Belmont Citizens Forum

Community Path Could Have Bridge, Box

By Vincent Stanton, Jr.

Last May, the consultants hired by Belmont to design Phase 2 of the Belmont Community Path (extending from the Clark Street Bridge to the Waltham border) recommended a final route to the Community Path Project Committee (CPPC), which endorsed the recommendation and sent it on to the Select Board (see "Belmont Community Path Route Takes Shape,"September/October 2023 *Newsletter*, for details). The Select Board asked for more details on the right of way, which is the focus of current work.

The Pare Corporation-Toole Design team proposed two audacious Phase 2 design choices: a new bridge over the Fitchburg Line and a potential "box-over" of Waverley Station, which would create space for a pocket park. Here are the key questions:

- Are there precedents for such structures as elements of a pedestrian/bike path?
- How flexible has the MBTA been about similar structures traversing its property?
- Has the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) funded similar projects via the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), the federal and state funding source Belmont will tap for construction?

Four recent TIP-funded projects bear on those questions, in Concord, Brookline, Milton, and Natick. Though none exactly matches the Belmont project, they provide insight regarding what is technically feasible, what the MBTA has allowed elsewhere, and what the Boston MPO will fund. Two earlier-stage projects in Cambridge shed further light on what neighboring communities will be proposing to the MPO.

First, here are a few details about the bridge and box-over. A new bridge just west of Clark Street would allow the path to jump from the north side of the Fitchburg tracks to the Belmont Village parking lot on the south side. From there it would continue west, parallel to the tracks, all the way to Waverley Square, rising to meet the Trapelo Road bridge.

Locating the path on the south side would facilitate path connections to residential areas, to Town Field, and to the Senior Center, all on the south side of the tracks. For example, several hundred seventh- through 12th-graders in the neighborhoods surrounding Town Field would be able to reach the path by crossing at most one or two busy streets (Waverley, Beech). The path would provide a nearly straight route to the school, with no road crossings, potentially increasing the number of children walking or biking to school.

GOOGLE MAPS

The Bruce Freeman Rail Trail bridge over Route 2 in Concord.

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The proposed box-over of the depressed Waverley Station would provide an attractive green space to help anchor further development in Waverley Square.

TIP-funded pedestrian-bicycle bridge: Bruce Freeman Rail over Route 2 in Concord

The Bruce Freeman Rail Trail, when complete, will connect Framingham to Lowell via a 25-mile abandoned railway corridor traversing six intervening towns. In 2013, the Boston MPO voted to allocate $23 million to construct 7.5 miles of trail, including $6.3 million for a bridge over Route 2 in Concord, dedicated for trail use.

Originally scheduled for construction in 2017, the bridge was started in May 2020 and completed last summer as part of a 1.04 mile trail segment. The project also included a replacement bridge over Nashoba Brook and a wildlife culvert under Route 2, at a final construction cost of $9,957,790. The bridge is an imposing 304-foot-long structure that rises and descends gently to conform with federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements and corresponding state regulations.

The proposed Belmont bridge over the tracks west of the Clark Street Bridge would be shorter and would almost certainly be less costly. At a public forum on May 17, 2023, the Pare team suggested bringing a prefabricated, one-piece truss bridge to the site and installing it on newly constructed abutments. Subsoil studies confirmed that the earth would support the abutments. In contrast, the Route 2 bridge is a conventional concrete and steel structure that was built in place over two years.

TIP-funded pedestrian-bicycle bridge: Carlton Street footbridge in Brookline

The TIP-funded reconstruction of a historic pedestrian bridge in Brookline illustrates the potential flexibility of the MBTA regarding bridge clearances and the potential uses of TIP funds for aesthetic ends.

Constructed in 1894 as an element of Frederick Law Olmsted's Emerald Necklace, the Carlton Street footbridge crosses over the Green Line D branch, connecting a residential neighborhood to Riverway Park along the Muddy River. In 2019, after two decades of advocacy, the project was awarded a $3,955,053 TIP grant for reconstruction.

The rusty old bridge was disassembled and shipped in pieces to a company in Rhode Island where it was sandblasted, painted, and structurally reinforced, then transported back to Brookline and reassembled. The project, completed in July 2023, also includes new ADA-compliant ramps and extensive landscaping.

According to Brookline construction project coordinator William Smith, the 1894 bridge cleared the tracks by 14 feet, 3 inches. The refurbished bridge clears the tracks by 15 feet, 6 inches, which required an MBTA waiver. Green Line trains are powered by overhead electric cables which pass (just) beneath

BROOKLINE NEWS

Carlton Street footbridge, Brookline.

Why not route the path across the Clark Street Bridge?

You, reader, might reasonably ask: why not use the existing Clark Street Bridge to cross the Fitchburg tracks? There are several problems with that route. The most important is the lack of a satisfactory route back to the south side of the Fitchburg Line tracks (the only place where there is space for an off-road path). Clark Lane is a type of private way where the property lines extend to the middle of the street, formerly the location of Clark's Brook, so the residents own the street. During the 2016–2017 feasibility study, residents made it clear they would not give up their property for a path.

Absent a direct connection from the southern terminus of the Clark Street Bridge to the back of the Belmont Village Parking lot via Clark Lane, path users would have to be routed along Clark Street, Thomas Street, Waverley Street, and Midland Street to reach the back of the Town Yard. Three of those streets are relatively busy and narrow; there is no space for on-street parking. The path would be highly constrained, and bicycle users would mix with cars.

A second problem is that the existing bridge is only six feet wide, which does not meet the minimum eight feet required by MassDOT for path fundability. Widening the bridge would result in loss of its grandfathered status as an 18-foot clearance bridge that preceded the MBTA's change to a 22.5-foot clearance standard. It is possible that a waiver could be obtained, but not certain. If not, raising the bridge 4.5 feet above its current height would require substantial grading on the south side, possibly including a switchback ramp, to meet ADA requirements. The cost of those changes has been estimated to approach the cost of a new bridge.

To be clear, the design recommended by the Pare-Toole team leaves the Clark Street Bridge intact; it will still be an access point to and from the path, just not an element of the path.

The future of Waverley Station

In 2012, the MBTA made modest repairs to the boarding platforms at Waverley Station, consisting mostly of asphalt patching and painting. Unfortunately, those small improvements triggered the expiration of a waiver, granted by the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB), which exempted the station from having to be in compliance with the accessibility requirements of the federal ADA and corresponding state law. (All older, non-ADA compliant MBTA stations operate under a similar waiver. They can't be improved without addressing ADA compliance.)

