



Belmont Citizens Forum

Belmont Hill School Plans To Pave Woodlands

By Justin Roe

Belmont Hill School has always held itself out to be a good neighbor and a responsible member of our community. The Belmont Hill School Sustainability Club is proud to be “Mindful of the rising importance of promoting environmentally sustainable practices and environmental stewardship in our world today and in the future . . . to reduce our school’s impact on the environment and educate faculty and students alike about environmental issues in areas such as

energy consumption, waste disposal, and climate change.” These are inspiring words. Nevertheless, Belmont Hill School has recently revealed plans to pave over a large section of existing woodland to build a new campus site across Prospect Street from their current campus.

The new development will be nearly as large as the school’s total current academic area, and its primary purpose—rather than providing direct support to their educational needs—will be a parking lot for an additional 138 cars. The



The Belmont Hill School’s property acquisitions. The dark gray portion shows the current campus: light gray areas were acquired prior to 2022: pink areas were purchased in 2022. Belmont Hill is seeking to purchase the area marked in red to the west of the main campus. Data provided by Justin Roe.

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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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head of school, Greg Schneider, says that the large parking lot is needed to allow the students to drive to school and also for faculty and parents to attend events. There will also be a new facilities maintenance building with still more parking for buses and maintenance vehicles. The project is likely to have a significant impact on Belmont, both environmentally and financially.

The project's details reveal many environmental concerns. The area earmarked for construction consists of a densely wooded wildlife habitat that is home to deer, coyotes, foxes, raccoons, wood ducks, hawks, owls, frogs, and other wildlife. Not only is the land so densely wooded as to be mostly inaccessible to humans, but it also abuts a wetland oasis where animals have access to ponds and streams. All of this—the land, the trees, and the wildlife habitat—will be paved over for cars.

There is a concern about runoff from the parking lot, which brings with it oil, tailpipe emissions, and the general grime that comes with added traffic. That runoff could seep into the ground, find its way into the abutting wetlands, and contaminate the wildlife drinking water. Furthermore, the simple act of paving over the area will necessarily cause heat concentration typical of large parking lots.

The school administration has offered assurances that it intends to address these issues as best it can, but in the end, a parking lot is a parking lot and not a woodland. There is only so much they can do once the destruction has occurred.

Not only will Belmont be subjected to an unnecessarily large parking lot, but a new feature added to the Belmont Hill landscape will be two new exposed fuel tanks, one for gasoline and one for diesel, each containing hundreds of gallons of fuel. Given the recent town uproar regarding safety concerns with the new tanks at the Department of Public Works site, prompting the town to bury them rather than leaving them exposed for safety concerns, this addition to the plan is surprisingly tone-deaf.

Today's news is full of accounts of people taking responsibility, and, more importantly, taking action to protect our environment. Countries are finally committing to substantial carbon reduction by 2030 and carbon neutrality

by 2050, and employing innovative thinking to achieve those goals. Similarly, innovative companies are committing to electric technology and leaving legacy gas-based automotive companies in the dust. Why does innovative thinking seem to be so lacking at Belmont Hill School? When faced with overcrowded parking lots, the solution to tear down woodland and install a new, larger parking lot seems to be completely out of step with climate mitigation practices.

Where are the alternatives? Where are the bicycles? Where are the shuttles to Alewife and to other towns? Where is the commitment to recharging stations rather than installing new above-ground gas tanks? And perhaps more importantly, what will this teach Belmont Hill students who will be our next generation of leaders?

Town Will Lose Real Estate Tax Income

Belmont Hill School's plans seem certain to damage the town of Belmont not only physically but fiscally. Over the last several years, Belmont Hill has been acquiring homes on Park Avenue, Marsh Street, and Prospect Street, a total of seven houses, covering about 10 acres.

The first of these houses is set to be demolished with the start of construction in April 2023. As a nonprofit educational institution, Belmont Hill School does not pay any taxes to the town to help maintain the services for police, roads, public schools, fire services, or indeed any of the public services the town provides (and the school uses). When these houses are torn down, the taxes paid to the town also disappear. The taxes on these homes amounts to about \$30,000 to \$35,000 per home, per year, resulting in a \$210,000 to \$245,000 reduction in the town's annual income. In order to balance its budget, the town would have to find that money elsewhere, i.e., by raising taxes on the rest of us. This is a significant additional annual cost for the town and its residents to pay for a private parking lot and a maintenance facilities building for the exclusive use of the Belmont Hill School.

Belmont Hill School's motto is "Providentia, Studium, Fidelitas" (Foresight, Effort, Loyalty). In today's climate, both figurative and literal, this project seems to show anything but foresight.



ANDREW JOSLIN

White-tailed deer photographed near Alewife.

It is promoting cars over bicycles and public transport, gasoline and diesel over electric, and pavement over woodland. Any one of these on its own would and should raise the hackles of anyone claiming to care about our environment, about the world the next generation will live in.

Together, they make it clear that the school is concerned not so much with what they leave for the next generation but with what they can get before the tide of public opinion finally turns. As an educational establishment, the school doesn't have to be concerned with the Belmont bylaws and regulations that you and I would have to conform to. As long as it is for "educational purposes," the school can take advantage of the Dover Amendment (Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40A Section 3) to bypass some zoning restrictions, and the school is claiming that a parking lot, a maintenance building, and gas tanks are indeed educational. That's certainly an education to me.

The truth is that by using this Dover Amendment and a \$130 million endowment, the school can and will do just what they want, destroying a wildlife habitat area, negatively affecting climate change, and making the people of Belmont pay for it. Maybe our Select Board will do the right thing to protect Belmont.

So, this brings me back to the inspiring words from the Belmont Hill School's website, "promoting environmentally sustainable practices and environmental stewardship in our world today and in the future." Inspiring words indeed, but I suggest that the people of Belmont need more than just words. We need action.

Justin Roe is a Belmont resident.

Do We Need a New High School Parking Lot?



Map of the tennis courts previously found near the old Belmont High School.

By Anne Paulsen

Belmont is a small town and space is limited. Land use planning is key to maintaining a town that is walkable and bikeable with shopping, services, recreation, educational opportunities, and open space close at hand. The key is how to make the best use of this limited space.

The town is now planning the completion of the high and middle schools, and plans are underway for a new skating rink and library. Parking is a big part of the plans. For the last 50 years, off-street surface parking in the area west of Harris Field has been limited, but the facilities have worked with what has been available.

And for 50 years, 10 tennis courts were available at the high school. They served as a home for the high school tennis team and were well used by the community at large. But as plans developed for the new school complex, the use of valuable space for tennis courts was eliminated. Tennis courts are not scheduled to be rebuilt at the high school. Tennis will be the

only high school sport where the varsity games will not be played on the campus.

The alternative for the high school tennis team is to use the four recreational courts at the Winn Brook playground for their practices and games. A fifth court at the Winn Brook is scheduled to be added to accommodate Middlesex League matches and tournaments, but there are no facilities for the players except for a portable toilet parked next to the courts. The fifth court further reduces green space at the playground, and these courts are no longer available to the community when the high school is using them. The loss of these courts for many afternoons creates further pressure on the remaining eight courts around the town, and with the advent of pickleball, there is a premium on the availability of courts in Belmont.

Beyond the loss of tennis courts, other spaces at the high school have also been reconfigured. Despite the goal to encourage students to walk and ride bikes to the new school, automobile

accessibility has been emphasized with a two-lane road circling the campus to allow for drop-offs at the door of each school. Faculty and staff parking will be along the back of the building. Plans approved by the Planning Board include student parking on Concord Avenue and in a 110-space student parking lot (90 spaces for the students and 20 for the rink) to be constructed in front of the proposed rink and available to others when school is not in session.

This past year, students have parked along Concord Avenue and in the curved parking lot known as “the jug handle” near the rink. Overflow student parking moved into the surrounding neighborhoods, impeding access for emergency vehicles and creating other dangerous situations with violations of intersection and driveway setbacks.

