



# Belmont Citizens Forum

## MassDOT Rep Discusses March 7 Path Hearing

By Jarrod Goentzel

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) will be hosting a Design Public Hearing on Phase 1 of the Belmont Community Path on Thursday, March 7, at 7PM at the Beech Street Center Multipurpose Room, 266 Beech Street, Belmont. You can watch the meeting at home on Belmont Media Center GovTV, Ch 8 Comcast or Ch 28 Verizon, or [belmontmedia.org/govtv](http://belmontmedia.org/govtv). Visit [www.mass.gov/orgs/highway-division/events](http://www.mass.gov/orgs/highway-division/events) for more information.

The project consists of a new paved shared-use path along the Fitchburg Commuter Rail and a new concrete underpass beneath the railroad tracks at Alexander Road to provide a connection from Channing Road to the Belmont High and Middle Schools.

In preparation for the meeting, Jarrod Goentzel, chair of Friends of the Belmont Community Path, conducted the following interview with Tom Currier, the MassDOT supervising project manager for this project. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### Goentzel

Why does MassDOT host a design public hearing?

### Currier

MassDOT hosts Design Public Hearings to fulfill its legal obligation to present the right of way (ROW) impacts of the proposed project to the public. We also want very much to hear the public's comments, concerns, and suggestions about the proposed design at this preliminary stage.

### Goentzel

Why should I attend a MassDOT design public hearing?

### Currier

Design Public Hearings are the best way to learn about the proposed project at preliminary design

and to learn about the ROW process and its impacts. As stated above, we very much want to hear what the attendees think about the project: concerns, comments, and suggestions.

### Goentzel

I understand that this public hearing will focus on the 25% design for Phase 1 of the Belmont Community Path. What does "25% design" mean? How is it different from the 75% design, which comes next?

### Currier

The 25% design reflects the preliminary design. It is a bit of a misnomer as it is really a milestone where about 50% of the design work has been done. In this case, maybe even more than 50% as Nitsch Engineering, Belmont's engineering design firm, has been working diligently for a few years now to get us to this point. The Design Public Hearing marks the end of Preliminary Design phase and the commencement of Final Design phase.

### Goentzel

The last public meeting on this project was on November 4, 2021, when town leaders presented the 25% design that was submitted to MassDOT. What happened during the review of this design submission?

### Currier

The plans, early environmental documents, and preliminary cost estimate were reviewed by MassDOT. The ROW plans must be developed to an acceptable accuracy before we can present them to the public. This often requires multiple submissions. Also, there is the pedestrian tunnel which is a very important element. Almost the entire project falls within MBTA ROW. The tunnel construction is a complex bit of work given the constraints necessarily applied by this location.

## 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.

The *BCF Newsletter* is published six times a year, in January, March, May, July, September, and November. Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

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It took quite a bit of coordination with the MBTA to arrive at an acceptable method of construction that protects track bed integrity and creates the least amount of disruption to the Fitchburg Commuter Rail line service. Initially, the MBTA required a “tunnel jacking” method but, after multiple discussions over several months, Nitsch Engineering, the MBTA, and the MassDOT Highway Division determined that a “cut and cover” method is the best method to advance. Cut and cover is a process where the existing tracks, railbed, and embankment are removed, then precast tunnel segments placed, and then, the embankment, railbed, and tracks are rebuilt. Tunnel jacking is much more complex, requiring the tunnel segments to be hydraulically pushed or “jacked” under the tracks and railbed while service above is maintained. This process was not feasible here.

### Goentzel

The project information on the MassDOT website indicates that construction will begin in spring 2026. What are the next steps in the process to complete the design and start construction? What is the town’s responsibility and what is MassDOT’s responsibility?

### Currier

This is a Belmont project. The town is the proponent. The town is paying for the design and must acquire the easement rights necessary to construct the project. MassDOT Highway will administer and pay for the construction.

After the public hearing, Nitsch Engineering will advance the design through 75%, 100%, and then to final plans, specifications, and estimate. Each submission is reviewed by MassDOT (highway division) and MBTA. Also, Nitsch must advance the ROW plans to an “acceptable for acquisition” state, which Belmont will use to acquire the necessary rights to build the project.

ROW is always the critical path item. Once the plans are accepted, the town begins the acquisition process. This is necessarily very time intensive to assure fairness to the affected abutters. When all that is accomplished, MassDOT advertises the project for construction bid. By spring of 2026, we will be able to award a MassDOT/MBTA certified contractor to build this important community path project.

## BCF Asks Path Experts Three Questions

To prepare for the upcoming Design Public Hearing on Phase 1 of the Belmont Community Path, the BCF asked three Community Path experts about what they think about the Community Path project today.

We spoke to Mark Paolillo, Select Board member; Holly Muson, chair of the Community Path Project Committee; and Will Brownsberger, Massachusetts state representative.

### BCF

Since you succeeded Russ Leino as chair of the Community Path Project Committee (CPPC) last year, you have had a ringside seat as this project advances. What has most surprised you about the mechanics of advancing the project? Are there lessons from Phase 1 that should inform the town’s approach to Phase 2 (Clark Street bridge to Waltham border)?

### Holly Muson

I joined the CPPC in 2019 after attending meetings during the feasibility study for the community path.

As someone who would rather find ways to get around town without using a car, I’m interested in helping to resolve the challenges of constructing a path that will serve Belmont residents of all ages, whether on foot or bike. I took over as chair in the summer of 2023 when Russ Leino moved out of state.

The review process by the various state agencies has taken much longer than we were initially led to expect. Of course, the pandemic probably had some effect. Still, a big part of the complication came from a disagreement between a senior MBTA official and MassDOT engineers regarding the construction method for the underpass at Alexander Avenue and the ensuing need to resubmit design documents. That change happened more than a year into the review process and resulted in requests for a great deal of extra work.



FRIENDS OF THE BELMONT COMMUNITY PATH

Holly Muson addresses a community path meeting in November 2023.

The long duration of the review meant that various state requirements had changed since the original submission, necessitating additional, unexpected work to meet those requirements. The change was a good one in the long run because it will allow for a faster and more efficient construction process and a wider tunnel, making the underpass safer for users.

Looking ahead to Phase 2, we will undoubtedly ask our consultant to meet with the MBTA and MassDOT early and often to identify potential “gray areas” and gain resolution to them ahead of design submission.

For example, if the final route chosen by the Select Board is the one that crosses to the south side of the train tracks, a pivotal question is: what clearance will be acceptable to the MBTA for the bridge over the tracks? The nearby bridges at Trapelo Road and Clark Street are lower (ca. 18 feet) than the current mandated requirements for new construction over MBTA tracks (22.5 feet). Still, there is precedent for the MBTA to make an exception, and we would hope to succeed in an appeal to match the other clearances, resulting in both lower construction costs and an improved user experience.

#### **BCF**

While MassDOT’s 25% design hearing is a welcome milestone, Phase 1 of the path is over three years behind schedule since it was presented by Nitsch Engineering at a public meeting in July 2020. Can Belmont residents (who are intensely interested in the date of completion) anticipate a faster schedule from here? Do you expect the project will be ready for construction by the TIP-scheduled FFY 2026 timeframe?