In 2016, the MAAB, in a public meeting, pushed senior leadership of the MBTA Fiscal and Management Control Board to make Waverley Station accessible, using it as a prod to get the agency to devote more resources to ADA improvements. The MBTA argued (correctly) that accessibility upgrades at other stations would benefit more customers, and promised to accelerate those upgrades. With that commitment from the MBTA, in June 2016, the MAAB granted Waverley Station a 10-year extension of its waiver to be in compliance with ADA standards. That waiver is now only two and half years from expiration, yet there is no plan to improve the station. Indeed, MBTA officials have communicated to the Pare team that the station is a low priority.

The Belmont Community Path potentially offers an opportunity to make ADA-compliant connections to the station using TIP dollars. A low-cost option would be spurs from the path on both sides of the station to the boarding platform (the main route will cross Trapelo Road and Lexington Street at grade). A high-cost option would be a full ADA upgrade, as will be implemented in Natick Center, with high boarding platforms and elevators. Both options are among those tabled by Belmont's design team, as well as the option of leaving the station untouched by the path. Unfortunately, the opportunity to use TIP money to make ADA improvements at Waverley Station has no chance of moving ahead without a supportive and engaged MBTA.

Absent a plan for improvements, there is a real threat that the MAAB will compel the MBTA to close the station in June 2026.

the bridge. That is different from the diesel-powered MBTA commuter rail system, including the Fitchburg Line, which also occasionally carries freight. Nonetheless, the MBTA's flexibility allowed the old bridge to be restored very close to its original dimensions.

Brookline is currently designing a second pedestrian/bicycle bridge over the Green Line at Davis Street, where an old bridge that used to cross over the Boston & Albany Railroad tracks (now part of the Green Line D branch) was removed decades ago and not replaced. The new design, approved by the MBTA, clears the tracks by 18 feet.

Both the Lexington Street and Trapelo Road bridges in Belmont, as well as at least half a dozen other Fitchburg Line bridges, clear the tracks by only 18 feet, which was the old standard.

The implications for Belmont: as noted at the May 17 public forum, a new bridge may not have to clear the Fitchburg tracks by 22.5 feet, the current MBTA design standard. Lowering the bridge would reduce the visual impact, lower construction costs, and improve the user experience by reducing the climb in both directions.

TIP-funded box-over: East Milton Square

In 1959, the Southeast Expressway (Route 93) was completed, creating a noisy canyon through East Milton Square: 121 houses were demolished or moved, 12 businesses closed, a 7-acre playground eliminated, and the town's main commercial center transected. To reconnect the business district and to restore a sense of place in East Milton Square, the town obtained state and federal funding in the 1970s to construct a platform over Route 93, with a small park (later named Manning Park) sited over the highway.

Starting in 2010, Milton has engaged in a contentious redesign process for the East Milton Square box-over. Car users have advocated for more parking and relief from traffic congestion, while walking/biking and open space advocates have opposed those changes. In 2017, an initial design that replaced a small amount of designated parkland with parking spots was rejected by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration. A subsequent redesign of the box-over passed muster with the Boston MPO and was awarded $6,849,943 in TIP construction funding in 2019.

PATCH.COM

East Milton Square box over Route 93 in 2022 prior to renovation.

The project encompassed deck reconstruction (the platform over the highway), road and sidewalk improvements, and the complete reconfiguration of Manning Park, including 67 new trees, 800 shrubs, and 368 perennials. None of the latter elements serve a transportation purpose, yet were deemed eligible for TIP funding as part of the larger project.

The sundering of East Milton Square by Route 93 could be compared to the cleaving of Waverley Square in 1952 by the Boston & Maine Railroad, which buried the Fitchburg Line tracks in a 20-foot-deep trench. That project, motivated by safety concerns, altered the configuration of Waverley Square that had existed since 1844, when the Fitchburg tracks were laid through the square at grade, supplemented by the Central Massachusetts railroad tracks in 1882.

However, while improving safety, the 1952 track-lowering project—accompanied by construction of the Trapelo Road and Lexington Street bridges—removed the heart of Waverley Square. Indeed, a 2022 study of Waverley Square by the Urban Land Institute (a group of real estate professionals including planners, developers, property managers, and land-use lawyers who volunteer to investigate the development potential of specific neighborhoods) concluded that the square had "not enough sense of place" to anchor a robust business district. That echoed the conclusions of the Pare team in 2017 when they proposed the box-over in the Belmont Community Path feasibility study.

In both East Milton Square and Waverley Square, state transportation infrastructure transects a vital commercial center. The fact that remediation of that harm in Milton was deemed eligible for TIP funding (along with road and sidewalk improvements and a park) is a potential precedent for the Belmont project.

TIP-funded partial box-over: Natick Center commuter rail train station

As in Waverley Square, the tracks of the MBTA's Framingham-Worcester Line run through Natick Center in a deep trench. In 2012, the town funded a feasibility study that explored how to bring the station into ADA compliance, including high boarding platforms (level with the floor of the train so handicapped individuals don't have to climb or descend stairs), while also improving access for all modes of travel, including a connection to the Cochituate Rail Trail.

The feasibility study contemplated a partial box-over of the station, extending a small park adjacent to the station (Moran Park) over the tracks. In the final MassDOT-approved design, funded by the Boston MPO, the box-over park was replaced by a wide, covered, four-season pedestrian bridge that provides a resting area for passengers or others crossing the tracks. The bridge/waiting area, while less ambitious than the full station box-over initially contemplated, is nonetheless an amenity—considerably more than the minimum required. The

MBTA

Bird's-eye rendering of the new pedestrian bridge over MBTA tracks, Natick Center.

Natick Center project was allocated $10,739,265 in TIP funds and is scheduled for construction in 2024.

The project provides a precedent for "nice to have" infrastructure at an MBTA commuter rail station.

Proposed pedestrian-bicycle bridge projects in Cambridge

The four projects described above have either been constructed or scheduled for construction. Two other bridge projects in Cambridge, both straddling the Fitchburg Line, are short of the 25% design stage at which TIP funding is typically sought. The two bridges would cross the tracks on either side of the Alewife Parkway bridge, one about 800 feet to the west, connecting the "quadrangle" to the "triangle" (see "Building Booms on Belmont's Border," January/February 2020 *Newsletter)*, the other about 1,350 feet to the east, connecting the Jefferson Park affordable housing development to Danehy Park and Fresh Pond Mall (see Cambridge Community Development for details). A feasibility study of the latter project was just completed in September, while the former project, which has been under discussion for decades, appears semi-dormant at present, though Cambridge has the necessary land parcels and easements, and has been collecting fees from developers for years to pay for it.

