



Belmont Citizens Forum

Pomponi Takes Over Habitat Sanctuary

By Nora Huvelle

The beauty of Massachusetts Audubon sanctuaries is how deeply rooted they are in their individual communities. Habitat is no exception. Belmont citizens have helped shape Habitat's programming and gardens and seek solace in its wooded paths and intimate landscape. Renata Pomponi, who is now managing Habitat, understands how special Habitat is, for the natural habitat it protects and the community that considers it their own. It is a true sanctuary within Boston's metropolitan area.

I spoke with Pomponi briefly last month, and she explained how her role came to be.

* * *

With COVID-19 and the cancelation of programs across the state, Mass Audubon faced—and continues to experience—tremendous financial loss, necessitating the reduction of staff. Prior to the pandemic, Mass Audubon had been strategizing a new model for management of its sanctuaries that would help it achieve statewide goals around climate action, education, ecological management, and equity. This “hub-and-spoke” model, increasing efficiency, conservation impact, and collaboration between sanctuaries, emerged as the solution to both challenges.

Under the new model, Pomponi, who has been Drumlin Farm's sanctuary director for

the past five years, is now director of Mass Audubon's Metro West hub. In addition to Habitat, the Metro West hub includes Brewster's Woods in Concord, Broadmoor in Natick, and Drumlin Farm in Lincoln. Pomponi is excited about the additional resources the new model

makes available to Habitat.

For instance, Sandy Vorce, the long-time property manager—“who has been outstanding managing the property and coordinating volunteers,” Pomponi said—will collaborate with Metro West staff such as Tia Pinney, ecological manager at Drumlin, and Pam Sowizral, head of volunteer recruitment and management at Drumlin. As Pomponi explained, the hub-and-spoke model allows Mass Audubon to “better deploy the resources we have.”

The question on the minds of many in Belmont is, What will stay the same at Habitat? Will we see changes? Pomponi seems to understand the cherished place that Habitat holds in the broad neighborhood. As a former teacher/naturalist, she is also

aware of the threats to its habitat. For instance, during the period when Mass Audubon had to close down access to sanctuaries, staff reported “a resurgence of wildlife” that was also noticed by nature photographers when the property reopened.



Renata Pomponi and friend.

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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.

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MEG MUCKENHOUP

Goats in Habitat's Weeks Meadow.

Local residents are wondering, Can we still walk our dogs in Habitat? The question is still under deliberation, but the area open to dog walking may be reduced. Pomponi explains that people drive from surrounding areas to walk their dogs, treating it as a "recreational dog park." (One byproduct of those visits was that the staff had to deal with two enormous trash barrels of dog waste every week.) Charged with protecting nature for wildlife and people, Pomponi is seeking a solution which will reduce the degradation of wildlife and habitat while attending to the concerns of its neighborhood.

Asked about the role she envisions for Habitat in relation to the organization's goals, Pomponi spoke about deepening and growing what Habitat already is doing well, with the Habitat Intergenerational Program—"a terrific program"—as an example. Similarly, Habitat's pre-school naturalist program, which to date has been available to families a few hours a day, a few days of the week, could conceivably become more available to more diverse families

by being a full-day, weekly program. She spoke about Habitat's proximity to urban settings and its "tremendous potential to invite access to nature."

Pomponi also hopes to expand the reach of Mass Audubon's Youth Leader for Climate Justice program in Belmont and surrounding area schools. As part of that program, Habitat educators led a group of 16 teens from five communities, who called themselves HEAT (Habitat Environmental Action Team). The students worked with similar teen groups at other sanctuaries including Drumlin Farm, the Boston Nature Center, and Broad Meadow Brook in Worcester to define and implement climate action programs in their own communities. While COVID-19 cut short their work last spring, Pomponi and Mass Audubon are looking forward

Wrubel Connected People With Nature

By Anne Paulsen, with contributions from Martha Moore, Heli Tomford, and Sharon Vanderslice

Roger Wrubel, entomologist, teacher, conservationist, and community activist, became the director of the Habitat Wildlife Education Center and Sanctuary in 2000 and retired this June. Trained in the study of insects, he spent time at Tufts and UMass Boston teaching and writing and was conscious of the need to build strong bonds between the natural world and people. In the ensuing years, Roger forged that relationship with foresight and determination.

Roger moved to Belmont in 1989 and began his community activism as a member of the Solid Waste Advisory Committee, which initiated the town's recycling program.

He became a member of the McLean Open Space Alliance, working with Judy Record to preserve the 120 acres of open space known as Lone Tree Hill. He continues to serve as a trustee of the Judy Record Conservation Fund, which supports conservation efforts in Belmont and beyond.

Due to Roger's persistence as the primary organizer of the Western Greenway, we now enjoy 1,200 acres—seven miles of interconnected open space—in Belmont, Waltham, and Lexington stretching from Habitat to the Robert Treat Paine Estate. This effort earned him the

to seeing the program grow at Habitat and increasing its impact as part of a statewide effort.

Pomponi was quick to note that there is no intention to dramatically increase visitation and traffic to Habitat. She cited Drumlin Farms as the nearby sanctuary with "the parking and the staff" to allow for that. Instead, she is hoping to see more engagement in deeper ways that are appropriate for Habitat.

And when we are once again able to visit together, Pomponi is looking forward to meeting more of Habitat's neighbors, visitors, and volunteers.

Nora Huvelle has lived in Belmont since 2003 when she moved from neighboring Watertown. She has served on the Mass Audubon Board and is chair of the Farm School board.



MEG MUCKENHOUP

Roger Wrubel tending to Habitat's resident flock, 2010.

Public Forum on McLean Zoning

The Belmont Planning Board will hold a public forum on the Proposed McLean Zone 3 Overlay District on Tuesday, September 8 at 7 PM.

This zoning amendment would allow up to 150 dwelling units in Zone 3, Senior Living Subdistrict, of the McLean District.

For more details and updates, see the Planning Board's web page at www.belmont-ma.gov/planning-board

"Citizen of the Decade Award" from the Belmont Citizens Forum in 2010.

As sanctuary director of Habitat, Roger took every opportunity to work with abutters and neighbors of the property to protect and expand its borders for wildlife and environmental protection and visitor pleasure in walking the trails. Expanding Habitat into the Weeks Meadow off Somerset Street added a hidden walk around Week's Pond and into adjacent pasture land. As an added environmental measure, Roger set up a solar field in the community garden which now provides about 60 percent of the energy used at the sanctuary.

At the same time, Roger expanded programs at Habitat and forged strong relationships with surrounding schools, libraries, and senior centers. He developed a reputation for hiring extremely capable staff and allowing them to use their creativity to the fullest. The nature classes and wildly popular vacation camps are well known.

HIP, Habitat's intergenerational program, has drawn hundreds of people into its volunteer system. Among school groups, service groups from surrounding businesses, gardening groups and Wednesday volunteer days, Habitat welcomes some 2,000 volunteers annually.

But Roger is not only a man of ideas and foresight. He walks and bikes the trails daily and is a working steward and volunteer for all Belmont's conservation land.

Roger's goal was to make Habitat a welcoming place for people and wildlife. During his tenure

he has done that and more. His dogged emphasis on land protection, his ability to educate young naturalists, and his hard work will continue to draw people to Habitat and into the natural world he has preserved and expanded for all of us.

Anne Paulsen is a long-time resident of Belmont and served on the School Committee, the Board of Selectmen, and as the representative from the 24th Middlesex District in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

Martha Moore is a Town Meeting member, former member of the Conservation Committee, and an advocate for open space.

Heli Tomford is a Town Meeting member and advocate for open space.

Sharon Vanderslice is the founding editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.