#### **Will Brownsberger**

The Belmont Community Path project is a top priority of mine, and I am absolutely committed to seeing it through. It will be great for Belmont and great for the region.

The final agreed route for Phase 1 is a clean and straight shot. However, we complicated the project by adding a new tunnel under the tracks. The tunnel will connect the Winn Brook neighborhood to the high school and middle school. The tunnel is a great addition, making the community path more

easily accessible from multiple neighborhoods and solving the problem of unlawful track crossings.

However, adding the tunnel introduced additional design variables and also brought the MBTA into the approval process. There was an impasse among engineers in MassDOT and engineers in the MBTA as to how to construct the tunnel.

One option was known as “cut-and-cover,” and the other as “tunnel-jacking.” The cut-and-cover approach is more disruptive of service but makes it easier to build a broader tunnel. Cut-and-cover is also less expensive. Discussions about this went back and forth for quite some time. The issue is finally settled in favor of the cut-and-cover approach, and we will have an ample tunnel. Now that the tunnel construction approach is settled, the way forward is clear. I’m hopeful that there will be no further delays. I’m thrilled that the 25% design hearing is scheduled for March. Scheduling the 25% hearing is a confirmation of substantial consensus about the project among MassDOT engineers.

I’m also thrilled that the Boston Municipal Planning Organization has placed the project on the Transportation Improvement Program for FY2026, which means that it must be advertised for bidding before October 1, 2026.

I do not dare speculate as to when exactly the project will be advertised. One never knows when new problems may emerge. However, I will continue to keep it high on the radar of MassDOT leadership and to bird-dog it diligently through completion.

#### **BCF**

Any advice for your successor and the select board going forward?

#### **Mark Paolillo**

My advice to current and future Select Board members is that they need to be deeply committed to the completion of the Community Path, all phases. There is strong and broad support among many of the residents in the community for the path. It will enhance the quality of life for our residents and dramatically improve pedestrian and cycling safety as well.

The Select Board needs to work closely with the Community Path Project Committee and other stakeholders in town to deal with any current and future obstacles to completing the path.

## Select Board Candidates Answer BCF Questions

*Each year, the Belmont Citizens Forum asks Select Board candidates questions about issues facing our town. This year, Alex Howard, Geoff Lubien, and Matt Taylor provided answers. They were limited to 1,000 words.*

#### **BCF**

*Currently, about 95% of the property tax levy in Belmont comes from homeowners and 5% from business owners.*

- a. Is the development of more business space a realistic solution to Belmont’s financial challenges, with much of the existing commercial space empty?*
- b. The number of empty commercial spaces, both retail and office buildings, conveys that Belmont is not prospering or attractive. Does the Select Board have a role in recruiting desirable businesses to fill these spaces (or is that up to the landlords)? If so, how would you encourage the revitalization of Belmont’s business districts?*
- c. What scale of development is realistic (e.g., enough to increase commercial tax revenue from 5% to 7, 10, or 15% of the property tax levy)? Can Belmont’s current business districts support that level of growth?*

#### **Howard**

Belmont has a terrific opportunity to both address its financial challenges while making the community an attractive destination to both new residents and business owners. Good zoning is key to success. The Belmont inclusionary zoning bylaw and Housing Production Plan adopted in 2018 sets us on a course to meet current and future housing needs, as mandated by law. With higher density, mixed-use spaces, alongside completion of the Community Path, a range of businesses would find Belmont a more attractive place to invest.

With this approach, we open the option to apply the smart growth overlay zoning districts, which could help Belmont leverage funds from the Smart Growth Trust Fund. Peer

communities that have invested in these kinds of initiatives have seen growth in commercial tax revenue. Finally, we need to streamline the process by which businesses come to Belmont. When government sets the conditions that are favorable to business, I believe 10% commercial tax revenue and beyond is achievable.

#### **Lubien**

a. There are no silver bullets to Belmont’s fiscal challenges. If there were, we would have employed them already. For Belmont to be vibrant, stable, and sustainable, we have to seriously consider anything that will improve our finances; this includes expanding commercial real estate, reforming fiscal management, and passing and managing the upcoming override. In the long run, the only truly viable solution is the expansion of our commercial tax base.



Geoff Lubien

COURTESY OF GEOFF LUBIEN



COURTESY OF MATT TAYLOR

Matt Taylor.

b. The Select Board has a critical role in providing stability to our business districts by appointing members to town committees that can either catalyze or constrain growth. It is imperative that the next Select Board member employ a growth mindset and is able to detect the right people to navigate our town departments and processes so they can then help revitalize our business districts. It is also imperative for the next Select Board member to empower the chairs of these committees with the knowledge of who and where to go to be as expeditious as possible in effecting change.

It is important to partner with business owners, business associations, property owners, and managers to find new ways to promote foot traffic through special events and other activities, like Town Day and holiday events. Finally, the Select Board should welcome new businesses to the community and make ourselves more available

to new and existing businesses and prospects, listening to their concerns and thoughts on their goals and objectives.

c. The short answer is, yes, it is possible to achieve 10, 15, or even 20% commercial real estate, but it boils down to what tradeoffs the town wants to make. Our town faces the following choices: a town of homes, good schools, or low taxes, but we can only pick two. Increasing our commercial tax base is attractive because it helps diversify our revenue, balance our budget, and it comes with additional benefits such as more vibrant streetscapes and more community support. I support initiating and funding a master planning process where our community comes together to answer hard questions about what the future of this town can and should look like.

**Taylor**

Achieving a 10% commercial tax base should be our community's most important goal.

Our current 5% (and declining) commercial tax base is unsustainable. It strangles our budgets and our growth potential, causing constant all-or-nothing override votes that strain our residential community. After thorough

analysis of our property database, I believe we should focus on maximizing revenue per acre in our land-constrained town. Each year we foster commercial growth makes the revenue pie bigger and brings us closer to financial sustainability without additionally burdening residents. Once we reach our 10% goal, it gets even better: we can start shifting some of the residential tax burden to commercial properties, giving us a path to broader-based affordability. Achieving this higher commercial tax base within a decade is the goal we need, and I am part of our best chance to accomplish it.

We urgently need a collaborative plan to focus on economic development.

I expect the current Select Board to fund economic feasibility and opportunity studies. Based

on this data, I'll urge us to complete a master plan focused on economic development within one year. I call it "The Plan to 10" and expect it would include:

- Rezoning to allow for more mixed-use, multiple-unit, mid-rise housing and commercial space, which increase tax revenues
- Business-friendly initiatives to attract small businesses, especially restaurants and cafes that boost tax revenues even further via Massachusetts meal taxes
- Allowing development of boutique hotels, a proven tax source
- Taking full advantage of state law changes that allow for additional sources of revenue
- Encouraging mixed-use development along our corridors, creating vibrant neighborhoods with desirable amenities
- Forming "benefit districts" to ensure we reinvest in surrounding neighborhoods
- Preserving open space and historic buildings

Vibrant neighborhoods and businesses are best friends; that's where buyers and renters want to live. That's where property values rise the fastest. We can create this for Belmont!