Waverley and the community path

The fact that Natick Center is the second busiest non-accessible station on the MBTA's Framingham-Worcester Line certainly improved its TIP score compared to a less utilized station like Waverley. Waverley Station is the fourth least busy of the 19 stations on the Fitchburg Line (average weekday boardings inbound: 82 on, 32 off; outbound: 33 on, 119 off, in 2018, the most recent data available), not far behind Belmont Center. The light use is partially attributable to the available service. Eleven of the 17 weekday inbound trains and 12 of the 17 outbound trains are flag service only (i.e., passengers have to "flag down" the train, or, if already on board, tell the conductor that they wish to get off at Waverley in advance).

More important may be the comparatively small business district. The path may help with the latter by shortening the trip from Waverley Square to the large Duffy Brothers development along Waverley Oaks Road in Waltham, the site of 1,200,000 square feet of office, retail, restaurant, and recreational space. The Belmont path (via the Waltham path) will provide a direct route from Waverley Station to the office park.

To put these two proposed bridges in context, the existing Sherman Street bridge crosses the Fitchburg tracks about 1,100 feet east of the proposed Danehy Park crossing, and the existing (recently renovated) Yerxa Road pedestrian/bicycle underpass is about 950 feet east of Sherman Street. Thus, if both new bridges were built, there would be a bridge or tunnel across the Fitchburg Line roughly every 1,000 feet—five over a 4,100-foot span.

In fact, until March 2021, yet a third pedestrian/bicycle bridge over the Fitchburg tracks was on the table, extending from the end of Smith Street (about 1,700 feet west of the proposed quadrangle-triangle bridge) north to the Fitchburg Cutoff path (covered in *Cambridge Day*). That bridge would have been paid for by a developer in exchange for higher zoning density, but when the city and developer couldn't agree on all aspects of the rezoning plan, the proposal was withdrawn.

While population density in the Cambridge neighborhoods that would be served by the two new bridges is certainly greater than anywhere in Belmont, still, five bridge or tunnel rail crossings in 4,100 feet is a lot. Both new Cambridge bridges would be tied to large housing projects with a significant affordable component, as would be the case in Belmont. In any event, the Belmont bridge proposed by the Pare-Toole team hardly looks ambitious in the context of the multi-bridge Cambridge plans about two miles away.

In conclusion, there is ample precedent for both of the innovative design elements proposed by the Pare-Toole team with respect to constructibility, MBTA cooperation, and TIP funding. Indeed, the lesson from our neighboring communities regarding path projects seems to be: think big!

Vincent Stanton, Jr. is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

MBTA

Rendering of the Natick commuter rail station.

What's in a Name? Walking and Biking

New Bikeway Condo Building's Title Says It All

By Vincent Stanton, Jr.

Data from various retrospective observational studies show that bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure enhance residential property values (reviewed in the article "Impact of Bike Facilities on Residential Property Prices" and in Chapter 6 of the Belmont Community Path Advisory Committee report).

However, some of the most persuasive evidence comes from the simple observation that real estate agents—who are paid to market properties effectively and knowledgeable about what works—consistently mention paths when they are nearby. The easiest way to measure that practice is to scan the 100 to 150 word property descriptions near the top of listings.

An article in the July/August 2014 issue of the BCF *Newsletter* ("Do Homebuyers Value Recreational Paths?") documented the practice locally: 16 of 41 residential listings in Arlington (39%) mentioned the Minuteman Bikeway, including 100% of properties within 100 feet of the bikeway (3/3) and 83% of properties between 100 and 1,000 feet from the Bikeway (7/8). One doesn't have to look far for further evidence; a broker in Needham currently offers, on a dedicated webpage, "Greater Boston Homes Near Walking Trails."

STEVE BREMIS REALTY GROUP

Image from the home page of Residences at Rail Trail Path (residencesatrailtrailpath.com).

Now, a new eight-unit condominium building at 1 Cedar Street in Cambridge settles the question: the building is called Residences at Rail Trail Path (double dipping on the path-yness of the location; a trail is a path!).

All of the marketing materials—photographs, prose, logo, even the link (residencesatrailtrailpath.com)—focus on the pedestrian and bicycle amenities. For example, at the top of the website is an aerial photograph of the new building with two bicyclists riding past on Cambridge's Alewife Linear Park, a community path that leads to the Minuteman Bikeway's eastern terminus at Alewife Station. Directly below the photo is this text (boldface from the source):

"About the Neighborhood

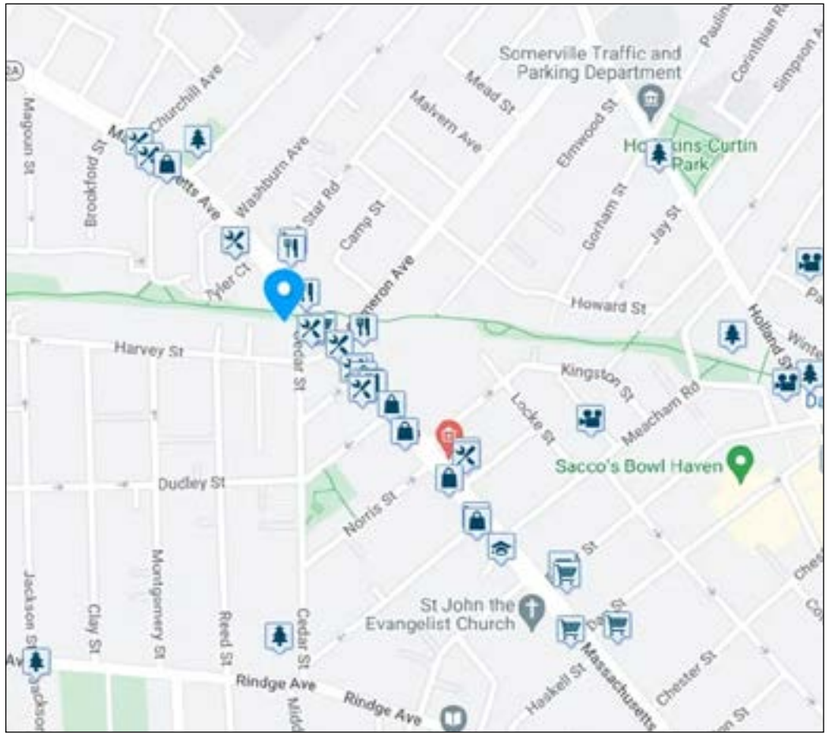
1 Cedar Street has **a Walk Score of 94 out of 100 and a Bike Score of 95 out of 100**. This location is a Walker's Paradise, so daily errands do not require a car.

