



Belmont Citizens Forum

Brighton Street Rezoning Gets Started

By Jeffrey North and Vincent Stanton, Jr.

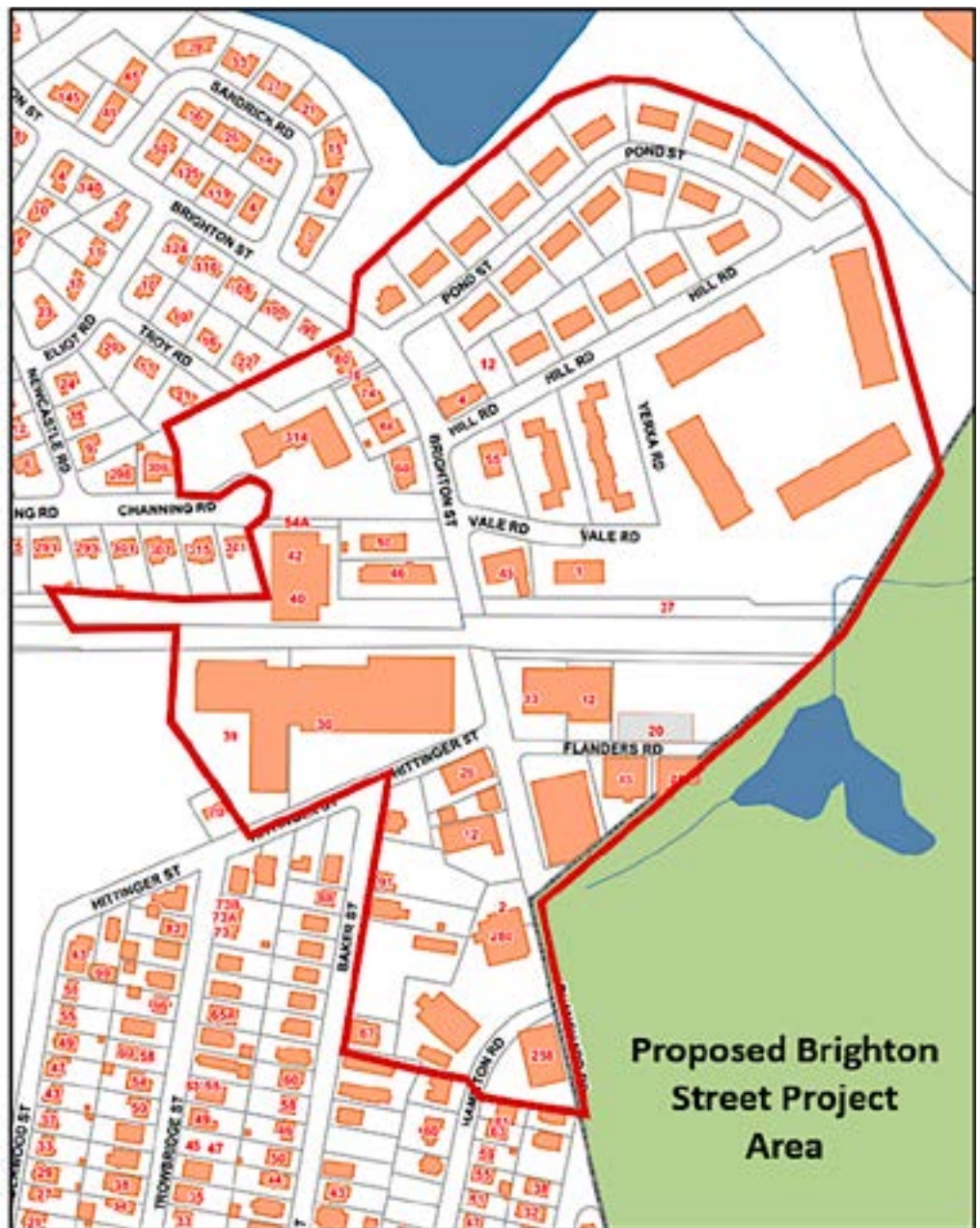
On March 30, the Belmont Select Board, Planning Board, and Office of Planning and Building, with support from consultants able.city, held a public forum at the Belmont Library for a proposed new overlay zoning of the Brighton Street business district.

The zoning is to be developed utilizing the same form-based code that Town Meeting adopted in March when it created new overlay zoning for Belmont Center. Select Board chair Matt Taylor proposed a timeline with draft zoning in place by late spring, followed by additional public meetings and review, culminating in a Town Meeting vote in fall 2026.

A recent Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) field study offers Belmont a detailed look at how the Brighton Street Corridor could evolve into a small, walkable center that brings in more tax revenue while still feeling like Belmont, albeit with larger buildings than exist currently. The study focuses on how to add shops, housing, and community spaces in ways that reflect what residents say they want, and what private developers say they can realistically build. Concepts and graphics from

the HKS study informed the town’s presentation on March 30.

The impetus to rezone Brighton Street grew out of the 2022 Financial Organization Structure Review of Belmont (aka the Collins Report; see [“Have You Read the Collins Center Report?”](#))



Proposed Brighton Street zoning area.

