Belmont Citizens Forum

OPINION: Belmont is Walking a Tightrope

By Michael Widmer

"We're being taxed out of our homes." "Belmont's special character is disappearing." "The town is at a crossroads."

In one variation or another, these are consistent refrains from residents who are worried about their future in Belmont. While no two individuals share the precisely the same concerns, it's fair to group them into three broad, interlocking categories:

- The escalating property tax burden from the combination of the 2024 operating override and three large capital projects—high school/middle school, library, and rink.
- The fear that pressures for additional housing and commercial development will overwhelm the town, exacerbate traffic, strain the schools, police, fire, and other services, and harm small businesses—all attractive features of the town for decades.
- A consequence of the first two is the fear that Belmont will lose its small-town character, with long-time residents moving out and the town becoming increasingly populated by two-income families who move here for the schools and prime location but have scarce time or interest in contributing to the community.

What's real and what's not? Let's break it into pieces.

Over the next decade, Belmont is sure to see more housing and commercial development. The pressures to produce affordable housing in the Greater Boston area are enormous. State legislation is spurring action in cities and towns, and Belmont Town Meeting recently approved two state initiatives—MBTA 3A zoning and accessory dwelling units (ADUs).

There is widespread agreement that Belmont needs more housing for people starting out and for seniors who downsize, as well as more affordable housing in general. At the same time, there is a growing cry for more commercial development in the hopes of shifting some of the tax burden away from residents.

If development is a certainty, it will be up to the Planning Board, Select Board, and Town Meeting to do it in a way that enhances, and doesn't compromise, Belmont's character. The Bradford in Cushing Square—constructed slowly over many years, curtailing above-ground parking, and driving out many small businesses—is an example of what not to do.

A key element of the town's strategy to reduce or suppress growth in residential property taxes is to promote commercial development. Several town leaders have proposed shifting the town's total assessed value from approximately 95% residential property and 5% commercial/industrial/personal (CIP) today to 90% residential and 10% CIP at some point in the future.

While a laudable target, is this goal realistic? The short answer is no.

Let's look at the numbers. In April 2024, the town contracted with RKG Associates to conduct a fiscal analysis of different hypothetical development scenarios that could potentially materialize in Belmont over the next 10 or more years.

What would it take to achieve a 90/10 split? The consultants concluded that reaching this goal would require more than doubling the current commercial valuation (from $527 million in FY24 to $1,192 million in the future). That translates into 1.9 million square feet of new commercial development compared to 1.2 million square feet that exists today.

The study puts these numbers into sharp perspective. The additional 1.9 million square feet is equivalent to adding one building the size of Boston's former Hancock Tower at 200 Clarendon Street. Obviously this is unrealistic.

To understand the impact of commercial and housing development on Belmont's budget, the study examined four different town-wide devel-

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opment scenarios—full build, mid-range, low range, and low range plus MBTA 3A rezoning.

Strikingly, the mid-range scenario, which would require the town to upgrade its development efforts, would produce only marginal new revenues—between $840,000 and $1,650,000 annually depending on how many school-age children occupy the new developments. Even the full-build scenario, highly unlikely, would only produce between $1.7 million and $3.3 million in net new annual revenues. The lower scenarios would barely break even or result in a loss.

Furthermore, it would take many years to achieve even these small gains, so the annual contribution would be tiny.

These are estimates, of course, but they are just as likely to overstate revenues as understate them. Regardless, the inescapable conclusion is that commercial and residential development, while helpful, will have only a small impact on the town's budget or the tax burden borne by residents. Increased tax revenues of $1,650,000 (the high end of the mid-range scenario) is only 1% of the town's FY25 budget of $161 million, and it would be even a smaller percentage by the time the development was completed.

To underscore this point, the RKG study calculated the impact on CIP values from each of the four development scenarios, all falling well below the 10% goal. In the full build, the CIP reached approximately 6.5%; in the mid-range scenario, 5.7%; and in the two low range scenarios, barely above 5%, where we are today.

What does this sobering analysis mean for the future of Belmont?

First, it surely does not mean that we should back off reasonable and well-thought-out commercial and housing development. Such development can strengthen the long-term future of our town, improving our business centers and providing badly needed housing while helping town finances on the margins. And every additional dollar raised by commercial development is a dollar not imposed on our residents.

But it clearly means that we cannot build our way out of our fiscal straits. Commercial development will not provide significant relief from our high residential property taxes, and Belmont will continue to struggle with a financial squeeze into the indefinite future.

As an aside, this will put great pressure on the town's political leaders with constituents clamoring for property tax relief but with no easy solutions. Yes, we need commercial development, but we must be realistic about its impact on our finances.

What then are Belmont and our leaders to do?

The only realistic answer is to hold down the rate of growth of spending. With the successful $8.4 million override last year, the town has a strategy to stretch out the proceeds over three years and turn to the voters for a smaller override in April 2027. That is part of a long-term strategy to control spending and ask our residents for more modest overrides every three years or so.

> The town is walking a tightrope in seeking to preserve the quality of our schools while not adding appreciably to our residents' tax burden.

The problem, of course, is that residents are "taxed out," and the chances of a successful override vote two years from now are problematic.

Where does the town need to turn to control spending? To the schools, of course, since they consume a lion's share of Belmont's budget and their spending has grown most rapidly over the past decades.

Belmont has always been deeply committed to its schools, which, with our location and small town character, are the town's greatest assets.

That commitment to the schools is reflected in the numbers. The schools' share of Belmont's overall budget has grown steadily over the years, from less than half of the total budget in the 1980s to approximately two-thirds today. From FY14 to FY25, the schools grew 90% and municipal services only 24%. Belmont's proposed FY26 budget continues this trend with schools growing 5.6% and municipal services 2.5%.

Over the years, several factors have contributed to the increase in school spending, including growing enrollments, increased high school course offerings, and soaring expenditures for special education.

Nevertheless, this trend of recent decades cannot be sustained indefinitely, even with periodic overrides, and certainly not if the overrides fail. And of course, if overrides are approved, that will put even more pressure on beleaguered taxpayers.

One small piece of good news: Belmont's school enrollment is forecast to decline marginally in the next decade—by 171 students or 3.9% from 2023-24 through 2028-29, and another 34 students or 0.8% through 2033–34. However, the town's efforts to expand housing options may bring in more school children than anticipated. To complicate matters further, teacher contracts are expiring this June, and in negotiations for a new contract, the union seems insensitive to the town's financial realities.

As Belmont faces an uncertain future, there are two overriding conclusions:

- Town leaders should pursue sensible economic development that preserves the character of Belmont, but with the understanding that this will only help our finances on the margins. Town leaders should not overpromise the benefits of development, and residents need to dampen their expectations of what is possible.
- School leaders will need to hold down the rate of spending growth. The 5.6% growth in the FY26 budget is a commendable reduction from prior years, no small feat, but even that rate of growth is not sustainable over the next decade. Also, over the years, many important municipal needs have been sacrificed to the schools. One recent example is the elimination of six positions in the Department of Public Works since 2022.

Looking to the future, the town is walking a tightrope in seeking to preserve the quality of our schools while not adding appreciably to our residents' tax burden. This will require an open dialogue from our leaders and some measure of patience and understanding from our residents, including parents. Our pride in Belmont may sometimes be over the top, but we are a community with special qualities that are surely worth preserving.

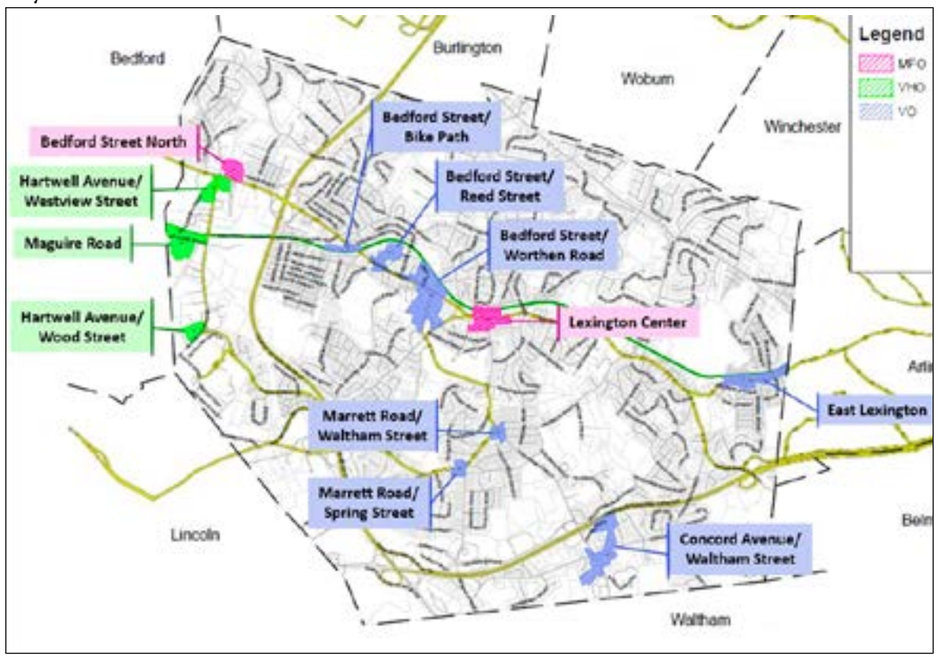
Michael Widmer was the town moderator for 17 years, Warrant Committee member (15 years including three as chair), and president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, a nonpartisan, public policy research organization (23 years).

