



## Belmont Citizens Forum

# Belmont Needs School Roof Solar Panels

A Small Step Toward Reaching Our Climate Goals



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The Belmont Middle and High School roof with solar panels as featured on the town website.

*By Brian Iler*

Photovoltaic solar panels (PVs) have been planned for the new Belmont Middle and High School (BMHS) since early designs for the project were presented in 2017. PV is integral to achieving this building's Zero Net Energy goal. And to many in Belmont, Zero Net Energy was a big factor when deciding whether to vote for a hefty tax increase to fund this colossal project in 2018.

Since this vote, the funds reserved for PVs have been on the chopping block three times to offset project cost overruns. Public outcry—with advocates crowding into Belmont Middle and High School Building Committee meetings, sending emails to town officials, and building record attendance at Zoom meetings—has convinced the Building Committee that PVs are a “need-to-have” item, not a “nice-to-have,” at least until the next round of cuts is considered.

Public support for PV was unequivocally expressed in spring 2022 when Town Meeting passed Warrant Article 13 by a 91% vote, declaring:

“ . . . the Belmont Town Meeting hereby expresses its desire that the Building Committee will ensure that the BMHS project will include a solar PV facility that maximizes solar energy capacity consistent with the rooftop size, layout, and setbacks, which Facility shall be installed as part of the construction of the BMHS project.”

With this overwhelming political support, the Building Committee prepared bid documents for the school's PVs last summer, vetted prospective bidders, and received bids in October of 2022.

The bids were revealed at the Building Committee's November 10 meeting. The low bid (from Griffin Electric) for the full PV array was \$2,669,000. This amount seemed to come within a rounding error of the amount budgeted: \$2,600,000.

## Belmont Citizens Forum

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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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However, this was not the end of the story. Additional PV-related costs were unearthed, and after calculations that only the sharpest construction-budgeting wizard could follow, the Building Committee determined that they were \$264,000 short of the amount needed to install the full array (1.14 megawatt-DC). At their next meeting on November 17, they voted to accept a bid for a truncated version: 86% of the full array.

Compared to the full array, this rump array would forfeit \$36,000 in electricity cost savings in the first year alone, losing equal if not greater amounts in subsequent years. Also left on the table would be \$65,000 in federal grant money (more on this below). Any benefits from the project's Zero Net Energy rating would also be forfeited.

Some committee members (and many residents who follow this project closely) were alarmed to hear of new PV expenses: \$146,923 "to support PV," which appears on line 19 of the Photovoltaic System Executive Bid Summary, and other expenses that led the committee to conclude they were \$264,000 short (since updated to \$290,000).

The Building Committee and the community had been assured at many meetings that the original design of the building incorporated all the infrastructure needed to support PV and that the solar array bids included all the items required for PV. This miscalculation calls into question the reliability of the project's owner's project manager's (CHA Consulting) oversight and the architect's (Perkins & Will) expertise.

Speculation that the last 14% of the solar panels could be added at a later date begs the question: where would the funds come from? Also, the cost of purchasing and installing the panels would likely be considerably more than the current \$290,000, as design and bid costs would need to be re-spent, and the logistics of installing the panels on a now-occupied school would be expensive.

A glimmer of hope in this depressing situation came from Washington: the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act includes funds for municipalities that install PV. Preliminary calculations indicate that Belmont is eligible for a grant of up to \$665,000 for the full array (less for the truncated array). Caveats include that the

money will likely not be available until 2024 or even later, and the funds will go to the town's general fund to be spent in any way the town wants.

On January 9, the Select Board voted to use federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) money received by the town to "loan" the Building

Committee the funds it needs to complete the full array. They found the economic benefits of installing the full PV array as soon as possible to be very persuasive: a \$294,633 outlay now will yield \$36,000 per year in energy savings and \$65,000 in additional federal grant funds.

## **Opinion** Belmont needs to get serious about climate goals

*By Brian Iler*

While providing \$290,633 to BMHS Building Committee to complete the full solar array is an encouraging development from both a fiscal and environmental perspective, this observer is discouraged by the fact that the Select Board's deliberations never included a mention of the climate-positive effect of the scheme. Instead, it was a 100% fiscal argument that carried the day.

There are obvious reasons for this. Everyone can agree with a proposal that saves the town money. It's a political no-brainer. What's not clear is whether the town shares a sense of its moral responsibility to decrease its contribution to the existential threat of global warming.

Is this because too many people don't believe in this threat? Or that we can't make much of a contribution as a minor player on the global stage? Or is there a disconnect between our intellectual acknowledgment of the problem and our responsibility to change how we do business and make real-world decisions to address it?

Belmont's residents and elected representatives have repeatedly voted to support climate action goals. Some compelling examples include:

- In 2009, Town Meeting and the Select Board endorsed a Climate Action Plan that included a goal of reducing carbon emissions in Belmont by 80% by 2050
- In 2019, 88% of Town Meeting voted to support the Climate Action Plan Roadmap
- In 2020, 76% of Belmont voters voted "Yes" to State-wide Ballot Question 3 on 100% renewable energy use within the next two decades.
- In 2022, 91% of Town Meeting members voted to support the BMHS Building Committee installing the full solar array

Despite these examples, when it comes down to putting our money where our votes are, we blanch, cower, and hide behind "fiscal responsibility" or "insufficient staffing." We don't rise to the challenge.

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**"Belmont is not making nearly enough progress toward its climate goal," according to the Belmont's Climate Action Plan Roadmap.**

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The solar panel good news related earlier was yet another example of an effort that is "... ad hoc or in response to the demand by community members," as written in the Metropolitan Area Planning Council's (MAPC) Net Zero Implementation Strategies report presented to the Select Board on February 6. The MAPC takeaway: Belmont leads the pack in big talk but falls down on implementation.

In 2009, we committed to reducing CO<sub>2</sub> by 80% by 2050. Ten years later, "Belmont is not making nearly enough progress toward its climate goal," according to the Belmont's Climate Action Plan Roadmap. Today, despite incremental (ad hoc and community member-demanded) victories like the school solar array, we continue to lag significantly behind our goals. Even this modest progress is remarkable considering that we rely on a committed group of volunteers (the energetic Energy Committee, Sustainable Belmont, and other concerned residents) to encourage, cajole, or beg town departments and committees to make good on our shared goals.

Belmont is currently designated a "Green Community," an official state status that gives participating towns access to state resources,





“to help municipalities reduce energy use and costs by implementing clean energy projects in municipal buildings, facilities, and schools.” Belmont received more than \$400,000 in grant money from this Green Community program in 2014 and 2017, but in every other year we’ve left at least \$200,000 on the table, totalling more than \$1.6 million. Why?