Roger Wrubel and volunteers clean up Lone Tree Hill.

Persistence Built Western Greenway

By Roger Wrubel

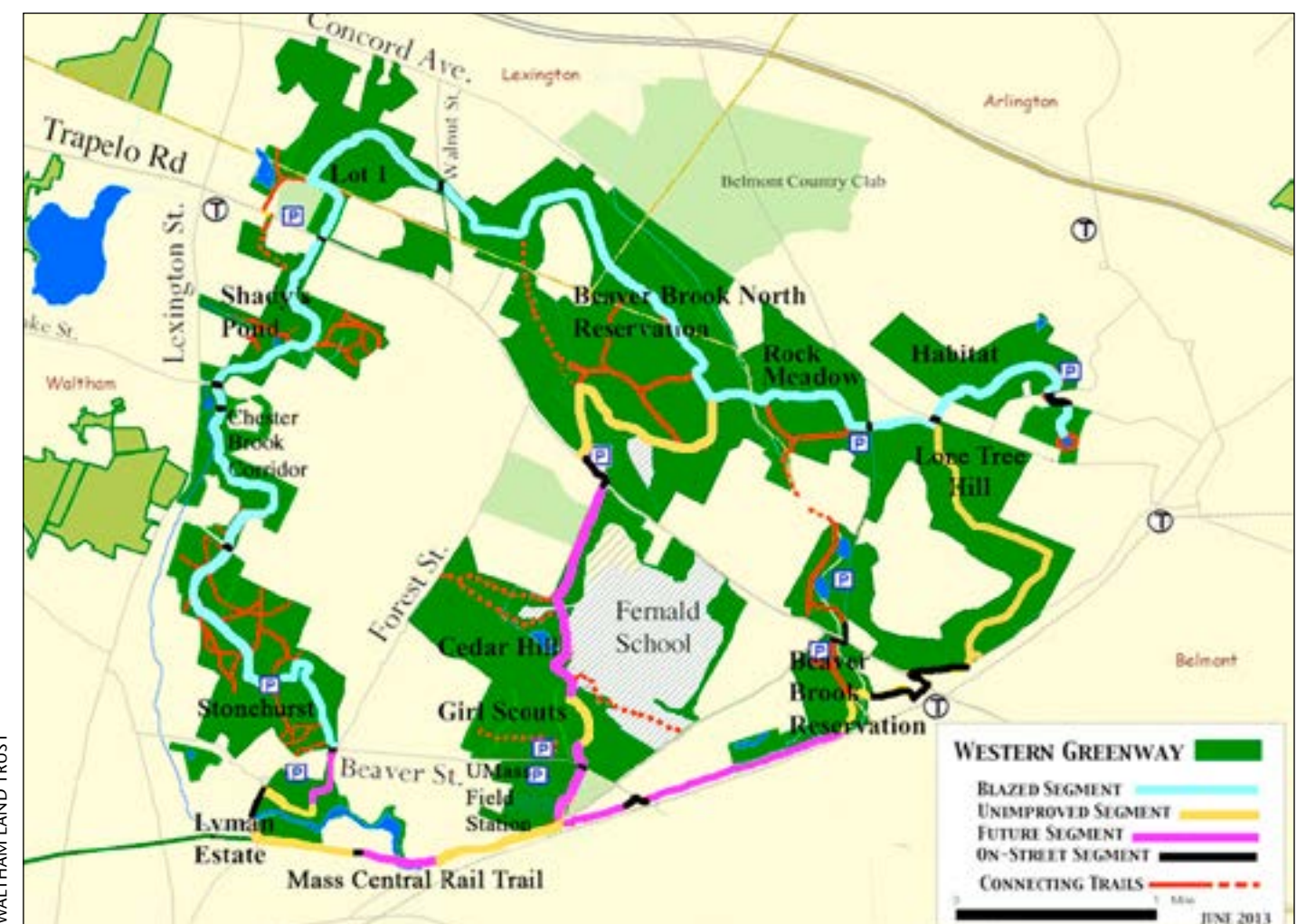
It began for me in 1995. I was working with a new grassroots organization, the McLean Open Space Alliance (MOSA), that formed to try to protect more than 200 acres of undeveloped land owned by McLean Hospital. The hospital campus occupied about 50 acres, and McLean owned about 180 additional acres of forests and meadow beyond that. During a period when hospital finances were challenging, Partners HealthCare, of which McLean was a part, wanted to sell its "surplus" property to developers.

This created great controversy in Belmont. About a third of the town favored development, including the Board of Selectmen at the time, as a way to increase tax revenue, while a third opposed development, viewing the loss of open space as unacceptable. An intense four-year

battle resulted in a compromise solution with some development and about 120 acres protected by a conservation restriction.

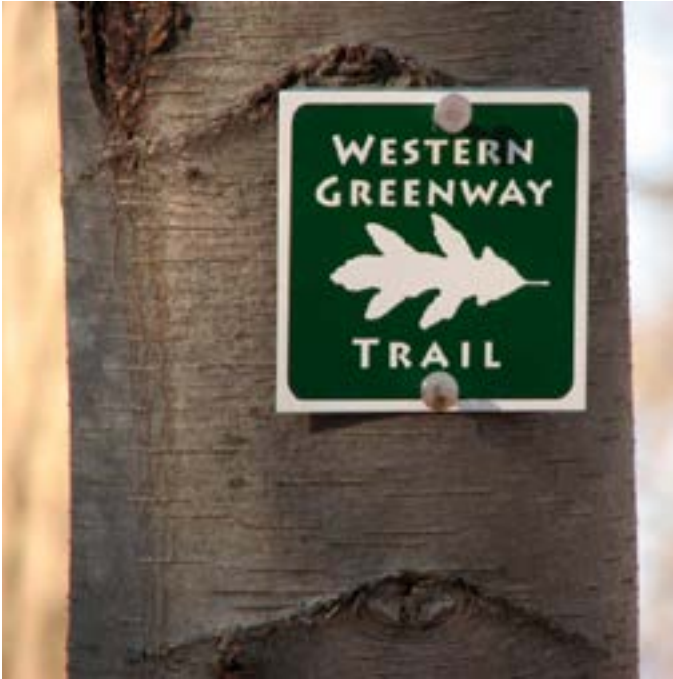
In my research for MOSA, I came upon an academic paper that described a large expanse of land in our area, including the McLean property, that had escaped development. Some parts had been pastureland acquired around hospitals that settled in the area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Examples included:

- McLean, established in 1894 and the only one of the hospitals still operating;
- Metropolitan State Hospital opened 1929, closed in 1992;
- Middlesex County Hospital, opened in the 1930s, closed in 2001;
- Fernald Developmental Center, opened 1888, closed in 2014.



A map of the current Western Greenway.

- Other properties had belonged to wealthy landowners whose estates found uses which spared them from commercial or residential development. These included:
- Mass Audubon’s Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary, formerly owned by the Atkins family in Belmont;
 - The Waltham city-owned Robert Treat Paine Estate/Storer Conservation Land;
 - Historic New England’s Lyman Estate;
 - Cedar Hill Girl Scouts Camp and Waltham city-owned agricultural fields, both part of the Cornelia Warren estate in Waltham.



ROGER WRUBEL

Linking these properties and several others by an off-road trail was still physically possible and would create a belt of publicly accessible open space which would include many natural and cultural features.

Working with a graphic artist, we created the first “Western Greenway” map, which showed the properties stretching across Waltham, Lexington, and Belmont, linked by a proposed “greenway trail” making a 12-mile loop. MOSA president Judy Record and I attended Belmont’s Town Day in 1996 using the map to engage passersby. We pointed out that the McLean open space had greater value than just that of the individual property because its loss would damage the larger greenway, i.e., the whole would be greater than the sum of the parts.

