contributions to historic preservation in Belmont.

Nomination forms are available online at [www.belmonthistoricalsociety.org](http://www.belmonthistoricalsociety.org), at the Claflin room in the Belmont Memorial Library, or by calling 617-993-2878. Nominations are due by May 1.



In February, the Waltham Land Trust released the first map of the walking paths in Beaver Brook North Reservation. For more information about the Trust, see [www.walthamlandtrust.org](http://www.walthamlandtrust.org).

# BCF Celebrates Ten Years of Service

In January, the Belmont Citizens Forum celebrated 10 years of preserving Belmont's small-town atmosphere with a ceremony honoring Roger Wrubel, Director, Mass Audubon Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary. Wrubel was honored as "Belmont Citizen of the Decade" for his perseverance in protecting the Western Greenway.

Four Belmont Citizens Forum volunteers were also honored: Sharon Vanderslice, founding BCF *Newsletter* editor; Ann Coit Sifneos, long-time *Newsletter* illustrator; Ken Stalberg, *Newsletter* mailing coordinator; and Eva Patalas, mailing list and database manager.



BCF Board member Evanthia Malliris shows off the 10th anniversary cake.



Roger Wrubel proudly displays his award—a framed photograph of an owl taken at Habitat Sanctuary.



Ann Coit Sifneos, *Newsletter* illustrator, enjoys the festivities.



Celebration co-hosts David Lubin...



and Nora Huvelle.



Honorees Eva Patalas, Ann Coit Sifneos, Sharon Vanderslice, and Ken Stalberg listen to BCF President Grant Monahon praising their years of service to Belmont and to the Citizens Forum.

# State Plans to Dredge Blair Pond This Summer

Pond to be Restored to “Historic” Depth

*By Lauren Ostberg*

Blair Pond, a part of the Alewife Reservation and an “urban wild,” will soon be restored to its natural depth, according to an Environmental Notification Report recently submitted to the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

“Well, OK, it was never really natural,” admitted State Representative Will Brownsberger. The pond was created when a brick manufacturing company excavated the area for clay in the early 1900s.

“Its historical depth, then,” he corrected. Brownsberger knows the area well. As a Belmont resident, former member of Belmont’s Board of Selectmen, and contact of the Tri-Community Flood Group of Arlington, Belmont and Cambridge, he has advocated the dredging of Blair Pond since the 1990s.

The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR),

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Department of Environmental Protection have had their eye on it as well, according to Robert Lowell, storm water manager at the DCR. The EPA defined the area as a “impaired water resource,” and the DEP identified the Alewife Brook Reservation as a “degraded wetland resource” as far back as 1998. At a March 2004 Blair Pond site visit, the Cambridge Conservation Commission and DCR representatives discussed flooding, debris, and sewage-seeping issues.

## Sedimentation is a Central Issue

The pond has become clogged with sediment, much of it runoff from nearby roads, some of it silt from Claypit Pond, which flows into Blair Pond by way of Wellington Brook. There is serious buildup. “We’re talking about a pond that was fifteen feet now being one or two feet deep,” Lowell said.

“Soon, it will no longer be a pond; it will be a muddy puddle,” reflected Brownsberger.

The accumulated sediment has hurt the water system’s flow, residence time—the time water stays in the pond—aesthetics, and capacity to support aquatic wildlife. It also introduces pollutants to the water system and reduces the pond’s capacity to hold storm water and prevent flooding. The Alewife sub-watershed, of which Blair Pond is a part, experienced noteworthy floods in October 1996, June 1998, March 2001, and December 2008. Blair Pond is a flood risk to Belmont and North Cambridge.

“It’s a long-term problem that has become a serious flooding issue,” Brownsberger said.

To address this unwelcome sediment, the DCR has proposed a three-month long, \$1.3 million project, to begin this spring or summer. It has three components: dredging in the northern and southern lobes of the pond and creating a sediment forebay, a small pool designed to trap sediment as it flows into the pond.

Water flows into the southern lobe of Blair Pond from Wellington Brook. The sediment forebay here will be approximately 10 feet deep and a quarter of an acre. It is designed so that



LAUREN OSTBERG

Blair Pond, originally more than 10 feet deep, is now shallower in places than a maple leaf.

accumulated sediments can be removed periodically, improving long-term site maintenance.

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“We’re talking about a pond  
that was 15 feet now being  
one or two feet deep,”  
Lowell said.