Our certification as a Green Community relies on Belmont Light staff’s dogged data collection from unresponsive town departments. (By the way, it’s not Belmont Light’s job, but they do it, thank you). Certification is also contingent upon the town adopting a municipal electric vehicle purchasing program. The Energy Committee researched and wrote a thorough plan and submitted it to the town administration for approval, where it has languished for months.

If Belmont is serious about meeting its climate goals, it must take action. We must hire a sustainability grant manager as requested by the Energy Committee on December 19 in front of the Select Board. This person will pay for their position many times over by identifying, applying for, and stuffing the Belmont town coffers with grant money, which we can then use to fund the programs we need to achieve the climate goals we’re so proud of setting, but are so timid about achieving. The Select Board summarily shot down this sustainability grant manager proposal at its December 19 meeting.

A month later, at the MAPC presentation, the Select Board chair lamented that “we’re falling

behind on our Climate Action Roadmap, without question.” Hmmm. Winchester, Lexington, Arlington, Watertown, Acton, Beverly, Melrose, Concord, Newton, and Framingham . . . all have full-time sustainability staff, bringing in grant money, saving their towns money on energy costs, and coordinating renewable energy efforts across multiple departments. They are making real progress toward their goals. What is Belmont’s excuse for not having this essentially self-funded position? And by the way, who is going to write the grant proposal to bring home the \$665,000 federal dollars mentioned above from our investment in the school’s solar array? The town is already spending this money without even having a person to apply for it in the first place.

If Belmont is serious about meeting its climate goals, the Select Board will demand that the town administrator and key department heads be evaluated for progress on the town’s climate goals, with salary increases contingent upon performance in this area.

If Belmont is serious about meeting its climate goals, we would require that the building committees for our major town buildings have charges that explicitly require Zero Net Energy designs and consideration for future operating costs instead of simple “design and build” directives.

If Belmont is serious about meeting its climate goals, the town will create a sustainability manager staff position and support this person’s programs across all town departments.

If Belmont is serious . . . is Belmont serious?

We are no better than the astoundingly oblivious Belmont Hill School, with their 1960s-style proposal to pave several acres of woodland to construct a parking lot to enable all of their students to drive their cars to school every day. Does the rest of Belmont live in the same cocoon as the privileged prep school, conducting business as usual as the planet heats up and thousands of species disappear? Where is the vision? Where is the commitment?

Keep these issues in mind as you vote in April.

*Brian Iler is a 25-year Belmont resident and father of three Belmont High School graduates.*

# Select Board Candidate Answers BCF Questions

*Each year, the Belmont Citizens Forum asks Select Board candidates questions about issues facing our town. This year, Elizabeth Harmer Dionne provided answers. She was limited to 1,000 words.*

**BCF:** During the time you have lived in Belmont, in what ways has Belmont improved as a place to live, learn, work, and connect? In what ways has the town “lost ground” as a place to live, learn, work, and connect?

**Dionne:** In the 12 years since my family and I moved to Belmont, I’ve seen—and contributed to—a series of heartening improvements to the town. I have seen real infrastructure improvements: police station, middle/high school, library, pool, (hopefully) rink. I’m proud to have led the Community Preservation Committee in distributing funds for renovations of town assets: fields, parks, affordable housing, historic sites.

The town has also benefited greatly from the influx of new residents, who enhance racial and ethnic diversity and bring great ideas for community improvement.

Yet challenges persist, due mainly to the town’s unstable financial underpinnings. Town and school services alike have suffered for lack of revenue due to Proposition 2½ limits. Increased property taxes and decreased affordability have forced out older residents and reduced economic diversity. We’ve diminished the town’s planning capacity, and we’ve gone backwards in terms of learning and mental health due to Covid.

**BCF:** Will Belmont be just as attractive for residents of the “town of homes” 10 or 20 years from now? Why or why not?

**Dionne:** Despite the fiscal challenges, I am optimistic that, with planning and carefully managed growth, Belmont will be just as attractive and even more vibrant in the years ahead. Some strategies we should consider: addressing crosstown traffic; supporting healthy commercial centers and small businesses; finishing the Community Path; obtaining home rule legislation to give Belmont greater ability to protect strategic open space (preventing projects like Belmont Hill School’s massive parking lot plan).

**BCF:** What are your concerns related to climate change, and what steps should the town take to address those risks?



Elizabeth Dionne

ELISA PERRY PHOTOGRAPHY



**BCF:** Reflecting on the Collins Center Report, Financial Organization Structure Review, Town of Belmont, Massachusetts, what are the town's most significant fiscal challenges and the town's most pressing organizational shortcomings? How would you address them?

**Dionne:** As a multiyear member of the Warrant Committee, I've been aware of the core challenges facing Belmont since long before the Collins Center Report confirmed our concerns.

Our town has a structural

**Dionne:** Belmont has made great strides in envisioning how we can combat climate change. I voted for Belmont's Climate Action Roadmap and continue to support a multifaceted approach.

Foremost, the town should partner with Belmont Light to promote strategic electrification, examine electrification of the town's vehicle fleet, and coordinate the installation of charging stations for town and private EV [electric vehicle] owners. Electrification of energy uses, including heat pumps and electric vehicles, reduces our dependence on fossil fuels and taps into the increasingly green regional electric grid.

We should also use strategic rezoning. As Max Colice noted in these pages in January, rezoning Audubon/Habitat, Lone Tree Hill, and Rock Meadow—from single-family residence to open space—would reflect current use and protect these valuable resources.

Because of climate change, "100-year" storms now occur more frequently. We need to mitigate resulting flood risks by following Belmont's Stormwater Management and Erosion Control General Bylaw. By using up-to-date rainfall data, rather than decades-old data (as the DEP [Department of Environmental Protection] standard does), we can develop larger capacity runoffs to manage increased stormwater volumes.

deficit—recurring expenditures exceed recurring revenues, and soon we will not be able to patch together a solution as we have in previous years. Our decentralized political organization impedes strategic decision-making. We must solve both problems.

On the financial side, we need ongoing budget coordination between the Select Board and the School Committee, which manages the majority of the town's operating budget. The Select Board should continue to root out inefficiencies in the parts of the town it can influence (e.g., improving retirement fund investment returns, reducing expenses of the Belmont Retirement System Board).

I am particularly interested in updating the town's zoning bylaw, making it much more supportive of small businesses and appropriate commercial development to enhance commercial tax revenue. Working with the Planning Board, the Vision 21 Implementation Committee, the MBTA Communities Advisory Committee (MBTA-CAC), small businesses, developers, and residents, the Select Board should spearhead efforts to: meet the state requirements for MBTA Communities (combining mixed use with multi-family zoning by right); balance neighborhood preservation with revitalized commercial centers and public transit; allow additional business uses (e.g., restaurants or boutique hotels) as-of-



right; allow additional, carefully planned commercial development; and restore necessary staff positions in the Office of Community Development (OCD).