Lexington Reverses Course on MBTA Zoning

By Meg Muckenhoupt

On April 12, 2023, Lexington Town Meeting adopted an ambitious plan to rezone 223 acres to comply with the state's MBTA Community Zoning law, spur economic growth, and increase affordable housing. Less than two years later, Lexington reversed course. Town Meeting reduced the rezoned area to under 90 acres, lowered the number of units per acre, and removed Lexington Center from the plan entirely.

The reasons for this about-face range from practical concerns about infrastructure to a century-long tradition of distaste for people who do not have enough money for a single-family home. In Lexington, the median home price is currently $1.5 million, according to Zillow.com.



Lexington's MBTA zoning in 2023.

How Lexington Rezoned 223 Acres

Lexington rezoned 223 acres in response to the MBTA Communities Act (Section 3A of the Massachusetts Zoning Act), enacted in 2021 to address the regional housing crisis. The law required Lexington to zone at least 50 acres for higher-density housing and allow for at least 1,231 units. At 15 units per acre, Lexington needed to rezone 82 acres.

In 2022-2023, Lexington's Planning Board held 23 public meetings. What they heard from the public was that Lexington needed to work towards the goals in Lexington's 2022 Comprehensive Plan, Lexington Next, including promoting a wide range of housing options throughout town and encouraging mixed-use development to stimulate commercial growth.

The Planning Board proposed an ambitious plan that went far beyond state requirements. The proposal rezoned 223 acres and created three new zoning overlays:

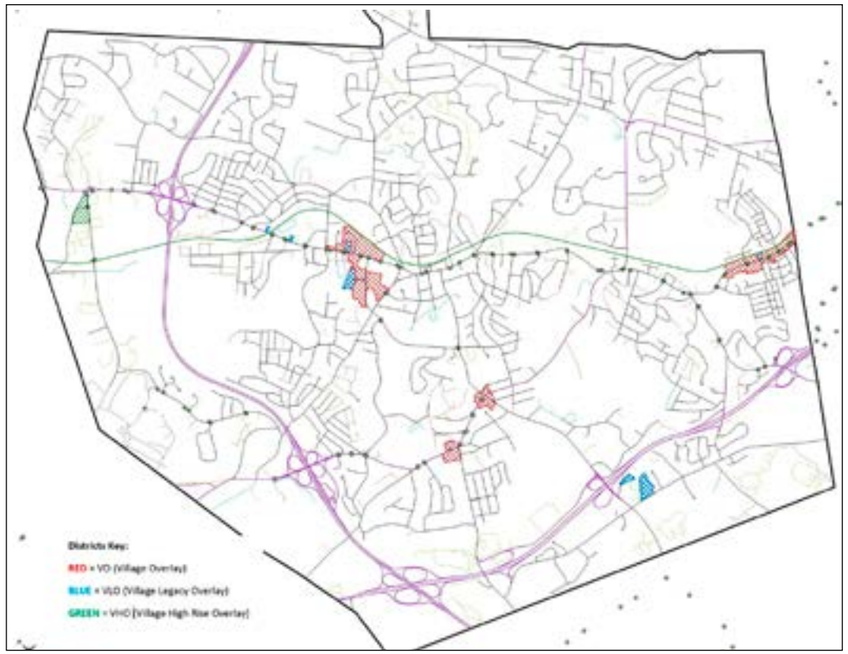
- Multifamily Overlay (MFO) districts in Lexington Center and at Bedford Street/ Hartwell Avenue.
- Village Overlay (VO) districts at seven sites across town.
- Village High-Rise Overlay (VHO) districts along Hartwell Avenue to encourage biotech redevelopment.

The MFO districts allowed taller buildings in Lexington Center (up to 52 feet vs. the existing 30-foot limit) for buildings with first-floor retail. The plan also required developments of eight or more units to designate 15% as affordable.

The Planning Board predicted that Lexington would see 400-800 units built over the next decade. For a little while, it seemed like they might be right.

No action, then rapid change

For the first year, no new developments materialized under the new zoning. That changed in mid-2024 when developers apparently noticed the lack of density limits and minimal dimensional controls. In October, Lexington Public Schools projected up to 119 new students from 756 planned units. By December, applications for 1,097 new units had been submitted—topping the town's 10-year target.



Lexington's new MBTA zoning in 2025.

In late December, alarmed residents petitioned for a Special Town Meeting to roll back the zoning to the minimum 50 acres. Legal requirements for public hearings delayed that meeting until March 17. Meanwhile, developers submitted preliminary subdivision plans covering 61.59 acres, freezing zoning for those parcels for eight years.

Throughout February and March, Lexington's Planning Board held public meetings attended by over 200 people. A compromise plan, Article 2, emerged. This plan reduced the MBTA zoning from 223 to 89.6 acres to comply with state rules. The major parts of the revised zoning:

- Allowed for 1,314 housing units at 15.1 units per acre.
- Added site coverage limits (28%) and height restrictions (40 feet for residential, 50 feet for mixed-use).
- Removed Lexington Center and one other district from the plan.

On March 17, Town Meeting approved Article 2 with 94% support. However, thanks to those preliminary subdivisions, the revised zoning still allows for nearly 6,000 new units–in a town with just over 34,000 residents.

Lexington's population would likely already be higher if Lexington hadn't adopted single-family zoning with a minimum 20,000-foot lots for most of the town decades ago. More than three-quarters of Lexington's housing stock is detached-single family homes—making it difficult for empty nesters, young workers, couples, single people, divorced parents, and other people in smaller households to live in Lexington.

The fact that so many apartments were proposed in such a short time makes it clear that there is pent-up demand for housing in suburbs with easy access to jobs along Route 128 and Boston, parks and recreation land, schools with good reputations and an historic sheen. What isn't clear is whether Lexington's about-face is a sign of practicality, fear, prejudice against people with lower incomes, or some combination. We can only hope that Lexington's future apartment and condo residents judge Lexington more kindly than Lexington judged them.

Meg Muckenhoupt is a Lexington Town Meeting member and executive editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.

How to Save Our Soil and Waterways

By Anne-Marie Lambert

It takes a village to clean up our waterways and rejuvenate the soil beneath our feet. I have been soaking in this topic for over a decade, studying the town's annual reports describing efforts to eliminate pollutants leaking into our waterways and thinking through what makes a real difference.

Step one is to care enough about the communities and ecosystems that we are a part of to realize that clean waterways and healthy soil matter. In the 1970s, citizens cared enough that Congress passed the Clean Water Act. This new regard for clean water resulted in regulations that have done an impressive job of triggering cleanup actions by developers and municipalities that might not have known what to do, even if they wanted to clean their waterways.

In the 2000s, town staff and citizens like Roger Colton cared enough to draft and push through Belmont's Stormwater Bylaw. This bylaw has become a matter-of-fact way to ensure that new developments retain stormwater on site rather than adding to our stormwater runoff problems. When the Belmont Select Board voted to support my 2014 proposal to update the standards for stormwater retention to reflect the more intense storms coming from climate change (rather than the storm data from 1961), I was very proud.

Someone else who is passionate about stormwater management recently joined Belmont's Department of Public Works (DPW) as assistant town engineer: Wayne Chouinard. Wayne is the former town engineer in Arlington, where he worked with the University of New Hampshire to design an infiltration trench that could be installed relatively easily and cheaply next to a catch basin to filter out phosphorus and other pollutants.

Arlington worked with UNH and the Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA) to install 88 infiltration trenches at a rate of 15 to 25 per year. As part of Belmont's Comprehensive Plan project, Wayne is developing an updated statement of town stormwater policy. Wayne hopes Belmont can eventually install these trenches as an add-on to regular roadwork.

In Arlington, he also worked closely with the MyRWA to educate citizens on planting rain gardens, sharing how much he knows and cares about waterways. Wayne is working on a draft statement of policy now. I am hopeful that Wayne's knowledge and passion will result in exciting progress in Belmont.

Meanwhile, Belmont's current outreach to citizens regarding pollution prevention meets the minimum requirements of the state's requirement for Belmont's Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4). It includes:

- Annual message to pet owners regarding proper management of pet waste
- Public health message about pet waste
- Educational material for owners of septic systems about proper maintenance
- Annual message in April/May regarding proper use and disposal of grass clippings
- Annual message in June/July regarding proper use of slow-release and phosphorus-free fertilizers
- Annual message in August/September/October regarding proper disposal of leaf litter
- Annual message in June regarding proper disposal of yard waste, hazardous waste, used oil, etc.
- Annual stormwater flyer (mailed with quarterly water/sewer bill in April)

During a recent interview with Wayne, he said he'd like to add a few more steps.