To me, protecting the greenway was important for two primary reasons. First, having a large continuous expanse of undeveloped “natural” land in our densely developed region of the state provided a unique, local recreational experience. Second, it was extremely valuable habitat for wildlife. Most of our protected lands are now islands in a sea of development. Small isolated patches of habitat are much less useful to a diversity of wildlife than larger uninterrupted habitats. In conservation biology, bigger is better.

The map generated a lot of excitement and curiosity. People were fascinated to learn that there was so much open space in and around Belmont. Many were familiar with Habitat, McLean, or Rock Meadow, but most had no knowledge of the Met State property, the lands beyond, and how they were connected. People pored over the map and we signed up many new MOSA members.

In 2000, I became sanctuary director of Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary and began leading walks through the “greenway.” My first walk attracted 35 people, including many local leaders. There was clearly pent-up interest in learning more about our nearby open spaces and how they were linked.

I soon discovered that I was not the only one thinking about a greenway. Land advocates in Lexington and Waltham were well aware of the value of these open spaces in their communities. What I brought to the table was the ability to look across town boundaries. In 2001, representatives of the Waltham Land Trust (WLT), the Citizens of Lexington for Conservation (CLC), Mass Audubon, and the Belmont Citizens Forum met and created an umbrella organization, Friends of the Western Greenway (FoWG), to work on making the Western Greenway a reality.

But what does calling someplace a greenway mean? As one WLT member, Marie Daly, said. “The greenway designation doesn’t create legal restrictions. It’s a planning tool the communities can use to draw attention to these vital areas.” (*Globe NorthWest*, March 27, 2003). The Western Greenway is made up of many properties: some publicly owned, some private, some protected from development, others not. The Western Greenway would exist if people thought and acted as if it were a real thing.



To accomplish this, we needed to get more people out using the greenway and thinking about it not as separate parcels but as a connected greenspace. As a start, FoWG—through the WLT—received funding from the Greenways Grant Program of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management to publish a brochure entitled *The Western Greenway: An Opportunity to Link the Lands*. That brochure named and described the greenway with a map and proposed trail. At the same time, we began to blaze the existing trails and make plans for what we needed to do to make the proposed greenway trail a reality.

The first evidence of political success in getting recognition for the Western Greenway came at a Lexington Planning Board meeting in 2005. A developer had bought part of the former Middlesex County Hospital in Waltham and Lexington at an auction of surplus state property. Greenway advocates let the Planning Board know that a section of the greenway trail went through that property and that we wanted the developer to do something to maintain trail access. The Planning Board acknowledged the greenway as a valuable regional amenity and included in its approval a requirement that the developer provide a greenway access trail between two of the house lots.

Western Greenway advocates became very busy in 2004 when the state legislature at the urging of the Romney administration slipped a provision into the state budget allowing for “fast-track” disposal of surplus state property. Several large abandoned hospitals were quickly

auctioned off for development. The Middlesex County Hospital parcel, discussed in the previous paragraph, was another example. The state then scheduled an auction for the remaining 47 acres of hospital property, which was part of the Western Greenway, shown on the hospital parcel map as “Lot 1.”

It would take an entire article or more to describe the frantic, persistent efforts FoWG and all its underlying organizations made to prevent Lot 1 from being lost.

Starting in 2004, many meetings with our state representatives, a letter-writing campaign to the state’s legislative leaders, certification of five vernal pools in Lot 1, and letters to newspapers led to the auction being canceled and the eventual sunset of the fast-track surplus property disposal law in 2006. In 2008, Lot 1 was transferred to the state’s Department of

Walk to promote western green way

BY SHARON VANDERSLICE
SPECIAL TO THE ADVOCATE

Residents interested in land conservation are encouraged to participate in a group walk on Saturday, Nov. 18 through some of the area's still pristine green spaces.

The two-hour to two-and-half-hour walk will begin at Habitat, a Massachusetts Audubon Sanctuary in Belmont, and continue on through the

attracted 35 residents of Waltham, Lexington, Belmont, Arlington, Somerville, Watertown, Cambridge, and Brighton. The walkers included State Representative Anne Paulsen, Waltham City Councilor Mike Squillante, Waltham Conservation Commission Member George Darcy, Lexington Selectmen Cathy Abbott and Jeanne Krieger, and aides from the offices of State Senators Steve Tolman and Robert Havern.

Many neighborhood and civic

Excerpt from article on Wrubel’s first guided walk through the Western Greenway in 2000.



Boardwalk construction along the Western Greenway.

Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and joined to the Beaver Brook North Reservation.

In 2001, there were trails on some of the properties including Habitat, Lone Tree Hill, Rock Meadow, Met State (now the Beaver Brook North Reservation), and the Paine Estate. But there were many gaps to fill in the proposed Western Greenway Trail. We spent the next 13 years obtaining easements for new trails crossing the properties of the Waltham School Department, the Waltham YMCA, the Bishops Forest Condominium Associations, DCR, and the city of Waltham (kudos to Marc Rudnick and the WLT). Conservation commission approvals had to be obtained for each bridge and boardwalk constructed. Grants were written to pay for the building materials.

Mike Tabaczynski, Lexington resident, a member of the New England Mountain Bike Association, and a well-known New England Trail builder, laid out all of the new trails, supervised much of the work, and got other NEMBA members to join our workdays. All new trails, boardwalks, and bridges were built by volunteers. During the week we would put out a call for volunteers. Luckily there was a critical mass of folks who thought it was good fun to spend a summer day getting dirty, sweaty, and very

tired building trails. (Of course, we did provide a pizza lunch.) An entire summer of work days was spent building a 500-foot boardwalk across the marsh on the west side of the former Met State property connecting to Lot 1. Several summers were spent building the Chester Brook Corridor, the part of the trail that parallels Lexington Street in Waltham between Lot 1 and the Paine Estate.

Filling in these gaps created a seven-mile Western Greenway Trail that runs from Habitat on the northeast to the Robert Treat Paine Estate on the southwest. You can now find the Western

Greenway Trail in Google Maps!

FoWG continues to work maintaining the trail. For example, the WLT provided training and tools to groups of volunteers to oversee segments of the Chester Brook Corridor. We are also planning to fill in the last gap. In 2018, we obtained permission from Bentley University to cross a short section of woods on their campus that ends at the Lyman Estate. That trail segment remains to be built.

We have been in discussions with Historic New England about an exciting idea—building a bridge across a small creek that separates the Lyman Estate from the soon-to-be-constructed Mass Central Rail Trail sections in Waltham and Belmont. You can now walk the abandoned railroad tracks, which were cleared (thank you, Laurel Carpenter!) of the covering forest, east to Belmont or west to Route 128. (Warning: there are two rickety bridges along the way to Belmont that will be replaced or repaired when the rail trail is built in the near future.)

After a generation, our group of trail-builder/advocates have learned that persistence is required and pays off. It is hard to describe the pleasure of showing friends and family a trail



Completed boardwalk through the Western Greenway's west marsh.

you have helped build. In our region, it is a sweet time for creating a network of off-road trails that offer us an alternative for recreation, commuting, or just doing our shopping away from the ever-present automobile. Other completed or in-the-works trails include the aforementioned Mass Central Rail Trail from Cambridge to Northampton, the well-used Minuteman Commuter Trail, the Bay Circuit Trail from Plum Island to Duxbury, MA, Across Lexington, the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail from Lowell to Framingham, and the Watertown-Fresh Pond Bikeway.