We must start now.

My data analysis background in leading and advising startups brings a goal-oriented vision to this work, helping us track, accelerate, and communicate progress. Inspired by successful models from other towns, we can create a robust permitting and zoning process that streamlines efforts, minimizes costs, and reduces delays. It will be a unified effort of committees, Town Meeting, and residents who make it happen. The long-term viability of our community, and affordability for a broader base of our residents, are worth it.

Change is difficult. It means working together to take care of each other.

It's always easier to ignore our economic reality for another year than it is to find our shared commonality and work together for current and future Belmont generations. Our last master plan expired years ago; it's time for a new and more visionary one. I firmly support the commercial development leadership Elizabeth Dionne has brought to the Select Board. If you elect me to join

her on our Select Board, Belmont stands to gain immensely from our collective efforts.

I believe this goal is our best bet for a more sustainable future. Your mandate makes change possible, so I need your vote on April 2!

**BCF**

*As Belmont faces what Select Board chair Roy Epstein has called "fiscal Armageddon" (particularly in the event of a proposition 2 1/2 override defeat this spring), what is the right balance between funding the schools, funding central functions of town government, and funding "elective" programs and services (e.g., library hours and programs, Senior Center services, recreational programs)?*

**Taylor**

We must focus on core competencies in every department, find more cross-department efficiencies, and build up in-town investments which reduce future costs. Because our town has a 95% residential tax base, we've always relied upon postponing important things to balance the current budget and delay overrides. We've avoided facing structural changes that we will eventually be forced to make, and neglected less visible needs which are growing more urgent each passing year.

We have to make progress. Our best choices for our medium- and long-term needs are available now, and these choices dwindle the longer we wait.

I am empathetic to how difficult it can feel to take these first steps. It's why I lead with a big important goal of reaching a 10% commercial tax base in 10 years. It's why maintaining the relationship with the broad base of residents is a core part of my process. Change is hard, and having your votes and visible support to make these changes together will help us enjoy our best opportunities. I commit to you that we will bring about visible, positive, lasting change that helps us keep what we love about Belmont, while mitigating the size and frequency of overrides. Along the way, I will keep an active dialogue with all our residents, so you are in the loop.

**Lubien**

There are funding mandates that direct the funding of schools unless Belmont wants to go into state receivership; however, we must live within our means. The balance of providing the level of service our community has come to expect with

the continued cost increases that exceed revenue growth is tricky. However, I am confident that the town and school administrations are finding efficiencies that the Select Board can and should support while fostering revenue growth and maximizing available federal and state grants.

We need to look for more creative and efficient ways to provide town services. We also need to make investment in areas that will lower expenses and/or increase revenues. Some initiatives that can help:

- Investing in bringing in more special education services that are a better solution for our students and will offset the more expensive out-of-district solutions.
- Providing more resources to the Office of Planning & Development to bring in more business and ideal property development.
- Developing fiscally sensible zoning to attract more businesses and be known as a more business-friendly town.
- Empowering and supporting our town and school administrators and department heads to continue to reduce inefficiencies, streamline and modernize technologies, and develop more effective and efficient ways of providing services.
- Capturing federal and state grants with what I am advocating—a newly appointed grant writer.
- Establish a long-term plan that provides stability and sustainability in these interrelated areas:
  - Fiscal management
  - Zoning
  - Business and commercial development
  - Energy and environmental issues

#### Howard

This isn't the first time that Belmont has needed an override. Without an override, funding for all of these essential functions will be at risk. Belmont's schools are a source of pride, and our entire community benefits from the rich vibrancy of the next generation that wants to make Belmont their home. Effective emergency response and programs and services, especially for seniors, are also critical to a functional community.

This may sound simplistic, but it's important to be disciplined about our spending so that our rate

of expenditures don't outpace our rate of revenue growth. That's how we ended up in this position. Additionally, there are always ways to apply a best-value approach to projects, rather than a lower bid approach, which is ultimately more fiscally responsible. In my professional roles in the military and commercial sector, I've approached balanced budgets with this lens. Disciplined spending and new zoning initiatives that generate business revenue will ensure we don't have to make these impossible trade-offs in the future.

#### BCF

*What priority do you assign to improving pedestrian and bicyclist safety, limiting traffic, protecting open space, and preserving historic buildings? If those are priorities, what specific measures will you support to improve the status quo?*

#### Lubien

With a natural tension between cars, bicyclists, and pedestrians of all ages, compromise and consensus are the most important assets I can help build. To limit traffic, we need to work on more sensible traffic calming and, with our federal and state partners and with driving apps, to redirect cut-throughs at key times while being careful not to direct customers out of our businesses. The override allows doubling the investment in sidewalks which will help our pedestrians of all ages.

The master planning exercise I advocate will include an inventory and assessment of the town's assets so that we can better maintain and plan repairs for our buildings and open spaces. It needs to account for future investments and improvements while preserving or restoring the historical buildings we can afford. We need to continue to leverage what the Community Preservation Act and committee have allowed us to tackle—investments in our recreational and open spaces which we would otherwise not have accomplished. For many of these, there are no definite solutions, instead compromises that meet the needs of the different constituents as best as possible.

#### Taylor

These are all core competencies of local government. Safety and access are top of mind for me as a jogger who has run every street in our

town. Roadway designs that focus on car throughput are a hazard. They lead to more cut-through traffic, aggressive drivers racing to "beat the light," reduced walkability, and dangerous crossings. Our younger residents are least likely to be seen by drivers, and our older residents are most likely to suffer a life-altering injury.

Mindful that we are a land-constrained town, I advocate for preserving open space and historic buildings as we work toward reaching a 10% commercial tax base.

#### Howard

One of the things I love about Belmont is its open space for its residents, their families, and their pets. I'd support the Historical District Commission's efforts to preserve historic buildings that speak to our town's resilience as we've grown and adapted over the years. That said, our investments in these important issues should be done with future progress in mind, and in alignment with other initiatives that support the town's fiscal strength. For example, implementing the Community Path supports pedestrian and bicyclist safety and makes the community more walkable, reducing traffic

#### BCF

*A series of recent structural changes to town government has centralized authority and moved it from elected to appointed authorities (as recommended by the Collins Center Report). To some degree, those and other changes have also lessened the role of town committees. Are you concerned that these changes could undermine Belmont's strong culture of volunteer participation and citizen engagement, resulting in changes in our small-town character?*

#### Howard

No, I am not concerned that the structural changes to town government will undermine Belmont's citizen engagement. In fact, I believe they will enhance engagement by streamlining participation



Alex Howard

of volunteers and expanding our ability to hear from all residents. The changes provide discipline and efficiency to enable an even broader group of committed volunteers to engage with the priorities of our community.

#### Taylor

This is the right concern but the wrong question. I see so many people volunteer for Belmont because they want to make a positive difference for our community. The right question: How do we keep our hard-working, passionate volunteers engaged and doing their best work?