1 Cedar Street is a 10-minute walk from the Red Line at the Davis stop and is **located directly adjacent to the Minuteman Bikeway**.

This location is in the North Cambridge neighborhood in Cambridge. Nearby parks include Clarendon Avenue Park, Sheridan Square, and Hodgkins-Curtin Park."

Below that is a blurb headed "About the Property," which concludes with this summary (in case you missed it above):

"Located directly adjacent to the Minuteman Bikeway, The Residences at Rail Trail Path provide uncompromised accessibility to the Red Line subway and one of the most prolific bike paths in the country." In fact, as noted above, the building is on another path, about 10 blocks from the Minuteman Bikeway, but apparently the strong Minuteman brand was irresistible.



STEVE BREMIS REALTY GROUP

Map of the Residences at Rail Tral Path and the surrounding neighborhood from the the project's website.

Steve Bremis Realty Group of Somerville is marketing the condominiums. Steve Bremis, principal, and a local real estate veteran, chose the name and designed the marketing materials. He observed that in thinking about what made the property unique, it was proximity to transit—both the bikeway and Alewife Station—that came out on top. He told the *Newsletter* that no one on the development team pushed back on the name, nor have prospective buyers found anything remarkable about it.

Asking prices for the eight units, expected to be complete by January, range from $899,900 to $1,299,900.

Vincent Stanton, Jr. is a board member of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Japanese Culture Center Comes to Belmont Hill

By Fred Bouchard

Drive up Concord Avenue from Belmont Center this winter, glance left after the big curve, and you'll see an eye-catching sight behind the driveway opposite Sumner Lane; cherry trees and rhododendrons, a garden, and—rising behind the house—a half-built, huge-timbered barn. What, a barnraising on Belmont Hill?

PETER GRILLI

The minka being constructed.

This property belonged to the late Anne Allen and now bears a conservation restriction encompassing 3.3 acres of forest, fields, and meadows. Allen donated this property's conservation restriction and the Maple Allee conservation restriction across the street to Belmont in 2004. These two conservation restrictions contribute to the town's open spaces in order to sustain wildlife and natural habitats. See Belmontlandtrust.org for more information.

The Allen estate sold the property—with the conservation restriction on part of the site—to Miho Belmont International in 2015, a nonprofit organization promoting traditional Japanese arts and aesthetics and the spiritual and environmental values of Shumei philosophy. Shumei fosters health, happiness, and harmony among people of all denominations by applying the wisdom and insights of its spiritual leader, Mokichi Okada (1882–1955), or "Meishusama." Meishusama taught that a world free of sickness, poverty, and discord is within everyone's reach through the spiritual healing of jyorei, the practice of natural agriculture, flower arranging, and the appreciation of art and beauty.

Peter Grilli was named as director of the Belmont property. Raised in Japan, Grilli is a Harvard alumnus and president emeritus (2000–2014) of the Japan Society of Boston. Grilli's ambitious and caring vision for the property focuses on founding a cultural center to be housed in a traditional Japanese farmhouse or minka. He'd already worked out relocation plans with Enishi Construction Company, and by 2018 had employed gardener Kenji Ban to plant 10 twice-blooming Japanese cherry trees and cultivate a quarter-acre vegetable garden.

COURTESY OF FRED BOUCHARD

Artist's rendering of the completed minka.

Today Kenji Ban and his family live in the neo-Georgian home; his son and daughter attend Belmont public schools. His garden thrives with yellow marigolds, tall pink-tipped pea vines, potatoes, greens, daikon, and cucumbers. He and his wife have hosted the visiting team of eight Japanese carpenters engaged to reconstruct the minka. They disassembled the 250-year-old building in Japan—many main beams are 30-foot, slightly curved trunks of zelkova trees—and orchestrated its massive shipping. They are reassembling it on a part of the property that is not subject to the conservation restriction.

In November, the carpenters were painstakingly aligning dozens of 8-by-60 inch rectangular granite foundation supports along the edge of the poured cement substructure. By Thanksgiving, the mighty brown beams had risen impressively. A formal, celebratory roof-raising ceremony was held in December. In the spring, work will resume in the meticulous task of crafting the interior in pine and cedar, free of any nails or metal joinery. An arcaded breezeway will link the minka to the house. The greenhouse once tended by the Belmont Garden Club is expected to be refurbished.

The opening is expected in late 2024 as a 50- to 60- seat cultural center offering activities such as cooking demonstrations, origami classes, tea ceremonies, and intimate concerts played on traditional instruments like the koto, shamisen, and shakuhachi.

The calm, thoughtful Grilli says, "I feel very lucky that my lifelong dream is becoming reality." Addressing the audience at the joto-sai, he said: "Much of what I learned in Japan—arts, architecture, material culture, social values and family relationships, design and proportion, and the like—came from sitting in traditional buildings like this. They are like silent universities, eloquent in conveying the deep truths about traditional Japanese life and culture."

Many of us attending the ceremony under that robust and majestic yet intimate and sacred shell shared Grilli's feelings of gratitude, inclusion, generosity, and gave thanks for the continued forging of Japanese-American unity.

Fred Bouchard is a member of the BCF Newsletter Committee and is a Belmont resident.

Lone Tree Hill Saw Improvements in 2023

By Radha Iyengar

Belmont's Lone Tree Hill Conservation area benefited from another year of conservation, restoration, and stewardship, thanks mainly to the efforts of the Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill (LMC). Many Belmontonians and visitors enjoy this 119-acre conservation property for walking, biking, viewing wildlife, and being out in nature.

The LMC was created through a memorandum of agreement between the town and McLean Hospital in 1999. The agreement outlined the development restrictions for the McLean Hospital campus. It also reserved approximately 119 acres of the campus as publicly accessible open space, including a new municipal cemetery, and placed conservation restrictions that specify the permitted uses of the property.

The LMC was created to establish and implement a land use and management plan for the newly created conservation area. Its mission is to provide sound conservation and management stewardship policies for Lone Tree Hill that protect the property's natural and historic resources and allow passive recreation and educational use.

The LMC consists of nine members: four from the town, including representatives from the Cemetery Commissioner, Conservation Commission, Historic District Commission, and a Select Board appointee; four members appointed by McLean Hospital, and one member from The Trustees of Reservations, the holder of the conservation restrictions on the property.

The committee meets on the first Wednesday of each month.

Below are the 2023 highlights of the committee's activities.