Think about the sheer space that we give up to the automobile: roads, parking spaces, parking lots, rooms in our houses. The first argument against any development project is “too much traffic.” In Belmont, many believe their lives are being ruined by something called “cut-through traffic.” It’s time we take back our streets and homes from these mechanical tyrants. Don’t feel guilty—build trails and use them.

Roger Wrubel is the former sanctuary director of Mass Audubon's Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary in Belmont.

How Affordable Housing Works Here

By Meg Muckenhoupt
With 12 townhouses proposed for a half-acre site at 91 Beatrice Circle, Belmont is buzzing with questions about how a developer can suggest such a dense development. The answers—because this question does not have a single, simple answer—have to do with a law known as Chapter 40B, aka the “Massachusetts Comprehensive Permit Law,” the legal definition of “affordable housing,” and how Belmont has developed up to now.

What is Chapter 40B?

Chapter 40B is a state law that was passed in 1969 to increase the supply of affordable housing in Massachusetts. As the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) website states, “Chapter 40B is a state statute, which enables local Zoning Boards of Appeals to approve affordable housing developments under flexible rules if at least 20-25% of the units have long-term affordability restrictions.” Those “flexible rules” mean that developers can override local zoning and build much more densely than is normally allowed under local zoning.

Of course, those “flexible rules” only apply if the developer offers enough affordable units. The way Chapter 40B counts affordable housing has had a profound effect on development in communities throughout Massachusetts.

What is Affordable Housing?

Most homeowners and renters think a property is affordable if they can live there for a price they’re willing to pay for it. A

lawyer making \$500,000 a year has a different definition of “affordable” than a sales rep making \$50,000 a year.
By contrast, the state has a very specific definition of “affordable housing,” as outlined in Chapter 40B. There are two parts to it: a calculation based on the local median income and legal restrictions on a property’s future sales, known as deed riders.

Median Income and Housing Costs

As stated in the Belmont Housing Trust’s 2018 Belmont’s Housing Future: Housing Production Plan, affordable housing “has a rent or mortgage cost set at no more than 30% of the income of households earning less than 80% of the Area Median Income and has a long-term deed restriction that insures the income and cost restrictions.”

As of June 2020, the Area Median Income for the area including Belmont was \$119,000, according to the federal department of Housing and Urban Development. A household earning 80% of that income would bring home \$92,500 per year and should pay no more than \$28,560 for housing, or \$2,380 per month. (The amount actually used for housing calculations depends on the number of people in a household.)

For renters, that \$2,380 is supposed to cover rent and utilities. For people seeking to buy affordable homes, that \$2,380 is supposed to cover “all payments made towards the principal and interest of any mortgages placed on the unit, property taxes, and insurance, as well as a homeownership, neighborhood association, or condominium fee,” according to DHCD. The



A depiction of the planned Chapter 40B development at 91 Beatrice Circle, as submitted by 91 Beatrice Circle LLC to Mass Housing on August 12.

average tax bill in Belmont is now \$14,135 per year, according to the Belmontian, or \$1,177 per month, which doesn’t leave much of that \$2,380 for paying a mortgage.

Deed Riders

To count as affordable housing, homes, condos, and apartments need to have deed riders, clauses which specify that the unit will stay affordable for at least 30 years after construction for new units and 15 years for remodeled units that are being put under restrictions for the first time. They specify a maximum sales price or rent using the same formula as the affordability calculation above: no more than 30% of the pay of a household earning 80% of the Area Median Income.

The need for a deed rider to be considered “affordable housing” is hard for many people to understand. It doesn’t matter if half the housing in Belmont costs only \$1,000 a month. If there isn’t any income test to make sure that people in need get that housing, and the price of that housing could change at time, it doesn’t count as affordable housing. The state does not consider privately owned housing affordable housing

unless there is a deed rider that guarantees it will be affordable in the future.

When is an Affordable Unit Not Affordable?

Chapter 40B intended to increase affordable housing in Massachusetts, and it has. According to MassHousing, a quasi-public agency that helps finance affordable housing, roughly 70,000 housing units have been produced under Chapter 40B, and 35,000 of those units are restricted to households making less than 80% of the area median income.

You might think it’s strange that only half the units built under Chapter 40B are affordable by the standard state definition. That discrepancy is due to a few quirks in Chapter 40B’s methods of counting affordable housing.

First of all, some affordable housing built before 1990 has outlasted deed riders or mortgages that restricted their sales price to affordable standards, so that the affordable housing is an “expiring use.” State and local authorities have been buying thousands of affordable housing rental units built in the 1970s with 40-year mortgages in recent years;

40B PRODUCTION TO DATE
Total Units Built or Under Construction

	Total Units	Affordable Units (Income Restricted)	Percentage of Units Affordable
Total	68,239	35,183	51.6%
Rental	48,780	29,771	61.0%
Ownership	19,459	5,422	27.9%

Massachusetts Chapter 40B production as of 2016. Source: www.mhp.net/writable/resources/documents/Municipal-role-in-Ch.-40B.pdf

Lexington bought five rental units in 2017 to deal with their expiring use.

Scndly, Chapter 40B doesn't count all units the same way. First, a development can qualify as a Chapter 40B project in two ways:

- 25% of units must cost no more than 30% of the income of a household earning 80% of the area median income, the \$2,380 listed above; or
- 20% of units must cost no more than 30% of the income of a household earning 50% of the area median income, or \$1,490 per month in Belmont.

But there's a catch. Rental units aren't counted the same way ownership units—homes and condos—are counted. Under Chapter 40B, if you build a rental development with the required percentage of units, **all the rental units count as affordable**. If you build a condo development of 20 condos with 5 affordable units, you have

contributed 5 affordable housing units to your town's inventory. If you build 20 rental apartments including 5 affordable units, you will contribute 20 affordable units to your town's affordable housing inventory.

One reason for counting market-rate apartments as affordable is that Boston has a general housing shortage, not just an affordable housing shortage. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council estimates that the greater Boston region will need 400,000 new housing units by 2040 if the region continues its economic growth.

Safe Harbors from Chapter 40B

The reason it's important to count the amount of affordable housing in town is that it gives communities a way to measure their progress in making it easier to live here and that it gives them a way to stop future Chapter 40B developments.

The point of Chapter 40B is to increase affordable housing, not to make every town inside Route 128 look like Kendall Square, so there are two ways to become a "safe harbor," i.e., a community that can deny or put conditions on Chapter 40B developments.

First, communities can meet one of three minimum criteria for housing:

- Affordable housing units make up at least 10% of the community's housing stock. This housing is also called the subsidized housing inventory, or SHI. As of 2018, 65 Massachusetts communities had reached this goal **according to DHCD**.
- Have affordable housing built on 1.5% of the total land area. As of 2018, 11 communities had asserted that they qualified for this safe harbor designation, including Arlington and Waltham. A **DHCD publication states**, "In each case, DHCD reviewed facts and determined that the community had not achieved the 1.5%."
- Affordable housing is being built on at least 0.3% or 10 acres of the community's land that year.

The other way that communities can become a safe harbor from Chapter 40B is to create and act on a housing production plan (HPP), as certified by DHCD. The Belmont Housing Trust's Housing Production Plan fulfills this purpose, but the town still needs to actually produce housing to reach safe harbor.

If a community increases the number of affordable units by 0.5% in a year, the town is granted safe-harbor status for one year. If they build 1% units, they get a two-year safe-harbor status. Since 2003, more than 50 communities have earned safe harbor status for at least a year, including Arlington and Watertown—but not Belmont.

Even if they're not safe harbors, communities can reject projects that are simply too big. Communities with more than 7,500 housing units can deny Chapter 40B projects with more than 300 units. Belmont had under 10,000 housing units (9,710) as of 2018—which means that anything up to 299 units is fair game as far as Chapter 40B developers are concerned.