Empowerment.

1. We follow through on their important, thoughtful work.
2. We take the advice of committees, unless they have clearly erred (in which case, we discuss

what was missed, and have them update their proposal to address what was missed).

3. All members of committees work together for a unified result.

Empowering our volunteers to make a difference keeps them connected to our town. I've learned in my years of leading and advising teams that empowering others is the most effective leadership style and generates the best results.

#### Lubien

The only role that has moved from elected to appointed has been the town treasurer, leaving hundreds of volunteers in place and valued by the town. The next roles that are moving from elected to appointed are roles that are critical to the functioning of the town. These moves are to ensure



An Alewife Brook combined sewer overflow outfall in 2016.

that these employees are accountable to do the high quality of work required to help get the town on the right fiscal footing. The voter-approved switch to an appointed treasurer has already resulted in significant efficiencies, including a reduction of headcount in the Treasurer's Office and the adoption of electronic technology that other towns have used for years.

What I believe undermines the effectiveness of town committees and participation by our dedicated and passionate volunteers is the dismissing of some or the majority of the work and recommendations of the community by the appointing authority. I vow to honor the hard work done by our town committees.

#### BCF

*According to the latest EPA data (circa 2022) Belmont's streams are the dirtiest in the Mystic River Watershed, grading D (Winn Brook) and D+ (Little River). What priority do you assign to cleaning up Belmont's streams? Do you have any ideas for improving or accelerating Belmont's current plans to address the problem of sewage seeping into our stormwater system?*

#### Taylor

Our shared environmental future is one of several areas in which our town is structured to create an affordability crisis. A 2021 Alewife Brook Water Sewage Overflow progress report listed Belmont first as a source of bacterial contamination that made it unsafe for fishing and swimming. Environmental cleanup gets more expensive every year and is a major source of uncertainty, costs, and delays for commercial growth.

We have postponed infrastructure improvements which would better manage wastewater and runoff. Our infrastructure uses open trough pipes for sewage, which means runoff can flow in and increase the volume of our wastewater. This costs us money. Yet the combination of sandy soil and a high water table means enclosed pipes would lead to more flooding. I will continue to follow this issue closely. We can all help, as nearly all dog owners do,

by picking up after pets, whose feces are a major source of bacterial water contamination.

#### Lubien

It is true that Belmont has received poor grades for the Winn Brook (D), Little River (D+), and Alewife Brook (D) for both 2021 and 2022. Unfortunately, Belmont is not the only town with failing grades that contribute to the pollution of the Mystic River watershed.

Over the last 10 years, the town has spent more than \$10 million identifying and mitigating sources of illicit discharges by lining or replacing sewer mains and services. However, many smaller, more difficult leaks are still unresolved and need to be addressed. Other contaminants such as phosphorus from lawn care and pet waste need to be addressed with education, enforcement, and new storm drain grates. To continue and accelerate the mitigation, more investment is needed.

Since 2019, water and sewer rates have not changed while costs have increased significantly. The town has implemented a plan to increase water and sewer rates by 3% and 5%, respectively, over the next five years to build back Sewer Enterprise capital funds. More should be done to obtain additional funding from the State Revolving Fund and grants from the Federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

Under my leadership as chair of the Warrant Committee, the committee is now paying closer attention to the water and sewer enterprise funds as well as focusing on investments in infrastructure and mitigation.

#### Howard

From Mystic River to Winn Brook to Little River, Belmont's streams are a critical natural resource worth our attention and care. Belmont has an aging public infrastructure that contributes to these low grades that impact our stormwater system. That being said, as a small town, Belmont can address these challenges most effectively by following through on our commitments to repair sewer lines with minimum wavering, and determining whether the plans were aggressive enough to be effective.

#### BCF

*Describe how the town can make progress towards implementation of the decarbonization plan adopted*

*by Town Meeting, green infrastructure projects, the community path, and the town's affordable housing goals.*

#### Howard

Beyond what was addressed above, the plan is to realize 80% emission reduction by 2050, and we are on track for that plan. There are likely opportunities to incentivize aspects of this plan, such as adoption of solar or EV charging that leverage state and federal resources for the town of Belmont. We should celebrate our success and continue on the pathway to meeting these important goals.

#### Lubien

First and foremost, I will continue to support the planning of the community path and, most immediately, the building of the Alexander Avenue tunnel. I believe there are many ways we can advance the town's goals but know that there is much more we can do. We need more electric charging infrastructure including spaces for electric school buses. For town buildings and homes, we should invest in insulation and weather-proofing programs, encouraging rebates and leveraging new and innovative technologies. Through zoning and the MBTA Communities Committee work, we can promote more affordable housing development to increase our housing stock.

#### Taylor

Connectivity, affordability, and preserving green space are all aligned with commercial growth. Getting to a 10% commercial tax base is a big, important goal that sharpens our focus and requires us to make changes to get out of our own way. The benefits will be tremendous. Housing choices enable residents to downsize and stay in our community. Walkable neighborhoods and mixed-use construction allow residents to live near the amenities they want—restaurants, cafes, local shopping, schools, parks—amenities which, in turn, increase property values. Commercial development spurs investment in infrastructure that badly needs it: sidewalks, crossing safety, roadway designs that calm traffic. Energy efficiency is an important factor in cost-of-ownership, and a critical long-term metric for success. We can score wins in all of these areas by building momentum toward commercial development.

# Profiles in Belmont: Phil Thomas

By Elissa Ely

*“One ought to do good to others as simply as a horse runs or a bee makes honey.” – Marcus Aurelius*

There is so much we could say about Phil Thomas. We could talk about his distinguished career in high technology, which followed his distinguished career in Naval Intelligence. We could talk about growing up oceanside in Florida, where his father worked as a photographer for NASA and John Glenn visited the house. We could talk about his childhood hopes of becoming the next Mickey Mantle (stymied only, perhaps, by height).

We could also talk about Phil’s life as a member of the Latter Day Saints Church, since this has informed so much else—including, after two years as a young Mormon missionary in England, an

astute business sense. “If you can engender trust, people are more inclined to listen to you,” he says. We could talk about how he currently coaches other executives; as a young CEO himself, “I didn’t know what I didn’t know.” Or how, at the age of 75, he is working towards becoming a business mediator. “No one gets everything,” he explains, “but there’s resolution and you have a voice in the outcome.” He approaches conflict resolution with the respect a conductor might use to approach a symphony.

Every chapter of his life is full of quotable experience.

But Phil himself would like to talk about bees. And so, that is what we will do.

It began in 2018, with a YouTube video about an Australian father and son apiarist team. Phil was fascinated: CEO, coach, and negotiator had encountered a hive community where every member

collaborated on a common goal. Bees adapt when necessary, and die without hesitation in the interest of collective survival. While mankind is not very adept at living in community, bees practice conflict resolution even before conflict occurs. They have no need for mediation.