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The dredging will restore the pond to a depth of 10 feet. Currently, the DCR estimates the pond is three feet deep. The project will not change the existing depth in the center of the pond. This sediment “island” will have a controlled low point that forces water from the southern basin to the northern basin and eventually to the outlet. This directed inflow and separation between basins will increase residence time. Longer residence times reduce the spread of some pollutants and provide flood control.

### Deeper Water Brings Biodiversity

The low-lying areas are hotbeds for “rooted aquatic nuisance vegetation” and “exotic invasive plant species,” including water chestnuts, purple loosestrife, and bittersweet. Many of these weeds will be eliminated in the dredging process and replaced with new wetland plants as part of the post-project site restoration.

The Environmental Notification Form also believes that increased pond depth and residence time will improve animal habitats, especially for fish. “There used to be fish there,” said Lowell. The DCR hopes that the changes will attract alewives and possibly herrings. More fish will attract still more birds.

Some local birders want to ensure that the dredging work will not adversely affect current wildlife habitats. Ellen Mass, president of the Friends of Alewife Reservation (FAR), acknowledges that the proposal is “environ-



LAUREN OSTBERG

Wood ducks are attracted to Blair Pond’s mud flats and nearby woods.

mentally sensible purely from a water retention perspective,” but she is concerned that, without very careful habitat assessment, “our ‘improvement’ plans may cause more harm than improvement.”

“The DCR’s primary concern is the flooding,” said Mass, “and I’m glad the dredging will happen. We just want to be sure that it’s done with sensitivity to the habitat we have here.” FAR, a stewardship and advocacy organization, hosts trail tours, conducts clean-up efforts, and maintains the kiosk and other amenities at the Blair Pond site. They have a close relationship to the bird-watching community and are proud

that the pond is home to more than 38 species of birds.

“Blair Pond is a rare pond, left by itself to grow,” said Mass. The thick vegetation along the shoreline is nesting territory for bird species like the Sora, a small rail that inhabits freshwater marshes, she said. The pond’s position on the edge of the Reservation near a wooded area also attracts wood ducks, who roost in cavities in rotting trees.

According to Mark Rosenstein, who has been birding in the area for the past three years, the mudflats attract numerous shore birds, such as killdeer and the yellow lake sandpiper. Wood ducks, as well as geese, who feed by dabbling—putting their heads underwater to eat plant material in shallow water—will have less opportunity to eat in the dredged pond, and may come to rely more on the bread crumbs that visitors toss to them. Likewise, many shore birds eat insects from the mud.

“The general goal of cleaning up the litter and pollution and restoring the wetland is a good one,” said Rosenstein. “The specifics of how they do that, and when, will have an impact on the local wildlife.”

## Dredging to Start in Summer

The community met to discuss these developments on February 23, and afterward Rosenstein declared that he was “fairly happy” with the construction plans. “They are very aware of wildlife habitat issues, and hope to make this project an example they can show when discussing other projects in the state,” he said

Mass, as FAR’s representative, remained “deeply disturbed” enough after the meeting to write a letter to the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act

(MEPA) Office. FAR is particularly concerned about the proposed construction site on the pond’s Eastern shore. Mass says that it is the most richly vegetated and isolated area of the island, full of denning animals. She adds that the two roads proposed for construction equipment are not necessary, as the pond is accessible through the parking lot and Normandy Road.

After surveying the area, hydrologist Bruce Jacobs recommended mitigation plans for the Mooney Street access road, a more gradual slope on the edge of the forebay, and plans that demonstrate cognizance of the habitat needs of coyote, deer, and other wildlife.

The project requires an Order of Conditions from the City of Cambridge, a Section 401 Water Quality Certificate from the MassDEP, and a permit from the US Army Corps of Engineers. If approved, the dredging will begin in July 2010.

Lauren Ostberg is a freelance journalist based in Somerville. Currently, she writes about beards and local government.



Wood ducks are attracted by trees like this specimen by Blair Pond’s mouth.

LAUREN OSTBERG

# Town Meeting May Decide Benton Branch Fate

By Dan Lech

The town will soon decide the future of Benton Branch Library, a one-time chapel built in 1892 at what is now 75 Oakley Road. The Selectmen will be making a recommendation this month, and Town Meeting may vote on the library's fate this spring.

Originally constructed as a chapel for the Belmont School for Boys in 1892, this example of late 19th century country gothic architecture was designed by the architectural firm of Dull and Dallney. The building is notable for its combination of carefully laid rubblestone walls, its stucco and oak-beam entrance, and its high cross-beamed cathedral ceiling.