Communities can still approve Chapter 40B developments once they reach safe harbor or

invite developers to work with the town to build Chapter 40B developments to increase the supply of affordable housing. The point is that safe-harbor communities have a choice.

Belmont's Status

As of 2015, Belmont had roughly 9,500 households; by 2018, Belmont was up to 9,719 households, according to **the US Census**. In June 2020, 675 housing units, or 6.7% of Belmont's housing was affordable by Chapter 40B standards—but almost a quarter of Belmont households were eligible for affordable housing in 2018, according to the Belmont Housing Trust's 2018 Belmont's Housing Future: Housing Production Plan. Belmont residents are also spending a lot of money on housing: 44.3% of renters and 28.9% of current home owners were paying more than 30% of their income for housing as of 2018.

To attain safe-harbor status, Belmont needs either to add 50 units of affordable housing per year or to achieve 10% affordable housing. In 2017, Belmont had 10,117 households, and needed 1,012 units of affordable housing to meet the Chapter 40B standards—but only had 365 affordable units, (see "**Belmont's Housing Future**," November/December 2017). Belmont was 647 units short of reaching that 10% level, according to Belmont's Housing Future: Housing Production Plan.

The Royal Belmont's 60 affordable units—20% of the total—meant that 298 units were added to Belmont's subsidized housing inventory, bringing the gap down to 349 units. The Bradford in Cushing Square only added 12 affordable units, less than 20% of the total 115 units, so only 12 units counted, bringing the number of units Belmont needs to be a safe harbor down to 337 units.

The 12-unit development proposed for 91 Beatrice Circle would add just three units to Belmont's subsidized housing inventory—not enough to get Belmont to 10% affordable housing or to make Belmont a safe harbor from other Chapter 40B developments. Under Chapter 40B, though, Belmont may not have much choice over whether it gets built.

Meg Muckenhoupt is editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.

91 BEATRICE CIRCLE LLC



A side view of the planned Chapter 40B townhouses at 91 Beatrice Circle.

Belmont's Current Chapter 40B Project: 91 Beatrice Circle

Belmont is currently considering a Chapter 40B project. The description by 91 Beatrice Circle LLC submitted to MassHousing on August 12 states:

"91 Beatrice Circle is a 23,496 square foot site located along a frontage road of Route 2. The property is immediately adjacent to an MBTA bus station with access to Alewife Station. The project seeks to construct 12, four bedroom townhomes and detached single family units, with 25% of those homes being affordable to households earning 80% of the AMI.

The design incorporates high-quality, contemporary style architecture to create distinct, visually-interesting residences. The project's massing and height is weighted along the Route 2 side of the property; along the southern side of the property, the project transitions to two-story, single family detached units to better integrate into the the single family land uses to the rear of the site. The homes have separate entrances and many include private outdoor spaces to provide a diverse, niche housing type relative to the many garden-style rental projects currently being built in the region. With 100% of the units having three or more bedrooms, the community creates new affordable housing options for families.

Affordable Housing on Belmont Hill

By Sumner Brown

Affordable housing and Chapter 40B affordable housing are not exactly the same.

My wife and I moved to Belmont from Cambridge while I was a graduate student. We rented. It was wonderful! We had wildlife, trees, and grass outside our windows. We had a parking spot. We bicycled to work and school. We liked the neighbors and the neighborhood. We lived in the lower part of a single-family house while the owner, Miss Bryant, an elderly woman, and her dog Zangy were upstairs. The building was of very high quality, but this was not luxurious housing. There were no doors between the upstairs and us. The other limitation was storage space. We had to resist buying another book.

When I graduated, we stayed for three more years until we could afford to buy a house half a mile away. In all, we rented at 105 Beatrice Circle for seven years. Now, a developer from Florida plans a 40B development that will replace a single-family home at 91 Beatrice Circle with sixteen apartments with three and four bedrooms each.

As a graduate student couple, we were a low-income family. We could afford to live at Beatrice Circle with Miss Bryant. But we were not living in "affordable housing" as far as 40B is concerned.

The 40B statute has no regard for affordable housing unless it is 40B-certified as affordable. If you wish your property to be 40B-certified as affordable, you need to put a long-term affordability restriction on your deed. The wonderful housing I enjoyed while a graduate student did not count.

My instinct is to care more about what housing opportunities low- and moderate-income people have available in Belmont than how many 40B units we have. Data about Belmont housing exists in considerable detail. It comes in part from the American Community Survey (ACS), which asks detailed questions of some sample of people everywhere in this country—How many bathrooms? Do you have a refrigerator? What is your income?, etc.

These data formerly were collected during the census when some households received a long form. Now, the ACS is separate from the census.

I have so far only found summaries of piecemeal data. For example, Belmont's web site includes a document called Belmont's Housing Future, Housing Production Plan, April 2018. The Belmont Land Trust and consultants for the town prepared this document. From this document, which used ACS data, I find that 9.3 percent of Belmont households have income of \$25,000 or less, and 12.8 percent have income between \$25,000 and \$50,000. There are about 10,000 households in Belmont. The Belmont Housing Trust looks at these data and says we need more 40B affordable housing. I look at this data and think that there are over 2,000 low-income households that are somehow living in Belmont, and adding 337 more units of 40B affordable housing will not help those 2,000 households much.

One reason it will not help much is that the affordable units in the 40B Belmont Uplands silver maple forest development, now called the Royal Belmont, are still too expensive for anyone with income less than about \$34,000 if they limit their housing budget to 30% of income. (See "How Affordable Housing Works Here", p. 10) Before the Uplands and Cushing Square developments, we needed 647 units to

reach immunity from more 40B developments. Our need for 40B immunity was reduced to 337 units, but only 72 units are affordable.

40B developments impose a cost on a community. They require comprehensive permits, which means multiple zoning restrictions can be overruled.

Unless affordable housing developments are age-restricted to seniors, these developments in Belmont can be expected to increase our property taxes because we must pay for educating the school children they attract. The first proposal for the McLean development had

age-restricted rental units. It would not have been a financial burden to the town.

That the silver maple forest in the Belmont Uplands (bit.ly/GoogSearSilverMapleForest) was lost to a 40B development is a reminder that what should be saved for environmental health and quality of life for future generations is at risk. Massachusetts Audubon's Habitat sanctuary is in financial trouble from COVID-19.

I hope the Belmont Hill School is not suffering financially. If they are, developers will be ready.

Sumner Brown is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

Thank you for the article on leaf blowers by Ian L. Todreas ("Leaf Blowers Damage Environment, Health," July/August 2020 Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter*.)

Working at home as I do, I find leaf blowers a miserable nuisance. The noise interrupts my concentration. Even closing windows helps little (and I live on the second floor).

I've always detested leaf blowers, to which I am subjected to two or three times a week in most seasons. Despite their being a well-known nuisance and substantial contributor to air pollution, it seems the town of Belmont has discussed but never taken action to regulate their use. There's not much to find on the town's website, but I did note the report of the Vision 21 committee (bit.ly/Vision21rpt) from 2015 brings the issue up in section IV, on environment and energy:

"5. Leaf blowers contribute noise pollution, particulate pollution, air pollution, harm soil health, are a nuisance to walkers and bikers, and harmful to hearing and breathing of workers. We should start working on a plan to curtail their use."

"10. Please enforce decibel limits for leaf blowers. Noise pollution is a huge issue."

"83. Re: bike transportation and walking: Allowing leaf blowers all spring, summer, and fall is a detriment—blowing dust and sand into faces of bike commuters not conducive. Also not environmentally responsible."

"86. Fewer leaf blowers and banks."