To respond to these concerns as well as concerns about increased neighborhood traffic and pedestrian and bicycle safety, the High and Middle School Traffic Working Group has partnered with the police department to limit the hours of parking on certain neighborhood streets and to advise parents to drop off and pick up students in designated areas. While partially successful, not all problems have been eliminated. Myrtle Street, which is near the school, has alternate side-of-the-street parking at all times; parking is prohibited on one side of the street for half its length, then parking is prohibited on the other side.

This arrangement seems to work most of the time. Naturally, there are times when students and others do not obey parking laws, which creates neighborhood opposition to on-street parking.

A third factor in planning for the high school has been the advent of the Belmont Community Path. When the underpass at Alexander Avenue is built, the Winn Brook neighborhood will have easy access to the new middle and high school as well as the library, the pool, and the skating rink. The need for automobile drop-offs will diminish because walking and biking will be safe and easy.

What good news to hear the chair of the Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee tell the Planning Board last month that with Concord Avenue and the jug handle available for student parking and an emphasis

on biking and walking, there is no need for a student parking lot in front of the rink!

Is the planned parking lot still necessary for the future, or would other uses be more beneficial for the town? As I stated earlier, the library, the pool, and the rink have prospered with existing limited parking all these years, and with the community path and tunnel in the offing, as well as more emphasis on safe biking and walking, fewer cars should be accessing this area in the future.

Without the large parking lot, there is plenty of room for tennis courts and some open space as well. According to my research, each car space averages 20 by 8 feet, but counting space between cars and access to the spaces, each space consumes almost 300 square feet. A tennis court is 2,106 square feet. Five tennis courts will require just under 11,000 square feet and the 35 spaces in the jug handle about 10,000 square feet. This leaves additional space open for other uses or open space.

Changes in the way we value the limited space in our town require buy-in by community members. While there are many advantages to living near many of the town facilities, there are disadvantages as well. Proximity to the town’s center, the library, the pool, the schools, and the athletic fields means walking is easy and children can be more independent. I always appreciate being able to hear the band as it practices and the cheers from the softball and football games as well as having neighborhood activity during much of the year.

The inconvenience is that other residents who live further away want to park close to their activities. The question becomes, “Is it more important to use space for activities or for parking?” The School Committee oversees the land west of Harris Field. I and hundreds more Belmont residents hope that the School Committee looks to the future and champions the better use of this area by abandoning the planned parking lot and supporting the inclusion of tennis courts west of Harris Field.

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

Could the Community Path Host a Solar Array?

By Vincent Stanton, Jr.

The imminent arrival of the Belmont Community Path prompts the question: what other productive uses might be devised for the Fitchburg Line corridor? One possibility is siting a south-facing solar photovoltaic (PV) array along the tracks.

Conditions for a PV array

Aspects of path layout relevant to design of a PV array include length, orientation to the sun, and the presence of a substrate to which PV panels can be attached. Moreover, the entire project would occupy an industrial brownfield site with no green potential, in contrast to the the potential for a proposed array at the former Belmont incinerator site. The proposed PV array would be close to important Belmont Light Department infrastructure: within 100 feet of the substation on Flanders Road, and within a few feet of the substation behind the old Belmont Municipal Light Department building on Concord Avenue.

The path will extend 6,090 feet from the west side of Brighton Street to the Clark Street Bridge and will be bordered on the railroad side by an eight-foot-tall chain link fence. All path measurements are from the 25% design drawings for the Belmont Community Path submitted to the Mass Department of Transportation in November 2021 and downloadable from the project website, belmontcommunitypath.com.

The fence is tall enough to accommodate two rows of PV panels attached at angles to optimize capture of solar radiation while avoiding shadows. Mounting panels on the fence between the path and the tracks would provide an additional layer of separation from train noise and possible debris. An MBTA service road will run between the tracks and fence, facilitating cleaning and maintenance of the panels or even seasonal repositioning for optimized solar ray collection.

Belmont Center to Brighton Street

The 5,000-foot path segment between Belmont Center and Brighton Street is oriented

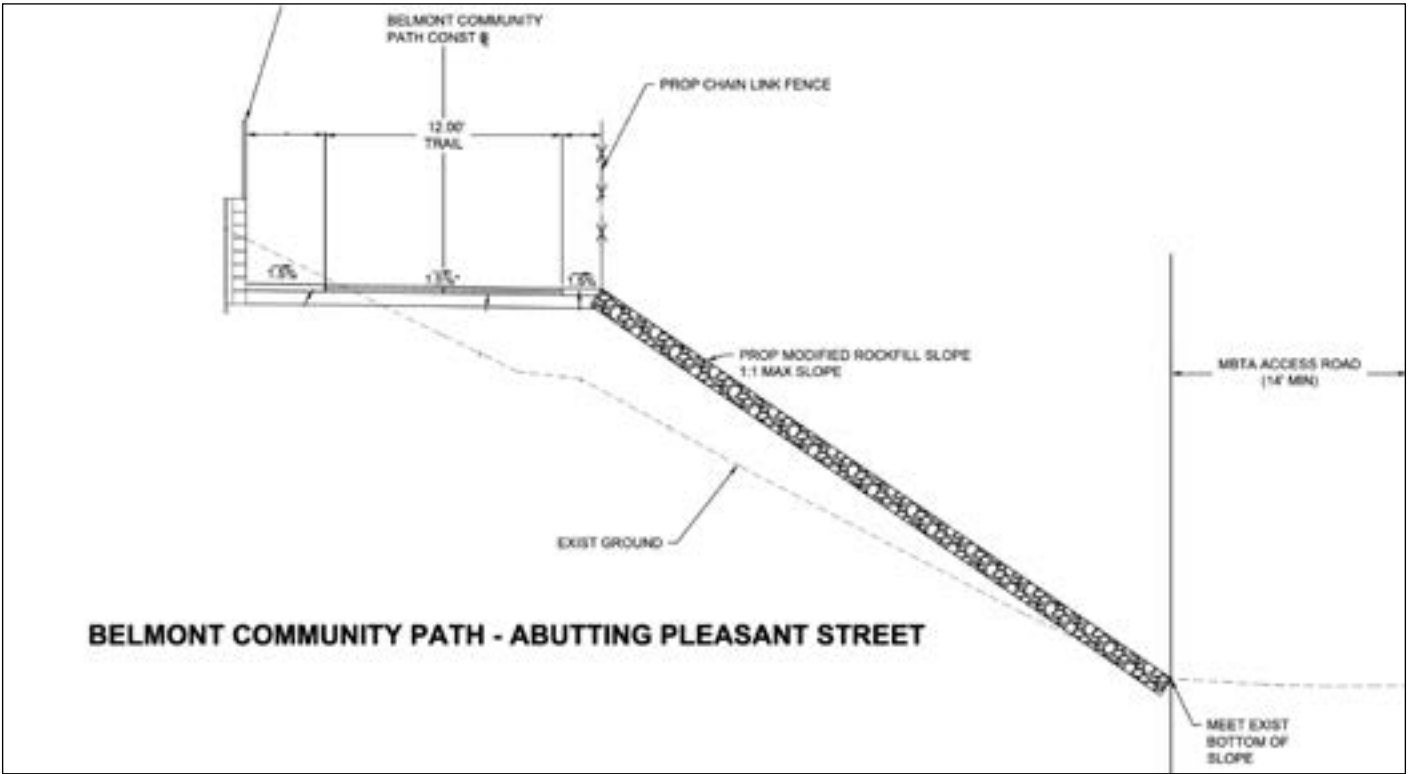


Diagram of the planned community path near the Clark Street Bridge, where an eight-foot fence flanks the path to the north and a rock wall descends at a 45 degree angle from the path to the track level.



Solar canopy at an MBTA parking lot, as shown in the MBTA’s *Solar Canopies: Parking Lots & Garages* report.

almost due east-west (parallel to the equator), allowing a due south-facing PV array facing the tracks, perfectly positioned for optimal sun collection and not shaded at any time of day. East of Brighton Street, the first 689 feet of the existing Fitchburg Cutoff Path are also located in Belmont and share the same properties (south facing, no shadows).