The Collins Center report also accurately reported weaknesses in our administrative processes. No single entity has the authority to make difficult but necessary decisions regarding spending priorities and amounts, so the town flounders. I believe we should move to an appointed treasurer (Ballot Question 2) to ensure professionalism in that office, and toward an appointed Board of Assessors as well, to ensure consistent, coordinated, and strategic approaches to property assessments—which will allow the town to assess non-residential properties at market value and facilitate implementation of requests for PILOT (Payments in Lieu of Taxes) from nonprofits. I support moves to streamline the town's 67 citizen committees, combining complementary committees to strengthen their membership and voice, while easing administrative burdens on town staff.

**BCF:** How would you guide the town toward needed improvements in infrastructure, such as building maintenance and modernization, electrification, stormwater management, and water quality compliance?

**Dionne:** To support infrastructure improvements, I would encourage the town to follow its own financial policies and increase the proportion of funds devoted to capital projects to at least 5% of the operating budget (up from its current 2%). I've noted above (Question 3) how I would support electrification and stormwater management efforts. Complying with increasingly rigorous state and federal requirements under the MS4 permit (Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System) will require additional staffing in OCD. Finally, the Department of Public Works program to replace 40% of all water mains within a 30-year period (begun in 1995) is well underway.

**BCF:** In 2021 Governor Baker signed into law a new measure that will require cities and towns with MBTA stations to permit apartment construction within 0.5 miles. How

## Conservation Volunteers Needed

Belmont Conservation Volunteers will be organizing group efforts to control nonnative plants that are disturbing Belmont's native plant communities. Starting in March, volunteers will pull garlic mustard at Lone Tree Hill, Rock Meadow, and elsewhere. There will be more opportunities throughout the growing season to remove a host of nonnative plant species. Learn to know, love, and protect our local native plants and share the experience with others!

For more information and to sign up for timely e-notices, go to:

[www.sustainablebelmont.net/belmont-conservation-volunteers/](http://www.sustainablebelmont.net/belmont-conservation-volunteers/)

should Belmont move ahead with its housing production plan?

**Dionne:** See my answer to Question 4 regarding the town's zoning bylaw. I support increased housing and mixed-use development. MBTA-CAC will include the Housing Production Plan in its work once it is finalized. MBTA-CAC will seek extensive public input and engagement to propose the best zoning plan for density, height, and location.

**BCF:** Briefly describe your vision for preserving (or "evolving") and enhancing Belmont's quality of living, learning, working, and connecting.

**Dionne:** I am running for Select Board to enhance Belmontians' quality of life. That means implementing a sound financial plan that promotes appropriate development of housing, commercial space, and small businesses. Such a plan will allow us to achieve what we all want—an interconnected, sustainable, and welcoming town with robust services, excellent schools, beautiful parks and athletic facilities, protected open space, and vibrant commercial centers with thriving restaurants, shops, and services. Working together with Belmont's dedicated town staff and engaged residents, I am confident that we can realize this future.

# CPC Changes Plan, Endorses Seven Projects

By Elizabeth Harmer Dionne

Every summer, members of Belmont's Community Preservation Committee (CPC) update Belmont's Community Preservation Act (CPA) Plan. Publication of the plan launches the subsequent fiscal year's funding cycle, which begins with the submission of preliminary project applications each October. The current version of the CPA plan is [posted on the town website](#).

During its initial years, Belmont's CPC learned a lot about elements of successful projects and how best to evaluate them. We have kept the structure and content of the original plan, but in recent years, we have refined and emphasized important provisions. One example is the funding guidelines on page 9, where we made the following additions.

**Receive endorsement from other municipal boards or departments (with particular weight given to endorsements by the CPC's constituent committees).**

The CPC has always relied on the advice of its constituent committees, which nominate

members and have significant subject matter expertise, but that wasn't explicitly stipulated in our funding guidelines. The CPC realized that at least one proposed project hadn't been adequately vetted (despite the plan sponsor claiming otherwise). We depend on the analysis and public process of the Historic District Commission, Housing Authority, and Recreation Commission (and hope to rely on the Conservation Commission for future open space acquisition). If the relevant committee has not reviewed and endorsed a project, it is premature for the CPC to consider it for CPA funding.

**Provide ongoing support for multiyear projects that have previously received CPA funding to ensure project completion.**

Examples include the Belmont Community Path and the redevelopment and expansion of Belmont's community housing stock, and also multiphase projects such as the ongoing rehabilitation of Grove Street Park and fields and amenities at Pequossette Park.

**Leverage additional public or private funds.**

This is not a new guideline, but it has become increasingly important in recent years as it now applies to three major projects for which we have provided significant and ongoing design funds: the redesign and redevelopment of both Sherman Gardens and Belmont Village, and the design and construction of Phases I and II of the community path. Belmont lacks the financial resources to construct any of these projects by itself, but with CPA design funding, each of these projects could qualify for tens of millions of dollars in state and federal funding.

One of the most significant recent changes in the CPA plan is an explicit acknowledgment that, per guidance from the Massachusetts Community Preservation Coalition, the CPC "is the gatekeeper that recommends the best projects" on page 28 of the plan). Prior to 2022, CPC members actively debated whether or not to recommend all qualified projects to Town Meeting, withholding judgment about a project's priority relative to current applications or future needs. We realized that Town Meeting



Bronze plaque of William J. Underwood included in the CPC project proposal "Library Historic Objects Preservation Plan."



relies heavily on our assessment, hence we now state our responsibility to do so.

A final important change is a strong emphasis on future planning. The CPC could weigh projects against each other in any given year, but we couldn't balance current requests against future needs because we didn't know what those needs would be.

During the 2021–22 funding cycle, we used administrative funds to commission an inventory and conditions study of the town's recreation assets. The published report will guide Recreation Commission projects and spending over the next two decades. In cooperation with the Historic District Commission, we are currently funding a two-year study of the restoration needs of the town's historic assets including the Town Hall complex and historic elementary schools.

## Projects for 2023 Town Meeting

The CPC typically votes on project applications in December of an application cycle which runs from October through Annual Town Meeting in the spring. However, due to the unexpected resignations of several members, we waited until January 18 to vote on this year's set of final project applications. Several projects came back to us with revised numbers, so we had to vote again on February 8.

This has been an exciting but challenging application cycle. We received preliminary applications requesting CPA funds in excess of what would be available for Town Meeting to approve and appropriate for FY2024. By working coopera-



The Children's Room stained glass windows are included in the CPC project proposal "Library Historic Objects Preservation Plan."