These are comments/complaints, not action items. I am surprised that no elected officials seem to have advanced plans to regulate leaf blowers. Just capping the dBA sound level would do a lot to encourage switching to electric models.

Most of them are being used by landscaping company employees whose ears and breathing are generally not properly protected. That's another thing that could be regulated. I personally would prefer them going back to raking grass and leaves, but of course that would slow down work and impinge on profits for their employers, with whom I have little sympathy after decades of annoyance.

What can be done? Has this ever been on Town Meeting agenda? If it was, what happened then? Why not now?

Thanks for your excellent reporting.
Geoff Dutton
Warwick Road

Geoff —You raise good questions! We asked Michael Widmer, town moderator, if there had ever been a Town Meeting warrant article on leaf blowers. He consulted Ellen Cushman, and they agreed that leaf blowers have never come before Town Meeting — although Ellen noted the Belmont has a noise bylaw. The field is wide open.
— Editor

Friendly vs. Unfriendly 40B

A "friendly 40B" is a development where the builder works cooperatively with town boards to create affordable housing, often at the invitation of an organization like the Belmont Housing Trust.

The Belmont Uplands development that bulldozed the silver maple forest was an unfriendly 40B. Belmont residents opposed the development, but the building was permitted anyway under Chapter 40B.

25% Belmont Bike Path Design Presented

By Jarrod Goentzel

Recent meetings offered a first look at the official 25% draft plan for the Belmont Community Path, which should include most significant features, and continued conversations with state leaders about how and when it can be built. On July 16, the Community Path Project Committee (CPPC) held a virtual public meeting for the design firm, where Nitsch Engineering presented draft 25% design drawings for the first two construction phases. (bit.ly/20200716BCPpresentation). A video of the full meeting, including public questions and feedback, is available at Belmont Media Center (bit.ly/20200716BCPvideo).

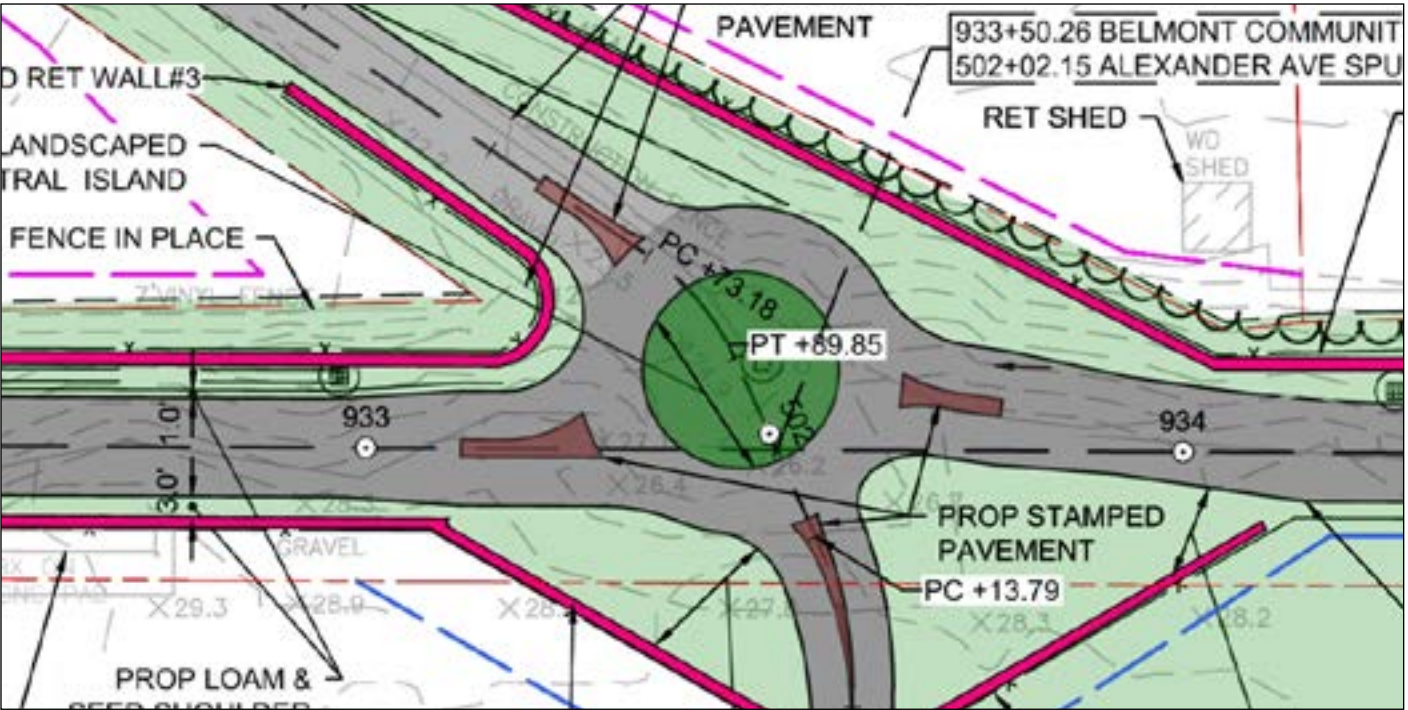
Phase 1 includes the rail trail from Brighton Street through Belmont Center to the Clark Street pedestrian bridge, the railroad underpass from Alexander Avenue to Belmont High School, and the route to Concord Avenue. Graphics featuring design elements with photos showed screening from the perspective of abutter backyards and the crossing at Brighton Street from the perspective of a rider or walker.

One week later the Friends of the Belmont Community Path (FBCP) hosted a virtual

meeting with two members of the Governor’s Inter-Agency Trails Team to hear how Belmont’s project fits into state plans. Peter Sutton, state Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator, presented new developments for the 104-mile Mass Central Rail Trail. This trail is one of the Team’s top priorities, and Belmont’s path is a key link in the trail.

Michael Trepanier, trails program manager for the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, discussed the timeline and process for obtaining state and federal funding that would cover construction costs. Trepanier was encouraged by Belmont’s recent progress and emphasized the importance of this path in their plans, affirming, “All you folks who are working on the Belmont Community Path recognize that we are part of a much, much bigger vision for the state and it takes all of us to get there.” The 61 minute video of this meeting (bit.ly/YT72020CP) also includes a brief review of the previous week’s design meeting.

Jarrod Goentzel is chair of the Friends of the Belmont Community Path. He can be reached at belmontpath@gmail.com.



Blueprint showing the roundabout proposed for where the path crosses Alexander Avenue. School. During the July 23 meeting, state leaders said this would be only the third bicycle roundabout in Massachusetts.