- Outreach to citizen groups regarding what stormwater management is and some best management practices such as "micro-swales" and "micro-basins" to retain stormwater and let it drain more slowly on your property
- Vacuuming leaves, sediment, and other particulates from driveways and walkways
- Landscaper seminar to incorporate stormwater retention features in landscape design
- Requests to owners of properties with stormwater operations and maintenance plans associated with their title to confirm appropriate stormwater control maintenance was done

I can think of more for those who are curious about how to help.

- Encourage homeowners to check out the "storm drains" and "sewer" layers on the town's GIS map (www.mapsonline.net/belmontma/index.html) to see how far rain travels to get from your nearest stormwater grate to one of our waterways (e.g., Beaver Brook, Wellington Brook, Winn's Brook, Little Pond, Little River, Clay Pit Pond, Blair Pond).
- Reach out to home buyers and building inspectors to ensure basement facilities and appliances connect to the same sewer main as upstairs facilities (and not out to the street, sump, or stormwater drain). Basement renovations can be the source of illegal connections to the stormwater system.
- Encourage voters to let our elected officials know that reducing the volume of pollution Belmont is sending into our waterways is a priority.

Detail of Belmont's web page on pet waste disposal.

Outfalls take Belmont water away

Do you remember learning about the water cycle, about evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and collection? The natural water cycle is broken in Belmont's two watersheds (the Charles and the Mystic rivers). A lot of the rainfall does not replenish local plants, soil, or groundwater. Instead, we have diverted it through stormwater grates and clay drain pipes until it reaches an outfall (OF) that eventually releases water into a natural water body that flows out of Belmont. This situation leaves much of the soil under our roadways and buildings dry, dead, and vulnerable to washout.

Outfalls are boundaries between our man-made infrastructure and nature. They come in all sizes and shapes. They transport road-related toxins that don't get a chance to filter slowly through soil before entering waterways. They release sediment that doesn't have a chance to settle out the way it would if our brooks were more meandering and less channelized. Finally, because our aging sewer pipes and stormwater drains are leaky and intermingle their flows underground, many of Belmont's outfalls release E. coli and other sewage-related pollutants directly into waterways that eventually flow into the Charles and Mystic.

Belmont's broken pipes

Fixing broken pipes is a job for the town and its contractors, not individual citizens. While the town staff are dedicated, and the town has spent close to $2 million from various funding sources to find and fix broken pipes over the last 10 years, Belmont's annual reports show that progress in finding and fixing broken pipes has been slow. We are challenged to address known problems in our underground infrastructure, let alone seek problems we don't know about yet.

The last annual MS4 report states that to date, only 35% of Belmont's outfalls have been "completed," meaning dry-weather investigations against EPA pollution standards are complete. However, this statistic is misleading because about 80% of Belmont land drains into just two of our 32 outfalls, OF 10 (Winn's Brook) and OF 8 (Wellington Brook). The 11 outfalls that have been "completed" are tiny by comparison.

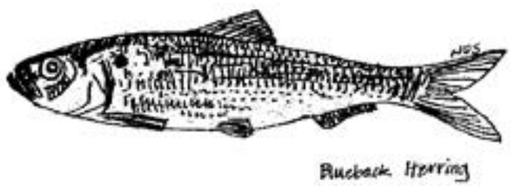
The scale of the potential problems with our hidden infrastructure is daunting. It's not clear to me that the pace of repairs can keep up with the pace of new breakages in our aging infrastructure, especially given that increasingly severe

weather and increasingly dense housing both cause additional strain for which our current system was not designed.

The last annual MS4 report covers progress between June 2023 and June 2024. During this period, the town's contractor, Stantec, focused on two small outflows, OF-1 and OF-11/11A. To my eyes, the town made painfully slow progress actually finding and fixing broken pipes.

OF-1 releases stormwater from a medium-sized area that includes parts of Trapelo Road. The town had already discovered and eliminated a partial illicit connection within that area at 58 Van Ness Road in November of 2022. When Stantec sampled downstream flows in April/May 2024, they found that certain pollutants were reduced but still slightly exceeded EPA standards. They are waiting until later this year to do more measurements. In another part of the OF-1 drainage area, the town found that stormwater drains in Unity Avenue, Fairview Avenue, and Payson Road flowed even in dry weather, an indicator that sewage is likely entering the stormwater drain. By June 2024, the town inspected the drains with cameras and found some were indeed in poor or fair condition. However, because the dry-weather flows might be related to broader flooding issues, the town decided to defer any repairs until it can complete a flood study within this catchment area.

Outfall 11/11A releases stormwater into Little Pond from two small catchment areas. After taking dry- and wet-weather measurements at downstream catch basins in 2017, the town knew there was a pollution problem around Staunton Road. This period was the first year of a five-year consent decree from the EPA (see "Fix the Stormwater System: It's the Law," *BCF Newsletter*, July 2017.) It took until 2022 to find and fix a problem with a sewer line draining into a capped drain, yet measurements taken in 2023 indicated there might still be a problem.



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In May 2024, the sewer lateral to one house was discovered to be broken in two places when a homeowner called the DPW about a backup. The town's latest annual MS4 report mentions this as a problem to address with the owner in 2025. We don't know how many more situations like this are out there and whether they will each take eight years to fix.

Besides follow-up work in the drainage areas for outfalls 1 and 11/11a this year, the town plans to focus on OF-2, which releases stormwater from a medium-sized area, including Payson Park. The town tends to pace its investments in sewer and stormwater measurements and repairs so that they coincide with road repairs driven by the state of the road surfaces. If voters do not consider addressing pollution as urgent as fixing potholes, if your staff is overloaded with other priorities, and if the EPA lets you off the hook, this makes sense.

Good news in Belmont's new construction

The new Belmont High School included important best management practices such as permeable pavement and a hydrodynamic separator to separate sediment and floatable trash from stormwater before it drains into Clay Pit Pond. Two projects in progress include significant stormwater retrofits (skating rink and Belmont Public Library) and the town has identified five town-owned properties where impervious areas could be reduced: Chenery Middle School, the Claflin Street parking lot, Wellington School, Butler School, and the Pequossette Park/VFW Post 1271 parking lot.

I wish there were a way to increase the visibility of underground infrastructure problems. We are accumulating data slowly, but we still don't know the full scope of the problem or even where to prioritize our efforts to find problems.

I hope that new sensor technologies and policy guidance will enable us to work together on a system-wide approach. Our "village" includes homeowners and staff engineers, pet owners and gardeners, educators, building committees, elected officials, and watershed organizations. Together, we can get this done!

Anne-Marie Lambert is a former director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Conservation Commissions Protect Our Water

By Dorothy McGlincy and Jeffrey North

Belmont is home to the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions (MACC), a vital nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting Massachusetts's natural resources by supporting conservation commissions across the Commonwealth. Since its founding in 1961, MACC has been a cornerstone of environmental advocacy, providing resources, training, and support to the state's 351 conservation commissions and promoting the protection of natural resources for future generations. MACC is headquartered at Mass Audubon's Habitat property on Juniper Road.

A mission rooted in conservation

At its core, MACC's mission is to assist and empower local conservation commissions, which serve as the frontline defenders of natural resources in their communities. Established under the Massachusetts Conservation Commission Act of 1957, these commissions play a critical role in preserving wetlands and maintaining open spaces. MACC's work ensures that these volunteer-led bodies are equipped to enforce state and local environmental regulations effectively and sustainably.

Core activities of MACC

Education and training

MACC has a wide variety of educational programs which are designed to strengthen the expertise of Conservation Commission members and other stakeholders. MACC trains more than 2,000 participants every year on wetland regulations, stormwater management, and conservation land management.

- Fundamentals for Conservation Commissioners
  A flagship certificate training series that provides a strong foundation for new commissioners and others interested in wetlands protection. Classes are focused on a wide variety of topics, including understanding the types of wetlands resources in Massachusetts; writing effective orders of condition; understanding site maps and how to conduct a site visit; protecting wildlife habitat; open space planning and protection; and stormwater requirements for wetlands protection.
- Workshops and Conferences
  MACC hosts an annual environmental conference, the largest gathering of conservation professionals in New England. The annual conference features more than 30 expert-led workshops on issues such as climate resilience, wetlands protection, stormwater management, and land stewardship. The conferences and training programs are open to the public.
- Free Lunch & Learn Webinars
  Monthly lunchtime webinars are offered on current topics such as invasive plants, vernal pools, solar siting, native plants for pollinators, stormwater management, the endangered species act, and protecting wildlife from rodenticides.
- Online Resources
  MACC provides guides, fact sheets, and webinars on evolving environmental policies, ensuring that commissioners stay informed about best practices.