West of Belmont Center

West of Belmont Center the path bends southwest, and during some parts of the year, sections will be shaded in early morning and late afternoon by tall trees on the south side of the tracks, mostly during the winter months. However that afternoon shade should not meaningfully affect overall performance of the array, which is mostly driven by mid-day electricity generation.

Close to the Clark Street Bridge, the path gradually rises 20 feet from track level to the bridge, with a 387-foot-long riprap (loose stone) wall covering the steeply angled slope from the path down to track level. The surface area of the riprap wall is not provided in the drawings, but I estimate it is about 7,700 square feet. That wall could be covered with PV panels angled to face south at a 45 degree angle.

The MBTA and Belmont Light?

The entire PV array would be on MBTA property, as is most of the path. The MBTA owns

approximately 40 feet north of the Fitchburg Line tracks. Why should the MBTA be interested in collaborating on a solar energy project?

First, the electrification of the commuter rail system is coming, though details and funding have not been worked out. From [the MBTA’s website](http://theMBTA.com), under the heading Greening the Fleet: Decarbonizing the MBTA:

“As the MBTA plans for the future of the commuter rail system, we are considering the transition from diesel locomotives to an electrified system . . . The MBTA has launched the Rail Vision program that will identify cost-effective strategies to transform the existing commuter rail system. The modernized system will offer improved mobility and support our efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

The advocacy group TransitMatters issued a [detailed report](#) last fall showing how the MBTA could electrify the entire commuter rail network for between \$800 million and \$1.5 billion.

Second, the MBTA is already generating large amounts of electricity from solar. In 2019, it finished installing solar canopies at [37 MBTA parking lots and garages](#).

These projects have been financed with a variety of partners. For example, all power generated by a 684 KW array installed over the parking lot at Nantasket Junction Station, and a 360 KW array covering the parking lot at West Hingham Station, is being purchased by

Hingham Light, a municipally owned utility, via a power purchase agreement.

This innovative partnership could be a template for a relationship between the MBTA and Belmont Light. Though the MBTA is currently selling solar power to Hingham, the electrification of the commuter rail system, when it happens, will create increased demand for power, likely making the MBTA a buyer. Countries including India, England, and Germany are ahead of the United States in directly coupling rail-side solar PV installations to the electric traction systems that power the trains.

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The MBTA is not in the electric generation and distribution business. The 37 PV arrays on MBTA property were built and are maintained and owned by a developer who leases the space from the MBTA, which expects \$55 million in rental income and savings on snow removal over the 20-year lease.

Similarly, Belmont Light could be the developer, operator, and owner of an array along the path, leasing the space from the MBTA. The contract might include a future electricity purchase option for the MBTA, anticipating electrification of the commuter rail, and also to charge electric buses that stop next to the path at the Belmont Center and Waverley Stations.

Project economics: battery backup

It will be years before the Fitchburg Line is electrified and the MBTA becomes a customer. To make a solar PV array economically attractive to Belmont Light today will likely require installing batteries which would allow supply and demand to be better matched.

To appreciate how addressing peak demand affects electricity prices, start by recognizing that the reliability of our electric system, at both the local and regional level, depends on having the capacity to deliver whatever amount of power is

needed during the most energy-intensive hour of the year. In practice, that means maintaining a system that can deliver considerably more power than is needed on the average day.

For example, one important rationale for Belmont Light’s construction of a new 115 kV substation on Flanders Road (completed in 2016 at a net cost of \$26.1 million) was that the old infrastructure would not have been able to handle increasing peak demand. At a regional level, about 20% of the electric generating capacity deemed necessary by the New England power regulator (ISO-NE), is used only 2% of the time. It is expensive to maintain that extra capacity, and the cost is reflected in a forward capacity charge that is determined by power usage at peak hours in the previous year. Capacity charges are unpredictable (though the trend is up). If Belmont Light were able to consistently and predictably reduce its peak demand, it would lower its capacity charges and hence its rates for Belmont residents.

In addition to capacity charges, the marginal price of electricity at times of high demand is a cost driver. As covered in the August/September 2014 *BCF Newsletter* (“[Solar Electricity Pricing Plans Debated](#)”), on hot summer days when electric demand is at its peak, Belmont Light (like other utilities) has to buy electricity on the spot market to supplement electricity purchased via long-term contracts. Spot prices tend to be high at such times; 10- to 20-fold variation in price is not unusual. In short, being able to predictably reduce spot market purchases also reduces costs. Together with the forward capacity charge reductions, these spot price reductions are transformational for solar PV economics.

The best publicized example of the powerful economics of battery storage plus intermittent renewable power (solar or wind) is a 100 megawatt (MW) Tesla battery installation in South Australia, which reportedly saved about \$35M in its first four months of service in late 2017, while reducing the cost of conventional power backup (mostly gas-fired turbines) by 90%. The \$50M system paid for itself in six months.

Case study: Sterling’s battery system

The attractive economics of solar PV coupled with battery storage have also been demonstrated locally by Sterling Municipal Light (SMLD), a Massachusetts utility which offers some of the lowest electric rates in the state. SMLD operates over 4.5 MW of PV in Sterling, built and owned by independent developers who signed power purchase agreements with the utility.

In 2016, SMLD installed a 2 MW/3.9 MWH battery storage facility at a cost of \$2.7 million, defrayed by \$1.71M in state and federal grant support. Sterling lowers its demand for electricity from ISO-NE by discharging the battery system during peak demand hours. The system saves electric ratepayers about \$400,000 per year by decreasing costs associated with capacity and transmission charges. With the grant support, the project had a payoff period of 2.5 years (vs. 7 years without grants). An additional benefit of the Sterling system is that it provides a dependable power source for first responders as part of an overall municipal vulnerability preparedness plan. Sterling has a population of 8,190 (one third of Belmont), so the scale of a battery system in Belmont would likely be larger.

Unlike Sterling and several other municipally owned Massachusetts utilities, Belmont Light does not own any electrical-generating capacity, so it must purchase all of its power. Participating in the design of an array would allow Belmont Light to optimize design features to the contours of Belmont demand (e.g., orienting panels to produce more electricity in the late afternoon closer to peak demand).

How to finance such a project is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that the level of participation of Belmont citizens in solar roof and electric car promotions sponsored by the Energy Committee in recent years have been among the highest in the state, yet many residents are not able to participate either because their roof is not suitable for solar, was just replaced, or they can’t afford the upfront costs of a roof array or an electric car. Instead, Belmont residents could purchase interest-bearing bonds to finance construction of a PV array from which they (via Belmont Light) would

be purchasing power. Littleton Electric Light customers have piloted such a program.

Extension to property flanking the path

The array discussed here utilizes Phase 1 of the Belmont Community Path project. Phase 2 of the path, from the Clark Street Bridge to the Waltham line, would be expected to nearly double the size of a PV array. A much bigger opportunity, however, lies in all of the flat-topped industrial buildings and large parking lots that lie within 150 feet of the path. Construction of PV arrays on even half of the available surfaces could produce a network of arrays with no loss of green space.

For additional material including sample calculations of how much energy would be generated by these arrays, see bit.ly/BCF-Solar-Path-Extras

Vincent Stanton, Jr., is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum and a member of the Belmont Community Path Project Committee. The ideas and opinions in this article are his alone.

Commemorative Tree Program

The town of Belmont now offers a Commemorative Shade Tree Planting Program. The program is a way to beautify Belmont and to recognize a person or an event with a shade tree.

Any person, business, or group may sponsor a tree and will be recognized on a commemorative plaque located in the Belmont Town Hall and on the town website. Celebrate a birth, a graduation, or wedding, or the memory of a loved one.

Trees improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gasses, lower summer temperatures, and reduce erosion of topsoil and storm-water runoff. Our community will enjoy the many benefits of trees for generations to come.

Learn more about the program and how to donate a tree at bit.ly/BCF-Plant-Tree

Mass Central Rail Trail Continues Expansion

By John Dieckmann

Progress continues on the Wayside section of the Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT) from I-495 to Boston. Two paved segments were recently completed: five miles, from the Waltham-Weston town line to Route 20 in Wayland at Russell’s Garden Center, and approximately three miles from Brighton Street in Belmont to Lowell Street in Somerville.