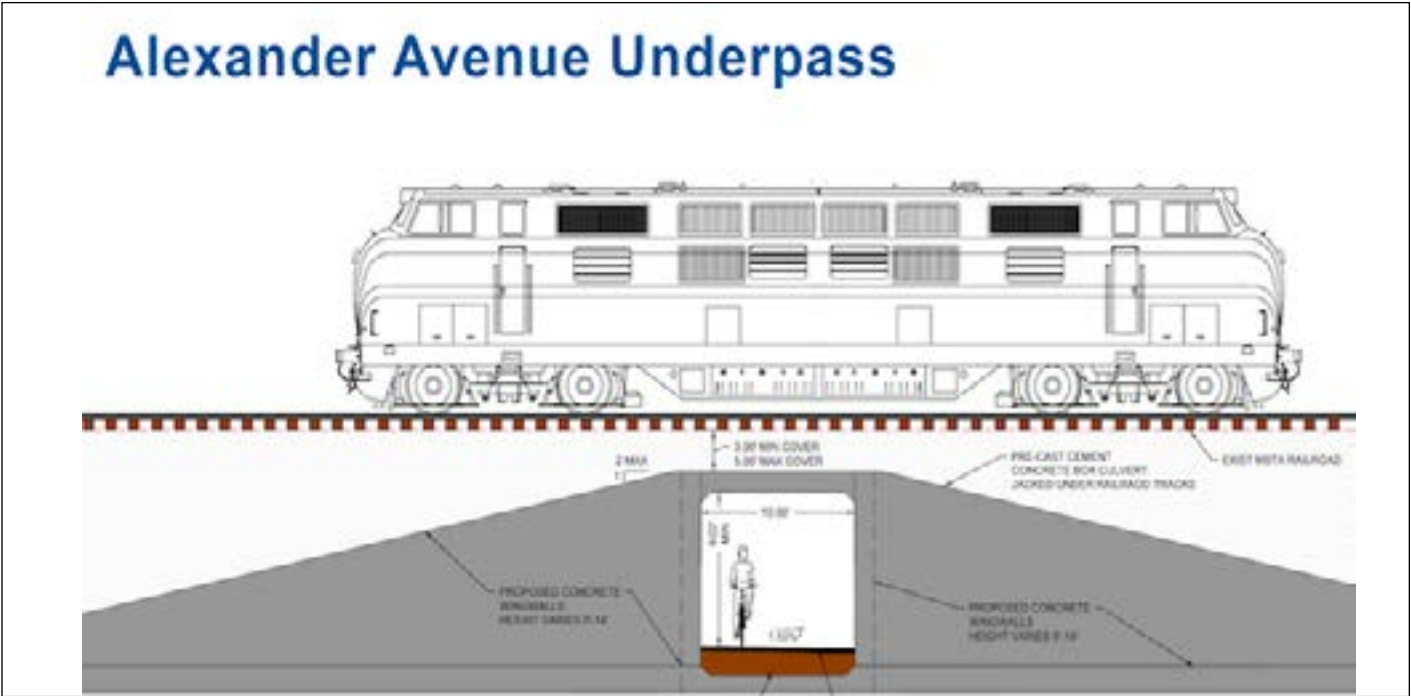


Illustration of the Alexander Avenue Underpass from the July 16 presentation.

BCF Editor Publishes “The Truth About Baked Beans”

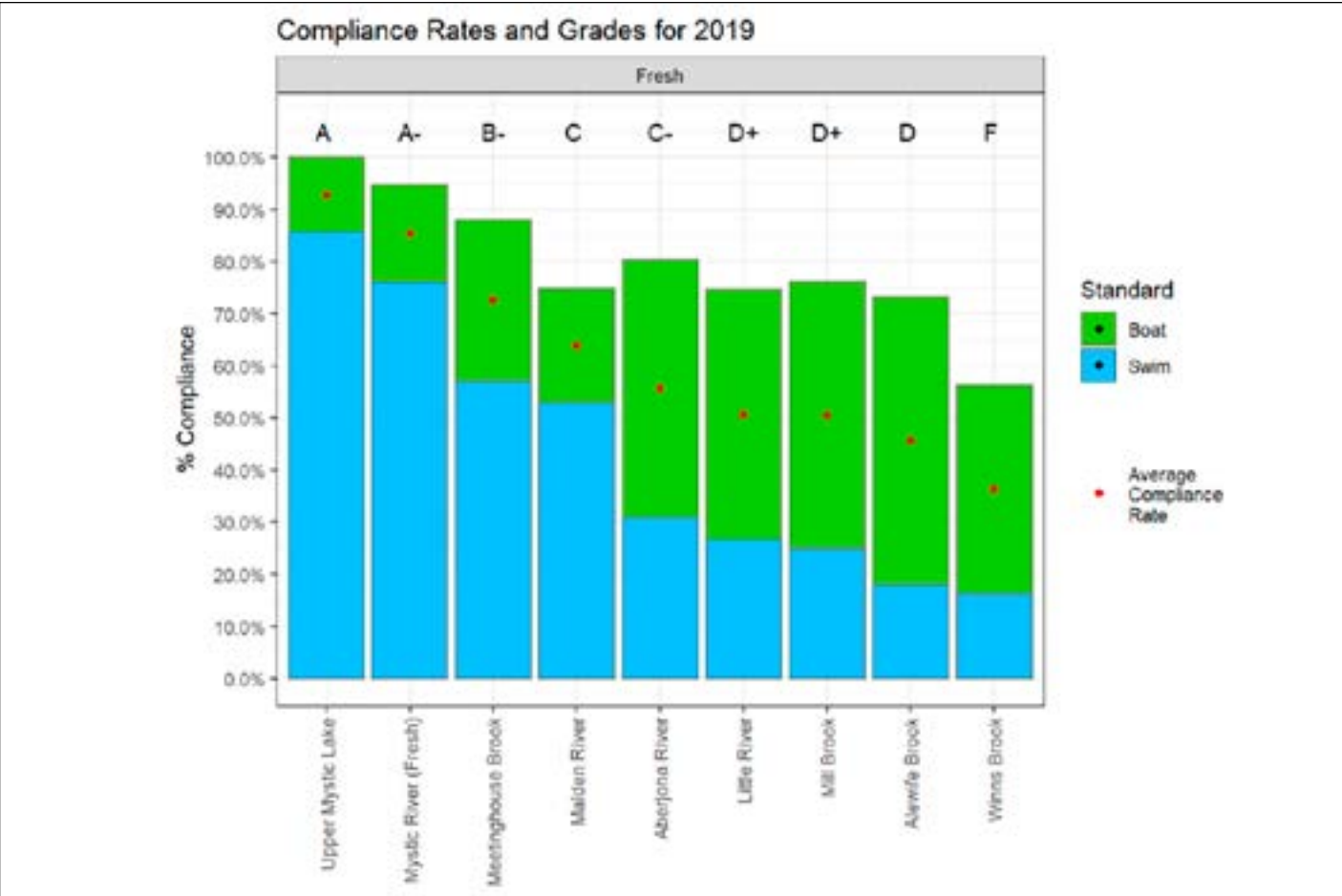
When she isn’t editing the BCF Newsletter, Meg Muckenhoupt writes about land use, the environment, gardening—and food. Her latest book, *The Truth About Baked Beans*, was released on August 30 by NYU Press.

As the NYU Press states, “*The Truth about Baked Beans* explores New England’s culinary myths and reality through some of the region’s most famous foods: baked beans, brown bread, clams, cod and lobster, maple syrup, pies, and Yankee pot roast. From 1870 to 1920, the idea of New England food was presented in magazines, newspapers, and cook-books, often through fictitious and sometimes bizarre origin stories touted as time-honored American legends. *The Truth about Baked Beans* delves into the surprising history of this curious cuisine, explaining why and how ‘New England food’ actually came to be.” It includes William Underwood of Belmont lineage, who worked with MIT professor Samuel Prescott in 1896 to figure out why his canned lobster was spoiling. (The answer: bacteria!)

The Truth about Baked Beans is available at Belmont Books and wherever fine books are sold.



Belmont Waterways Get Failing Grades



By Meg Muckenhoupt

The Mystic River’s **most recent water quality report card**, released on August 13, gives Winn’s Brook an F for 2019—and the Little River and Alewife Brook earned Ds. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) creates the annual report card in collaboration with the Mystic River Watershed Association. It grades segments of the Mystic River’s lakes, river, and streams on how frequently they meet bacterial standards for swimming and boating. The Upper Mystic Lake and the Chelsea River got an A grade; they met boating and swimming standards 90% or more of the time in 2019.