BELMONT LIBRARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES

tively with various applicants, we reduced the size of some preliminary requests and postponed others. Ultimately, we recommended that Town Meeting approve and appropriate substantially full funding for all final project applications.

The CPC has recommended the following seven projects to Town Meeting for FY2024.

### Grove Street Baseball and Basketball Reconstruction

Town of Belmont Recreation Department, Friends of Grove Street, Belmont Youth Baseball & Softball, \$941,935.07

This project will implement the conceptual design from FY2023 through a \$40,000 appropriation to rehabilitate the baseball fields and basketball courts. It will rebuild and replant the grass playing fields, which require reconstruction every 20 to 25 years and are currently dangerous for players. It will also reconstruct the basketball court, which is beyond repair. Finally, it will

address ongoing drainage issues to protect work done in the rest of the park.

### **Rejuvenation of Sherman Gardens**

Belmont Housing Authority, \$400,000

This project seeks funding to support the redevelopment and expansion of Sherman Gardens. A funding award would build upon prior CPA allocations for this purpose made in fiscal years 2018 (\$173,200) and 2022 (\$400,000). These awards provided funding for consulting, feasibility analysis, architectural, and engineering work at Sherman Gardens. Predevelopment efforts are proceeding well, with a feasibility report prepared by Cambridge Housing Authority delivered to the Belmont Housing Authority in December 2022.

### **Fund to Support the Creation of New Affordable Housing**

Belmont Housing Trust, \$190,000

The purpose of this project is to develop or support affordable housing within the town by subsidizing the creation of additional affordable units in housing construction projects. This project builds on the \$250,000 in CPA funds that Town Meeting approved in 2021 for the same purpose. The funds will be expended at the discretion of the Housing Trust under terms of a grant agreement signed in spring 2022 by the town, the CPC, and the Housing Trust.

### **Conservation Fund**

Belmont Conservation Commission, \$140,000

The goal of this fund is to provide a dedicated account with readily accessible funds to facilitate the purchase of open space and/or deed restrictions for allowable CPA Act purposes. The Conservation Commission has evaluated the CPA programs in neighboring towns and believes that a successful acquisition of open space is dependent on having a ready source of funds to initiate a transaction.

### **Pequossette Park Basketball Court Replacement**

Town of Belmont Recreation Department, \$124,592

This project will address issues with the basketball court and the CPC plan's goal of

preserving town assets. This court at Pequossette Park is a critical piece of infrastructure within the town's parks system. Replacing it in-kind and making it playable will allow many residents to enjoy the sport. Parts of the court are torn up; playing on them is dangerous. The plan is to combine the design, engineering, and construction into one phase since the court will be replaced in the same footprint. This project is identified as a need in the Activities Inventory and Assessment document.

### **Library Historic Objects Preservation Plan**

Belmont Library Board of Trustees, \$86,787

The goal of this project is to protect, preserve, restore, and reinstall specific historic artifacts that are currently housed in the Belmont Public Library building. Key artifacts will be removed, renovated, and/or repaired as needed, stored, and then reinstalled in the new library building. The trustees wish to bring the past forward into the new library building. Each of the artifacts included in this proposal represents a unique and special tie to the history of our town.

### **Belmont Woman's Club Window Restoration Installation Project for 3rd Floor**

Belmont Woman's Club, \$31,500

This is an off-cycle funding request to complete a project initially funded in FY2021 to restore the windows of the historic Homer House. During the project, the restorer removed windows, brought them to her shop to restore them, then returned them to the house for reinstallation. Several windows have been successfully completed on the first and second floors. However, when her crew came to reinstall the restored windows on the third floor, they determined that the existing window frames were unstable due to significant rot. This additional funding will allow the placement of scaffolding around the building to remove the rot and replace pieces of the window frames as needed.

*Elizabeth Harmer Dionne is chair of Belmont's Community Preservation Committee. Any opinions expressed in this article are personal to her and do not necessarily reflect the view of the entire committee.*

## Opinion Staffing Shortages Imperil Belmont

By Paul Joy

In the last few months, Belmont's trajectory toward the fiscal cliff has accelerated with alarming speed. The School Committee has already been asked by the Select Board to find ways to plug a \$2.1 million funding gap in its proposed FY2024 budget. These budget shortages, projected to continue in FY2025 and beyond, would require untenable cuts to our schools and first responders.

Are we capable as a town of changing our trajectory? Of investing in growth and renewal? In my opinion, as the co-chair of the Economic Development Committee (EDC), we must change. We must act now to develop and implement a comprehensive community compact and framework—starting with addressing the serious staffing shortages in the Community Development department.

Currently, the Community Development department is down four or five positions, including a code inspector, a town planner, a zoning and bylaw enforcement official, and a town engineer. This situation has resulted in an increased workload for the remaining staff and has made it incredibly difficult for the department to pursue grants and respond to other departmental requests. The town administrator's office acknowledged these staffing shortages in a letter to the town

board, committee, and commission members on January 9, writing "Currently, there are three employees in the Office of Community Development that are balancing the work of seven positions."

This letter was in many ways necessary due to Glenn Clancy's December 12, 2022, Select Board presentation, where he brought these staffing shortages to the attention of the board and the public. Clancy, Belmont's director of the Office of Community Development, highlighted the staffing shortage's impact on processing building permits, staffing committees, and pursuing grant funding. He argued, and I wholeheartedly agree, that additional staff is needed to effectively serve the needs of Belmont and keep up with an ever-increasing workload.

Let's talk briefly about Community Development's role in staffing volunteer committees, including the EDC. Staff are responsible for attending meetings (often after hours), scheduling meetings and agendas with the Town Clerk's office and the chairs of each committee, and responding to committee member requests. Currently, Community Development is staffing the following committees:

- EDC
- Historic District Commission
- Planning Board
- Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA)
- Master Plan Committee
- MBTA Multifamily Zoning Committee

Community Development staff also regularly attend and present at Warrant Committee meetings, Select Board meetings, Capital Budget Committee meetings, and Town Meeting.

As co-chair of the EDC, I have seen the impact the staffing shortage has had on our committee and elsewhere. In response to this crisis, the EDC is currently studying and benchmarking Belmont's





business origination process with those of other towns, especially those pertaining to opening a new restaurant. We have found that the current ZBA and Health Department processes involving significant commitment from Community Development staff have reduced the number of new restaurants to around three to four per year. Restaurants and bakeries often have six-plus month wait times, which is unacceptable and significantly higher than in neighboring towns and cities. We think having a more streamlined process will assist Community Development's overall efficiency.