In addition, two major segments are under construction. The Somerville-Cambridge section being constructed along with the Green Line Extension will open in late summer and will complete the MCRT from Brighton Street to Boston in the vicinity of the TD Garden. Construction has also begun on the central Waltham section, 2.75 miles from Beaver Street to Main Street near the Market Basket shopping center at 1265 Main Street. Waltham has funded the approximately \$9 million cost of construction of its segment from city revenues.

This construction will leave three gaps in the overall section from Russell’s Garden Center in Wayland to Boston. They are:

- Belmont, a little over two miles
- East Waltham, about three-quarters of a mile from the Belmont-Waltham line to Beaver Street
- West Waltham, about three-quarters of a mile from Main Street to the Waltham-Weston line

Belmont’s progress

In Belmont, detailed design work on Phase 1 is moving along slowly. Pending Mass Department of Transportation approval of the 25% design, expected this fall, the design should advance to the 75% stage rapidly. At the May 26 meeting of the Boston Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization,

construction funding was included in the 2022–2026 Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) for FY2026. With anticipated completion of the detailed design by late 2023, it is possible for construction to move up to FY2025 if other projects on the TIP aren’t shovel-ready at that time.

At the June 6 session of Belmont Town Meeting, \$200,000 of Community Preservation funding was approved to begin detailed design of Phase 2. Additional funding for Phase 2 is anticipated from the state and from the recreational trails program.



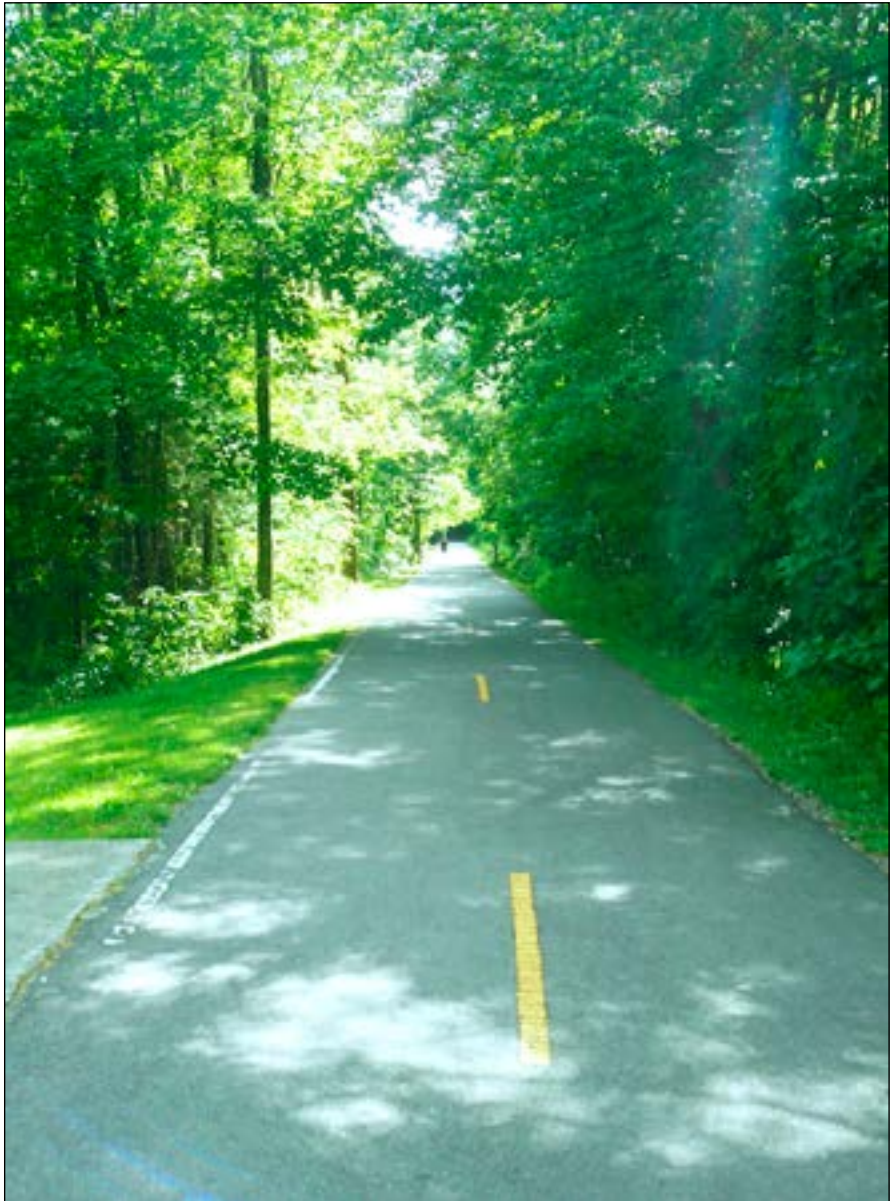
JOHN DIECKMANN

The Mass Central Rail Trail right of way west of Horse Pond.

While Waltham is focused on the central section, the three-quarter mile eastern section will be getting some attention from friends groups. The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has taken the lead on the detailed design of the three-quarter mile western section which includes the existing railroad bridge over Route 128/95 and a truss bridge over the Fitchburg Commuter Rail line at the Weston border.

MCRT west from Route 20

This brings us to the focus of this article, the section of the MCRT running westward from Route 20 in Wayland at Russell’s Garden Center to the current trailhead of the Assabet River



JOHN DIECKMANN

The northeast end of the Assabet Rail Trail in Hudson.

Rail Trail (ARRT) in eastern Hudson off Route 62, a total of 8.3 miles. Detailed design and construction of this section is going to be carried out in the same manner as for the five-mile Weston-Wayland section. The electric utility Eversource has obtained an easement from the MBTA to construct a 115,000-volt transmission line in the MCRT right of way from the Sudbury substation to Hudson. The line will be placed in an underground conduit. To provide maintenance access, Eversource will construct a heavy-duty gravel and stone dust road. The DCR will pave this road, which will serve as the multiuse MCRT. In addition to paving, the DCR will implement safe road crossings, guard rails, and other necessary features.

This plan has been opposed by elements in Sudbury, delaying the project for almost three years. In April 2017, Eversource petitioned the Energy Facilities Siting Board (EFSB) for approval to construct the transmission line. In December 2019, the EFSB issued a final decision approving the project. Sudbury and a citizens’ group calling itself Protect Sudbury appealed the EFSB final decision to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. In January 2020, the Supreme Judicial Court ruled in favor of Eversource and the EFSB. Then, in March 2021, Protect Sudbury petitioned the Surface Transportation Board to block the project on the basis that the corridor had not been formally abandoned. In February 2022, the Surface Transportation Board ruled in favor of Eversource and the EFSB. This latest judgment ended legal challenges to the project.

With the legal challenges over, what is the timing for design and construction? It is looking like Eversource will begin construction this August and could finish in Spring 2024. DCR is prepared to implement the upgrade to paved shared use path level and could be finished as early as Spring,



The Mass Central Rail Trail just west of Russell's Garden Center, Wayland.

2025. Given the complexity of the powerline construction, having this section of the MCRT open in another three years isn't half-bad.

In early June, I spent an afternoon examining the right of way (ROW) of this section, mostly at road crossings. Generally speaking, the ROW is intact, without encroachments, and is passable on foot, maybe on mountain bike, on a single track path alongside the tracks (which are deteriorating, but still in place along most of this section). The path varies from six inches to a few feet wide.

Starting at Russell's Garden Center, the corridor runs parallel to Route 20, on the south side of Route 20, passing through a portion of the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge,

mostly wetlands. A narrow footpath exists, but it is not clear if it is passable all the way to Landham Road, the next road crossing, 1.5 miles from Russell's. The ROW passes under Landham Road then goes through woodland the rest of the way to the ARRT trailhead. At 2.4 miles from Russell's, the ROW crosses to the north side of Route 20, then intersects the ROW of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail. At this point and continuing west, a nice path has been cleared to the side of the tracks, about four feet wide and easily mountain bikeable.