The Master Beekeeping course at Cornell elevated Phil’s beekeeping from hobby to commercial level. For the bee-ignorant among us, apiology hums with facts and numbers. Up to 60,000 residents live together within a hive, most of them semi-sterile females. During their short lives—about five to six weeks in summer and spring, about twice that in winter—they evolve through a series of roles; beginning as janitor bees cleaning the hive, becoming nurse bees caring for the brood, then water-collecting bees, then nectar-seekers. There are undertaker bees and guard bees, too.

The great progenitor is more enduring. After her mating flights, the queen lives up to four protected years, laying around 2,000 eggs a day in the cells of the hive. When she dies—or if she weakens, and Darwinian forces within the colony put an end to her—nurse bees transform one of the genetically identical larvae into royalty by feeding her a protein-rich secretion from their glands. “Royal jelly” is a kind of miracle of creation—but also true.

Bees are short-lived (and unlike humans, have no preoccupation with mortality), but have been around for 30,000,000 years. “Edible honey was found in King Tut’s tomb,” Phil says, adding, to be clear, “I don’t think anyone ate any of it.” The work is labor-intensive: a pound of honey requires nectar from 2 million flowers, and the average forager makes only 1/12 a teaspoon in its goal-driven life.

Many of these irresistible facts are on Phil’s Belmont Bee Company website ([belmont-beecompany.com](http://belmont-beecompany.com)), where “our focus is on the watchful care of our bees.” As head beekeeper, he sells from a dozen colonies living luxuriantly in a corner of the Rock Meadow Conservation area. Locating them here requires collaboration with the Belmont Conservation Commission (“They get honey in the spring”), and he chose Rock Meadow because of its abundant water supply, its abundant wildflower supply, and its paucity of insecticide spraying. “My dream,” he says, “would be a crop duster plane flying over and dispensing a billion flower seeds.”

A few times a year, Phil dons his gear for a complete hive inspection. Over several hours, he watches the entrance for flight activity, opens and checks frames for egg-laying patterns, makes sure the bees have sufficient food (and if not, especially in winter when business shuts down, supplies them with a careful formulation of sugar and amino acids), cleans out the dead, clears away debris, and attacks the number one honeybee enemy: varroa mites. Shorter inspections occur every one to two weeks. “I can also pop the lid off the hive and listen,” he says. If the queen is alive, all is calm and quiet; if she is dead, noise and chaos reign throughout the land.

Yes, to answer the question, he has been stung hundreds of times. Yet beekeepers live longer than any other profession, and bee venom contains melittin, which may have a role in preventing several types of cancer. Even so, take this advice: the safest response to a sting is to flick off the barbed stinger before it can continue to inject venom.

Along with caring for hives and rescuing honeybees from disease, one of Phil’s jobs as a member of the Massachusetts Bee Keepers Association is to collect swarms. When a queen and half the hive take flight for a less crowded new home, usually in late spring, the visual effect is intimidating. A call is made, and help arrives—not for the humans, but for the bees. “Sometimes they swarm on the hood of a car, or a deck, or a child’s swing,” Phil explains. He has rescued and safely relocated swarms from trees, leaning out the window of an eighth floor apartment in Boston, and once, from some Belmont Hill School bleachers in the middle of a football game. Without help, the swarm has a 20% chance of creating a new comb. With his help, it’s 80%. “The sound of a swarm congregating, there’s nothing like it,” he says. “You can feel the energy, like a mini-version of a tornado, tens of thousands of beating wings.”

A single respectful, hard-working human (wearing a “Hives Matter” baseball cap on this day) can protect tens of thousands of hard-working insects. “For all of us to flourish,” Phil says, “we should do work that’s constructive. Working on behalf of a community is good, and you’re never too old to help someone. We should evolve,” he adds firmly, “like the bees.”

*Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.*



Phil Thomas and some of his Belmont bees.

COURTESY OF PHIL THOMAS

# E-Bike Library Lets Locals Take a Spin

By Sarah Firth

Inae Hwang was torn: Should she buy a new electric bike?

“I’ve been looking at e-bikes for six months straight, really looking to purchase one,” Hwang, a Belmont resident, said. Then, a friend referred her to the Camberville E-bike Lending Library, which Somerville resident Christopher Schmidt runs out of his Porter Square home.

Hwang decided to take one of the e-bikes for a spin. “I was like, ‘Oh, I should totally borrow one because then I will know what it feels like, and how well it does or doesn’t work for me,’” she said. Hwang was hooked; she tested out multiple different e-bike models through the library. “I borrowed one for the last week. . . . Oh my god, that was awesome,” she said. “And now, I just tried a different bike out because it wasn’t in last week.”

The E-bike Lending Library has a collection of electric bicycles available for loan to community members for up to a week, completely free of charge. The library works to expand access to e-bikes in Somerville and Cambridge (“Camberville”), and the surrounding areas.

Electric bicycles have become an increasingly common sight on the streets of Somerville in the past few years. With a battery that gives a boost of power behind the pedals up to 20 mph, electric bicycles can be an efficient way to get around the Boston area. However, between the vast number of brands and styles to choose from and the fact that many e-bikes are sold online, it can be difficult to take one for a spin before purchasing.

Schmidt, a Somerville resident, is trying to change that. He first purchased an e-bike in March 2021, which sparked his passion for e-bikes and led to him creating the lending library. “I immediately fell in love,” Schmidt said. “I have been riding bikes off and on since I was a kid, like many of us, but using a bike as transportation . . . was really hard for me, and the e-bike just changed everything.”

For Schmidt, an electric bike offered many advantages compared to a standard bicycle. “It let me feel more comfortable in traffic, it let me feel more comfortable on the road,” he said. “I could go farther, I could run errands, and I immediately wanted to share my joy with everyone else.”

Schmidt frequently would bring his e-bike to his friends and let them try it out. “Half the people I took it to would just immediately be like, ‘Yes, I’m doing it and buying a bike,’” Schmidt said. “The other half liked it . . . but they would be worried about ‘Can I do the grocery run? Can I take the kids to school? Can I make it to work?’ . . . They just really couldn’t tell you in a five-minute ride.”

Electric bicycles are much more expensive than a regular bike—price tags usually begin at \$1,000, and a quality e-bike can cost upwards of \$3,000—and it can be difficult to make the jump with only a short test ride around the block. Schmidt wanted to be able to lend friends his e-bike to try for a longer period of time so they could decide whether it fit into their lifestyle.

Then, in October 2022, the e-bike manufacturer RadPower had a large sale on one of their e-bikes for \$500. Schmidt took advantage of the opportunity to purchase a second bicycle and to spread the word about the sale. “I told all my friends, ‘Go buy this bike. You will not be disappointed. Trust me, just go buy this bike,’” Schmidt said. “And, it turns out, I have a lot of friends.” In total, 183 people followed Schmidt’s referral link to purchase a bike, and Schmidt earned a store credit for each friend he referred. “At that point, I had \$4,500 in gift card credit to an e-bike store,” he said. “So, what do you do with a \$4,500 in gift card credit to an e-bike store? The obvious answer is buy more e-bikes.”