People often ask, "Why do we have so many empty storefronts in Belmont?" While this is a complex and multifaceted problem, lessening the regulatory burden on small businesses by reducing the number of required meetings and hearings and allowing Community Development to approve requests directly without unnecessary permitting processes will only increase the effectiveness of this department.

Furthermore, adding staff to Community Development—especially the Planning Board—will improve our ability to attract new businesses and strategize with town leaders on how to increase commercial tax revenue through new business formation. This is paramount given the proposed cuts to our schools and other town departments.

The Community Development department's staffing shortages are significantly impacting the department and the town. If we are serious about creating a viable, long-term compact with Belmont residents, I urge the Belmont Select Board to take action to address this issue as soon as possible. By providing additional resources to Community Development and acting on the EDC's recommendations to reform business formation, we can ensure that the community's needs are met and that our town can continue to thrive.

*Paul Joy is co-chair of Belmont's Economic Development Committee.*

## Join New Belmont Group Protecting Raptors

**By Jeffrey North**

Eagles, owls, and hawks are dying. Of the 161 Massachusetts raptors tested at Tufts Wildlife Clinic in a study between 2006 and 2010, 86% had poison residues in their liver tissue. And according to the EPA, more than 10,000 kids are poisoned by toxic chemicals left around residences, restaurants, or public



parks to poison rats.

### Take action

Proven tactics to address the problem with minimal or no rodenticide use include Integrated Pest Management plans, engaging housing authorities, affecting retail and construction site practices, and a rat poison bylaw. And please support legislation currently before the House (HD 577) and Senate (SD1144). This legislation would increased the use of integrated pest management strategies with multiple methods to address rodent problems.

Join other interested Belmontians for a kickoff meeting for Save Belmont Wildlife on Zoom at 7 PM on Thursday, April 13: register at [bit.ly/BCF-Raptor-Zoom](https://bit.ly/BCF-Raptor-Zoom). Meet wildlife biologist and BCF **Newsletter** author Laura Kiesel, who will talk about the rodenticide problem in our region. Can't make it? Email [bcfprogramdirector@gmail.com](mailto:bcfprogramdirector@gmail.com) for more information.

## Opinion Belmont Zoning Laws Penalize GR District

by Chris Arthur

The last article I wrote about zoning (“[Belmont’s Zoning Needs Rethinking](#),” BCF Newsletter, January/February 2023) focused on changing the use of “nonconforming” properties so that all properties would have to abide by the same rules, and owners could build to the allowable requirements of the code. I also mentioned changing the code to create a smaller allowable footprint. This article focuses on the unfairness of the existing code to an entire zoning district.

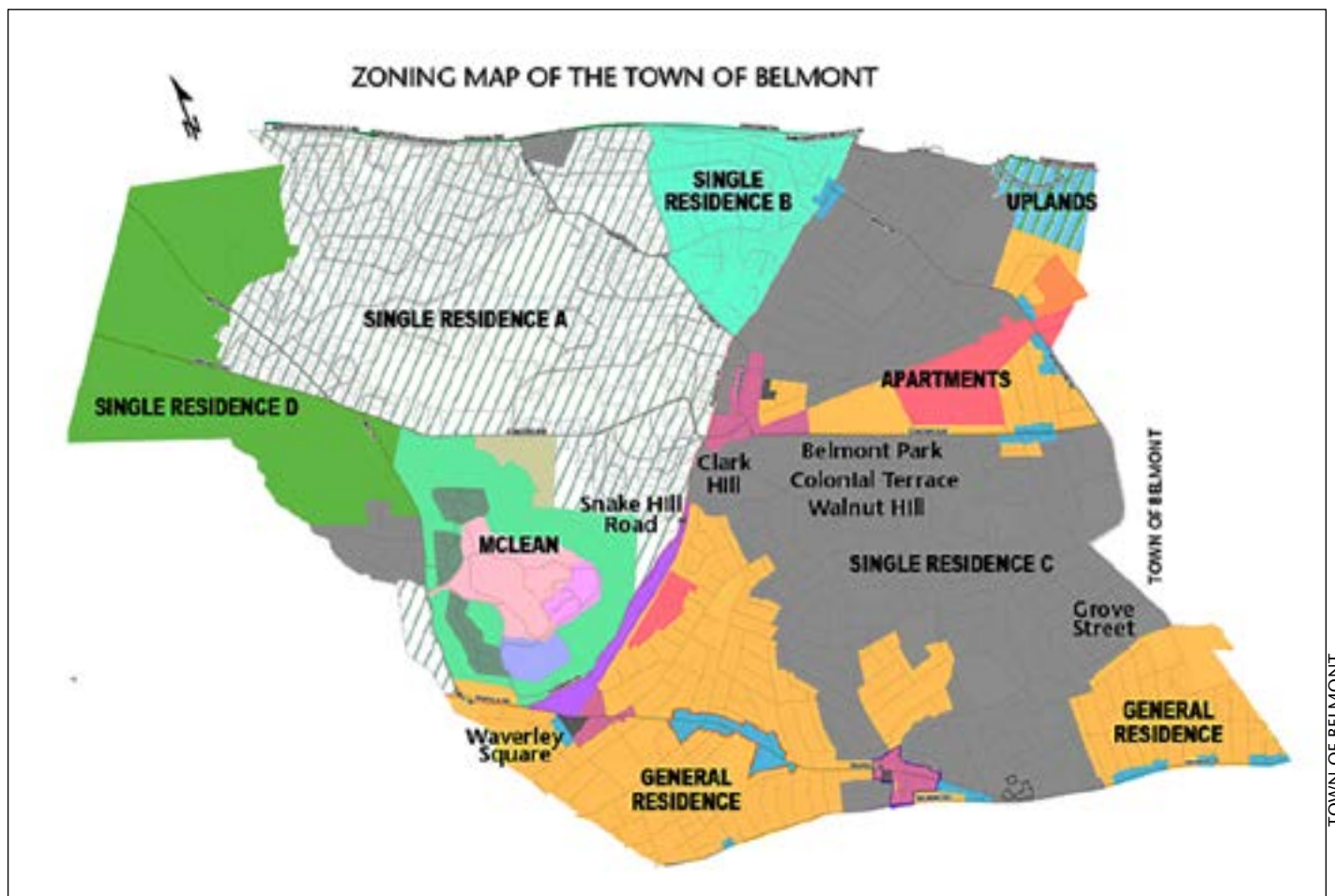
Belmont’s zoning map can be found on the [town’s website](#). There are several residential districts. For example, SR-C (Single Residence “C”) and GR (General Residence) are shown on the map. They are intertwined.