Winn’s Brook has been getting failing water quality grades for years. The bacteria contaminating Winn’s Brook and other Mystic tributaries are *E. coli* and enterococcus bacteria, found in sewage. Thanks to legal orders from the EPA, the town of Belmont has been cleaning up illegal, illicit, and accidental connections between

sanitary sewers and storm drains that empty into local waterways for years (see “**Sewer Repairs In Progress to Clean Up Wellington Brook and Winn’s Brook**,” Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter, September 2018.)

Clearly, there is more work to do. This spring, Belmont embarked on a \$500,000 effort to replace and reline sewers along Wellington and Winn’s Brook (see “**Cleaning Belmont’s Water Means More Work**,” Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter, May 2020). However, the effect of that work won’t be clear until the the 2020 water quality report card is released.

There is hope: Everett and Chelsea worked together to control sewage discharges into the Mystic River and brought the grade for the Island End creek from F in 2016 to a B for 2019. Belmont could have clean waterways too, if the town can keep sewage under control.

Meg Muckenhoupt is editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.

Belmont Spreads Compost Townwide

Town puts out RFP for preferred vendor program

By Julie Wu

Since its inception in 2018, Belmont Composts!, a project of the nonprofit Belmont Food Collaborative, which also runs the Farmers’ Market, has urged curbside composting to reduce Belmont’s trash, saving both town funds and the environment. Using online and in-person outreach and leveraging collective bargaining power to obtain bulk discount rates, Belmont Composts! has made it possible for more than 600 households to sign up with curbside compost companies.



With approximately 10,000 households in Belmont, there is potential for much more participation. In October 2019, the cities of Newton and Boston announced their partnership with Black Earth Compost, a major vendor for Belmont. Both cities had submitted Requests for Proposal (RFPs) for a preferred vendor program, in which the city promotes the partnership and in return receives a reduced rate for residents, who pay for their subscriptions privately. Within their first week, Newton had 400 residents sign up for curbside composting.

Belmont Composts! immediately began contacting town officials about setting up a similar program in Belmont. Belmont Composts! met with Patrice Garvin, town administrator, and Select Board vice chair Tom Caputo, and a plan was made to submit an RFP. This RFP went

out in mid-July. The town has received applications from six vendors as of mid-August, and will be making decisions this fall.

With many Belmont residents telecommuting from home and generating more trash than usual, this RFP represents an opportunity to save the town significant money on trash fees.

With many Belmont residents telecommuting from home and generating more trash than usual, this RFP represents an opportunity to save the town significant money on trash fees. An individual composting subscription will likely be less costly than buying an overflow trash bag once a week and will also be more beneficial to the environment.

Subscriptions would be entirely voluntary, and residents would be able to retain or choose curbside composting subscriptions with other companies if they wish.

Julie Wu is the founder of Belmont Composts!, volunteer coordination lead for Belmont Helps, and a Town Meeting member.

The Litter Guy Cleans Up Belmont



By Patrick O'Dougherty

Photos by Mary Bradley

As a boy, I became aware of seeing litter almost everywhere. Among the many things we did and learned about as Boy Scouts was public service. Picking up litter was one of our services. In the 1970s, a targeted ad campaign seemed to diminish the amount of litter in public spaces.

Adulthood has taken me in many different directions, and litter wasn't something about which I thought. About 20 years ago, I fell in love with cycling and I began to notice litter again. Lots of it. Apparently, litter is back.

My memories of boyhood service called to me. Equipped with a 30-gallon yellow trash bag with a shoulder strap, a pointy-tipped spear, a pair of pincers that are good enough to pick up cigarette butts, and a bright yellow safety vest to protect me from traffic, I began picking up litter in Belmont over a year and a half ago.

The most common litter I find is water bottles, nips, cigarette butts, styrofoam Dunkin Donut cups, fast-food containers, and, recently, used masks and gloves. Each road, though, has its unique trash and, occasionally, I find street and yard signs and large construction parts.

I spend about an hour a couple of times a month picking up litter. The areas I clean include:

- Pleasant Street from Trapelo Road to past Cityside Subaru. Pleasant Street catches a lot of litter from Star Market parking lot, and a lot of windblown litter, due to its location. Pleasant Street's signature litter includes grocery cart wipes and newspaper flyers.
- Mill Street from Trapelo to the intersection with Concord Ave. The parking lot at Beaver Brook Reservation seems to attract a lunch and smoking crowd as evidenced by the litter.
- Concord Avenue from Mill Street to the Lexington town line. I find more litter on the stretches of Concord Avenue and Mill Street.



With no houses nearby, people seem to think that these areas are the best places to litter.

- I pulled a toilet tank out of the Concord Avenue wetlands mud. A propane tank, half

underwater, and some other plastic bins remain in the mud about 20 to 30 feet from the road.

- White Street from Belmont Street to Trapelo has a lot of cigarette butts in addition to common trash.
- Trapelo Road from Dunkin Donuts to Cushing Square. Both areas collect an abundance of trash. There are cigarette butts clustered at bus stops, and the construction at Cushing Square seems to have brought in a lot of trash from the workers.

I am beginning to try and spread awareness of this littering problem and hopefully initiate some action.

Picking up litter has gone very well. Fall, winter, and early spring are the best times to see and grab litter that is in the bushes and plant life. Summer is good for more open, visible roadsides. At the urging of some friends, I started a Facebook page and named it "**The Litter Guy.**" I also put that name on the back of my safety vest. Facebook and my vest are the only public relations actions I've taken thus far.

Patrick (Pat) O'Dougherty works as a scientist for a small company in Watertown. He has lived in this area his entire life, and in Belmont for the last eight years.



Belmont Roots

Environmental News, Notes, and Events

By Meg Muckenhoupt



Well, it’s fall, and most meetings are still being held via screens and speakers. I’m sorry. There are still some things you can do alone, or sitting on your couch, that

might help you understand and improve the world. The following organizations are offering a variety of virtual events. These are highlights:

Mass Audubon is holding several online classes this fall, including Identifying Hawks in Flight (Wednesday, September 9, 7–8:30 PM, \$20 member/ \$24 nonmembers), Beginner Birdwatching (eight classes beginning Thursday, September 10, 7–8:30 PM, \$100 members/ \$120 nonmembers), and Nature Writing (two classes beginning Thursday, October 1, 6:30–8:30 PM, \$50 members/\$60 nonmembers). Register at [MassAudubon.org](https://www.massaudubon.org).



Red-tailed hawk.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Earthwise Aware is still holding virtual nature hours every Tuesday from noon to 1PM. According to Earthwise Aware, these free interactive sessions are “virtual nature meetups for sharing together wildlife sightings, nature stories, news, EwA community science program updates, and ideas to explore out there in your yard, park and reservation, alone and with our loved ones.” Register at www.earthwiseaware.org/events.

The Mystic River Watershed Association will be presenting “Climate Justice in the Mystic,” a Zoom presentation about the history and legacy of discriminatory policies that have contributed to uneven climate vulnerabilities in our watershed, on Tuesday, October 6 at 7 PM. To register, visit mysticriver.org.

You can watch an informative Zoom every day of Climate Preparedness Week (September 24–30), including “Neighborhood by Neighborhood: Mapping Our Resilience,” an overview of a Boston mapping project with the Conservation Law Foundation and the city of Boston about the community assets and how they can be used to create a more climate-resilient future, and “The Economics of Climate Change,” with Madhavi Venkatesan, PhD. Register at climatecrew.org/prep_week.

There are a few more events on all these sites, but not too many. Perhaps it’s time for another meditative stroll on the Western Greenway (walthamlandtrust.org/the-western-greenway) to clear our minds.



MEG MUCKENHOUP

Habitat property manager Sandy Vorce with goats at Weeks Meadow, 2010.

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