With the funds from the referral link, Schmidt was able to start up the Lending Library. Of the 103 individuals who requested them in October, the library was able to lend 51 e-bikes. Many of the families who borrowed bikes were looking to replace or avoid purchasing a second car. “The goal of the library is just to help people primarily figure out, ‘Does an e-bike work for me? Can I use it in my daily life?’” Schmidt explained.

Although the library’s primary purpose is to give people the chance to test out an e-bike before purchase, individuals can also borrow a bicycle simply for leisure. “I had someone who came in from Hawaii who was just here for a week and she had heard about the library from somebody,” Schmidt said. “They put 120 miles on the bike in a week, which is awesome.”

The e-bike library recently partnered with Electric Bikes of New England, a New Hampshire-based dealer. The store has donated e-bikes to the library, including cargo bikes, which are bicycles designed to carry multiple children or other large items. “They’ve really been just a huge boon,” Schmidt said. “The library was able to go from zero cargo bikes to three cargo bikes in the course of a week because of our partnership with them.”

Parents now have the opportunity to try out more budget-friendly cargo bike options than most of those offered at stores in Cambridge and Somerville; the models available for loan at the Camberville E-bike Lending Library typically sell for \$2,000 to \$4,500 online, several thousand dollars cheaper than alternatives commonly found at stores in the Tufts area, which can run from \$5,000 to \$9,000.

Schmidt operates the library out of his home. Due to limited storage, the library depends on a cycle of continuous loans. “The key thing is to store them in other people’s garages,” Schmidt said. “My goal really is to keep these bikes in rotation.”

Anyone who is 18 years or older and has a place to store the e-bike securely can borrow one by filling out a request form on the library’s website. Once the bike becomes available, Schmidt arranges a time for the person to come by the library. Between three days and a week later, the bike returns to Schmidt’s home to be loaned out to the next rider.

Hwang’s experience with the library was very positive. “It was easy. It was convenient. And the bikes are fun,” she said.

Peter Williams, a resident of Watertown, commutes to his job at Harvard using public transportation every day. Williams used the library to test out the feasibility of using an e-bike for his commute. “It’s a specific group of people for whom [e-bikes] are practical and work well, and it’s certainly not everybody,” he said. “But for my commute, I certainly came out convinced that for where I happen to be, the e-bike would not just be a good option, but I think it would really be the best option.”



Christopher Schmidt and some of his e-bikes.

For Williams, the e-bike helped bridge gaps in public transportation and avoid congestion. “Compared to my public transit commute, where I’m not super close to bus stops and work . . . the e-bike version, the best route I can come up with, is half that time, so 22 or 25 minutes,” Williams said. “The nice thing is that because you’re on the bike lane, it can be rush hour and your commute still takes around the same amount of time.”

Williams also highlighted the community spirit of the library. “It just feels like a very nice community thing to me, and certainly, it takes a lot of trust on Chris’s part to lend out these expensive [e-bikes] to people and it takes a lot of work to manage it all,” he said. “Participating in it feels like a very ‘getting involved in the community’ kind of experience that can be kind of hard to come by these days.”

Williams believes the library will encourage cycling in the neighborhoods and towns around Tufts. “Once there’s enough bikes out there, it kind of hits a tipping point where [bicycling] is just sort of a thing that people do, as opposed to this lifestyle choice,” Williams said.

*This article was first published in The Tufts Daily on November 30, 2023, and updated December 6, 2023; see the original at [bit.ly/BCF-Tufts-EBike](https://bit.ly/BCF-Tufts-EBike). Reprinted with the permission of Sarah Firth and The Tufts Daily.*



# Belmont Rower Looks Out for the Charles River



ANTON PRODAN

Maggie Fellows on the Charles River.

By Zeus Smith

As a US National Team rower, Belmont resident Maggie Fellows spends a lot of time on the Charles River.

Since 2021, the Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) has mobilized a cohort of passionate community leaders like Fellows to push for climate-smart policies and practices right in their backyards. Called River Advocates, this program brings together volunteers from various backgrounds and experiences to learn effective advocacy strategies and steward a more climate-resilient future.

The River Advocates program is a crash course in civic engagement--by joining, volunteers find a community of like-minded individuals interested in

learning about direct actions to affect meaningful change. Recently, the program has grown significantly. Over 25 local leaders have signed up for the program and are pushing for policies like stronger wetlands protections, stormwater utilities, and more.

"As an Olympic hopeful, I am frequently on the water," says Fellows. "Because I'm out there so often, I see how climate change and human influence affect the Charles. I am very concerned about the future of our planet and want to find a way that I can make a difference in the community. The River Advocates program provides me with resources so that I can learn more and take action while I'm still training for rowing."

What this looks like is very different in each of the 35 cities and towns that make up the Charles River watershed. From navigating the ins and outs of municipal bylaws and ordinances to strengthening environmental protections to championing green infrastructure and tree canopy to even state-level legislative advocacy, these leaders foster the change we need to see to assure a clean, resilient Charles River for future generations.

River Advocates are active in Waltham, Brookline, Cambridge, and, of course, Belmont, where there is much to do. CRWA's research reveals that the town is one of only two in the watershed with neither a specific local tree ordinance nor a local wetlands protection bylaw that expands protections for isolated wetlands, intermittent streams, and vernal pools. These policies can improve wildlife habitat, control stormwater pollution, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Through the River Advocates program, Fellows has been pushing for change--particularly around invasive plant species, water quality, and sewer overflows.

"Climate change is majorly affecting the Charles River and stressing the ecosystem," Fellows said. "For example, changing precipitation patterns lead to more frequent intense rainstorms, causing flooding, increased runoff, and higher incidences of combined sewage overflows. More nutrients and higher temperatures lead to more cyanobacteria

blooms and the proliferation of invasive species. Reducing climate change is one of the biggest ways we can make a difference for the entire watershed. That means taking action to reduce our carbon emissions.

"How can we do that? Drive less, reduce energy inefficiencies in our homes, eat local, plant trees, vote for leaders who act on climate, and so much more. Don't let the magnitude of the problems keep you from taking small steps in the right direction," advocates Fellows.

Fellows is a dedicated and reliable member of the River Advocates program, always bringing creative energy to these pressing environmental issues. In addition to the River Advocates, she is a member of the Citizens Climate Lobby, a bipartisan group of volunteers working to raise awareness and lobby elected officials to pass climate legislation.. She is truly committed to this work, and CRWA is lucky to have her on the team.

"Climate action can't wait. We are running out of time to make the changes necessary for a livable future world. Everyone can have an impact, and that action starts on the local level," says Fellows.

Want to get involved? Become a River Advocate! Visit [crwa.org/river-advocates](http://crwa.org/river-advocates) to learn more about the program and sign up.