PARTERRE ECOLOGICAL SERVICES

Map of Lone Tree Hill showing Parterre Ecological Services' restoration area (cross-hatched area in upper right).

Ecological restoration

Parterre Ecological Services was engaged again in 2023 to continue restoring woodland and meadow areas by controlling invasive plant species. In the spring, Parterre's technicians treated garlic mustard with targeted herbicide applications.

In the summer, invasive woody species were treated in and around the meadow while knotweed colonies were kept from spreading. In the fall, woody invasive species including tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), white mulberry (*Morus alba*), and common buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) were remediated at multiple locations surrounding the Great Meadow and in the Eastern Woods. The LMC is grateful to the Judy Record Conservation Fund for sharing the cost of all the work conducted by Parterre and to Joseph Hibbard for his guidance for the ecological restoration.

The LMC retains other vendors to mow the Great Meadow and the trails. In the fall, the arborist firm Tree Specialists conducted maintenance work for the trees along the Pine Allee including crown reduction pruning of 55 white pines and removal of miscellaneous invasive trees and brush encroaching on the southeast border of the Allee. This work was made possible by a generous Judy Record Conservation Fund grant.

PARTERRE ECOLOGICAL SERVICES

Work by Parterre Ecological Services included identifying invasive plants such as the *Ailanthus* tree wrapped in black plastic.

Volunteer efforts

On April 22, the Belmont Citizens Forum (BCF) and the Judy Record Conservation Fund held their ninth annual Lone Tree Hill Volunteer Day. The volunteers included Girl Scouts Troop 82027, Cityside Subaru employees, M&T Bank employees, the Sai Group employees, and citizens from Belmont and the surrounding communities.

Many hands made light work. Efficient volunteers planted 40 white pine saplings along the Pine Allee. These new trees completed the replacement of the Allee's missing pines and some of the saplings from the 2017 to 2019 and 2022 volunteer day plantings that did not prosper. At the adjacent meadow, the volunteers planted native wildflowers including slender-leaf mountain mint, short-toothed mountain mint, wild bergamot, white wood aster, blue wood aster, New England aster, and butterfly weed (70 plant plugs of each species). By season's end, these plants were starting to bloom.

At the other end of the property, volunteers collected 20 bags of trash, including rusted metal sheets and an old bed frame. Garlic mustard was pulled up and bagged in the same effort. The volunteers also closed an unauthorized bike trail and dismantled an abandoned improvised shelter.

On May 19, as part of the Belmont Day School Service Day, students pulled 16 bags of garlic mustard, supervised by Leonard Katz and Nancy Kougeas from the Belmont Conservation Volunteers group.

On November 5, 13 volunteers from BCF, LMC, and other Belmont citizens spread white pine wood chips along the Pine Allee. The wood chips were material from the white pine pruning work that was processed and left on site.

Most weekends in the spring and summer, Belmont Conservation Volunteers, a Sustainable Belmont working group, removed garlic mustard and other invasive plants at Lone Tree Hill, the McLean Barn, and at an abutting area at Rock Meadow. They also pulled knotweed after rainstorms, when the wet soil allowed volunteers to

PARTERRE ECOLOGICAL SERVICES

Cut stem of an invasive plant painted with herbicide on Lone Tree Hill.

pull the entire plant up, roots and stalks, reducing the odds that the plant will resprout.

McLean Barn

As reported in the June/July 2023 BCF *Newsletter*, the McLean Barn, also known as the Brick Barn at Rock Meadow, was conveyed to the town in 2005 by McLean Hospital. The barn has been largely unused since that time. In response to several unsuccessful attempts to break into the barn by prying open the doors, the LMC engaged a security services vendor to close and lock the barn doors more effectively.

Recently, the McLean Barn has been approved for the short-term storage of the White Memorial Field House lockers when the field house is demolished. The lockers will be reinstalled in the new ice rink.

On February 10 and March 3, the LMC gave tours of the McLean Barn to interested citizens in preparation for public discussions about the disposition of the barn and the best community uses of the space as allowed under the conservation restriction governing Lone Tree Hill land. A request for proposals for a facilitator to structure a public process for generating ideas for the reuse of the barn has not yet been issued. The LMC expects to issue this in 2024.

Signage

The Department of Public Works has installed new "no parking—fire lane" signs at the bottom of the Coal Road turnout on Pleasant Street. This signage was approved by the fire and police departments and Select Board because unauthorized vehicles were parking in that area.

The Greater Boston New England Mountain Biking Association has donated signs stating new rules, including the prohibiting of rogue trails. These signs will be installed by the end of 2024.

Responsible use of Lone Tree Hill

The committee would like to remind the public that dogs must be on leashes measuring six feet or less. The presence of free-running dogs stresses a broad spectrum of wildlife, particularly ground-nesting birds, as well as walkers, cyclists, and dogs being walked on leash. Dog owners shall remove all feces created by their dogs on the property.

The LMC would also like to solicit your help in preserving this open space. If you see signs of unauthorized trails or happen upon a trail being constructed, please contact us by sending an email to lonetreehillbelmont@gmail.com.

Radha Iyengar is the Select Board appointee and co-chair of the Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill, treasurer and board member of the Belmont Citizens Forum, and Precinct 8 Town Meeting member.

Profiles in Belmont: Julia Blatt

by Elissa Ely

LOUISE DOMINITZ

Julia Blatt.

Shortly after the pandemic began, when the only response within anyone's control was isolation, Julia Blatt and her husband bought kayaks. They had canoed as a family for more than 30 years—Montana, Idaho, Maine, Colorado, Florida, Vermont, New Hampshire—and for years her professional work had taken her kayaking through the Concord, Sudbury, and Assabet rivers. Sometimes she brought politicians with her (a form of visual education) and sometimes it was a form of solo field research.

But this was different. The sky doesn't know a pandemic is raging; birds and turtles have no idea and less interest. The river is simply itself. "Most people," Julia says, "experience rivers as something they cross on the road." But during COVID, the rivers were the road. Over the next months, Julia and her husband kayaked along about 15 of them.

Julia Blatt has been executive director of the Massachusetts River Alliance since 2009, but rivers have been her road in one way or another starting in 1987. She was an aide to former Congressman Chet Atkins after college (Brown University: Modern European History) when staff divided up local issues in need of attention. In those days—imagine!—no one wanted to take the environment. She took it, and never let go.

Julia grew up in Sudbury, along a river but not on it. "I had no idea such a beautiful piece of nature was in town," she says. "All I knew was that we crossed it on the way to Wayland and Lincoln." Her family shared "an abundance of unconditional love," though not for outdoorsmanship. One of their greater pleasures was reading together for hours in contented silence.