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The biggest concern with a private home sale is that the Town will be losing an opportunity—forever—to use the building for the public benefit.

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The chapel was purchased by Col. Everett C. Benton in 1903. The Colonel made the chapel available for public meetings, and the Payson Park Congregational Church and the Belmont Methodist Church were among its occupiers from 1913 to 1924. After Benton passed away in 1924, his wife, Willena, gave the building to the town for use as a branch library in his memory. In January 2009, the branch was closed for lack of town funding.

The Benton Library Reuse Committee, appointed by the Belmont Board of Selectmen in March of 2009, has held 10 public meetings starting in April of 2009 through February of

2010 to determine the best future use of the building.

## Restrictions Make Reuse Difficult

Reusing the Benton branch will be a challenge. Because the former chapel sits on a small lot (6033 square feet) town building code does not permit any expansion of the building's footprint. Any potential buyer for the property would have to make use of the existing structure unless the town approves a significant zoning variance. There is also no off-street parking, so any use of the building would involve street parking, which neighbors oppose. Town zoning restricts non-residential use to religious or educational uses such as a nursery school, an adult education center, or a church.

The Friends of the Benton was formed by neighborhood residents and concerned citizens dedicated to preserving the architectural integrity of the building and insuring that its reuse would be beneficial to the town and not disrupt the neighborhood. They have proposed that the town keep the building, which would be used as a combination continuing education center, recreational facility, and neighborhood meeting place to be known as the Benton Educational Collaborative. I spoke with Friend of the Benton member Michael Sattler about the Collaborative and other potential uses of the Benton building.

**The property wouldn't be attractive to an outside developer. The lot is too small to be rezoned, to rebuild on or to include any type of parking. What do you see as the worst-case scenario?**

Sattler: In a sale situation, the worst-case scenario is that the buyer chooses to alter or destroy some or all of the building for their purpose, or use it for purposes not in keeping with the neighborhood. A residential buyer, for example, might want to compromise the integrity of the Benton by adding dormers or additions or walls or landscaping, while a commercial buyer could decide to use the building as a nursery school or as a religious counseling center—all without

violating existing encumbrances. Further, a buyer could make zoning changes part of their offer to buy, and the Town might be so eager to sell that they would agree to those changes.

**What is the best-case scenario? Even if it is used as an arts and learning center as the Benton Educational Collaborative proposes, wouldn't increased auto traffic and street parking still be an issue?**

Sattler: Compared to the existing level of traffic (which is none), yes, any community use would result in increased auto traffic and street parking. Compared to the level of traffic in place before it was closed (and what any reasonable person would expect from having a small library in their neighborhood), most community uses would generate modest traffic levels in line with its past.

Further, a community use run by the neighborhood would have a degree of control over that traffic (reducing operating hours, for example), or finding ways (requesting that the

town impose parking restrictions or even shut the street to traffic occasionally, for example) in order to moderate it. None of that control would be in the neighborhood's hands with a sale or commercial lease. Plus, the neighborhood gets to use it, which is worth something.

**What about the option of converting the Benton into a private home?**

Sattler: The biggest concern with a private home sale is that the town will be losing an opportunity—forever—to use the building for the public benefit. Whether it's a library or an art gallery, the town would benefit from community use, for which the building is uniquely suited and has been used for decades. Those public use opportunities are dwindling in Belmont (and everywhere), and something important to our communities is being lost in the process.

The larger fiscal point is that the town would not benefit substantially from doing so—the best-case sale price to the town would result in less than .7% of one year's annual budget.



DAN LECH

The Benton Branch Library

Even if the town “gave” the building for community use, the issue of utility and maintenance still would need to be addressed. The building costs the town X to maintain empty and would cost the occupiers Y if it were in use.

**Would the Benton Educational Collaborative be able to bear the financial burden of the basic day-to-day expenses? How would this be accomplished? (Fees for adult ed classes? Voluntary contributions?) Also, do you know approximately what X and Y are?**

Sattler: The exact maintenance costs for the 1688 square foot building have not been nailed down, but estimates put them at between \$500 and \$1000/month. The most recent Collaborative proposal would rely for its financial support on fees for the use of tutoring space, as well as individual and corporate contributions. The largest variable in the Collaborative’s proposal

is its payment to the town—the higher that is, the more fees and therefore operating hours and contributions the Collaborative would need to secure. Open only a few days a week, and with only a moderate degree of support, the Collaborative could easily cross a maintenance threshold; at higher levels more effort would be required.