Advocacy and policy support

MACC is a strong voice in state-level environmental policy, advocating for laws and regulations that enhance wetlands, open space, and natural resource protection. The organization collaborates with many other environmental partners, state agencies, and legislators to strengthen water, wetland, and climate-resilient programs to ensure the programs are robust enough to address modern challenges such as climate change and urbanization.

Technical assistance

Conservation commissions often encounter complex environmental challenges, from permitting disputes to wetland restoration projects. MACC serves as a trusted advisor, offering guidance on the commission's authority and responsibilities, administering the Wetlands Protection Act and regulations, and suggesting ways to run effective meetings.

Community engagement

Recognizing that conservation success depends on public awareness, MACC works to educate the public as well as the volunteer conservation commissioners about the importance of protecting wetlands and natural resources. Through outreach initiatives, the organization fosters a culture of environmental stewardship that extends beyond commission chambers. MACC staff and board members connect with high school students when assisting with the annual Envirothon competition. The next generation of environmental leaders can be seen in the Envirothon's student environmental teams.

Adding value to communities

The all-volunteer conservation commission is the first line of environmental protection to local communities across the Commonwealth. By educating and empowering local conservation commissions, MACC helps local residents, with their "boots on the ground," implement state Wetlands Protection Act regulations, allowing the state wetlands staff to focus on more complex projects. The educational opportunities MACC provides for commissioners mean their environmental decisions will be made with expertise and care. This benefits Massachusetts communities in several ways:

Protecting wetlands and water resources

Wetlands are vital ecosystems that provide flood control, water filtration, and habitat for wildlife. Through training and policy support, conservation commissions learn to protect wetland resource areas, enforce wetlands regulations and safeguard these critical areas.

Enhancing climate resilience

As Massachusetts faces increasing threats from rising sea levels and extreme weather, MACC's training equips conservation commissions with tools to plan for climate resilience. This includes strategies that can preserve natural buffers that protect drinking water quality, enhance groundwater recharge, minimize stormwater runoff, and mitigate urban heat islands.

Preserving open spaces

Open spaces contribute to community well-being by offering recreational opportunities and promoting biodiversity. MACC supports efforts to identify and protect these areas so they remain accessible for future generations.

Looking ahead

As environmental protection challenges grow more complex, MACC's educational and advocacy efforts remain as essential as ever. From protecting wetlands and open space, to combating invasive species and addressing climate change, Massachusetts communities will continue to rely on the expertise and advocacy of this Belmont-based nonprofit organization, and the hard work of their local conservation commission members and the commission staff.

For residents of Belmont and beyond, our conservation commissions serve as a reminder of the power of collective action of nonprofit associations and volunteer conservation commissioners working together to protect the natural world. By supporting the local conservation commissions that safeguard wetlands and open spaces, MACC helps ensure that Massachusetts remains a leader in environmental stewardship.

This article was prepared by Dorothy McGlincy, MACC executive director, and Jeffrey North, BCF managing editor.

MACC.ORG

One of Massachusetts's many wetlands: South River in Marshfield, MA.

The Role of a Conservation Commissions in Massachusetts

Conservation commissions have two primary areas of responsibility in Massachusetts: to manage and protect a community's natural resources, and to administer the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act. The Wetlands Protection Act is intended to ensure that work in or near wetlands will not alter them.

Commissions review and permit projects near wetlands, rivers, and other protected resource areas to ensure the projects do not harm these ecosystems. Whether it's a small project like a new deck on a house or a large construction project, if the work is conducted within an area under the jurisdiction of the Wetlands Protection Act, the local conservation commission will evaluate the potential environmental impacts and work to mitigate them.

Conservation commissions often lead efforts to preserve open spaces, maintain trails, and promote environmental education. Many commissions collaborate with local land trusts, state agencies, and volunteers to acquire and manage conservation land, ensuring it remains protected for public enjoyment and ecological health.

Commissions also play a growing role in addressing climate change. They help communities minimize flooding from severe storms, protect wetlands, and promote nature-based solutions to enhance resilience.

Conservation commissions, typically composed of volunteer members appointed by the town or city, bring together residents committed to environmental stewardship. Commissions are guardians of a community's natural assets, balancing development needs with the imperative to protect the environment for current and future generations.

Learn more about the Belmont Conservation Commission at www.belmont-ma.gov/1558/Conservation-Commission. See additional information about Massachusetts wetlands at www.mass.gov/guides/wetlands-information.

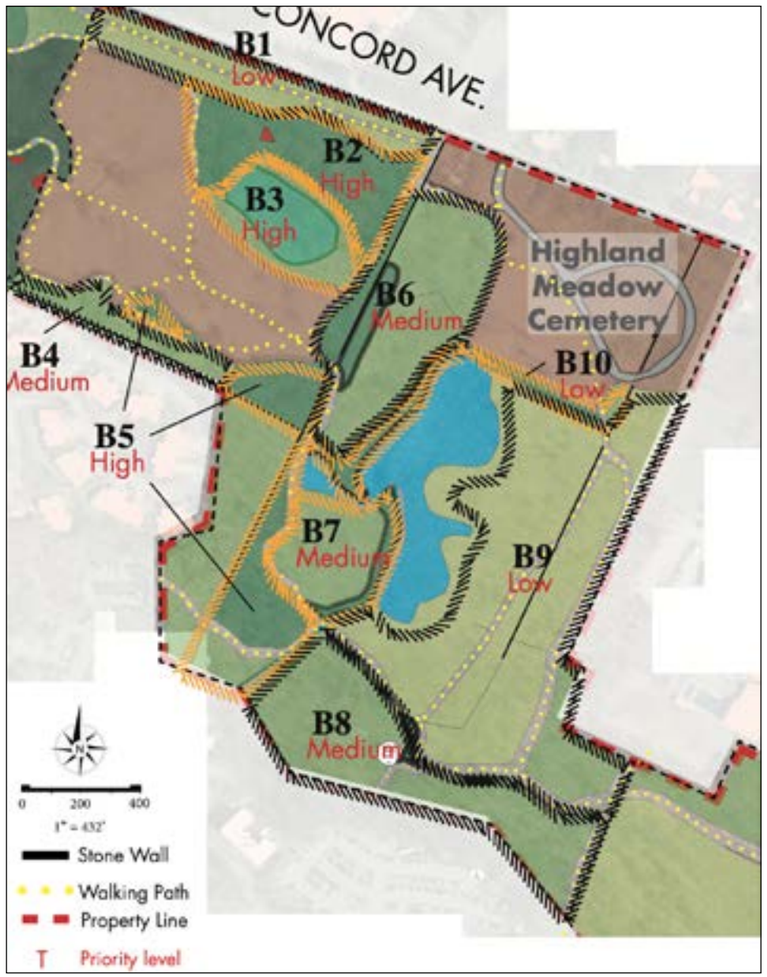
There is More to Restore on Lone Tree Hill

By Joseph Hibbard and Jeffrey North

A crew of 30 field technicians, crew leaders, and one or two landscape designers kicked off the Lone Tree Hill work season on Lone Tree Hill on March 14 with a day of training. For the second consecutive year, the Land Management Committee (LMC) for Lone Tree Hill (LTH) granted permission for the Parterre Ecological Services "Class of 2025" to conduct an invasive species removal training session for field technicians.

The trainees' target area was a section in the northeast corner of the Great Meadow. The training area provided a hands-on workspace for training in plant identification, hand cutting, safe chainsaw operation, and stacking brush into habitat piles. Joseph Hibbard, Belmont resident and landscape architect, represented the LMC while guiding the work alongside Parterre staff.

The day included a review of the LTH land management plan, a discussion about site history, tool setup, instructions on debris piles that provide habitat for wildlife, herbicide signage, safety measures, seeding, and the identification of invasive and native plants in the work area. The group received training and reinforcement of prior lessons in step-by-step techniques for removing and treating invasive plants, including cutting, dabbing, girdling, and spraying.



Lone Tree Hill.

This training exercise on LTH has produced a more capable group of field technicians, and another area of LTH (Area B2) has been cleared of invasive plant species. After initial training, Parterre divided into four teams to tackle invasive species, including common buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), glossy buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*), Asiatic bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), and European privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*).

After cutting, the stems of these species were treated with a targeted herbicide to eliminate them at the roots, allowing native species to compete without the negative impacts of soil disturbance. Debris from the removal was stacked into intentional habitat piles that will provide cover for cottontails, nesting birds, and amphibians. Parterre work groups, trained on the site, will return to LTH at intervals during the growing season to continue the ecological restoration work that began in 2020.

Last year, during orientation and training, the team carried out an initial removal operation of invasive plants in one of the high-priority areas (B5). They removed or cut back common buckthorn, glossy buckthorn, winged euonymus (burning bush), bittersweet, and honeysuckle. Visitors to the site can see the large brush piles stacked nearby. This year, another high-priority area (B2) was addressed in a similar manner. For those familiar with the LTH conservation land back in 2020, the annual removal of invasive species since then has transformed broad areas surrounding the Great Meadow.