Continuing west, in 0.84 miles, the corridor crosses Horse Pond Road. I walked the next mile from Horse Pond Road to Peakham Road to Dutton Road, a pleasant wooded stretch that averages about 100 yards wide with large residences on either side. From Dutton Road, the corridor enters Sudbury's Hop Brook Marsh Conservation Land, reaching the Hudson town line in a little over a mile and crossing White Pond Road in Hudson, in another 3/8 of a mile.

Several road crossings later (Parmenter Road, Main Street, Chestnut Street, and Route 62) the corridor meets the Eastern trailhead of the ARRT in Hudson. To the west, the MCRT ROW parallels the

ARRT for about a mile before turning a little north and continuing to Berlin. The Eversource power transmission line-based project ends for the MCRT at the ARRT trailhead; the conduit continues into Hudson Center along roadways.

While the parts of the ROW described above are passable now, when construction begins in August, I would expect the ROW to close and stay closed until construction is completed in 2025.

John Dieckmann is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Restoration Resumes on Lone Tree Hill

By Jeffrey North

A crew of field horticulture technicians returned to the Lone Tree Hill conservation area for their first visit in 2022 on May 20. Begun in late 2020, the work to enhance the ecological integrity of Belmont's 80-acre conservation land site addresses the most egregious infestations of biodiversity-erasing invasive plant species. (See [Restoration Projects Approved for Lone Tree Hill](#), BCF Newsletter, May 2021)

The mission this time was to cut or pull and spray garlic mustard in bloom. As garlic mustard is one of the first plants to start actively growing in late March, leaves can be sprayed with herbicide in early April when most of the native species are still dormant. Unfortunately, we were not able to get going as early as planned, but this will be our plan in subsequent years. Due to many native plants growing between



Ryan Corrigan, Parterre project manager, at Lone Tree Hill.



Aerial photo of Lone Tree Hill showing areas where garlic mustard was hand-pulled (right) and sheared and treated with foliar spray (left).

garlic mustard in the area outlined in blue, the crew from Parterre Ecological Services decided to hand-pull the garlic mustard in these areas. In areas of dense garlic marked in yellow the crew sheared the tops off the garlic mustard stems to prevent it from going to seed. They will follow up with a foliar spray during a June visit to treat black swallowwort.

The horticulture field technicians have observed native plants in the area, including various goldenrods, chokecherry, Virginia creeper, false Solomon's seal, woodland sedge, *Ribes* (currants and gooseberries), wild sarsaparilla, Jack in the pulpit, Solomon's seal, sticky willow, tower mustard, and staghorn sumac. The field operators even found a nesting woodcock in dense masses of carex sedge.



Ryan Corrigan inspects hand-pulled garlic mustard, Lone Tree Hill.

It is exciting to see many natives coming back and establishing themselves. Three species of goldenrods (*canadensis*, *altissima*, and *rugosa*) are quickly establishing themselves in the open meadow and will continue to spread by rhizome and seed.

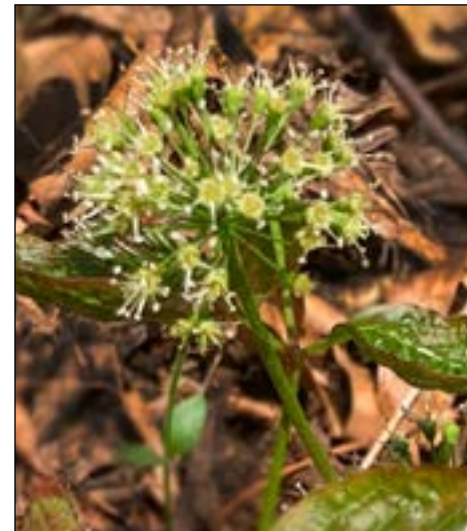
Invasive black swallowwort still exists but in much lower quantities compared to last season. South of the trail (yellow) there are still extremely dense areas of garlic mustard and knotweed and these areas will be slower to restore.

The newly planted pollinator meadow adjacent to the Mill Street parking lot has some perennial weeds such as burdock and mugwort, but overall the newly-seeded area is establishing well with a flush of tower mustard and other annuals such as *Rudbeckia hirta* (black-eyed Susan), lupine and *Monarda* (bee balm) from the seed mix. Invasive plants still on the site include black swallowwort, common and glossy buckthorn, porcelain berry, bittersweet, yellow rocket, dames rocket, bitter-sweet nightshade, multiflora rose, bindweed, honeysuckle, and ailanthus (tree of heaven).

On future visits the horticulture team will continue managing the knotweed and spraying the black swallowwort as well as cultivating the new pollinator meadow. The Land Management Committee generously supported these efforts with matching funding from the Judy Record Conservation Fund. The Land Management Committee and the Invasives Working Group

also provided administrative and planning assistance for this work.

Jeffrey North is managing editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter, the ex-officio Belmont Conservation Commission representative on the Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill, and chair of the LMC's Invasives Working Group.



Wild sarsaparilla flower.



Monarch butterfly caterpillar on Lone Tree Hill milkweed.



Woodcock chick found in nest on Lone Tree Hill.



Panoramic view of Lone Tree Hill.



Lone Tree Hill site infested with garlic mustard before hand pulling (above) and after (below).



Volunteers Battle Invasives

On Saturday mornings in May and June, Lone Tree Hill's Invasives Working Group led volunteers removing black swallow-wort and garlic mustard from areas near Mill Street and in Lone Tree Hill's Barn area, which abuts Rock Meadow's driveway, parking lot, and entrance path.

To volunteer for work in July and August (which may shift to different times, species, and areas), email Leonard Katz: ldkatz86@gmail.com



Leonard Katz collects bags of garlic mustard.



Garlic mustard in Lone Tree Hill.



Invasive pink dame's rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*) and relatively benign Queen Anne's lace.

Belmont's Invasive Species: Black Swallowwort

By Jeffrey North

Black swallowwort is a killer. Monarch butterflies mistake the plant for native common milkweed, and lay their eggs in the non-native invader, where the larvae die. Besides threatening the population of migrating monarch butterflies, it is toxic to mammals, and by crowding out food for wildlife, worsens wildlife habitat.

Vincetoxicum nigrum, also known as Louise's swallowwort or black dog-strangling vine, is a species of plant native to Europe and found primarily in Italy, France, Portugal, and Spain. Black swallowwort was probably introduced to North America as an ornamental plant in the 1800s. The first sighting of *Vincetoxicum nigrum* in North America was recorded in Ipswich in 1854. In 1864, a plant collector recorded that it was escaping from gardens in Essex County, and by 1867, the fifth edition of Gray's Manual of Botany stated that it was spreading from gardens in Cambridge, whence it naturalized in Massachusetts and surrounding states. It is still spreading today.

Identification and habitat

The town of Concord [describes black swallowwort](#) as "a perennial, twining herbaceous vine in the milkweed family. The leaves are oval shaped with pointed tips; 3 to 4 inches long by

2 to 3 inches wide, and they occur in pairs along the stem. The small, five-petaled, star-shaped flowers are dark purple. The fruits are slender, tapered pods, 2 to 3 inches long by about an inch wide, turning from green to light brown as they mature."

So what's the problem?

Black swallowwort is a threat to native species because it crowds them out, reducing habitat and food sources for wildlife, including Monarch butterflies and birds. This invasive species reproduces very prolifically, quickly overtaking various habitats. Most of the possible implications of *Vincetoxicum nigrum* changing the structure of various ecosystems have not yet been studied. It is found in upland areas in forest understory, pastures, old fields, shores, flood plains, and disturbed areas . . . and in Belmont yards, gardens, open spaces, and along roadsides.

Treatment

The most effective treatment is spot-treating with a selective herbicide, usually by applying the chemical to the recently cut stems of the swallowwort vines. Careful use of herbicides, such as glyphosate or triclopyr, can be effective when applied at flowering time (early June). Repeated applications may be necessary to achieve control. Haphazard use of herbicides could harm other plants nearby. Make sure

you always follow herbicide label directions or engage a licensed applicator.