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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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November/December 2022 BCF *Newsletter*), which warned that the town relies too heavily on residential property taxes. That report urged Belmont to expand its commercial tax base, and Brighton Street emerged as one possible place to do it. A team from the HKS Urban Politics Field Lab was asked to engage residents, businesses, and developers to help shape a shared vision for the corridor's future.

How the Harvard team did its work

The five-person student team used multiple research methods. They analyzed current town survey data and created maps showing the locations of various amenities, such as restaurants, clinics, and entertainment venues in Belmont and nearby communities. Then, they met with 105 residents, including four focus groups and a survey of Hill Estates tenants, to gather firsthand insights about hopes and concerns for the area.

They also interviewed 14 developers and property owners to understand what makes a project feasible from a private perspective, and spoke with staff from peer communities like Cambridge and Watertown to learn from their experiences. Together, this provides Belmont with a clearer picture of what residents want, what the market can support, and where those perspectives align or conflict.

What residents say they want

Residents in the focus groups consistently asked for “third places”—settings where people can gather that are neither home nor work. The most popular ideas were family-friendly restaurants or a brew pub, a coffee shop with outdoor seating, small local shops, a modest grocery or convenience store, and health services such as doctors' offices. A survey of 68 Hill Estates residents produced a similar list: coffee shop, small grocer, and family-friendly restaurant topped their rankings.

The study also probed how people want Brighton Street to look and feel. Participants gravitated to images of traditional brick storefronts, outdoor cafés, trees and flowers, and people walking along sidewalks, and largely rejected pictures dominated by parking lots or a “downtown nightlife” vibe. Many described wanting a place that feels welcoming, lively, and comfortable, not overly urban or flashy.

On building height, most focus group participants said they could accept up to four stories, especially if upper floors are set back so buildings don't feel too tall or “oppressive” at street level. They also emphasized greenery, good lighting, and safe, comfortable sidewalks.

Concerns: traffic, flooding, affordability

Residents raised a familiar set of concerns as well. Traffic on Brighton Street today already feels heavy and sometimes unsafe, and many worry that additional development will make congestion worse unless the town improves intersections and offers better options for walking, biking, and transit. The new Belmont Community Path is a particular asset, but people stressed that side streets and crossings must feel safe for pedestrians and cyclists of all ages.

Flooding came up frequently; most of the corridor would flood in a category 2 hurricane and all of it a category 3, per [Belmont's 2020 Municipal Vulnerability Plan](#). Residents noted the need for careful stormwater management and raised questions about environmental contamination associated with the Pure Coat site. Many want to see any redevelopment use resilient design—such as elevating buildings, adding rain gardens, and protecting green space—so problems are not exacerbated.

Affordability is another major theme. Hill Estates residents, in particular, expressed worry about losing affordable units or being displaced. (The property was sold to a new owner in June 2025.) Interviewees broadly support creating more affordable housing in town but do not want Brighton Street to be the only place where it happens, nor do they want to see primarily luxury housing and upscale amenities in this corridor. Several residents emphasized the need to better include Hill Estates voices in decision-making.

What developers say is realistic

Developers and property owners see Brighton Street as having potential, but they flag real obstacles. Ownership is fragmented, lots are small or constrained (see map of proposed rezoned area), and the area competes with stronger nearby commercial centers like Fresh Pond, and in the future the proposed 4.5 million square foot Cambridge Point development just east of Brighton Street (between Concord Avenue and the Fitchburg

rail line). That means any major project must overcome higher costs and more complicated land assembly.

From their vantage point, housing is the most feasible primary use, with shops and other commercial space added at street level if enough residents live nearby to support them. Proximity to the commuter rail is a plus, but traffic congestion, limited access, and the high cost of building parking on poor soils all cut against redevelopment.

Above all, developers stress the importance of clear, predictable rules. They are more likely to invest if Belmont sets out a straightforward plan for where taller buildings are allowed, what kinds of uses are encouraged, and how quickly projects can move through review and permitting. Some interviewees mentioned tools like modest increases in allowed building size, reduced parking minimums, and financial incentives (for example, tax-based tools that help pay for infrastructure) as ways to make the numbers work.