Forestry mower at Lone Tree Hill.

JEFFREY NORTH

Restoration Plan for 2025

Parterre's team of restoration ecologists will continue treatment with herbicides for invasive plants in the areas where the removal of invasive species began in 2020. Parterre has performed follow-up spot treatments on reemerging plants each year since then. This summer, they will schedule two visits for spot treatment in edge areas of the Great Meadow, which cover about 16 acres in the northwest corner of the LTH property and had the highest density of invasive species back in 2020. Since then, approximately 12 of the 16 acres have been successfully cleared of woody invasive plants. These clusters of oak-hickory-pine woodlands, along with meadow and meadow edge habitats, are showing renewed health due to the removal of invasive plant species.

This year will also see ongoing invasive plant herbicide treatments in the area along Judy's Trail, named for the late Judy Record, who campaigned to save this land. Volunteers cleared this area in 2023, and Parterre has performed spot herbicide treatments in 2024, with additional treatments planned for this coming summer.

This year, new work areas include forest mowing on a slope on the south side of Lone Tree Hill along the Meadow Edge Trail. The slope was heavily overgrown with invasive glossy buckthorn, common buckthorn, and bittersweet vine. On March 19, a forestry mower produced impressive results.

On April 26, at the Belmont Citizens Forum volunteer day organized in conjunction with the Judy Record Conservation Fund, volunteers replanted the area with Eastern white pine and Eastern red cedar saplings. These evergreen trees will eventually provide shade for the bank and help suppress the regrowth of invasive shrubs and vines. Several years of follow-up monitoring for invasives on the slope will be necessary until the pines establish dominance and the desired forest growth is achieved.

The Belmont Citizens Forum and the Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill express our heartfelt gratitude for the ongoing support from the Judy Record Conservation Fund, which makes this vital restoration work possible.

Joseph Hibbard is a landscape architect and Belmont resident. Jeffrey North is the managing editor for the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.

Profiles in Belmont: Hal Shubin

By Elissa Ely

Height comes with advantages (which many of us low to the ground wish we had). In Hal Shubin's case, it's one way to recognize him at the Belmont Farmers' Market, where he's chairman of the overseeing committee. You might already have recognized him, though, from his work with the Belmont Food Collaborative, or his three terms on the Board of Library Trustees, or his early involvement on The Belmont Voice, back when the weekly newspaper was still a list of suggested names. As he wrote on his LinkedIn page, "no rest for the retired."

Hal's farm awareness started early in life. Growing up on Long Island, "everything was a farming community." One farm was reconfigured into a bowling alley, a shopping center, and the Shubin family home, with a farmstand behind the house. The neighborhood was close-knit, and reunions still draw former residents from around the country.

As a boy, Hal loved sports and AM Top-40 radio. His first real job was selling ice cream and soda in Shea Stadium; eventually, he was promoted to selling beer at the Nassau Coliseum. That was a mixed financial experience. Profits went down during concerts because he was too busy listening to the music.

He had no particular path in mind when he majored in chemistry at Albany University. But then, as he describes, "the most pivotal moment of my life: a friend said, 'Take the Intro Computer Science class, it's fun and easy. You'll get a good grade.' " A master's degree in computer science from Buffalo University followed, and after that, an entire life.

His move from upstate New York to Massachusetts in the 1980s was driven by temperature and common sense—"I wanted an upgrade in the weather from Buffalo," he says. The move from Maynard to Belmont in 1994 was driven by schools and convenience; he and his wife had become parents by then, both working in Cambridge. Bicycling also let him pedal to talks that interested him at Harvard and MIT, and he still gets around that way. "I stop at bakeries," he adds. Probably more of us should combine transportation with pastry.

Hal's professional direction changed once he discovered user-experience design: eight enigmatic syllables that translate into creating easy, intuitive computer products. He conducted research with clients' customers, studied program usability, designed workshops, developed prototypes. "The goal is to make software understandable to users and meet their needs," he says—kind of a variant on creating chemistry labs that non-chemists can enjoy.

Over more than 25 years, he worked his way through a wide range of projects: dictation instruments for physicians, patent searches for lawyers, email marketing, speech-to-text translation. "When I was fixing forms for medical offices to file their Medicare claims, it wasn't exciting," he recalls, "but it made the work day easier for people and patients."

User-experience design was invaluable in unforeseen areas, too. After COVID vaccines became available, the state established a labyrinthine website for booking appointments (and how many of us lost ourselves there, in one dim cave or another?). Hal volunteered with an Arlington software engineer who, frustrated like everyone, had the talent to create a workable alternative. He observed users of the state design, ran study sessions, fixed problems, and, when the website launched, became a customer. "I got my first shot that way."

In 2006, the Belmont Farmers' Market came into existence. It's part of the Belmont Food Collaborative, a nonprofit umbrella organization including Belmont Composts, Belmont Helps, Belmont Food Pantry, and Community Gardening. Hal was involved in the market from its inception. "I like to eat, I like to cook, and it's a half mile from my house," he says straight-facedly. "But it's more than that. It's a community every week."

It's also an educational forum in the guise of a good time. The POP (Power of Produce) program hands kids $3 a week to buy fruit, produce, or plants. "I just can't tell you how cool it is," he says. "One kid said, 'I tried garlic scapes. Not my favorite thing, but I still like 'em.'" Financially strategic POP users save their money from week to week for higher purchase power at the end of the season. Extra dollars are awarded for joining the aerobic "Move It" hour, run last year by a local martial arts

ALISA ISAKOVA

Hal Shubin.

organization. And when the kids talk to farmers, it's almost like getting their own hands in the soil.

Each week there is mingling on every level in the large parking lot behind Belmont Center. Market vendors become friends; some trade leftovers at the end of the day. Hal occasionally visits their farms. "It's wonderful to see where your food's grown," he says. "I like blueberries, but not from Peru." Market managers from different communities become friends, too—a Facebook page that shares their problems and solutions was especially essential in 2020, when there were two months to figure out how to run markets during COVID.

Alongside vendor stalls, artisan tents, education, music, motion, and wanderers with reusable bags, there are office hours. Select Board members, Representative Dave Rogers and Senator Will Brownsberger sometimes appear in person for dialogue (also, hopefully, for purchase).

Then, there are the services. This will be the fourth year for a Food Assistance Information Fair, where state organizations advise on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) applications. Hunger is no stranger to Belmont; almost 700 households receive SNAP for now, though Congress is contemplating a projected $230 billion withdrawal of federal sponsorship. Their benefits are doubled at the Farmers' Market, and coupons also go to eligible seniors and WIC patrons. Supporting this funding, as well as POP, takes grant proposals and wooing sponsors; there is more to do.

All this programming throws a lot of spinning plates into the air. Even a tall person could have trouble juggling them at times. "Someone once said to me, 'Why do you need a committee to run a Farmers' Market?'", Hal recalls. "I said, 'It's like running a bar mitzvah every week.' We bring in 1,000 shoppers on average. Now if only we could control the weather."

Running a perpetual bar mitzvah has had some consequences for the committee chairman. Hal doesn't eat as much meat, and what he eats now has been humanely and healthily raised. Also, he keeps a garden, though it's mostly shrubs and perennials. "I grow some tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs. "But," he adds, "it turns out I know where to get really fresh local produce."

Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.

OPINION: Understanding America's Food Systems

By Tom Phillips

With ambitious promises being made by the new Secretary of Health and Human Services to challenge "big ag" and reduce the country's reliance on processed foods, and with significant actions already being taken by the Trump administration that impact agriculture on a national level—including the attempted layoffs of federal workers at USDA and FDA—it is crucial for Belmont citizens to understand the complexities of food systems.

Growing up in the suburbs of Boston without any family ties to farming, I find it challenging to grasp the financial struggles, social issues, and environmental impacts inherent in food production. I doubt I am alone in this feeling, which has led me to wonder how I can become better informed. After speaking with local Boston-area food producers, I have identified two primary obstacles to understanding agriculture and ways to overcome them.

Obstacle 1: Flexible Definitions

One challenge to understanding modern agriculture is the flexible and often ambiguous terminology used in public discourse. Words like "organic," "sustainable," and "local" vary in meaning depending on whom you ask. For example, the US Code Title 7, Section 3103 defines "sustainable agriculture" as:

"An integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over the long-term—(A) satisfy human food and fiber needs; (B) enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends; (C) make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; (D) sustain the economic viability of farm operations; and (E) enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole."

While this definition may seem straightforward to people like me who are unfamiliar with farming, food producers often find it impossible to fulfill all five components simultaneously. Jim Wilson of Wilson Farm states, "One of the biggest aspects of sustainability is financial. With land values as high as they are, we're under pressure to stay profitable." In high-cost areas like Boston, maintaining economic viability sometimes conflicts with other sustainability goals, such as environmental conservation.