If you opt not to use herbicide, you can hand pull the vines, but the vine has an extensive underground rhizome system which must be completely removed to prevent new shoots from growing. Trying to remove the vine by pulling will often cause the plant to detach from its rhizome, allowing the vine to continue to grow new shoots.

Digging up the rhizomes could be effective if all of the root system is removed, but disturbing the soil could allow other invasives to colonize the area. Areas cleared of swallowwort should be quickly replanted with native ground-cover species to reduce the chance of reinfestation. Seed pods must be disposed of carefully (in black plastic bags destined for incineration) to avoid inadvertently spreading the seeds to new areas.

Mowing is another technique used at Rock Meadow and the great meadow at Lone Tree Hill. This method does not eradicate black swallowwort, but it can stop the plants from producing seeds and thus slow the spread of the threat.

Biological management is the use of the vine's natural enemies to stop the spread and weaken the population of *Vincetoxicum nigrum*. In the United States, *Vincetoxicum nigrum* has no natural enemies, but in its native Europe, certain caterpillars, beetles, and diseases attack the plant.

Researchers at Cornell University and the US Department of Agriculture have [investigated](#) the use of natural enemies as a way to control the plant, but the use of biological controls is contro-



Black swallowwort seed pods.

versial because the implications of adding more nonnative species are unknown.

Overall, early detection and removal are the best management strategies.

Alternatives

The following native vines can serve as a good replacement to black swallowwort in spaces from which it is removed:

- Native honeyvine (*Cynanchum laeve*)
- Northern bush honeysuckle (*Diervilla lonicera*)
- Trumpet creeper (*Campsis radicans*)
- Trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*)
- Dutchman's pipe (*Aristolochia macrophylla*)
- Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)
- Native wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens*)

Jeffrey North is managing editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter, the ex-officio Belmont Conservation Commission representative on the Land Management Committee (LMC) for Lone Tree Hill, and chair of the LMC's Invasives Working Group.

What is a Cisma, and Why Do We Need One?

By Jeffrey North

New York state has eight very large ones. Oregon has 10. Michigan has more than 20 (required by law for every county). The number of Comprehensive Invasive Species Management Associations (CISMAs) across the country is approaching 400. Massachusetts has one. But that number is likely to increase. With the likely passage of the invasive species bill (H4595), financial and administrative resources will be available for CISMAs and a host of other programs, plans, and projects for controlling invasive plants.

The bill would establish an invasive species trust fund. A statewide invasive species coordinator would be appointed, along with an invasive species advisory committee composed of representatives of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance, the Trustees of Reservations, and a dozen more nonprofit institutions and state offices.

Operating within the Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs, the invasive species coordinator and the advisory committee will promote the ecological integrity of the state’s lands and waterways via mechanisms including the development and support of CISMAs. This new office will develop and implement a statewide strategic management plan for invasive species. More than just pulling weeds, the management plan would also drive research and pilot projects to test new and emerging technologies for controlling invasives.

What Is a Cisma?

A Cisma is a partnership of federal, state, and local government agencies, tribes, individuals, and interested groups that manage invasive species (or weeds) in a defined area. These partnerships are also known in other parts of the country as Cooperative Weed Management Areas (CWMAs) or Partnerships for Regional Invasive Species Management (PRISMs) in New York.

CISMAs are created to address threats posed by invasive species at landscape scales, fueled by collaboration between landowners and land

managers with a mission to manage and raise awareness about invasive species in a region or a watershed. CISMAs conduct surveillance and mapping of invasive species infestations. They locate and treat new infestations early and respond rapidly, and they restore habitats. CISMAs educate stakeholders on invasive species and the costs of just letting nature take its course—to the detriment of biodiversity. Typically, there is a lot of partner coordination and volunteer recruiting and training to do.

CISMAs also support research through citizen science in collaboration with research organizations and universities. They act as regional communication centers and hubs for best practices.

Massachusetts has a model

Just a few miles to the west of Belmont, the Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord (SuAsCo) Cisma is a partnership that works across 36 cities and towns to manage and control invasive species in three watersheds. Established in 2009, its 40+ partner organizations include 15 conservation commissions, land trusts, garden clubs, Framingham State University, the National Parks Service, town governments, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. The three watersheds cover approximately 377 square miles and include upland and wetland habitats, historic and scenic sites, and recreational areas. This Cisma protects the biological, aesthetic, cultural, historical, and recreational values of natural areas, farmland, water resources, and scenic vistas by cooperating, coordinating activities, and sharing resources to prevent and control invasive species on public and private lands.

SuAsCo hosts spring and fall meetings with speakers on subjects like knotweed management and using goats to eat invasive plants. At meetings, each partner organization shares what they are working on, and a monthly newsletter keeps the Cisma partners looped in and informed on available training, conservation topics, and invasive species knowledge. Management plan workshops teach partners and volunteers how to build a plan for their town and conservation properties.

The new and rapidly expanding Weed Warriors Program educates and supports volunteers who work independently to control invasives. Grant funding from the Wild & Scenic Rivers Stewardship Council, run by the River Network and the US Forest Service, supports partners’ efforts to create management plans, engage school groups, purchase and plant native species, and create educational signage.

To learn more about the SuAsCo Cisma, visit cisma-suasco.org.