Still, the outdoors called. In the woods beyond the small backyard her father fondly mowed, she loved toads and salamanders and capturing lightning bugs (also, to be clear, letting them go). "What drew me outside was animals," she explains. "I'd like to say something sophisticated, but really, I just love animals."

She thought about becoming a Jacques Cousteau, or maybe a professional violinist, or maybe a psychologist, or maybe a rabbi. She felt certain she didn't have a scientist's mind. It was karma when no one in the congressman's office cared to take the environmental assignment.

Julia began with the most elemental (yet most intelligent) strategy: she called local organizations to ask what they wanted. She learned that the Sudbury Land Trust wanted the Sudbury River to be designated—and therefore, protected—as a Wild and Scenic River. She also learned that this was far more complicated on water than on land; for starters, who owns a river, and where does its flow begin and end?

Eleven years of town meetings, surveys, collaboration with the Park Service, votes, and legislation followed. It led to a graduate degree in urban and environmental policy and launched a river career. Now the Sudbury, Taunton, Nashua, and Westfield rivers have Wild and Scenic protection status. In

life as in politics, asking what someone wants is the place to start.

In 2009, Julia became executive director of the Massachusetts River Alliance—for the first time. "I thought I'd do it for a year," she says. She was wrong, though there was a brief gap when she left to work for a foundation. "I missed being in the thick of policymaking," she remembers. "It takes all of you: work with people, the mission, the vision, the strategies, the writing. I like the ups and downs of working as a team." Rivers drew her back to them.

The Alliance (funded almost entirely by donations) began as a small group of about 10 organizations. It has grown to 85 (including the Belmont Citizens Forum,) and their website goals can seem a little daunting: improving water quality and streamflow, habitat protection, climate resilience, environmental justice, stormwater management, mosquito control, vulnerability preparedness, sewage discharge notification, and dam issues. The needs appear endless.

And, 85 organizations in a room means 85 opinions. Under Julia's guidance, though, somehow they come to consensus on annual priorities. "We work on a surprising number of issues at the same time," she says. "If you want to protect rivers, you have to come together on an issue, even if it's not YOUR issue. We end up punching above our weight."

The accomplishments are proof: among others, they have won multimillion dollar increases in protective funding, defeated damaging bills, increased aquatic protection, improved drought response, infrastructure funding, and stormwater utilities, and forced necessary help from the EPA.

In March 2020, a virus threw the 85 groups (and the world) into chaos. In April 2020, an addition to her usual work, Julia organized "Mass Rivers Connects," a monthly peer Zoom with educators, scientists, fundraisers, board members, and executive directors. The sessions, full of camaraderie and advice, became so popular that they have continued even as the pandemic has receded.

At the start and finish of it all, there is the state of the world. Back in 1987, when Julia was a congressional aide, no one competed to cover the environment; it was a low-shelf issue. But even the birds and turtles sense that this has changed. "Most people will actually experience the impacts of climate change through their interactions with water," she wrote in a recent op-ed for the Daily Hampshire Gazette. In Massachusetts, fire is more frequent, droughts more severe. A summer ago, parts of some rivers became "disconnected puddles." And this, for her, is "a reason the work feels urgent and central. All environmental work is about climate change. You can just give up, or you can be the person who says 'What can I do?' I want to be that person."

She does this for the rivers. Then, there is what the rivers do for her. Here is how Julia views them from her kayak: "I can't imagine a happier place to be than on the water—the landscape, the sky, the trees, the animals, the way water rocks you. You don't have to work hard. The river will carry you."

Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.

KEITH SHANNON/USFWS

Blanding's turtle at the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge.

Coyotes Live Among Us All Year Long

By Jeffrey North

As the cold winter months set in across New England, coyotes adapt their behaviors to the harsh conditions. They establish their breeding territories, and expand their range in search of food. Belmont has ample green space and conservation land where coyotes roam and hunt. For the most part, Belmont's coyotes raise their young, contribute to the health of the ecosystem, and mind their own business.

COURTESY OF SUZANNE TRASAVAGE

Coyote photographed on Clifton Street.

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are an important species in North American ecosystems, and their role is often overlooked. These adaptable predators play a vital role in maintaining ecosystem balance and diversity by controlling populations of small mammals and birds and by influencing the behavior of larger herbivores like deer.

Coyotes are opportunistic hunters and scavengers, and they can survive in many habitats, including urban areas. Their diet includes small mammals like rodents, rabbits, squirrels, birds, insects, fruits, and carrion. By controlling the populations of these smaller animals, coyotes help to prevent overgrazing and habitat destruction, which can have cascading effects on other species in the ecosystem.

Coyotes are also known to influence the behavior of larger herbivores like deer. Studies have shown that the presence of coyotes can cause deer to change their feeding patterns and avoid areas where they are more vulnerable to predation. Coyotes can reduce damage to the vegetation in those areas, allowing for more diverse plant communities and healthier ecosystems.

While humans often see them as pests or nuisances, they play a vital role in maintaining the health and diversity of North American ecosystems.

Where coyotes are in Belmont

In Belmont, we are currently seeing much of the coyote activity in the Winn Brook area and Belmont Hill. All coyotes spotted appear to be well-fed and healthy at this time, according to Suzanne Lasavage, Belmont's animal control officer.

Residents should be aware that these sightings do not necessarily indicate that the coyotes are becoming aggressive. The animals are likely adapting to changing conditions and exploring new food sources.

However, residents need to take precautions to minimize potential conflicts. Securing garbage cans, not leaving pet food outside, and supervising pets, especially during the early morning and evening hours, are practical measures to reduce the likelihood of negative interactions.

COURTESY OF SUZANNE TRASAVAGE

Coyote photographed on Clifton Street.

For more information about coyotes, visit these websites.

The Human Society of the United States has a general page about coyotes, and a page about solving coyote problems.

- www.humanesociety.org/resources/what-do-about-coyotes
- humanepro.org/trainings/solving-problems-coyotes

Mass Audubon has a page about living with coyotes.

- www.massaudubon.org/nature-wildlife/mammals-in-massachusetts/coyotes

Project Coyote advocates for coexistence with coyotes.

- projectcoyote.org

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife also has information about living with coyotes.

- www.mass.gov/doc/living-with-coyotes-fact-sheet/download

Jeffrey North is the managing editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.

Letter to the Editor

Thank you for all your efforts on behalf of us, Belmont residents!