Similarly, the term "organic" carries varied interpretations. The USDA's Certified Organic standards promote practices that conserve biodiversity and maintain ecological balance. However, some small farmers question the label's effectiveness. Mike Chase of Belmont Acres said, "I've seen multiple iterations of what 'organic' means. Just because something is organic doesn't guarantee it's environmentally friendly." He pointed to recent contamination issues on organic farms in Maine involving PFAS chemicals, raising questions about the true sustainability of certified practices.

This lack of consistency makes it difficult for consumers to make informed choices or support policies that align with their values. When definitions change or prove insufficiently specific, the public is left navigating a murky landscape of claims and counterclaims.

Obstacle 2: High Expectations

Another challenge in understanding food systems arises from consumers' expectations for inexpensive and diverse food options. Chase notes that many customers feel disappointed when local farms cannot provide the same variety and low prices as

TOM PHILLIPS

Mike Chase and friends at Belmont Acres farm.

supermarkets. "People are so used to supermarkets that they don't grasp what's feasible seasonally," he said. This disconnect between expectations and reality also affects pricing. Chase further added, "If you want cheap, you're not going to find it at a small family farm. I can't look my employees in the eyes and pay them eight dollars an hour."

Such expectations also complicate public understanding of food policy. For example, while the idea of combating "ultraprocessed foods" sounds appealing, it could significantly increase grocery costs. As Chase observed, every management decision impacts the financial, environmental, or social aspects of farming, and finding a balance is more complex than it seems.

Overcoming the Obstacles

The question remains: How can consumers better understand agriculture? The reality is that the financial, environmental, and social complexities of agriculture can only be fully grasped by people working within these systems. However, one practical approach is to "get to know our farmers."

Both Wilson and Chase believe that direct communication through farm tours and community discussions helps bridge the knowledge gap. Wilson said, "I've been doing farm tours for decades, discussing soil health and marketing—it helps people understand the challenges we face." Chase shared similar sentiments, emphasizing the value of open dialogue between farmers and the community.

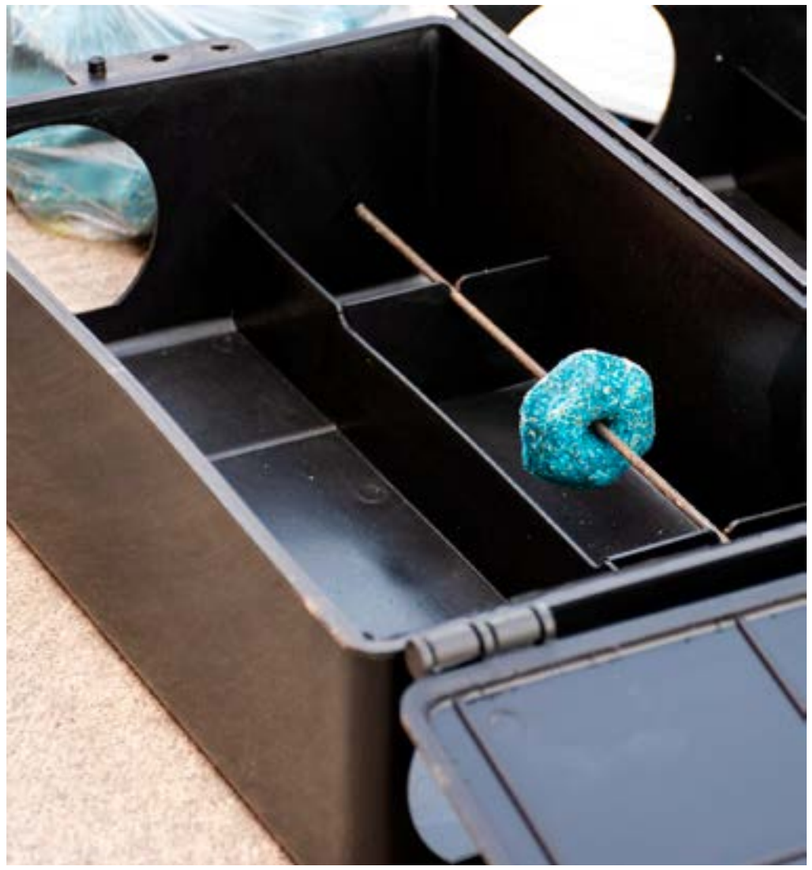
Although personal interactions cannot fully address the challenges of understanding food systems, they promote a deeper awareness of the trade-offs involved in sustainable and ethical food production. Taking the time to engage directly with farmers can provide a more nuanced perspective than media sound bites or political rhetoric. By seizing opportunities to learn directly from local farmers, we can better understand the complexities of modern agriculture and make more thoughtful decisions moving forward.

Thomas Phillips is a Belmont native and an environmental legal assistant at the Sierra Club.

Belmont Reduces Rodenticides on Town Land

By Jeffrey North

Belmont is preparing to vote on a home rule petition at the May Town Meeting to seek local authority to regulate use of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs) on private property. Belmont has largely eliminated SGARs on public property, recognizing their dangers to wildlife, pets, and children. Town departments, including the Health Department, Public Works, Facilities, and Housing Authority, have adopted safer alternatives such as electric traps, carbon dioxide treatments, and snap traps. This initiative reflects Belmont's commitment to environmentally responsible pest management and aligns with statewide efforts to curb the use of the most toxic rodenticides.



JEFFREY NORTH

A bait box with rodenticide.

Rodenticides, particularly highly toxic SGARs, pose significant threats to wildlife, pets, and public health. These potent poisons disrupt blood clotting, resulting in prolonged internal bleeding in rodents. However, they also have unintended consequences for nontarget species. Predators such as hawks, owls, eagles, coyotes, and foxes (and their newborns) that consume poisoned rodents become poisoned themselves, leading to illness and death for entire families. These poisons also pose threats to pets and children.

We do not know how many children die from ingesting these compounds. However, according to the 2022 Annual Report of the American Association of Poison Control Centers, more than 8,000 rodenticide ingestions were reported in the United States, with more than half involving children younger than six. Anticoagulant rodenticides accounted for more than 3,000 of these cases. In Massachusetts, nearly 200 people were exposed to SGARs between 2021 and 2023, with almost half of them being children under the age of six. Although the full impact on human health remains uncertain, the risks are undeniable.

Vendors' choice

While SGARs are widely used due to their cost-effectiveness, research suggests they do not provide long-term rodent control and may attract more rodents. This type of rat poison is so prevalent because it's among the most cost-effective ways for exterminators to deal with rodents, providing the greatest amount of revenue to the vendor with less labor than other methods.

However, there is no credible research that demonstrates that SGARs are more than briefly effective at controlling rodent pests . Rats reproduce young, frequently, and year-round. SGARs are manufactured to be tasty, so they tend to attract more rats and mice, although their first-choice dining options are always open trash containers and compost. Further, rats are developing a tolerance for SGARs after years of exposure to first-generation ARs resulted in a high tolerance and immunity to those older products.

There are several alternatives to SGARs that are just as (or more) effective at controlling rodent populations without killing hawks, foxes, and pets.

Municipal action: alternatives to poison on public property

A growing number of Massachusetts towns and cities have adopted policies to eliminate or reduce the use of SGARs on public property. Belmont is among the municipalities at the forefront of this trend, actively implementing safer pest control practices. Belmont has largely, if not entirely, removed SGARs from town property.

The Belmont Health Department has piloted the use of several Smart Boxes around town. These devices deliver electric shocks rather than poison to eliminate rats. The Health Department also offers guidance to local businesses and homeowners on rodent prevention and control.

Belmont's Department of Public Works (DPW) does not use rodenticides. In 2017, when rats were reported at Joey's Park near Winn Brook Elementary School, using poisons in a playground setting was deemed unwise. "The challenging thing about managing pests on a playground is there are kids on the playground," remarked DPW Director Jason Marcotte.

Instead, the DPW partnered with Assurance Pest Solutions to implement nontoxic integrated pest management (IPM) techniques. These methods include using carbon dioxide from dry ice in burrows, garlic-based nesting deterrents, and snap traps. Bait boxes at Grove Street Park contain nontoxic, flavored bait and snap traps, posing no risk to children, pets, or groundwater.

Belmont's Facilities Department, responsible for more than one million square feet of buildings and grounds, also avoids rodenticides. Facilities Director Dave Blazon confirmed that none of the town's schools, police, fire stations, or administrative sites use these harmful chemicals.

The Belmont Housing Authority (BHA) provides 256 housing units in town for low-income families, veterans, older adults, and individuals with disabilities. Recognizing concerns about the impact of SGARs on wildlife and pets, the BHA has taken steps to transition toward safer pest management practices. According to Raymond Morales, District Housing Manager, the BHA is actively replacing SGARs with rodenticides containing Vitamin D3, which do not travel up the food chain and thus pose less risk to non-target species.