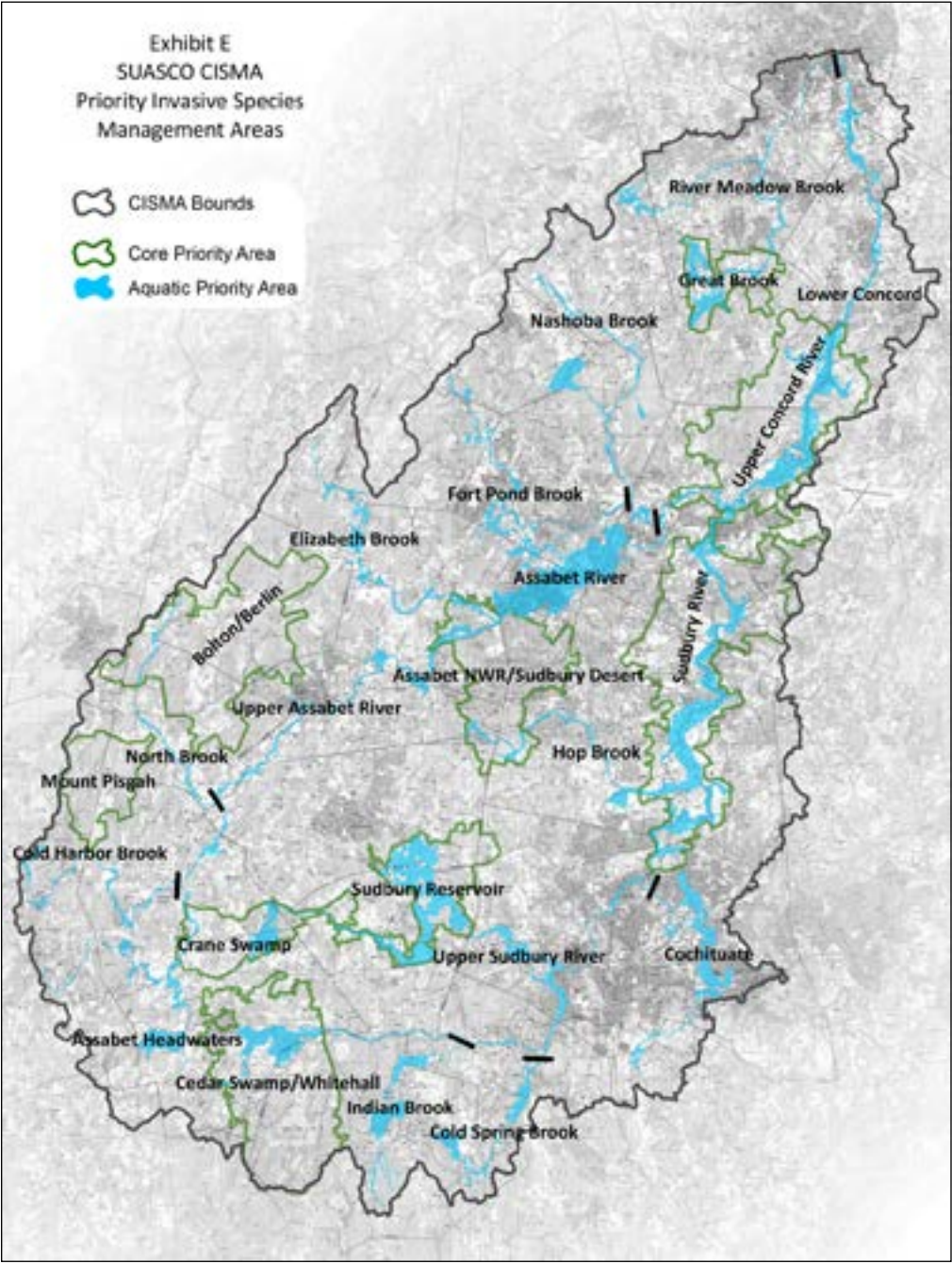
Next Steps

If you are alarmed by the seemingly sudden plethora of knotweed, bittersweet, garlic mustard, and black swallowwort outcompeting and overwhelming native plants, help is at hand. The invasive species bill (H4595) is currently before the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, the final stage before passage of the bill. Timing is uncertain, but passage into law is optimistically anticipated, according to Kira Arnott, chief of staff for Representative Dave Rogers’s office. The House bill was originally presented by Representative Rogers while the corresponding Senate bill was authored by Senator Patricia Jehlen.

Readers can suggest to friends and family living in other districts that they contact their legislators to indicate support for the bill. In the meantime, the Invasive Working Group of the Belmont Land Management Committee has been established to oversee removal of invasive plant

species on Belmont’s Lone Tree Hill conservation land. Check the [Belmont town calendar](#) for the dates of Invasive Working Group meetings and watch for upcoming volunteer opportunities.

Jeffrey North is managing editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter, the ex-officio Belmont Conservation Commission representative on the Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill, and chair of the Land Management Committee’s Invasives Working Group.



Map of the watersheds included in the Sudbury, Assabet, and Concord Comprehensive Invasive Species Management Association (Cisma).

Gas Leaks Are a Civil Rights Issue



Home damaged in 2018 by Merrimack Valley gas explosions.

By Aditya Jain

Governments have embraced natural gas as a “bridge fuel” to completely renewable energy sources, yet natural gas is far from a clean energy source (“[It’s Time to Switch from Gas to Clean Energy](#),” *BCF Newsletter*, August/September 2021). Natural gas leaks in streets and homes cause significant public health hazards and environmental damage.

Across Massachusetts, gas leaks are often underestimated by officials and underserved by gas companies. While numerous gas leaks in Belmont are listed and mapped, other communities of underrepresented minorities face the heaviest burden of this pollution. Massachusetts-based energy researchers analyzed gas leaks in different geographic areas in a recent study (Marcos Luna, Dominic Nicholas, “[An environmental justice analysis of distribution-level natural gas leaks in Massachusetts](#)”). Their findings show that the people most exposed to gas leaks in the Commonwealth are people of color, people who speak limited English, lower-income households, renters, and adults with lower levels of education.

As previously cited in the August/September 2021 *BCF Newsletter* (from a [Sierra Club analysis](#)), Massachusetts ratepayers pay up to \$128 million annually in natural gas repairs. Much of this spending is directed toward fixing aging infrastructure, such as in Boston, where pipes made of cast iron and other corrosive and leak-prone materials are over 50 years old ([Boston: Snapshot of natural gas leaks under the streets](#), Environmental Defense Fund). Luna and Nicholas’s findings reveal that these repairs are distributed unequally; whiter, older communities have repairs completed the quickest, even when these communities are located in the same utility region as communities of people of color.

Efforts have been made to hold natural gas companies accountable for disproportionate levels of environmental harm occurring within their purview. Brooklyn, New York, groups Brownsville Green Justice and the Indigenous Kinship filed a federal lawsuit this year to charge their local provider National Grid under the Civil Rights Act for failing to comply with local environmental justice regulations, building pipelines concentrated in communities of color.

Yet amid the growing urgency of today’s climate crisis, why continue to maintain the natural gas bridge at all? Financial investments in natural gas infrastructure only prolong public health exposure to methane emissions, which are 25 times as potent as carbon dioxide as an agent of climate change. Simultaneously, leaky gas mains exacerbate the inequities in health, environmental risk, and procedural justice that exist across socioeconomic lines. While we face a relatively light hazard exposure in Belmont, we can call for change by advocating for systemic electrification, a cost-effective solution with renewable energy potential across the Commonwealth.

Massachusetts’ electric grid is getting cleaner. To meet the Commonwealth’s 2050 net-zero

emissions target, state policy dictates an annual increase of 3% in renewable grid sources. By 2030, municipal light plants such as Belmont Light will be required to source half of their electricity from non-carbon-emitting sources. A progressively cleaner grid is an opportunity for communities to reduce local emissions. Options include replacing natural gas-powered thermal systems with electric heat pumps (an efficient, heat-transferring technology), and replacing gas-powered appliances such as stoves and clothes dryers with electric alternatives.

This process does not have to exclude natural gas companies, however. On a larger scale, existing pipeline infrastructure can be repurposed for new, renewable fuels and technologies, such as ground-source heat pumps, biogas, hydrogen fuels, and carbon capture. Research into this prospect has started with California provider SoCalGas, the largest gas utility in

the United States, and their pledge to achieve net-zero emissions in “operations and delivery of energy” by 2045.

Whether on a community level or through larger, regional changes, the path to electrification has the potential to be an agent for energy and environmental equity in Massachusetts communities. By delivering clean electricity first to people most impacted by natural gas emissions, state policy can work to reverse decades of disproportionate emissions and environmental harm. Policy makers must prioritize their efforts in environmental justice communities to ensure that solutions to promote electrification, such as clean energy retrofits, decentralized solar power, and incentive programs, are readily accessible to all.

Aditya Jain is a 2022 graduate of Belmont High School.

Belmont Porchfest to Celebrate Our Resilience

By Mary Bradley

Planning is underway for Belmont Porchfest’s most ambitious event yet to reflect on and celebrate our resilience as a community. Porchfest is scheduled for September 10, and registration is open at [BelmontPorchfest.org](#). Expect to see our new “Thank You Sponsors!” signs in front of EVERY registered porch beginning in early July.

A peek behind the curtain reveals plans for a Park Palooza (location TBA) featuring student musicians, a community-wide art project, and food vendors. The art project is geared toward all ages, aimed to bring out our inner painters and writers, each creating a small part of a larger image. Julie Choi, Belmont High School Class of 2018, is leading the art project and is looking for student and adult volunteers to help explain and manage the project. We are also looking for people interested in filming and taking photos at Porchfest, and for a point person at the Palooza to work with volunteers managing the student musicians, vendors, attendee safety and comfort, and the art project, and coordinating with the town.

Volunteers can register at [BelmontPorchfest.org](#). Sponsors and vendors can reach Belmont Porchfest at [BelmontPorchfest@gmail.com](#).

Mary Bradley is the founder of Belmont Porchfest and a Town Meeting Member.



Affordable Housing: A Primer

By Tomi Olsen

The Belmont Housing Trust (BHT) is committed to enhancing Belmont residents’ knowledge of affordable housing. We would like to define some terminology to make it clearer when we talk to the community about the need for affordable housing and ways to accomplish it.

The BHA and the BHT

There is often confusion about the difference between the Belmont Housing Trust and the Belmont Housing Authority (BHA). Each is a distinct organization. Housing trusts are typically nonprofit organizations while housing authorities are state agencies.

The BHT, like other housing trusts in the Commonwealth, is a nonprofit corporation (501c3) established by Chapter 126 of the Acts of 1999. Volunteer committee members are appointed for three-year terms, in Belmont’s case, by the Select Board. The mission of the BHTt is “to investigate and implement alternatives for the provision of affordable housing for persons of low, moderate, and middle income, and others, in the town of Belmont, whose needs may be identified from time to time.” In other words, to find or build additional low-income housing. This is the primary mission of all housing trusts.