1. The Opinion by Max Colice on Chapter 61B ["Opinion: Why Pay Property Taxes When You Can Get a Tax Break?", BCF *Newsletter*, November 2023] was an eye opener: our property taxes subsidize the Belmont Country Club! In the meantime we are discussing an upcoming override to increase the taxes we now pay.

This excellent idea to contact state Senator Brownsberger and Representative Rogers needs to be pursued promptly! I suggest we collect signatures from Belmont residents in a bulk kind of letter and send it to the two representatives of Belmont. I am sure Belmont Country Club members can afford a bit of higher taxes than many Belmont residents.

2. Taylor Yates and Paul Joy's opinion was also on the money. I understand from Elizabeth Dionne's interview the difficulties the Select Board faces as their decisions come with a lesser authority. I think we need to change that, because many good ideas on how to save our town and its residents from the constant threat of tax increases either rust in drawers or languish in interminable discussions and or deliberations.

Finally, I want to stress that our love for our town, where we raised our children these past 40+ years deserves to better regulate its expenses and its budget. Putting to vote items that cost an exorbitant amount of money—without having prior knowledge whether the money can be secured—is not a good idea because it leads to discussions of overrides and or holes in the town's budget. It also creates negative feelings from our older residents who face difficult choices in their golden years.

Thank you,
Andreas Geovanos

Belmont's Beech Trees are Dying

By Phil Perron

The majestic beech tree is under attack in Massachusetts. The culprit is a microscopic nematode (*Litylenchus crenatae* ssp. *mccannii*). Beech leaf disease (BLD) has taken the state by storm, causing, in the best cases, leaf distortion and, in the worst cases, total tree mortality. All beech tree varieties are at risk, including the stately copper beech. Unfortunately, many questions about this disease have yet to be answered as the industry works to find solutions to manage this pest before it is too late.

BLD was first discovered in Ohio in 2012. Eight years later, it had made its way to Connecticut, and as of this writing, it has been reported in most counties across Massachusetts. While nematode damage to plant material is not unheard of, the destructive nature and tree loss associated with this pest are concerning.

BLD damage is relatively easy to see and diagnose when the trees have leaves on them. Looking up through the canopy on a sunny day, you will see dark green patches in the leaves between the leaf veins. This is pretty pronounced on green-leaved beech trees like American beech with dark green bands contrasting with a lighter leaf color.

Red leaved beech trees, like copper beeches, hide the damage a little better. However, you will see the same banding though it will be redder in color, blending in with the darker leaves.

During a heavy infestation, the leaves take on a leathery appearance, and the trees will look sparse and thin. Given enough damage, some trees will drop damaged leaves and push a new set of leaves. The new leaves will not be infected with BLD at emergence but are often light in color and weak. Reserved energy is required to push this second set of leaves, putting further stress on the tree.

Management decisions should begin with an understanding of the lifecycle of the pest. The microscopic nematode spends the fall, winter, and early spring months in the buds of beech trees, feeding and destroying leaf tissue while laying eggs. As the leaves emerge in the spring, we see damage on the newly emerged leaves caused by the nematodes. In some cases, damage to the leaves in the buds will be so severe that the leaves will not emerge. These dead buds will be loaded with eggs that are still viable.

BARRETT TREE SERVICE EAST, INC.

Damaged beech leaves showing dark green patches.

BARRETT TREE SERVICE EAST, INC.

Leathery leaves caused by beech leaf disease.

While there is some debate on movement, it is thought that the eggs and hatched nematodes are moved around by birds, wind, and water. Once hatching has occurred, the nematodes will enter next year's buds in August, and the cycle continues.

Studies are ongoing on the effects that the damage can have on trees over time, because of the resulting mortality and tree loss. Beech trees are a major player in the forests of the Northeast. We see BLD deep in our forests, causing decline and outright death. We also see other insects and diseases moving in on stressed trees with BLD infestations. There has been a correlation with increased anthracnose infections on trees and BLD.

So, what can be done? Is it all doom and gloom? Science is playing catch up. I would love to tell you that we have a proven solution. The reality is this: the nematodes spend a lot of time protected in the buds of the trees. They are doing damage at this time and contacting them is difficult once they have entered the buds. The products we can use are limited in their efficacy and are in very limited supply. Treating large beech trees with foliar products can be very challenging. There is also some uncertainty on the timing of applications, and we are concerned with resistance development in the products we can use.

Now, the good news. There is promising research on the use of phosphite products applied directly to the tree or injected into the soil.

Everyone is starting to take notice of this issue. The urgency of the situation has caught the attention of many in the industry. There is a lot of ongoing research regarding this pest, and I suspect that recommendations will be ever-changing. The most encouraging news is that we do have treatment options, and while limited, they can be employed.

We have been in situations like this before. Think about the American elm (Dutch elm disease) and the American chestnut trees (chestnut tree blight). Although not total success stories, eventually, science catches up, treatments are developed, or other strategies are employed. We lost many elm trees before a treatment method was adopted with success. The American chestnut has seen some positive results, with resistant varieties being planted in recent years.

The best advice I can offer at this time is if you have a beech tree on your property, please consult with a certified arborist. The Massachusetts Arborists Association (massarbor.org) lists certified arborists. These credentialed professionals will be able to give you an honest assessment of your tree with the most current advice and recommendations available.

Phil Perron is the plant health care director at Barrett Tree East in Medford, Massachusetts. He is a Mass Certified Arborist and an ISA Certified Arborist. He has been in the green industry for the past 23 years.

BARRETT TREE SERVICE EAST, INC.

Beech leaves damaged by anthracnose.

The Best Recycling Choices Aren't Always Obvious

By Barry Kaye, MD

You are a good person. You recycle everything that you can and feel good about that. But have you wondered what happens after that big blue bin is picked up? I just assumed it was all recycled until my son told me some inconvenient truths about recycling.

If you read no further—just remember that because something is recyclable, it does not mean that it will be recycled. Unless it is economically feasible and there is a market, it's just trash. It turns out that the only things that are genuinely recycled at the present time are paper, #1 and #2 plastics, and metal cans. The town pays a fee for all items in recycling bins that are not clean or not recyclable. Please don't place that sticky peanut butter jar in the blue bin.

Some people say that the problem is so huge that there is no point in working at the individual level. I disagree.

Paper

Paper and cardboard fill most of our bins. Why is that? In a word: Amazon. Vast amounts of paper are needed to make all those cardboard boxes that come to our doors. Paper cartons can be recycled, but only if they have been washed out.

Making paper uses energy and pollutes water, so try to use less. Buy more locally and less online.