The GR district contains more duplex houses; that results in greater density. Belmont allows changing a duplex into two single-family homes on larger lots that have the allowable frontage

and area for two smaller lots (with Planning Board approval). Many existing duplexes have been torn down and are now two single-family homes. This section of the code makes the GR district similar to the SR-C district, which contains mainly single-family homes with the occasional duplex.

However, adding a small addition to a single-family home or duplex in the GR district is much more onerous than adding a small addition to a single-family home or duplex in the SR-C district.

Belmont’s zoning law changed in 2014, adding significant oversight to the GR district. The zoning changed in response to people’s concerns with the large side-by-side duplexes that were built after smaller homes were torn down, but the rights taken away from the GR district went far beyond oversight for teardowns. (Teardowns should require Planning Board approval for all



Zoning map of Belmont showing SR-C (Single Residence C) and GR (General Residence) zoning





Houses near Waverley Square (GR District).

districts on properties that are conforming or nonconforming. That's my opinion, and it's for another article.)

The code allows an as-of-right option for small additions for all residential districts, except the GR district. Further, ANY addition or expansion proposed in the GR district (except for a dormer) requires oversight by the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) or the Planning Board, depending on its size.

"As-of-right" means one does not have to go through the Planning Board or ZBA for approvals. Owners must still obtain a permit, hire a licensed contractor, and abide by the building code. The SR-C district permits an addition of 30% of TLA (total living area) without going through the ZBA or the Planning Board, allowing for modest additions without requiring discretionary approvals. The option to build without oversight from the Planning Board or the ZBA is often the basis for a design in the SR-C district. Owners will opt to work within the requirements that allow them to build without discretionary approvals.

The GR district has no such option. One of my projects in the GR district was a 120-square-foot addition to the main floor of a small home

to create a larger kitchen and back entry. This project required ZBA approval because the area is greater than 0 square feet and less than 300 square feet.

The approval process took months longer than it should have, and the owners hired an attorney because they were so concerned about the circuitous process. This process and the additional requested drawings added thousands of dollars to the project cost, increased anxiety, and took about six months.

If the project were over 300 square feet, for example—150 square feet

per floor (a 10 foot by 15 foot room at the back of the house) as a small two-story addition—it would have required the Planning Board's approval. This condition would add months to the approval process, require neighbors' approvals, and result in significant additional costs.

In both cases, the additions are well below the 30% total living area allowed in the SR-C district and followed the zoning requirements for a lot. In SR-C, they would not have to go through the Planning Board or the ZBA. Instead, they could simply file for a permit and begin construction.

Requiring this extra oversight for small additions in the GR district adds months of time, frustration, uncertainty, worry, and money. Instead, the GR district should have an "as-of-right" option for modest additions like all the other residential districts, perhaps based on a percentage of total living area as it is in the SR-C district. Or, since the zoning laws are pushing toward single-family homes where taller duplexes once stood, perhaps the GR designation should no longer exist, and the GR should fall under the SR-C designation.

*Chris Arthur is an architect and a Belmont resident.*



# Let The Charles River Run Free of Dams

By Julia Hopkins

For more than 400 years, the Charles River has been altered, controlled, and dammed to bend to the will of industry and profit.

The river we know today is not free. Instead, a river radically changed by the long history of human intervention. We dammed its waters to power industry, leaving a legacy of toxic pollution in our wake. We straightened its gentle meanders, buried its tributaries, and hardened its shores, constricting its natural flow. We drained and filled its wetlands to free up more land and let our parking lots sprawl right up to its banks.

Now, we are facing the consequences. Today, our river and all who depend on it suffer from our attempts to control nature: polluted water quality from stormwater runoff, impeded fish passage by aging, defunct dams, invasive species growth, harmful cyanobacteria blooms, and biodiversity loss. Climate change is amplifying these impacts. We took away our river's natural resilience to adapt to the challenges of increased precipitation, stronger storms, drought, and

extreme heat. Now all of us, but especially our most vulnerable, are at risk.

We are at a critical juncture. Now is the time to reverse the antagonistic relationship we've built with the river by setting it free.

## A river interrupted

Before colonization, the Charles River flowed freely, and Native Peoples relied on its vibrant population of migratory fish for food, water, and cultural survival. Each spring, the Charles River historically welcomed hundreds of thousands of migratory fish from the depths of the ocean to the river's numerous lakes, ponds, and tributaries to spawn. American shad, blueback herring, alewives, rainbow smelt, white perch, striped bass, and American eel all enjoyed clean, rich habitats with cool, flowing waters to begin their lives.

In 1783, despite Massachusetts law requiring dam owners to provide ample fish passage, colonists raised Watertown Dam several feet to increase its power yield, completely blocking spring fish runs upstream to the Nipmuc people in Natick. The Nipmuc people residing in Natick petitioned the state legislature to oppose the Watertown Dam, as it infringed on Native Peoples' rights to food sovereignty, stripping the community of vital resources, cultural ways of life, and free-flowing water.

However, their protest was to no avail. As dams were constructed on the Charles River, migratory fish lost a staggering two-thirds of their available habitat. The consequences were stark and swift. By 1920, American shad and alewives, two of the most populous native migratory fish species, were declared extinct in the Charles River and the possibility of their return was deemed remote in a study from the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Game. But American shad and alewives live in the Charles River today, thanks to the considerable cleanup of the river and ongoing restoration efforts.

Today, more than 100 dams continue to choke the Charles River and its tributaries with stark consequences for water quality, aquatic life, public health, and climate resilience.



CHARLES RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION



Overhead view of the Watertown dam on the Charles River.

Migratory fish are still stopped short at insurmountable functionless dams. Dams disrupt natural hydrology—the slow-flowing water upstream faces rising temperatures, rapid evaporation, the accumulation of sediments and excess nutrients, and disastrously low dissolved oxygen levels. These factors all contribute to invasive species growth, severe cyanobacteria blooms, reduced biodiversity, habitat loss, and in extreme conditions, the death of all aquatic life.

Above all, as climate change brings more frequent and intense heavy rainfall events, these dams were not designed for the intensity of today's storms. Our homes, roads, and critical infrastructure will flood in the event of catastrophic dam failure.

## A river resurgent

Let's set the Charles River free. By removing functionless barriers like Watertown Dam and allowing nature to take its course, we could allow our river to again be a welcome place for all people, plants, and wildlife. Dam removal offers the opportunity to acknowledge the rights of present-day Nipmuc, Massachusetts, and Wampanoag people, revive migratory fish populations, restore the river ecosystem, and build climate resilience across the watershed.

Across the state of Massachusetts, more than 60 relic mill dams have been removed from our rivers, including Old Mill Dam in Bellingham. Many more are under consideration for removal, including Watertown Dam, Charles River

Dam in Natick, and Eagle Dam in Wrentham.