The BHA is a state agency under the Department of Housing and Community

Development (DHCD). It professionally manages state-aided public, conventional housing units in Belmont for low-income families, veterans, the elderly, and people suffering from disabilities, but allows for a full-time salaried executive director to oversee the day-to-day functions of the housing authority, including maintenance.

The BHA board is made up of five members, four of whom are elected by the citizens of Belmont, for overlapping five-year terms. The fifth is appointed by the governor. The board sets policy and is the fiduciary of the authority. Board members are paid a quarterly stipend from the rent collected from the tenants.

The BHA manages approximately 262 housing units: 100 family units at Belmont Village and 154 units for seniors and people with disabilities at Sherman Gardens. In conjunction with the Department of Mental Health, BHA also oversees an eight-bedroom duplex for people suffering from mental illness. The BHA also administers 10 state-aided Alternative Housing vouchers and 47 federally aided Section 8 Housing Choice vouchers.

Belmont Village was originally built by the town from 1949 to 1950 for returning veterans and their families. The oldest resident veteran in Belmont still lives in Belmont Village where he raised his family.

In September 2020, the BHA board entered into an agreement with the Cambridge Housing Authority for the day-to-day management of

the BHA. At that time, there were few qualified candidates available to become executive directors, although the professional market has since changed. The authority’s contract with the Cambridge Housing Authority permits it to be “suspended or terminated” without penalty or cause by either party given 60-day notice.

Area median income

Since affordable housing is scarce, with waiting lists throughout the Commonwealth often measured in years, affordable housing applies stringent criteria to applicants, beginning with income. To qualify for affordable housing, an applicant or applicant’s family must have a household income no greater than 80% of area median income (AMI).

AMI reflects the comparative income of cities and towns within the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Metro Fair Market Rent Area. Belmont is one of over 100 communities within this market. The benchmark used for this group is the median income, aka income for the 50th percentile. The most recently calculated AMI for this region is \$120K.

Affordable housing eligibility

Affordable housing eligibility starts at 80% of AMI, or no more than \$96K. It should be noted, however, that this high end cannot be considered “affordable” under the state’s 40B law. It is not eligible for inclusion on the Subsidized Housing Inventory. Those who qualify for affordable units fall into four categories:

Extremely Low-income households (ELI) earn less than 30% of AMI

Very low-income households (VLI) earn between 30%–50% of AMI

Low-income households (LI) earn between 50%–80% of AMI

Moderate-income households (MI) earn between 80%–100%

Eligibility also considers family size. Housing preferences exist for people lacking permanent housing, including veterans, people with disabilities, and older people. Homelessness takes precedence. This means that if an affordable unit becomes available, a person or family experiencing homelessness is the first to be notified of an available unit.

	Single person	Four-person household
Extremely Low Income	\$29,450	\$42,050
Very Low Income	\$49,100	\$70,100
Low Income	\$78,300	\$111,850

A person or family can be considered homeless if they reside in an affordable housing unit that is being renovated and is temporarily uninhabitable. This occurred in February 2022 when the Affordable Housing Trust of Cambridge completed the purchase of a private five-bedroom home adjacent to the Belmont Village property and immediately installed a family from one of their Cambridge Housing Authority units which was being renovated. The family continues to be a Cambridge Housing Authority client although the surrounding homes in Belmont Village are under the BHA. While there are other serious issues with this arrangement, at a minimum, this is a very confusing situation.

Once an applicant becomes a tenant, they pay 30% of their income for rent if utilities are included or 25% if they are not included.

Applying for affordable housing

The BHA participates in the Common Housing Application for Massachusetts Public Housing (CHAMP). This is an online system where families seeking affordable housing can apply for low-income housing and in a community where they’d like to live. Again, given the severity of the housing need and availability, applicants may be able to relocate to any community of their choice, anywhere in the Commonwealth.

Public housing

This refers to multiple housing units in one location. Belmont Village and Sherman Gardens are considered public housing.

Section 8

Another affordable housing option is Section 8, a voucher program which allows voucher holders to select rental units from the commu-



Belmont Village at dusk.

nity’s general housing stock. These units, often apartments, must be designated by the owner under the Section 8 program. The Section 8 program establishes the rental limits, often by the number of bedrooms. Section 8 also determines the rent a tenant must pay—typically 30% to 40% of their income. The balance of the rent is paid by the federal government. Section 8 vouchers are mobile and follow the recipient, even to another state. The BHA currently accepts 47 federal mobile housing vouchers and one state mobile voucher.

Workforce housing

Workforce housing is a relatively new category resulting from the high cost of owning a home in Massachusetts. Workforce housing is described by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) as “housing affordable to households earning between 60% and 120% of area median income. Workforce housing targets middle-income workers such as police officers, firefighters, teachers, health care workers, retail clerks, and the like.” While Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker has deemed adding workforce housing a priority given the needs of the lower-income groups, it seems unlikely that this need will be met.

Providing affordable housing

Given the demand and the limited number of affordable units, one method for increasing housing stock is to build new buildings/units. This has been the focus of the BHT’s application for Community Preservation Act funds for the past three years. The BHA has been awarded grants of \$193,000, \$250,000, and at this recently concluded FY2023 Town Meeting, \$400,000. These most recent funds are to design and develop additional affordable housing units on Sherman Gardens property. The Affordable Housing Trust of Cambridge, which is also a development company, is the contractor for this project.

Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40B

This 1969 law requires cities and towns to demonstrate that at least 10% of their housing stock is affordable. Towns with less than 10% affordable housing are subject to “unfriendly 40B developments,” in which the developer or property owners can override local zoning and

build a housing development that includes at least 25% affordable units. Belmont has experienced an unfriendly 40B development with the construction of the Royal Belmont near Route 2 on the Cambridge line.

Based on the 2010 census, Belmont has not yet met the 10% standard. That census states that Belmont has 10,117 housing units, of which 673 are affordable (6.65%). The 2020 census may result in a different number but has not yet been computed.

Towns that do not meet the 10% standard must show the progress of adding to their housing stock at a rate of 0.5% to 1.0% per year. They must also adopt a DHCD-approved Housing Production Plan. Doing so can provide a town with years of “safe harbor,” allowing them to reject unfriendly 40B developments. In 2018, the BHT passed the Belmont housing production plan and has now begun to update it.

Zoning tools

The Commonwealth uses several zoning tools to produce affordable housing. Massachusetts General Law provides for Chapter 40R projects which give local neighborhood input into the development. The process involves creating a smart-growth-zoning overlay district that includes dense residential and mixed-use areas near transportation hubs.

Once the smart growth overlay district is adopted, communities can receive funds from a Smart Growth Housing Trust Fund. The Oakley Development on Belmont Street (formerly Our Lady of Mercy property) was permitted through a 40R smart growth overlay district.

Also, the town has passed recent overlay zoning districts that have helped to zone areas for higher density housing that include affordable units. Examples of this type of development include The Bradford in Cushing Square and the Residences at Bell Mont/McLean.

Inclusionary zoning is another tool that requires a proportion of units in a newly constructed development to be designated as “affordable.” Inclusionary zoning was an important tool in planning the Bel Mont/McLean property.

In January 2021, Massachusetts enacted MGL Chapter 40A S3A. This new law requires multi-family housing by right in eligible areas near

transit hubs. The draft of the statute’s guidelines was presented by Robert Hummel, Belmont senior planner, to the Belmont Select Board on April 11, 2022. His presentation is available on the town website.

According to Hummel’s presentation, to comply with Section 3A:

- Belmont must establish one (or more) by-right zoning districts that total at least 50 acres and have a zoned capacity for 2,176 units.
- Belmont is not mandated to build this many units, only to create zoning districts that allow for them.
- Multiple zoning districts may be used to comply, as long as they meet Section 3A’s criteria.
- Belmont has multiple train stations and bus lines; thus the town has more flexibility for zoning district locations

Tomi Olson is a member of the Belmont Housing Trust and served as an elected commissioner of the Belmont Housing Authority.

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