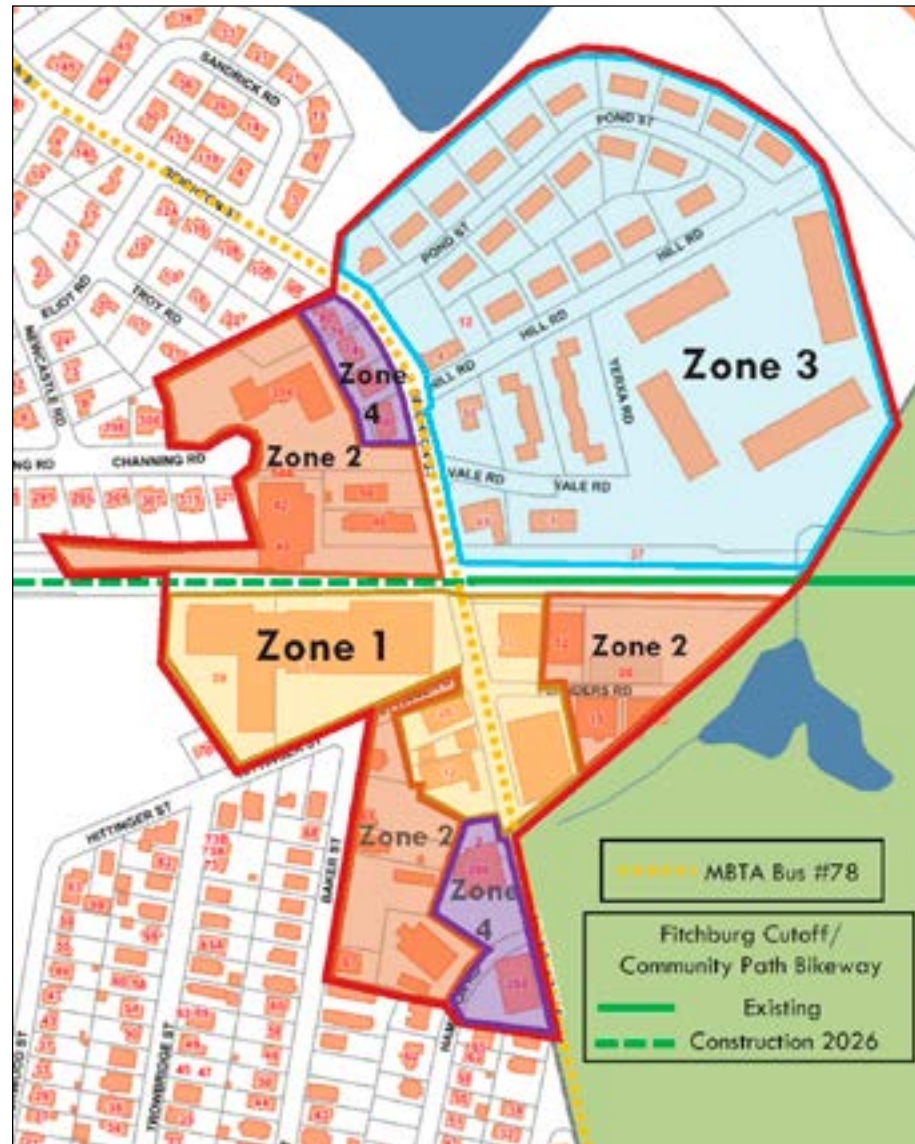
A possible future Brighton Street

To pull these strands together, the HKS team offered a set of illustrations based on what they heard from both residents and the private sector. Their “after” images show a corridor with wider sidewalks, street trees, and plantings that help absorb stormwater; café seating and storefronts along the sidewalk; and mixed-use buildings with homes above and shops or community uses at ground level. Parking is still present, but much of it is placed behind buildings or in structures, rather than fronting the street.

The authors propose a phased approach. The first step would be to map current ownership and identify a few key sites, especially properties with single owners, where zoning updates and infrastructure investments could encourage an “anchor” project to move forward. Later phases would expand improvements, add more green space, and knit together a cohesive mixed-use district over time.

Process: keeping everyone at the table

Finally, the study underlines how important it will be to communicate clearly and early with all affected groups, including Hill Estates residents, nearby neighborhoods, and the wider town. Stakeholders said they want more than one-time public hearings; they asked for a mix of small group



Potential zoning for Brighton Street.

meetings, online updates and surveys, walking tours, and regular opportunities to react to evolving plans.

The HKS team's central message is that a "Belmont-scaled" mixed-use center on Brighton Street is possible—but only if the town carefully balances fiscal needs, neighborhood character, environmental concerns, and housing affordability, and keeps residents and property owners meaningfully involved at each step.

March 30 update

On March 30 the town's consultant, [able.city](https://www.ablecity.com/), proposed to divide the Brighton Street corridor into four subdistricts with a differing development focus and matching zoning for each subdistrict (see map).

Zone 1, comprising buildings along both sides of east Hittinger Street, including Purecoat North and

Crate Escape, as well as the buildings on the east side of Brighton Street flanking Flanders Road, would be the "heart" of the new district, functioning as a walkable, mixed-use district with a strong public realm" featuring residential units over retail businesses.

Zone 2, comprising lots behind Zone 1 (off Brighton Street), as well as the current Belmont Printing, N. Sacca & Sons Construction, and French & Mahoney buildings along Brighton Street north of the Fitchburg Line tracks, would be zoned as "an artisan and light industrial district focused on small-scale production, creative enterprises, and entrepreneurship."

Zone 3, comprising the Hill Estates, the largest of the four zones, would be reconceived as "Belmont's compact version of Arsenal Yards or Assembly Row, including a higher-intensity, destination-oriented mixed-use district, combining residential, retail, entertainment, and public amenities."

Zone 4, comprising two small areas along Brighton Street at the northern and southern borders of the district where it abuts residences, would be restricted to

smaller buildings: "A transitional district between more intense development areas and adjacent neighborhoods with some commercial space and upper floor apartments."