Statewide movement toward safer pest management

Belmont's shift from poisons to IPM reflects a broader trend across Massachusetts. According to Mass Audubon, groups in 84 communities with names like "Save Arlington Wildlife" have organized to minimize the use of SGARs in communities throughout the state. Many towns and cities have eliminated SGARs from municipal properties, including:

- Arlington (2022): Banned SGARs on town property.
- Brookline (2023): Adopted an internal policy prohibiting SGARs.
- Grafton (2025): Restricted SGAR use on town property.
- Lexington (2024): Passed Article 40, banning SGARs on town-owned properties.
- Newbury (2024) Select Board voted unanimously to ban the use of SGARs on town-owned property.
- Newton (2023): Voted to ban SGARs on public lands.
- Somerville (2024): The city removed SGAR bait stations from school grounds and is evaluating phasing out SGAR use on other municipal properties and demolition projects.
- Waltham (2023): Updated Conservation Commission policies to restrict SGAR use.
- Wayland (2025): Proposed a ban on SGARs on town-controlled properties.
- Lowell (2025): The City Council unanimously voted to prohibit SGARs on city-owned properties.

According to Mass Audubon, 24 towns and cities have reduced their use of SGARs on municipal

properties, and 11 more were working towards this as of March 31. Mass Audubon operates an ombudsman or umbrella organization, A Campaign to Rescue Raptors, that provides resources and guidance to Massachusetts communities.

Addressing Private Property Challenges

Under Massachusetts law, municipalities cannot enforce stricter regulations than state law. Towns must file a Home Rule petition to request state permission to establish their own rules concerning restrictions on SGARs for private properties. If a Home Rule petition for rodenticide use on private property is approved, a town may create its own regulations or adopt those set by neighboring municipalities.

Belmont has largely, if not entirely, removed SGARs from town property.

Raptors seek sustenance and food for their young across a wide geographic range. Eagles nesting around the Mystic Lakes regularly visited Belmont until they succumbed to lethal doses of SGARs from consuming poisoned rodents. Since November 2024, at least two hawks and two owls have died from SGAR poisoning in Belmont; however, these are only the birds found on our streets or in residents' yards. We can assume that more have perished in Belmont's woods and conservation lands.

Seven towns and cities have submitted petitions for home rule, seeking the authority to impose restrictions on SGARs on private property: Arlington, Brookline, Eastham, Lexington, Newbury, Newton, Orleans, Provincetown, and Wellfleet. For example, on March 26, Lexington Town Meeting voted 166 to 3 in favor of a home rule petition, paving the way for a future bylaw to restrict SGARs in their town.

At least six more towns and cities—Belmont, Concord, Grafton, Kingston, Swampscott, and Winchester—aim to pass home rule petitions this spring. Each of these towns has already adopted policies to reduce or eliminate SGAR use on town-owned lands, reflecting a broader statewide movement toward environmentally responsible pest management practices.

As more towns and cities file home rule petitions, the message is amplified to state lawmakers that broad action is ultimately required, especially as raptors, coyotes, foxes, and possums don't stay within town boundaries.

New state law

Efforts are also underway at the state level to curb SGAR use. Recently introduced bills H.995 and S.644, titled An Act Restricting the Use of Rodenticides in the Environment, have garnered significant legislative support from 95 co-signing senators and representatives as of April 10.

A request to make our own rules

Belmont's vote at the May Town Meeting seeks to file a Home Rule petition with the Massachusetts Legislature to let Belmont regulate SGAR use within town limits. Although the passage of this article would not immediately implement new regulations, it would pave the way for future Town Meeting action to protect wildlife and public health.

Belmont's proactive approach underscores the town's commitment to sustainable and environmentally responsible pest management. By adopting non-toxic alternatives and advocating for legislative change, Belmont joins other concerned communities in eliminating harmful chemicals that threaten wildlife, pets, and humans.

To listen and read more on this topic:

See WBUR's To protect wildlife, advocates look to reduce rat poison use in Mass.

See Mass Audubon's Campaign to Rescue Raptors.

Watch the Campaign video on YouTube.

And please join Save Belmont Wildlife on Facebook.

The Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter has published many articles on the dangers and deaths from SGARs; all are available on our website, www.belmontcitizensforum.org.

Jeffrey North is the managing editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter and a Precinct 1 Town Meeting member.

Attune Yourselves to the Voices of Spring, Tra La!

An Informal Cornucopia of Nature's Natterers

By Fred Bouchard

Now we've shed our muffled-up, gray brumal months and can wake up to the myriad bright voices of spring that surround us.

Some are tiny, and too intimate: the house fly zizzes angrily to escape your bedroom; a drone mosquito whines by your ears. Some are shrill and chattery: from a tree fork a gray squirrel scolds in a chitter; a chipmunk goes *tuk! tuk!* as she scoots underfoot. The Eastern cottontails burrowing under your yard—normally silent—may emit petulant squeals if alarmed or attacked. A red fox, skunk, or raccoon can give you nightmares with a midnight shriek. Many little voices—chirrupy crickets, clicking beetles, buzzy bees—tell us "Take heart: life renews!"

SHAWN CAREY

Blue Jay.

Even mute critters make incidental noises, say, when a line of Eastern Painted Tortoises and Red-eared Sliders *plop!* off a Blair Pond log. In late March, the blind Eastern Red Bat I watched skitter across Halcyon Pond at Mount Auburn Cemetery used echolocation to home in on moths and water bugs, but that sonar works far above human hearing range. Emerging butterflies and dragonflies pay mute, if rainbowed, eloquent tribute to vernal bounty. First-out *lepidoptera* are sepia and violet Mourning Cloaks and black-spotted Cabbage Whites; early dragonflies include the tan-and-black Ringed Boghunter and emerald green Eastern Pondhawk. Also water-based, local amphibians chime in choral conclaves: Wood Frogs' high ticking rattles, bullfrogs' competitive *brrups*! and ear-splitting screech-fests by spring peepers.

Resident nonmigratory birds that kept fairly quiet all winter exercise their syrinxes to celebrate warming weather and attract mates. The Northern Cardinal that got by at the feeder with a chip-chip since November has re-found his whoop-de-doo song and broadcasts it from a telephone wire, to be shortly echoed by a competing male half a block away. The august red cardinal is the Celine Dion of avian songsters: syrupy, exuberant, indefatigable. Out of the limelight, Black-capped Chickadees and Tufted Titmice *dee-dee* and *twit-twit* inquisitively from lilac, yew, and verbena.

American Robins *tut-tut* and cock their heads to hear the earthworms they steadfastly yank from your lawn—in a sadly rare avian/sod interaction. Early risers and inveterate singers, robins haunt the predawn hours with endlessly repeated riffs. Mourning Doves likewise *coo-OOO-oo* by 5 AM—to my taste, ad nauseam. White-breasted Nuthatches nod their knowing peppy *henh-henh* as they inch down tree trunks. Northern Mockingbirds, erstwhile sentinels guarding their winterberry bushes, now hit high perches and notes, practicing their astonishing repertory of all-birds' songs.

Intelligent, social corvids—Blue Jays and American Crows—*nyah-nyah* and wrangle and sweep overhead in outlaw bands, out-shouting boisterous leaf blowers (just kidding). April arrivals, the migratory Icterids, also weigh in as noisy and collegial, flocking en route: Red-winged and Rusty Blackbirds, Common Grackles, Eastern Cowbirds. All sport dark, glossy plumage and a predilection

SHAWN CAREY

A juvenile Yellow-rump Warbler.

for raspy, shrill calls. Flashy family members are the Orioles, males black with orange (Baltimore) or chestnut (Orchard) and females that tend to yellow. Both males sing gorgeous, elaborate melodies.

Unobtrusive by day, American Woodcocks commence their elaborate mating "field exercises" in late March with post-dusk sky-dances and death-defying dives. Not much to look at with comically long bills, asymmetrical eyes, dumpy shape, and shambling shuffle, Woodies nonetheless impress their ladies. Repair to Rock Meadow at last twilight in spring to catch the show. Here's my E-bird entry for 3/31: *Late dusk. Warmish, 60F. Gray dissipating. Fingernail new moon, 'tiny' Jupiter riding far above. Walk 1-2 football fields to low rise between Victory Gardens and phragmites stand by the boardwalk. Woodcock peent here and there by 7:30; sporadic male kamikazes "timber-doodle" by 7:45, but no visuals picked up. Leave at 8, still not fully dark.* Spoiler alert: you don't need to see 'em.

But the cream of spring song-fests is reserved for those early bird(er)s who haunt Mass Audubon's Habitat, Mount Auburn Cemetery, Mission Hill's McLaughlin Park, Brookline's Hall's Pond and other famed sylvan spots. The warblers! Your complete New England birdwatcher must master 30 species, plumages, and songs (plus confusing "chips"). Among the more numerous are migratory Yellow-rumped (*seedl-seedl-seedl!*), Black-and-White (*weeza-weeza-weet-weet*), Palm (*zee-zee-zee*), and summer residents Pine (upslurred trill), Common Yellowthroat (*witchety-witchety*), Yellow (*sweet-sweet!*) The thrushes! Hermit, Swainson's, the elusive Gray-cheeked—and headliner meistersinger Wood Thrush—all have subtle, exquisite, overtone-rich songs I won't desecrate by attempting to print. Let us not omit the cinnamon Veery, whose very name evokes its sweetly descending spiral. That's my license plate.