Glass

I always imagined that all those beer, soda and wine bottles would be easily melted down and made into new bottles. Unfortunately, that is not the case. There is currently little market for glass; almost all of it is crushed and sent to landfills. There is only one recycling plant in the state that can handle only a tiny fraction of our glass.

I used to think that beer is better in bottles. I spoke to Suzanne Schalow, the owner of Belmont's Craft Beer Cellar. She told me that's no longer the case. Bottled beer can develop "skunking" from even low light exposure—a nasty taste.

Beer in cans stays fresher longer. Aluminum cans are light in weight and easily recyclable, and that lighter weight translates into less energy use overall.

Wine comes in heavy glass bottles. Making the bottles and shipping them thousands of miles uses a lot of energy. Boxed wine uses much less energy, and everything except the thin plastic liner is recyclable, but who wants to drink wine from a box? Even if it tasted OK, what would my guests think? Who would bring a box to a dinner party?

I spoke to John Mooradian, wine director at the Spirited Gourmet. He told me that many very good wines are now available in boxes. The main obstacle to switching from glass to boxes is consumer acceptance—our belief that good wine only comes in bottles and snob appeal. Wines in "bag in a box" containers have the added advantage of lasting much longer after opening, as they are less exposed to the aging effects of oxygen.

Electronics

Do you have drawers and shelves full of adapters and cords? They seem to multiply like rabbits. Can't remember what they went to? Do you have old computers and game consoles? If you go to the Department of Public Works website, you will see that these can just be put in the trash. That's what I have always done.

I recently discovered that major stores like Staples and Best Buy will accept and recycle these for free—even those pesky old cords. These items contain valuable rare earth metals, copper, steel, and aluminum. I dropped off three big boxes at Best Buy last week. (They charge for recycling TV screens).

Textiles

About 10% of our carbon footprint comes from our clothes, and we are wearing a lot more than we used to—about 60% more than a generation ago. Much of the increase can be attributed to "fast fashion"—inexpensive, trendy clothing produced in sweatshops in countries without worker protections. The quality is often poor, so they don't last long, goes go out of style quickly, and are tossed.

While some fabrics are recyclable, few are recycled. They wind up in incinerators or landfills. There are places in developing countries where these items cover and pollute vast areas. Historically, people bought less clothing of better quality that was worn for many years. We can all REDUCE—buy less. Somehow, we managed to get by with a lot less not long ago.

Fleece, which we have all come to love, gives off nanofibers that go into the environment—never to return. Before there was fleece, we wore wool, a natural fabric. Many people don't like wool because it can be itchy, but modern marino or "Smart Wool" is soft on the skin and does not scratch.

Cotton requires a lot of water, pesticides, and energy to produce. Linen and hemp require much less.

Textiles, including footwear, purses, backpacks, and belts, can no longer be thrown away in trash bins. So long as they're not moldy, wet, and contain no hazardous chemicals, you can bring these items to a bin at one of the designated pick-up locations listed below. Ninety-five percent of these textiles are reused or recycled.

- Grove Street playground
- Waverley Square parking lot
- VFW at 310 Trapelo Road
- Claflin Street parking lot at Belmont Center
- Belmont Street next to Oakley Country Club

Metal

What do we do with all the metal objects we cannot put in the recycling bin, which will only take metal cans and containers? Old tools, dead toaster ovens, nuts and bolts that don't fit anything. Think about a road trip to Everett, where there are several junk yards that recycle metals—no questions asked, and items can have attached glass or other materials. Just throw them on the pile.

Make it a destination: take a trip to the casino—or just stroll along the Mystic River and the casino gardens. Check out Everett's craft breweries and distilleries. Combine a load with neighbors at your next block party.

Jay Marcotte, director of Belmont's Department of Public Works (DPW), told me that metal items can be placed in the textile recycling bins, and the town will then sell these to metal recyclers. The DPW will pick up large items. This service comes with an additional charge; check the DPW website for more information.

Metal that is thrown into the trash is incinerated, using yet more energy.

Plastics

The impetus for plastics recycling came from the plastics industry, not environmentalists. Some would say it's a form of "greenwashing." For starters, only about 60% of plastics are potentially recyclable, and only a small fraction is actually recycled.

I used to think plastic could be quickly melted down in a saucepan and reused. It turns out that it's much more complicated than that. It takes a lot of energy and chemicals to break the plastic bonds to make it reusable.

Currently, only #1 and #2 plastics are reliably recycled. Number 5 plastics are difficult to recycle, and black plastic (takeout containers) are not recycled. Plastic bags gum up the recycling machines and should never be thrown in recycling bins.

Many of us know about the great Pacific garbage patch. Even more concerning are the nanofibers that plastic ultimately breaks down into. Eventually, these enter our water, soil, air, and bodies. This is a looming health crisis of immense proportions.

Eliminate plastics

The real solution for plastics is not recycling. It's trying to eliminate as much plastic as possible. For starters, we try to avoid as many plastic products and as much packaging as possible. Do we really need the billions of plastic water bottles thrown away every year?

Can we ask restaurants to use recyclable or compostable containers and leave out the plastic cutlery that we don't need? Blueland sells a whole line of non-plastic household products. I've switched to bar shampoo and conditioner instead of bottles, and I am very happy with the results.

Food waste

Forty percent of food in America is wasted. When we lived on farms, wasted food was fed to livestock or used to enrich the soil. Now, it ends up in our trash.

Our family signed up for Black Earth compost pickup. For $2 per week, we just put our garbage in the rat-proof container, and every year, we get a free bag of composted soil. It's so easy! Check out www.belmontcomposts.org for more information.

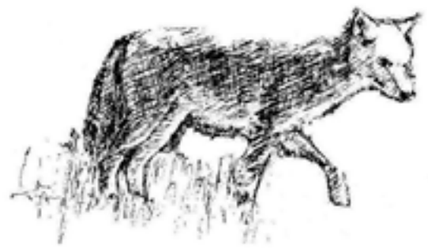
Hazardous waste

It is tempting just to throw this in the trash. You can hide it inside a trash bag, and no one will know, but these materials do need to be disposed of properly rather than sent to the incinerator with our regular trash. Go to www.belmont-ma.gov/dpw-highway-division/pages/hazardous-waste for collection dates.

We can do a lot, and one of the best ways to change our culture and government is to lead by example. Of course, we must also work to get local, state, and federal governments to address these problems effectively. Using our recycling bins is simply not enough.

I hope that this has been helpful. Many thanks to Jay Marcotte for his help with this article and for his leadership of Belmont's recycling efforts.

Barry Kaye, MD, is a Belmont resident and primary care physician at Mass General Brigham in Everett.



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