To read the team's presentation and final report, visit the town's web page for the Brighton Street Planning and Zoning Project: www.belmont-ma.gov/2131/Brighton-Street-Planning-and-Zoning-Proj

Slide deck presented March 30, 2026, at the kickoff meeting: www.belmont-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/13910/Brighton-St-Workshop-Presentation-33026

Jeffrey North is managing editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter. Vincent Stanton, Jr., is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Belmont Joins the ADU Era

By Jeffrey North

Belmont now allows small accessory apartments by right on most residential lots, putting it roughly in line with neighbors like Arlington and Lexington — but the number actually built so far remains very low.

After years of debate, Belmont has joined the growing list of Massachusetts communities that allow "accessory dwelling units" (ADUs) on most residential lots. The town's ADU bylaw, approved at the March 2025 Special Town Meeting, was crafted to comply with the state's 2024 Affordable Homes Act, which requires communities to allow at least one small ADU by right where residential units are allowed. This change can help residents create more flexible and potentially more affordable housing, support multigenerational living, and, in some cases, increase property value.

On paper, the change is significant. Until early 2025, Belmont allowed ADUs only by special permit in historic accessory buildings, such as old carriage houses, and even those were rare. Now, a homeowner can add a small apartment in a basement, above a garage, or in a separate backyard structure without going through a discretionary special-permit process as long as the project meets the town's dimensional rules and the new state limits on ADU size.

Yet almost a year after the new zoning took effect, activity remains very light. Christopher Ryan, Belmont's director of Planning and Building, reports that the town has received four ADU applications so far. Two have been approved and are under construction, but none have been completed, and two additional potential projects were dropped after initial exploration. Ryan says he is

"surprised that it's as light as it has been," and attributes the slow pace to high construction costs and interest rates rather than to the bylaw's strictness.

What Belmont's ADU bylaw allows

Belmont's bylaw closely tracks state law. A single ADU is allowed on each lot with a residential dwelling (including two-families). The unit must be clearly smaller than the primary home, with its area capped at 900 square feet or 50% of the principal dwelling's floor area, whichever is less. ADUs can be internal (for example, a basement unit), attached, or in a detached accessory building, provided they meet setbacks and height limits.

The state law prohibits local rules that require an owner to live on the property and also bans "unreasonable" restrictions on renting ADUs. [Belmont's ADU FAQ](#) and [information materials](#) reflect this fact. The town cannot require owner-occupancy, and it cannot ban year-round rentals of ADUs that otherwise follow state law. At the same time, the local bylaw is drafted to prevent ADUs from being used as short-term rentals, reflecting concern about turning backyard apartments into de facto hotel rooms instead of long-term housing.

In designing the bylaw, Ryan notes, staff and the Planning Board were acutely aware that Belmont's residential districts already carry strict open-space and lot-coverage requirements. To create some room for ADUs, they added two modest forms of



An example of a detached backyard ADU.

flexibility: a 5% bonus to maximum lot coverage and a relaxation of open-space requirements, both available when an ADU is added. They also chose to require one off-street parking space per unit outside defined transit areas, responding to one area of citizen concern, while still staying within the state law.

So far, though, these adjustments have not emerged as clear barriers. Ryan says that, given the very low volume of applications and pre-application inquiries, “we haven’t seen those as specific limiting factors,” and that it is too early to say whether

zoning parameters or physical constraints will be the main brake on future ADUs.

Costs, codes, and the homeowner experience

If the bylaw itself is not the main obstacle, what is?

Belmont’s inspector of buildings Ara Yogurtian notes that applicants are often surprised by “more restrictive state building codes per 780 CMR 10th edition and current rising construction costs.” For attached ADUs inside or connected to existing homes, the typical sticking points are fire

separation, fire suppression, and fire alarm systems. For new detached ADU structures, the challenges tend to be utility connections and compliance with energy-conservation regulations for new construction. DC Structures, Inc. a national firm that delivers prefabricated free-standing ADUs, estimates a cost of \$250-\$500 per square foot in Massachusetts (e.g., \$125-250,000 for a 500 sq ft building), depending on site conditions and design selections.

So far, Yogurtian estimates that at least two potential ADUs have never become formal applications because owners realized the work or cost was more than they expected. For those who do want to move ahead, he advises three concrete first steps to avoid surprises: obtain a certified plot plan, commission architectural drawings, and secure an existing-building report from an architect. He and Ryan also note that the town already offers pre-application meetings, but that this option may not be communicated clearly enough to residents who are just starting to consider an ADU.

Both staff members see room for better guidance materials. Ryan suggests that existing outreach documents from the bylaw-adoption phase could be “fleshed out.” At the same time, Yogurtian says the town would be open to hosting typical plan sets created by outside professionals, provided there is no conflict of interest. For now, they describe ADU implementation as “a work in progress.”

Belmont in a regional and long-term context

Belmont is not alone in adjusting to the state’s ADU mandate. Neighboring Arlington had already built an ADU framework, with clearer homeowner guidance, before the state law; Lexington and Waltham are working from more complex, special-permit-heavy regimes that now must be reconciled with by-right requirements. Belmont, by contrast, moved later but adopted a relatively simple structure that largely copies state standards with a few local adjustments for open space, lot coverage, and parking.