*Zeus Smith is CRWA's associate attorney. He works at the local, state, and federal levels to protect the Charles River and its watershed.*



ANTON PRODAN

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Representatives of the Select Board, Health Department, Department of Public Works, Facilities Department (Schools), and Conservation Commission;

As local communities in and around Belmont wake up to the dangers of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs) to children, wildlife, and pets, we see encouraging progress toward reducing and eliminating SGARs. We would like to share with you what is going on in neighboring towns in this regard as Save Belmont Wildlife seeks to work with our community to eliminate these poisons as part of a cross-community effort. We are working to prevent the further poisoning of Massachusetts birds of prey and promote alternative rodent control, like integrated pest management (IPM), that works with wildlife to control the presence of rodents in our towns.

Last week, at a packed public event (a presentation by the founder of Save Arlington Wildlife, Laura Kiesel, hosted by Green & Open Somerville), Somerville's environmental health coordinator announced that the city of Somerville would remove bait stations containing SGARs from their school grounds immediately. Somerville will also evaluate phasing out their use of SGARs on their other

municipal properties and in demolition projects throughout the city. It's a great start, and we hope this will be just the beginning of their efforts. See Somerville's comprehensive public service content on rodenticide at [bit.ly/Somerville-rodents](https://bit.ly/Somerville-rodents).

The Arlington Select Board voted unanimously to support a ban on SGARs within Arlington's borders in 2022. From there, the Arlington Town Meeting voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution requesting that their town manager adopt an IPM policy that banned SGARs on all municipally owned and managed lands. The town manager quickly complied. Town Meeting also voted in favor of submitting a home rule petition requesting permission to ban the use of SGARs on private property, which is currently pending in the state legislature.

The Arlington Health Department has posted a lot of content to assist townsfolk in addressing pest problems without poison as a first resort.

The city of Newton followed in Arlington's footsteps in 2023, with all chambers of the city council voting unanimously in favor of an SGARs ban on public lands and submitting a home rule petition to the State Legislature to ban on private lands, where it recently had its hearing at the Joint Committee for the Environment and Natural Resources.

In Waltham, the conservation commission updated policies based on those of Arlington's conservation commission in codifying restrictions to SGARs on all lands under their jurisdiction.

In Lexington, Save Lexington Wildlife is pursuing a nonbinding resolution toward banning SGAR use on public lands at their Town Meeting this year. They will pursue a home rule petition next year.

In Newbury, Save Newbury Wildlife convinced their Select Board to vote unanimously to prohibit SGARs on their public properties effective immediately. Newbury's new policy to ban the use of SGARs on municipal property precedes their next step, a citizen's petition to ban the use of SGARs on private property. Save Newbury Wildlife will also request that the town educate residents on integrated pest management. These two articles will be discussed and voted on at the annual Town Meeting.

Locally, the Save Belmont Wildlife group has been working closely with Save Arlington Wildlife, and both are part of a quickly expanding Save Wildlife network that now has initiatives in Waltham, Winchester, Lexington, Belmont, Newbury, Natick, and Somerville.

In its institutional mission to protect birdlife, Mass Audubon is launching local campaigns in communities across Massachusetts to regulate the use of SGARs by providing information and organization to volunteers from as many towns and cities as possible.

Members of SBW and SAW founder Laura Kiesel would be glad to meet with Belmont health, DPW, facilities, and school department decision-makers to discuss these developments further and what (we hope) it means for the future of reduced rodenticide use in Belmont.

Thank you for your attention to this initiative to improve our commonwealth.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey North, Town Meeting member Precinct 1, Managing Editor, Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter

Allison Lenk, Town Meeting member Precinct 8  
Dean Hickman, chair, Sustainable Belmont  
Laura Kiesel, founder Save Arlington Wildlife & Volunteers of Save Belmont Wildlife



Red-tailed hawk.

MARK BOHN/USFWS

### Lone Tree Hill Day April 27

Join us in stewarding Lone Tree Hill! The Belmont Citizens Forum, in conjunction with the Judy Record Conservation Fund, is holding its tenth annual cleanup and trail maintenance day on April 27, from 9 AM until noon.

Help with planting white pine saplings along the Meadow Edge Trail, cleaning up, and removing invasives at the Mill Street parking lot and the Coal Road, respectively. 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 is managed by the Land Management Committee.

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



# Say **NO** to Rat Poison

SAVE BELMONT WILDLIFE

# Native Peoples Lived in Belmont

By Mark Jarzombek

It comes as a surprise to people who assume that Boston's colonization began with the settlement of Boston in 1630 that there was an equally important settlement in Watertown that same year. It was organized by Sir Richard Saltonstall, along with approximately 40 families. Unlike the Bostonians, the group in Watertown consisted of ranchers and farmers living primarily in homesteads spread out over the rapidly deforested landscape.

Though Boston takes the glory when it comes to the history of New England, the relationship between a town and its farm and pastureland was critical to the settlers' success. Horses, cows, sheep,



Metacombet (King Philip) from the 1772 *The Entertaining History of King Philip's War*.

and pigs required very large tracts of land. But the history of the transition of the land from Native Americans to colonists and then to national land is murky.

Local narratives emphasize the legitimacy of the transfer by mentioning purchase arrangements. For example, in 1638, by order of the General Court, Watertown paid the Pequossette—who controlled the upstream areas of the Charles River—the sum of 13 pounds, seven shillings, and sixpence for the land. The post office in Arlington features a visual representation of this transaction. The large mural in the main hall is entitled *Purchase of Land and Modern Tilling of the Soil*. By William C. Palmer, the 1938 mural depicts a soldier paying a Native American some silver coins for the land.

But this is mostly myth. One must set the stage. The smallpox and other diseases that swept through the area largely came from the north and were the consequence of Basque fishermen and other European contact beginning in the 1500s as the Basques plied the fishing grounds of Maine and Newfoundland. By the end of the 1620s, disease had reached this area, and it is estimated that 90% of the population along the coast had died.

The survivors had little choice. There were not enough warriors to defend the land from the newcomers, and selling land was a way Native Peoples could try to control the narrative. But it was too late once it was clear that the new arrivals were in an expansionary mode.

Some resistance did develop. The King Philip's War (1675–1676) pitted the Indigenous peoples of the northeastern woodlands against the English New England colonies. The war is named for Metacombet, the Pokanoket chief and sachem of the Wampanoag, who adopted King Philip's English name because of the friendly relations between his father Massasoit and the Plymouth Colony.

The brutal war ended badly for the Native Americans. Families were separated, and some were sold as enslaved people and sent to Caribbean sugar plantations. The surviving refugees were forcibly clustered together in enclaves in Cape Cod and the islands.

The final blow, ironically, was the Massachusetts Act of Enfranchisement of 1869, which stated that Native Americans were “entitled to all the rights,



The mural *Purchase of Land and Modern Tilling of the Soil* at the Arlington, MA, post office.

privileges, and immunities, and subject to all the duties and liabilities” of citizenship. “All Indians,” the act decreed, “shall hereafter have the same rights as other citizens to take, hold, convey, and transmit real estate.”

What this really meant was that there was no longer any such thing as tribal territorial control in Massachusetts. To become a citizen of the state, the newly minted “Native American” had to become complicit in governmental structures that unraveled ancient bonds of community.