For some, dams are seen as iconic or historical structures, reminders of the area's industrial past. Their long-lasting presence in our rivers and streams has become familiar, and dam removal presents an unknown. Some people wonder how wildlife they have witnessed near the dam could adapt to such a big change. But nature knows what to do, and nostalgia should not hold back our river's right to be free.

But what does dam removal actually look like? When the barrier is slowly and carefully removed by engineers, in collaboration with wildlife experts and with the help of streambank restoration, our river will be resurgent. It will meander more naturally through the newly created flood plain, buffered by a vibrant wetland ecosystem that helps us weather intense storms, and welcome all manner of fish, birds, insects, and life.

The transformation will be swift. As the river's edges are exposed to sunlight, dormant seeds will blossom from the riverbed into lush native plants—milkweed, swamp hibiscus, sedges, marsh marigold, asters, goldenrod—providing habitat for birds and wildlife and scenic beauty for all to enjoy.

With the dawn of spring, migratory fish will return from the ocean, instead of stopping short at a wall of concrete. They will experience free passage to an abundance of clean, cool waters and tributaries to spawn for the first time unimpeded in over four hundred years.

We will all be able to again enjoy the wonders of a wild, living river.

Learn more in [A River Interrupted](#), Charles River Watershed Association's long-form persuasive multimedia about dam removal and river restoration, and find ways to get involved on CRWA's website [www.crwa.org/dam-removal](http://www.crwa.org/dam-removal).

*Julia Hopkins is communications and outreach manager at the Charles River Watershed Association.*



# Change Comes to Waltham Fields Site

By John Dieckmann

For the past 30 years, the 28-acre former UMass Field Station at 240 Beaver Street in Waltham has hosted the Waltham Fields Community Farm and several other nonprofit organizations. The property includes an office building, a boiler house, greenhouses, and sheds. Ownership has recently transferred to the city of Waltham, and as a result, significant change may be in the offing.

## History of the UMass Field Station

The property is a portion of the 200-acre, mid-nineteenth century Cedar Hill estate that was owned by a successful businessman named Samuel Dennis Warren, the namesake of the S. D. Warren paper company. Notice that current roads Beaver Street and Forest Street existed then, as well as the Fitchburg and Mass Central railroad tracks.

His daughter Cornelia Warren inherited the estate in 1901. She died in 1921, leaving the land in several major pieces. Seventy-five acres were left to the Girl Scouts, now the site of the present day Camp Cedar Hill on the north side of Beaver Street.

Twelve acres were donated to the Harvard School of Landscape Architecture. Fifty-eight acres were left to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to be used by the Massachusetts Agricultural College, which became the UMass Field Station.

The balance of the land was given to the city of Waltham for schools, open space, and/or parks. The land given to the city is now occupied by some Bentley University dormitories and, along Forest Street, the Gann Academy, Veterans Memorial Athletic Complex, Forest Street Park, Cornelia Warren Park, and Waltham Woods.

The land for the Mass Agricultural College is located on either side of Beaver Street, the Field Station itself on the south side, and an additional 30+ acres on the north side, known as Lawrence Meadow, much of which is wetlands. The field station land is considered to be some of the best agricultural land in this region, and has been farmed continuously since the mid-17th century.

In the mid-1990s,

UMass ceased to operate the Field Station as an agricultural college and research station. In 1994, the Green Rows of Waltham (GROW) community gardens was established on part



Boundaries of Cornelia Warren's estate circa 1900.



of the field station land and shortly after that, the Waltham Fields Community Farm (WFCF) was established on a significant portion of the acreage.

WFCF operates as community-supported agriculture, selling shares of its output to more than 700 families, and donates a significant amount of produce to food pantries in Waltham and Greater Boston. In addition, various nonprofits have rented office space in the office building, including the Waltham Land Trust, GROW, WFCF, the Boston Area Gleaners, the Federation of Massachusetts Farmers Markets, and Grow Native Massachusetts.

Change was precipitated by the UMass acquisition of Mount Ida College when Mount Ida faced bankruptcy in 2018. In the wake of the acquisition, UMass determined that it had no further use for the field station and negotiated

the sale of its land to the city of Waltham. A portion of the purchase price was financed with Community Preservation Act funds and a portion with regular city funds. The sale from UMass to the city closed on March 1, 2022.

The city has decided that the future use of the field station will be determined by a competitive bidding process on several parts of the property. As of this writing, requests for proposals are being developed and will be put before the Waltham City Council for approval.

It is not clear how much, if any, of the status quo (farming by WFCF, use of office space by the current nonprofit tenants) will continue into the future.

*John Dieckmann is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum and the Waltham Land Trust.*

## Lone Tree Hill Volunteer Day April 22

Join us in stewarding Lone Tree Hill! The Belmont Citizens Forum, in conjunction with the Judy Record Conservation Fund, is holding its ninth annual cleanup and trail maintenance day on April 22, from 9 AM until noon.

Help complete the planting of white pine saplings along the Pine Allee, cleaning up at the Mill Street parking lot and the Coal Road area, and planting “mother colonies” of native plants to reintroduce diversity in an area cleared of glossy buckthorn. Students can earn community service credits.

Bounded by Concord Avenue, Pleasant Street, and Mill Street, Lone Tree Hill spans 119 acres of permanently protected conservation land and is available to everyone. It is stewarded through a public/private partnership by the town and McLean Hospital and administered by the Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill.

For more information, email [bcfprogramdirector@gmail.com](mailto:bcfprogramdirector@gmail.com).



JEFFREY NORTH

# Profiles in Belmont: Jean Devine

By Elissa Ely

There were woods behind Jean Devine's house growing up in Manchester, New Hampshire. As a child, she liked pressing leaves and hated wearing socks; her mother would send her outside on 'safaris' with apple slices, the family dog trailing behind. She was always late to school.

Jean was unafraid of bugs and fascinated by Daddy Longlegs. Woods and spiders did not turn her into the environmental educator, native-plant coach, and landscaper she eventually became, but they were her introduction to nature. Her mother belonged to the Garden Club in an era when plots were visually beautiful, organized by color and regimented pattern, and without particular attention to native or invasive species. Back then, natural pesticide control involved plucking beetles off a rose bush and dropping them into beer (it made an impression), and concepts like biodiversity and co-speciation were decades from being discussed. But her mother encouraged an explorer's spirit, and they tapped the sugar maple in the yard together, boiling its sap down to one tablespoon of thrilling maple syrup.