Ryan says the Planning & Building office has not yet conducted systematic research on how many ADUs have been built in surrounding communities since the law passed (see box for state data). He hopes that, over time, the state or regional organizations like Citizens Housing and

Planning Association or the Massachusetts Housing Partnership will convene a broader conversation so communities can share experiences.

Looking ahead, Ryan is reluctant to label ADUs as either a major or minor element in Belmont’s housing strategy. Instead, he sees them as one of “many tools in the toolbox” that should be addressed explicitly in the town’s ongoing Comprehensive Plan and broader zoning reform. In particular, he points to the potential for ADUs to support “missing middle” housing for specific groups—such as seniors and empty nesters—and to create opportunities for residents to downsize and remain in town even if they no longer need, or cannot afford, a full-size single-family home.

As for what success might look like, Ryan offers one benchmark. If, in five to 10 years, annual ADU production approaches the levels staff initially estimated when they were doing outreach on the bylaw, that would be a sign that the policy is starting to work. Until then, he and Yogurtian see the picture as still forming. High construction costs and financing conditions remain major constraints; whether zoning details or neighborhood reactions will emerge as equally important factors is, for now, an open question.

The state’s housing law was promoted with the promise that small backyard homes could offer new options for seniors, caregivers, and renters. By year-end 2025, at least 1,229 ADUs had been approved statewide, based on data from 293 of 351 municipalities. Belmont has opened the legal door to these “little houses” and taken modest steps to make them feasible. Whether ADUs appear on dozens of Belmont streets—or remain a niche solution for a handful of homeowners—will depend on a combination of markets, codes, and, above all, residents’ willingness to take on a demanding building project in their own basements or backyards.

For more on how many ADUs cities and towns across the commonwealth are permitting see the state ADU website: www.mass.gov/info-details/accessory-dwelling-unit-tracker. That database shows, for example, that Milton, with a population similar to Belmont (28,630 vs. 27,295), had permitted 25 ADUs through June 30, 2025 (the most recent data available).

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

ADUS in Belmont and Nearby Communities

Here is a quick snapshot of how Belmont compares with a few neighbors on the basics: what’s allowed, how big the units can be, and how easy the process is on paper.

ADUs are small secondary homes on the same lot as a main house—often basement apartments, over-garage units, or small backyard cottages. They can help older residents age in place, provide a place for adult children to live, or offer one more long-term rental in a tight market. The state’s 2024 Affordable Homes Act pushed every town to open the door to these “little houses.” Belmont has done that. The question now is whether homeowners will follow.

Town	Status (on paper)	Size/ key rules	ADUs permitted
Belmont	By right, 1 ADU per qualifying lot	Up to 900 sq ft or 50% of main home; 5% lot-coverage bonus; no owner-occupancy; no short-term rentals.	3
Arlington	By right or via building permit	Up to 900 sq ft; follows state limits; strong homeowner guidance online.	7
Lexington	Older, more complex ADU regime	Multiple ADU types (including “Protected Use” ADUs up to 900 sq ft); some legacy units still tied to owner-occupancy; adapting to state rules.	6
Waltham	Historically more permit-heavy	ADUs require a special permit through the Board of Appeals under local rules, but state law now also guarantees one by-right ADU on single-family lots.	5

Community Preservation Team Endorses Projects

By Aaron Pikilingis

Each spring at Belmont's Annual Town Meeting, Town Meeting members (TMM) consider projects recommended by the Community Preservation Committee (CPC) and vote whether to award each Community Preservation Act (CPA) funding.

TMM may choose to either fund the project as recommended, reject the project, or reduce the funding. CPA funding requires both the recommendation of the CPC and Town Meeting, so TMMs may not elect to vote for different projects or substantially alter a proposed project, nor may they vote to provide more CPA funding to a given project than is recommended by the CPC.

For FY2027, Belmont's CPA surcharge will generate about \$1.8 million and the state match will provide an estimated additional \$300,000. Belmont's CPC has recommended the following five projects for CPA funding.

Recreation

Community Path Phase 1 Right of Way Acquisitions — \$500,000

This funding would support the costs of temporary and permanent construction easements for construction of the first phase of the Belmont Community Path. This section of path will connect from Brighton Street near the Cambridge line



Image from Beaver Brook Invasive Control CPA application.

over the bridge at Belmont Center and end at the Clark Street Footbridge on South Pleasant Street. This phase also includes a bridge under the tracks connecting the Winn Brook neighborhood to the Middle and High School campus and the other community assets along Concord Avenue.

Community Path Phase 2 Design — \$250,000

This funding would support the ongoing design of Phase 2 of the Belmont Community Path, which will run west from the Clark Street Footbridge and continue through Waverley Square, eventually connecting with Waltham and the rest of the Massachusetts Central Rail Trail. This funding would also unlock \$1,000,000 in additional funding for the project from the federal government.

Brendan Grant Flagpole Grounds Project — \$35,000

This project proposes to improve the area around the recently installed flagpole just outside the Brendan Grant baseball field. Improvements would include levelling the area and adding a patio and benches to make the area more accessible and appealing.

Community Housing

Sherman Gardens Redevelopment — \$2,100,000

This request is the first of a two-phase, \$3,100,000 total request to support the reconstruction of Belmont's public housing property at Sherman Gardens near Waverley Square. These funds, along with prior CPA appropriations for predevelopment, will serve as Belmont's contribution toward this \$75M project, most of which will be funded from outside sources.