More importantly, what was left of tribal land could now be legally purchased. The area of Watertown, Belmont, and West Cambridge (as Belmont was then called) had been settled long before the Massachusetts Act of Enfranchisement. The Pequossette had, for all practical purposes, died out by the end of the 17th century along with the Mashawomuk, who lived along the Mystic River just to the north.

Survivors, along with refugees from other local tribes, totaling a few hundred, were moved—among other places—to Nonantum Hill, a Christianized enclave in Newton, until that land, too, because of the Massachusetts Act of Enfranchisement, was

bought out. The final traces of that Native American past were erased in the 1890s with the creation of the Newton Commonwealth Golf Course. Nonantum—as still marked on a map from 1700—was near the 15th hole, where the sacred spring still exists as a “water feature.”

This Nonantum—with not even a sign to register its location—has absolutely nothing to do with Nonantum, a region of Newton that was some two miles west, despite what Wikipedia claims. Nonantum, Newton, was named after a successful textile mill known as Nonantum Worsted Company, which was founded in the mid-19th century.

The local Native American world has been erased, appropriated, and historically misdirected. And that applies to the Belmont/Watertown area as well. When Pequossette Park was put up in 1929, it was not out of respect for the Pequossette but in anticipation of celebrating the 300th anniversary of the arrival of the Puritans in Boston in 1630. Back in the 17th century, the Pequossette used an area the original settlers called “a meadow”—now called Rock Meadow—that is a half-mile northwest of McLean Hospital and about 1.5 miles north

of Pequossette Park. That “meadow” was one of countless such areas used by the Native Peoples for communal hunting and social gathering. By the mid-19th century, it had been converted into a farm and grazing land. In 1968, the town of Belmont purchased the property from McLean and the Belmont Conservation Commission assumed management, thus at least preserving some token of its ancestry. But there is no indication on the site, nor even at Pequossette Park, about any of this.

“Indian” street and park names, here as elsewhere, were put in to make the colonial history more visible in the cultural landscape, especially for the arriving immigrants from Ireland, Russia, and Europe, who knew nothing about it all. In this way, the old guard could cement the place of colonial history in the broader history of the United States. So, for example, a plaque on the Old Powder House in Somerville reads: “The first occasion

on which our patriotic forefathers in arms met to oppose the tyranny of King George III in 1775.” As the plaque points out, it was put up in 1892 by the Massachusetts Society of the Sons of the Revolution, a hereditary society formed in 1889 to promote awareness about the importance of the American Revolution.

These efforts were reinforced by the spread of colonial-style single-family houses that developed beginning in the 1880s, and that were sparked by the celebrations of the American Centennial in 1876. They became almost de rigeur across the region in the 1920s and 1930s. But apart from a few references to the Pequossette in this region, there is no acknowledgment—not even a plaque—that this land was once Native American.

One cannot turn back history, but one can—belatedly at least—begin to think of how to acknowledge the incontestable fact that the land we

live on has a history more profound than just the history of colonial encounters.

*Mark Jarzombek, PhD, is a history and theory of architecture professor at the MIT School of Architecture and Planning and a Belmont resident.*



MARY BRADLEY

Rock Meadow.

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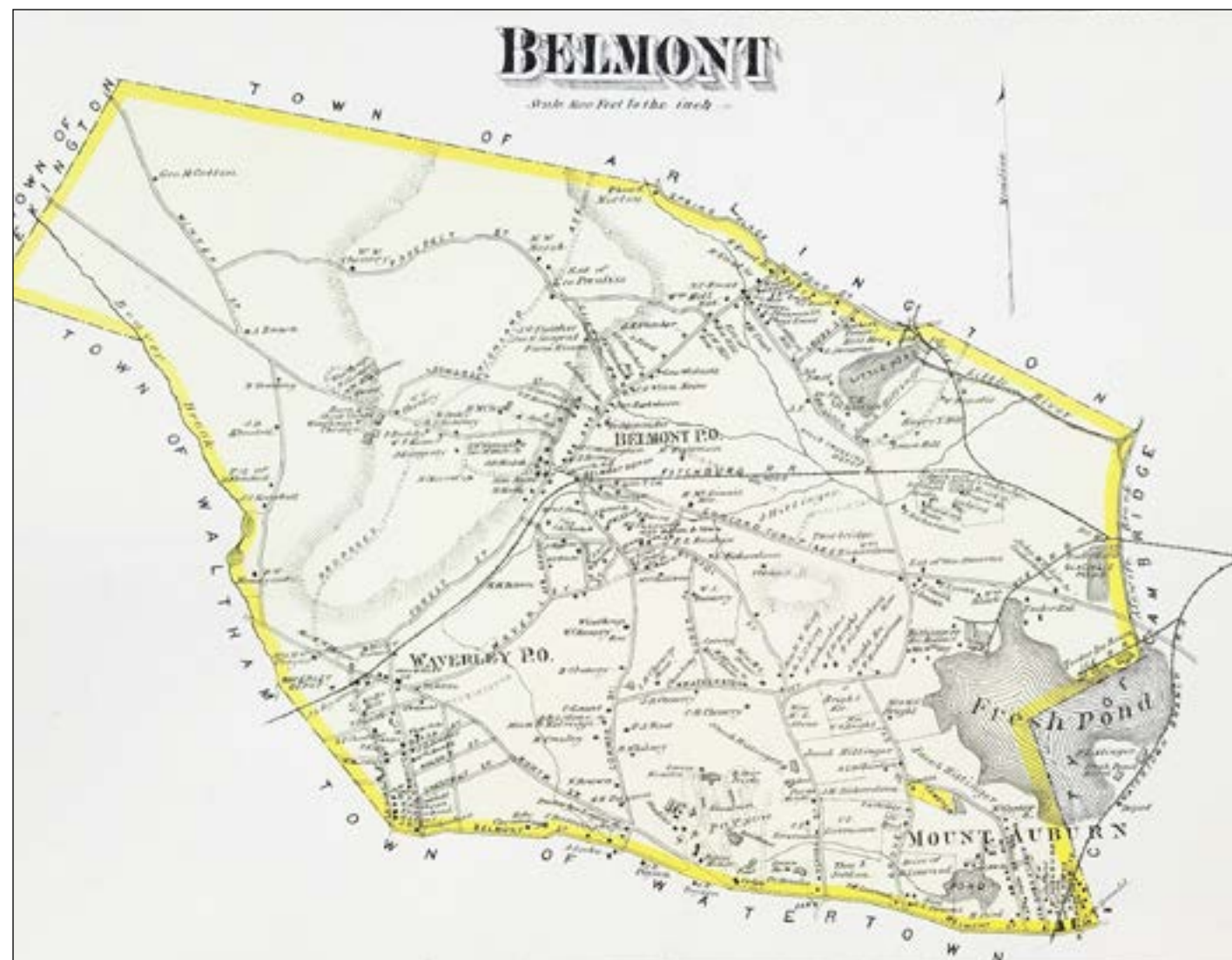
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Detail of 1875 map of Belmont.

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