After studying European history at Brown, her road took many turns. "I'm Epicurean," Jean explains cheerfully. "Life is a buffet." She sampled abundantly, beginning as a community development worker in Providence, a job that ended suddenly when the Republican mayor discovered she was the daughter of a liberal Democratic judge ("case of reverse nepotism"). There followed a chapter in landscape design and another working with a high-end furniture manufacturer, where she "could feel like a designer and use colored pencils."

Eventually, she returned to school for an MBA, thinking maybe she would find her way into real estate. Instead, she discovered the power of case studies and the pleasure of careful assessment and synthesis. This led to a decade in the biotech industry, pulling pharmaceutical science, patents, strategies, and business models together into a palatable form for an audience. Along the way, there was also time to volunteer on the



JEAN DEVINE

Jean Devine with her husband Phil Chisolm.

board of a Concord theater group, in front of the lights and behind. "It forced me to limit endless work hours," she says (though of course it also added more).

Most experts master a subject before turning to teaching, but Jean reversed the direction: she was driven to mentor students, then went in search of her subject. Reading widely, she became a historian of New England soil and species, evolution and ecology, childhood development, and environmental awareness. She learned how indigenous insect, avian, plant, and tree species co-evolved and continue to require one another, how the native insect can't sustain itself on a non-native plant, and how most native plants require pollination from a native species. A garden that strikes us as visually appealing—maybe tailored, maybe flamboyant—strikes local butterflies and bees as nutritionally empty: an asphalt lot.

Recognizing a problem does not lead reliably to recognizing a solution. But Jean realized what many of us haven't yet: that we can't depend on national parks and federal organizations for salvation. We are our own best hope, in our own backyards. "It's the urgency of now," she says.





Jean Devine at work.

Endangered monarchs and honeybees are “the poster children for the movement” but also the tip of all the species in decline. For those who doubt, she recommends the Windshield Test: speeding down the Mass Pike at 65 mph, where has the usual coating of insects gone?

In 2014, she founded Biodiversity Builders, an environmental and entrepreneurial program for campers, high school and college students in Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge. She describes it as “place-based and project-based learning.” Students are paid to design and market native-plant-based gardens, to remediate lacking habitats, to prune out invasives. “Can you teach curiosity?” she asks and answers herself. “I always thought you could. They see how excited I am.”

They learn ecology, landscape design, marketing, financing, and customer relations; a universe from a grain of soil. So far, 50 plots have been planted or revised. For the Builders, it’s education and profit. For the gardens (including in front of Payson Park Church), it’s a living laboratory. For the cause of local biodiversity, it’s hope.

In 2020, Jean cofounded the Mystic Charles Pollinator Pathways Project, another byproduct of the urgency of now. Adapting one yard at a time may be insufficient to support declining native bees, butterflies, moths, wasps, and birds. For one thing, they are dietary specialists; monarchs eat milkweed, and caterpillars won’t

dine on trees from China or Japan. For another, pollinators can’t fly far; native bees have a range of only 750 meters. Adequate public and private pollinator sites need to be closely spaced.

Through its volunteers, the Project created a point-to-point map of gardens that contain the necessary native plantings. The map identifies nutritional corridors that already exist, but also, geographical gaps in need of revision.

It’s a local response to species loss, as well as an antidote to the helplessness of the individual. And, it’s a dynamic undertaking under constant re-assessment, thanks to those who track their own data (does your garden have six native species?) and update surveys. (*You can add your garden to the map at [bit.ly/BCF-Pollinator-Map](http://bit.ly/BCF-Pollinator-Map)—Editor*)

Most recently, Jean founded Devine Native Plantings, where she is “chief seed sower and native-plant coach,” auditing sites and yards, then tailoring them to native plants. It’s her only for-profit venture—although, as she points out, “I haven’t done the taxes yet this year.”

The forest in Manchester she used to wander through as a child is gone. A field she crossed on the way to school is covered with houses. Now she lives in Belmont, with a small lawn in front and a large garden in back. “It’s like a mullet haircut,” she says.

Here she raises sun-lovers like penstemon, swamp milkweed, golden Alexander, and Carolina rose; partial shade-lovers like wood asters and sedge, native goatsbeard, kalmia, and mountain laurel; affable sun-shade accommodators like turtlehead, yellowroot, purple coneflower, and cohosh. Reciting their names is like reciting a poem aloud. Put them to music, and you have an aria.

Long ago, in college, Jean sang in an a cappella choir. She sang with others then. She wants others to sing with her now.

*Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.*



# American Chestnuts May Return to the Wild

*By John Dieckmann*

Prior to 1900, an estimated three billion American chestnut trees populated the Eastern United States. It was an important tree ecologically, with its nuts being a vital food source for a variety of wildlife and a significant food source for people. Chestnut wood was used in both construction and in furniture making.

In the late 19th century, a blight fungus that attacks chestnuts was inadvertently imported from Asia. The fungus spores spread rapidly, and by 1925, the vast majority of American chestnut trees had been infected and killed.

In the 1970s, the American Chestnut Foundation was organized to restore the American chestnut. Since the Chinese variant of the chestnut is blight resistant, the idea was that by carefully crossbreeding the two chestnut varieties, the American chestnut could acquire the blight resistance of the Chinese chestnut while maintaining the unique characteristics of the American variety. This is a lengthy process, as each generation of new chestnuts takes several years to mature to the point where it can produce seeds (the nuts). Now, blight-resistant varieties have been produced in quantity. However, the trees are not immune to the blight.

Genetic engineering technology is now being used to make American chestnuts truly blight resistant. The cause of the chestnut die-off is that the blight fungus produces oxalic acid, which destroys the cambium, the living layer under

the bark where sap flows. Oxalate oxidase (OxO) is a naturally occurring enzyme that breaks down oxalic acid. Genetic engineering has been used to take a gene from wheat for producing OxO and inserting it into the American chestnut genome.

The resulting chestnuts retain all of the characteristics of the American chestnut, with durable blight resistance based on OxO breaking down the oxalic acid before it can damage the cambium layer.

For several years now, this modified chestnut has been going through an extensive regulatory review that applies to all genetically modified organisms to approve its widespread use. All signs point to this chestnut being approved soon, at which point it can be reintroduced into the wild. Visit the American Chestnut Foundation website ([www.acf.org](http://www.acf.org)) for more information about the process.

*John Dieckmann is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.*



American chestnut tree.

PENN STATE UNIVERSITY



# Claflin Street Culvert Project



RADHA IYENGAR

Spot repairs of the trough of the old Claflin Street culvert. The project includes the removal of the old grate system and replacement by a newly engineered grate with a larger mouth. The new grate is similar to the one behind the library and is designed to accommodate debris and greater precipitation. The new culvert will contain and direct higher water levels without limiting the flow.





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