Open Space

Beaver Brook Invasive Control — \$80,000

This proposal would fund a three- to four-year effort to control invasive phragmites plants in the marshlands along Concord Avenue near the Lexington town line. The funding would support the design and execution of the program.

For more details on these projects, please visit the [CPC page on the town website](#), under "CPC Documents" in the folder "Final Applications."

To date, the Belmont CPA fund has supported numerous projects that have each provided a meaningful benefit. I would like to highlight a few recent projects that I feel are especially significant to our community.

Chenery Park Complex (Recreation)

Currently under construction, the CPA provided all funding for redesign and reconstruction of the Chenery Park Complex. After collecting significant community input, this project will provide a revitalized park to serve the needs of the Chenery Upper Elementary school, nearby residential neighborhoods, and our whole community.

Belmont Community Path (Recreation)

The CPA has been the local funding source for the Belmont Community Path, allowing the project to secure millions in grant and federal funding to support a project that will serve to better connect our community to Belmont destinations and to a growing regional network of multiuse trails. Phase 1 of the path, including the path under the tracks to the Middle and High School campus, is expected to begin construction this coming fall.

Historic Town Hall Complex (Historic Preservation)

The CPA has been critical to preserving our historic Town Hall complex, including the recent repair of a retaining wall along Concord Avenue at the Town Hall, preserving the slate roof at the School Administration Building, and much more.

Public housing properties at Sherman Gardens and Belmont Village (Housing)

The CPA has funded predevelopment work to support the redevelopment of our public housing properties at Sherman Gardens and Belmont Village. These redevelopment projects are a key step to creating new affordable homes in our community and to properly caring for the people who live in them. This year, the CPC has recommended funding to support the construction phase of redevelopment at Sherman Gardens -- see below for more detail.

Without the dedicated resources of the CPA fund, it's unlikely Belmont could have completed these projects or many of the dozens of others supported

by the CPA fund. At best, we may have completed some of them at the expense of other capital needs that would have been competing for the same limited funding. To learn more about the projects Belmont has funded through our CPA, visit the Community Preservation Coalition's database at [bit.ly/BCF-CPA-DB](#)

Belmont voters adopted the CPA in 2010, and we began funding projects for fiscal year 2014. Since its adoption, Belmont's CPA fund has collected \$17,533,224 from the local surcharge, plus \$4,734,137 in matching state funds for a total of \$22,267,361.

Massachusetts's Community Preservation Act is a state law passed in 2000 that allows communities to impose a small property tax surcharge to fund local projects in three community benefit areas:

- Community housing
- Historic preservation
- Open space and recreational lands

Belmont's CPC is charged with overseeing these funds by soliciting applications for funding, reviewing applications for eligibility, and, ultimately, by recommending to Town Meeting which eligible projects are worthy of funding. This process typically begins in September and continues through January when CPC members vote on their funding recommendations. Each year, the CPC updates two documents that support this process.

- The CPA Timeline, providing an outline of when each step in the process takes place.
- The CPA Plan, which includes a CPA overview, guidelines for evaluating projects, and instructions for how project sponsors can apply and what the process will look like. The CPC accepts community input on the CPA Plan each spring and incorporates it into updates to the plan.

For more information about the CPC process in Belmont, the guidelines members use to evaluate proposals, and more, please visit the CPC's page on the town website.

Finally, we encourage members of the community to submit project proposals. For questions, more information, or just to say hello, please contact us via email at cpc@belmont-ma.gov.

Aaron Pikilingis is chair of the Belmont Community Preservation Committee.

Volunteers Clean Up and Restore Lone Tree Hill



By Radha Iyengar

On a sunny and cool Saturday, April 25, the Belmont Citizens Forum (BCF), in conjunction with the Judy Record Conservation Fund, held its 12th annual Lone Tree Hill Volunteer Day.

The volunteers included Girl Scout Troop 84205, Cityside Subaru employees, volunteers from Habitat, and citizens from Belmont and the surrounding communities. Many hands made light work. This year we had three different work locations. At the Meadow Edge Trail, volunteers planted 60 white pine saplings and five

eastern red cedar saplings. These trees will eventually create shade as another way to make it harder for the buckthorn that has been removed over a multiyear process to grow back. Volunteers also planted 14 white pine saplings along the Pine Allee to replace either dead or downed trees. At the other end of the property along Pleasant Street, volunteers collected 14 bags of trash that included a chair, wood, cardboard, a tire jack and an iron chain. Along Judy's Trail, volunteers filled two bags with garlic mustard and removed a large honeysuckle tree that was encroaching the Highland Cemetery entry gate.