Capital improvements (ADA compliance, bathroom expansions) add an extra level of complexity to the picture. Any use other than a private home would need to make these improvements, which are estimated to be in the \$25,000 range. The Collaborative could pay for these out of a combination of corporate support (for which preliminary commitments have already been received) and rent forgiveness from the Town.

Dan Lech is an 11-year Belmont resident, wine professional, and musician who is attempting to think globally and act locally

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## Environmental Events

### Sugaring Celebration

**Saturday, March 13, 10 a.m.-noon or 1-3 p.m.**

Bring the kids and grandparents and learn how maple syrup is made from sugar maple trees at Belmont’s Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary. Try your hand at a few sugaring activities, hear stories, and visit a few places on the Habitat property including tapped sugar trees. Mass Audubon members \$8, nonmembers \$10. Registration required. Information: [www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org), [habitat@massaudubon.org](mailto:habitat@massaudubon.org). 617-489-5050. *Habitat, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont.*

### Living with Coyotes in Cambridge

**Sunday, March 14, 1-3 p.m.**

John Maguranis, Belmont’s animal control officer, will share his knowledge of and experiences with coyotes that frequent the Fresh Pond area. Maguranis will discuss coyote behavior and pet and human safety. After the formal presentation, walk in the Lusitania Meadow to look for coyote tracks. Free: registration required. Information:

[www.friendsoffreshpond.org](http://www.friendsoffreshpond.org), [friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com](mailto:friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com), 617-349-6489. *Maynard Ecology Center, Basement of Neville Place, 650 Concord Avenue, Cambridge.*

### First Day of Spring Walk

**Saturday, March 20, 10 a.m.-noon.**

Join the Waltham Land Trust for a walk on the first day of spring! David Kehs, a member of the Waltham Land Trust’s Board of Directors and its Land Committee, will lead walkers through Lot 1. This walk is one of our series to explore Waltham’s open spaces and is free and open to the public. Wear sturdy shoes or boots and dress for the weather. Information: [www.walthamlandtrust.org](http://www.walthamlandtrust.org), [info@walthamlandtrust.org](mailto:info@walthamlandtrust.org), 781-893-3355. *James Falzone Memorial Park, 901 Trapelo Road, Waltham.*

### Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival

**Saturday, March 20, 7-10 p.m.**

“e” hosts The Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival, sponsored by the Green Roundtable. The festival shows films from around the globe on a wide array of environmental issues; this year’s festival opens with the acclaimed documentary

"Tapped." Doors will open at 6 p.m. with a light supper and silent auction; films begin at 7 p.m., with dessert served at the intermission. Tickets \$30. Information: [www.e-action.us](http://www.e-action.us), 617-227-1522. *The Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology*  
41 Berkeley Street, Boston.

### Climate Change Comes to Walden Pond

**Sunday, March 21, 7:30 p.m.**

Prof. Richard Primack of Boston University will speak on climate changes at Walden Pond, based in part on Henry David Thoreau's detailed records of natural history in the 1850s. Sponsored by the Lexington Global Warming Action Coalition. Information: [www.lexgwac.org](http://www.lexgwac.org), [info@LexGWAC.org](mailto:info@LexGWAC.org). Cary Memorial Hall, 1605 Mass Ave., Lexington.

### Timberdoodle Trek

**Wednesday, March 24, 6:15 p.m.-8 p.m.**

Witness one of the most remarkable courtship rituals in the natural world. The male woodcock, a.k.a. "timberdoodle," sings and dances for his prospective mate in a performance you won't want to miss! Keep your ears and eyes out for owls too. Rain date March 25. Mass Audubon members \$12, nonmembers \$15. Registration required. Information: [www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org), [habitat@massaudubon.org](mailto:habitat@massaudubon.org). 617-489-5050. Meet at Rock Meadow parking area, Mill Street, Belmont.

### Spring Thaw, Ice Out, the Worm Moon and Mud Madness

Sunday, March 28, 1-3 p.m.

March in New England is known as Mud Month, and the properties of this substance play an important role in the transition of soil from winter to spring. This program will be a muddy hands-on experience. Aprons and soapy water for washing hands will be provided. Free: registration required. Information: [www.friendsoffreshpond.org](http://www.friendsoffreshpond.org), [friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com](mailto:friendsoffreshpond@yahoo.com), 617-349-6489. Maynard Ecology Center, Basement of Neville Place, 650 Concord Avenue, Cambridge.