Fred Bouchard is a member of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter Committee and a semicentennial member of the Brookline Bird Club.

Shawn Carey is a globetrotting nature photographer and videographer whose avian portraits grace nearly all of the BCF's bird essays. View more of his work at migrationproductions.com.

SHAWN CAREY

Yellow-rump (Myrtle) Warbler.

Make Your Yard an Avian Oasis

You can bring joy to your backyard flocks without going to the trouble and expense—and to some, imagining the specter of surreptitious nocturnal rodents—of up-keeping bird feeders.

Birds are opportunistic feeders—a bug in the beak is worth two in the bush—even if cannier species maintain acorn and seed caches. Nor are they circumspect about having a quick drink: a drop of dew, sip from a puddle, draft from a drainpipe—all afford vital hydration. In times of freeze or drought, refreshed watering oases are lifesavers and bird magnets. If you put out birdbaths, even makeshift ones, a sip of Adam's ale can afford our winged brethren sustenance, especially in these uncertain, and often parched, times.

During summer heat and all-season dry spells, I fill two garden bird baths nearly every day. The one in the shade, between the verbena and garage, is a brown plastic rimmed "pizza" dish, 16" across and 2" deep. A flat rock in the middle anchors it and affords a central perch. A sparrow or titmouse can enjoy a quick fluff bath, but it's tight for a jay. The one in full sun is a ribbed oval "conch shell" of gray resin, about 1x2 feet, set in the herb garden. Both rest on old concrete pedestals (or you could improvise other supports to keep baths two to four feet off the ground) strategically placed nowhere near windows (flight hazards) or ambush corners (to thwart pouncing predators, e.g., your cat.)

Maintenance is a breeze: hose out the plastic dish and/or pick leaves and debris out of the conch to avoid grime and stagnation that might breed bacteria or larvae. No chemicals, please.

When the extended fall drought turns chill, I heat a coffee carafe for hot water to melt hoar-frost riming the surfaces. This steady liquid contribution to birds' diets as flora shrivels and dries out proves immediately welcome, even vital. Yet the avian acceptance seems modest compared to this gratified reception recorded by fellow Belmontonian Bruce Aguilar:

"Yesterday and today I put out water in our granite birdbath. All of a sudden, a host of robins, cardinals, starlings, grackles, a Red-bellied or a Downy Woodpecker, a Northern Flicker, a White-breasted Nuthatch, a House Wren, and lots of Dark-eyed Juncos arrived to take drinks. Once in a while, a Blue Jay would come in and scatter the group to take a drink itself. It was wonderful to see how a small offering can benefit so many beings."

– Fred Bouchard

IDFG.IDAHO.GOV/

Dark-eyed Junco.

Belmont Drives Electric May 10

Belmont Drives Electric will host its next EV Ride & Drive event on Saturday, May 10, from 11 AM to 3 PM at Chenery Middle School. Belmont residents are invited to come test drive, ride along in, and check out a number of all-electric vehicles from different manufacturers.

The Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources will be there to talk about current state and federal incentives for new and used EVs. Car dealerships will have EV models available to test drive in a no-pressure environment. Local residents will bring their own EVs to discuss what it's been like to drive electric and offer a ride along experience for visitors. There also will be electric bicycles and other sustainable ways to electrify your life.

Launched in 2016, Belmont Drives Electric is a community organization sponsored by the Belmont Energy Committee, Belmont Light, and residents enthusiastic about EVs.

For more information, visit BelmontDrivesElectric on Facebook and Instagram.

Another Successful Lone Tree Hill Volunteer Day

By Radha Iyengar

On Saturday, April 26, a day with steady rain, the Belmont Citizens Forum (BCF), in conjunction with the Judy Record Conservation Fund, held its 11th annual Lone Tree Hill Volunteer Day.

The volunteers included Girl Scout Daisy Troop 63278, Cityside Subaru employees, volunteers from Habitat, and citizens from Belmont and the surrounding communities. Many hands made light work. At the Meadow Edge Trail, volunteers removed garlic mustard and planted 50 white pine saplings, 10 eastern red cedar saplings and also replaced five white pine trees that did not survive the planting from last year. Volunteers also transplanted seven white pine saplings from the end of the Pine Allee to replace either dead or missing trees along the Pine Allee. At the other end of the property, the volunteers collected 10 bags of garlic mustard and trash that included four chairs and a table.

BCF is grateful to David Ropes of Tree Specialists, Inc., and his amazing crew for not only supervising the planting but also helping with the tree planting, and the Judy Record Conservation Fund for funding their ongoing work, purchasing the trees, and funding the forestry mowing of the Meadow Edge Trail by Parterre to prepare the site for the plantings. A big shout-out goes to Joe Hibbard for suggesting this white pine and eastern red cedar planting project and for marking the planting locations ahead of the volunteer day; to Nancy Kougeas for supervising of the pulling of garlic mustard near the Meadow Edge Trail; to Leonard Katz (Belmont Conservation Volunteers) for supervising the removal of the invasive *Akebia* (chocolate vine); to Vincent Stanton, Jr. for supervising the Cityside Subaru volunteers picking up trash and removing invasives; to Dean Hickman for supervising volunteers picking up trash and removing garlic mustard; to Anna-Marie Lambert for signing in volunteers at the bottom of Coal Road; to Hannah Fletcher of Habitat for sharing some of the Habitat volunteers to help with the tree planting, garlic mustard removal, and for lending us some gardening tools; and to Jay Marcotte and Scott Mosca, DPW Highway Division, and their staff, for picking up the trash. It took a village to have a successful volunteer day especially on a day with constant rain.

Radha Iyengar is treasurer of Belmont Citizens Forum and organizer of the BCF Volunteer Day.

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Calender of Events

Belmont Conservation Volunteers
Monthly, on Saturdays , 9:30 AM–Noon
Help remove the evergreen *Akebia* (chocolate vine) that smothers young trees and displaces native ground cover in the South Pleasant Street area of Lone Tree Hill. For more information and upcoming dates: www.sustainablebelmont.net/belmont-conservation-volunteers/

Habitat Intergenerational Program Annual Plant Sale
Saturday, May 3, 9 AM–1 PM
Mass Audubon Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont
Herb and vegetable plants along with some native plants will be on offer. Parking is limited; carpooling is encouraged. For more information: habitat@massaudubon.org

Spring Naturalist Walk
Mass Audubon Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont
Saturday, May 10 l 10 AM–Noon
Take a walk with a Mass Audubon ecologist to observe and explore different habitats across the sanctuary, from wetlands to uplands. Look for amphibians, reptiles, mammals, flowering plants, trees, shrubs, lichens, fungi, insects, and birds, observing seasonal changes. Each walk will focus on one area or habitat. Members: $20. Nonmembers: $25.
For more information and to register, visit www.massaudubon.org/programs or email habitat@massaudubon.org

Fauna and Flora of Arlington's Great Meadow
Citizens for Lexington Conservation
Saturday May 10, 1 PM–3 PM
Arlington's Great Meadow features meadows, wetlands, and wood, 675 trees, plants, insects, mammals, and more documented on iNaturalist to date. Learn more about natural communities, with a focus on taking a closer look at wildflowers and insects. Long pants, bug repellent recommended. Meet at the end of Emerson Gardens Rd. off Maple St. in Lexington. Light rain cancels. For more information, visit clclex.org/2025/03/april-2025-newsletter/ or andgold@comcast.net

May is Bay State Bike Month
MassBike
May 11 Charlie Proctor Memorial Ride (Medford, MA)
May 18 Kittie Knox Ride (Watertown, MA)
For more information: www.massbike.org

Monthly Work Days
Friends of Spy Pond
Saturday, May 17, 9-11 AM
Monthly Saturday Work Days start on May 17. Remove grass between cobblestones lining the path throughout the park, remove invasives and plant natives, pick up litter, and groom the tot lot. Meet by the boat ramp, 40 Pond Lane, Arlington. To volunteer, email fsppvolunteer@gmail.com or register at forms.gle/woMA5JXVxwmbNhRh6

29th Annual Mystic River Herring Run and Paddle
Mystic River Watershed Association
Sunday, May 18 , 9 AM Start
Run, walk, and/or paddle to help the Mystic and celebrate the return of the river herring.
For more information and to register: mysticriver.org/herring-run-paddle

Belmont Farmers' Market
Opening Day, June 5, l 2–6:30 PM
Thursday afternoons June–October, Belmont Center parking lot
Celebrating 20 years!
For more information on vendors, special events, and more see www.belmontfarmersmarket.org


SARAH MCCABE
At the Belmont Farmers' Market.

Thank you to our contributors

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