BCF is grateful to David Ropes of Tree Specialists, Inc., and his amazing crew for not only supervising our efforts but also for helping plant trees, and to the Judy Record Conservation Fund for funding their work and purchasing the trees. A big shout-out goes to Joe Hibbard for suggesting this white pine and eastern red cedar planting



ANNE-MARIE LAMBERT

ANNE-MARIE LAMBERT



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project and for marking the planting locations ahead of Volunteer Day, to Leonard Katz (Belmont Conservation Volunteers) and Art Kreiger for supervising the pulling of garlic mustard along Judy's Trail and for removing the honeysuckle tree and bittersweet vine, to Vincent Stanton for supervising the Cityside Subaru volunteers picking up trash, to Evanthia Malliris for signing in volunteers at the bottom of Coal Road on Pleasant Street, to Hannah Fletcher and Erika Harimoto, Habitat, for sharing some of the Habitat volunteers, notably six members of the Wayland High School Student Corps, to help with the tree planting and for lending us some gardening tools, to Jay Marcotte and Scott Mosca, DPW Highway Division, and their staff, for picking up the trash. As always, it takes a village to have a successful Volunteer Day.

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



VINCENT STANTON, JR.



ANNE-MARIE LAMBERT

Environmental Leader: David O'Neill



GRETCHEN ERTL

David O'Neill.

The interview below is an excerpt. A complete version is available on the BCF website, belmontcitizensforum.org.

Mass Audubon, founded in 1896, is one of the oldest and largest conservation organizations in New England. With more than 112 wildlife sanctuaries across Massachusetts, a network of 180,000 members and supporters, and a mission to protect the nature of Massachusetts for people and wildlife, Mass Audubon combines land protection, habitat restoration, conservation science, and environmental education to safeguard biodiversity and build climate resilience across the Commonwealth.

The Belmont Citizens Forum spoke with David O'Neill, president and CEO of Mass Audubon, about the organization's statewide conservation strategy, its partnerships with communities and policymakers, and his vision for the future of nature in Massachusetts. Jeffrey North conducted the interview.

BCF

Mass Audubon is known primarily for birds, but can you explain why that's only a part of the picture and talk about how the organization's mission and scope have evolved over the last two decades?

O'Neill

We have been, are, and probably always will be best known as "the bird organization" by some – and that's great. We were founded in 1896 by two pioneering women, Minna Hall and Harriet Hemenway, who set out to stop the feather trade, and we're extraordinarily proud of our origin story.

But I'm also heartened to see Mass Audubon's crucial evolution. We are focused on confronting the most challenging issues facing the natural world today, and while we still do a lot of work to protect birds and to celebrate them as sentinel species, we also advocate for horseshoe crabs, endangered sea turtles, moose, bobcats, and other wildlife that call the Commonwealth home.

The biggest shift we have made over the past five years is our effort to battle against the loss of biodiversity and climate change, often where those two issues intersect. For example, we've tripled our pace of land conservation to meet the state's ambitious 30x30 goals, protecting 30% of Massachusetts lands by 2030. We are also scaling up our ecological restoration work. Our Tidmarsh Wildlife Sanctuary in Plymouth, for example, is a result of the largest freshwater wetland restoration project in New England and is now open to the public. We are also restoring thousands of acres of marshes, shorelines, and beaches along our coast, which are so vulnerable to sea-level rise and rich in biodiversity. And we're engaging in climate-smart forestry to help improve the health of our forests and the wildlife that calls them home.

Our mission is to advocate for policies that protect nature, and we have ramped up these efforts by championing a variety of bills on Beacon Hill, including setting up a permanent state revenue source specifically for land and water conservation. In short, Mass Audubon has gone from "the bird folks" to nature's fiercest ally in the Commonwealth.

And complementing all this work are the experiences and joy we provide at our sanctuaries each and every day. We have 10,000 campers joining us

this summer to learn about and be a part of nature, and tens of thousands of visitors just exploring nature or participating in nature-based education programs. All of this adds up to growing a love of nature that, in return, expands the number of people who care about it and will fight to protect it.

BCF

Suburbs like Belmont are proactive in making sure we have plenty of green space for people to enjoy, but what about the state's more densely populated urban communities?

O'Neill

Speaking of Belmont, I know most of your readers are already familiar with our Habitat Education Center & Wildlife Sanctuary, where many families have enjoyed our camp (with sliding scale tuition to make it affordable), preschool, and intergenerational programs there, but if folks haven't been there in a few months, they'll find the entrance looks different. Not only is it more aesthetically pleasing, but it also enhances safety, accessibility, and the property's ecological health. With an ADA-compliant ramp connecting the parking lot to the main building's front entrance, adjustments to the doorway itself, and the planting of native grasses and shrubs, Habitat has a whole new look and feel that's more inclusive of everyone while also showing off the beautiful historic home that serves as our nature center.

But on the accessibility front, one of the core tenets of our mission is that ensuring nature and all the benefits it offers is available to everyone no matter where they live. But the fact is, environmental justice communities have been on the short end of the stick when it comes to access to nature, and they feel those effects via lack of green space, a dearth of trees, and heat deserts that directly impact people's health.

Last year, we opened Pawtucket Farm Wildlife Sanctuary in Lowell, which provides more than 20 acres of outdoor trails, farm fields, and wildlife habitat amid a densely populated city. It's the result of a fantastic partnership between two local conservation organizations, Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust and Mill City Grows, and together we can provide the community with an all-persons trail, community gardens, environmental education programming, and a nature oasis in the middle of

Lowell. Pawtucket Farm is the first urban wildlife sanctuary that Mass Audubon opened in 20 years, building on the success of our Boston Nature Center in Mattapan and Broad Meadow Brook in Worcester, and represents our commitment to finding ways to work with local partners to bring the benefits of open space to nature-deprived communities.