### Woodcock Mating Dance

**Sunday, April 4, 7-8 p.m.**

Walk at dusk with the Waltham Land Trust and quietly see the woodcocks dance on an early spring evening. To avoid disrupting the birds'

activities, this event is limited to 10 people; registration required. A second walk may be scheduled if there is enough interest. Bring binoculars if you have them, and a flashlight for the short walk back after our viewing. Information and registration: [www.walthamlandtrust.org](http://www.walthamlandtrust.org), [info@walthamlandtrust.org](mailto:info@walthamlandtrust.org), 781-893-3355. Location provided upon registration.

### Sustainable Belmont Monthly Meeting

**Wednesday, April 7, 7 p.m.**

All are welcome. Information: [sustainablebelmont@gmail.com](mailto:sustainablebelmont@gmail.com), [www.sustainablebelmont.net](http://www.sustainablebelmont.net). Assembly Room at the Belmont Public Library, 330 Concord Avenue, Belmont.

### Down:2:Earth Sustainable Living Expo

**Friday, April 9-Sunday, April 11**

This expo is a marketplace for eco-friendly products, a public stage for community initiatives, and an educational forum that addresses sustainability issues. Sponsored by several commercial partners; tickets \$10. Information: [www.d2eboston.com](http://www.d2eboston.com), 617-266-6540. Hynes Convention Center, Boston.

### Warm up to Earth Day: Indoor Market 2010

**Saturday, April 10, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.**

Celebrate spring by shopping at the indoor market featuring local products! The market will feature local Massachusetts producers, their food, and products. Check the web site for a full list of vendors. Information: [walthamlandtrust.org](http://walthamlandtrust.org), [info@walthamlandtrust.org](mailto:info@walthamlandtrust.org), 781-893-3355. Waltham Field Station located at 240 Beaver Street in Waltham.

### 11th Annual Earth Day Charles River Cleanup

**Saturday, April 24, 9 a.m.-noon.**

More than 3,000 volunteers will pick up litter along the banks of the Charles River and other streams and ponds in the watershed, at one of the country's largest one-day cleanups. Contact the Charles River Watershed Association to register. Information: [www.crwa.org](http://www.crwa.org), [charles@crwa.org](mailto:charles@crwa.org), 781-788-0007. Register to get location.

### 4th Annual Statewide Volunteer Day

**Saturday, April 24, 9 a.m.-noon.**

The Habitat Intergenerational Program joins other Mass Audubon sanctuaries to host this 4th Annual Statewide Volunteer Day. Bring your family, friends, and others who want to make a difference! There will be something for everyone to do. Special activities for children! Habitat will supply tools and refreshments. No registration required. Information: [www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org), [habitat@massaudubon.org](mailto:habitat@massaudubon.org). 617-489-5050. *Habitat, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont.*

### Run of the Charles Canoe & Kayak Race **Sunday, April 25, all day**

Come join the Charles River Watershed Association in celebrating the Charles! The CRWA is seeking canoe and kayak racers (professional, amateur or recreational), and volunteers for this year's race or come and watch the action, enjoy live music and vendors at the free Finish Line Festival. Information: [www.crwa.org](http://www.crwa.org), [charles@crwa.org](mailto:charles@crwa.org),

781-788-0007. *Various locations along the Charles River.*

### CLC Annual Meeting

**Tuesday, April 27, time TBA**

The Citizens for Lexington Conservation's annual meeting will include a talk by Scott LaFleur, Horticultural Director of the Botanic Garden at the New England Wild Flower Society's Garden in the Woods. Information: [www.lexingtonma.org/clc](http://www.lexingtonma.org/clc). Brookhaven Auditorium, 1010 Waltham Street, Lexington.

### Peak Oil Talk with Richard Heinberg

**Thursday, April 29, time TBA**

The Lexington Global Warming Action Committee will host a talk with Richard Heinberg, Senior Fellow-in-Residence at the Post Carbon Institute. Information: [www.lexgwac.org](http://www.lexgwac.org), [info@LexGWAC.org](mailto:info@LexGWAC.org). Cary Memorial Hall, 1605 Mass Ave, Lexington.

## We need you.

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

### *I can devote time to:*

- ☐ Archaeology & Historic Preservation
- ☐ Environmental Protection
- ☐ Planning & Zoning
- ☐ Community Path
- ☐ Walking in Belmont
- ☐ Mailings
- ☐ Newsletter

### *I can help pay for this newsletter:*

It costs about \$4,000 to publish each issue of our newsletter. Please donate for this purpose:

☐ \$25 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$250

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

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