One project on the very near horizon that I'm extremely excited about is in Chelsea, one of the most densely populated communities in the entire state. This 18-acre site sits on the banks of Chelsea Creek, and we're working with local nonprofits GreenRoots and The Neighborhood Developers to transform a former industrial site into a world-class waterfront greenspace that also includes mixed-income housing.

This groundbreaking project could be a national model going forward that proves affordable housing and land conservation don't have to be at war with each other. Opening up public access to prime real estate at the confluence of two rivers in a city that suffers from lack of tree canopy, heat islands, and a lack of exposure to nature is essential to increasing equitable access to nature and aligns perfectly with our mission.

Everyone benefits from nature but not everyone has ready access to it. We're working hard to change that.

BCF

If you could leave our readers with one key takeaway about what matters most in the decade ahead, what would it be?

O'Neill

The thing that matters most is for people to understand it's not too late to achieve our goals, and the problem isn't too big to solve. We use the tagline "hope, urgency, and action" to convey that we believe hope is essential to our success, that we must work with urgency, and that tangible action solves problems and creates more hope. And we have also said that in this uncertain political environment, where nature is threatened by federal policies, "progress is our protest." In other words, while steps are being taken to undermine bedrock federal environmental laws, it is at the state level where we can be a bulwark to these decisions and where we can and will make progress.

Profile in Belmont: Anne Marie Mahoney

By Elissa Ely

At some point, we all become experts in grief. After Anne Marie Mahoney lost her mother, husband, sister-in-law, brother, and father within a few stunning years, she became an involuntary expert. Hospice and hospital resources were available in the beginning, but after a year or so—when the paperwork was done and the casseroles were no longer delivered—she had a sense that others felt it was time for her to move along. They may have been ready. She was not. "You wake up one morning," she remembers, "and the permanence of loss sets in. Everyone's dead. It becomes fixed and solid." The second grieving year is full of a different, unwanted expertise.

Someone once said the best predictor of the future is the past. Anne Marie is a long-standing, busy Belmontian. She has lived here almost her entire life; she married another Belmontian, believes deeply in community and service, has served on endless town committees for unfathomable amounts of time. Grappling with her own losses, she realized that death happens while life is continuing. "Everything I learned in my life," she says, "came together. I said, I can do this. I can survive. I can even thrive."



Anne-Marie Mahoney

She studied dying, grief, trauma. She leaned on her degree in Pastoral Ministry and returned to Boston College for an additional certificate in Spiritual Formation. She grounded herself in the music and crafts that had always mattered to her (this is a woman who sewed her own bridesmaids' dresses, and every Easter turned out her young daughters in matching coats and hats). Because death happens while life continues, she organized all she knew into a "creative bereavement" program; piloting it first in her own church, then in the Weston church where she worked, and eventually running retreats and workshops. An hour-long monthly drop-in group continues in the Beech Street Senior Center.

One way through grief is realizing what can be offered to others — and then offering it. This is what Anne Marie did. Four initial sessions expanded into six, then eight, and ultimately, into a training manual ("they gave me five months and 31,000 words") for other group facilitators. Each meeting rises on a scaffolding of art, music, and video clips.

There are prompts for members, heartfelt listening, and empathy based on a common, yet always singular, experience.

Her book, *A New Parish Guide to Grief Ministry*, opens with a poem about a box full of darkness. In

light, and through realization, the box becomes a gift. Anne Marie's husband died in 2010, her father in 2012. She began assembling her program in 2014, and her book was published in 2023. The darkness that became a gift did not do so rapidly.

The constancy of Belmont played its part. She was just a girl when her family moved here from Waltham 64 years ago. She and her Belmont-bred husband bought a house a few blocks from where she was raised. All four of her children came up through Belmont public schools. The in-laws lived a few hundred feet up the street. These are such deeply submerged roots that they probably traveled under Trapelo Road, down Common Street, along Leonard, right onto Pleasant, and emerged on the Arlington property line.

Of course, the town today is not the town of 65 years ago. Anne Marie recalls it then as a destination for people growing up in Somerville, Medford. "They worked hard, saved their money, moved here, and stayed," she says. "It was the goal of their lifetime." Anti-Catholic and antisemitic biases were prominent, the John Birch Society thrived on Concord Avenue, and a Mormon church steeple was decades from conception. Still, then as now, quiet eminences lived among us. Anne Marie's older brother delivered newspapers to Henry Kissinger's doorstep when he was teaching at Harvard.

In those distant days, the Underwood Pool prohibited boys and girls from swimming together: three days a week for one gender alternated with three days a week for the other. Belmont High School was located in today's Wellington Elementary School, and she still recalls watching the fire that levelled the building in 1967: "It was a mess of flames in the sky, the sound of glass breaking. The fire department was there for days."

She became a teacher. She had always enjoyed writing—"when other kids groaned at school assignments, I rejoiced"—and her undergraduate Emmanuel College thesis examined the Arthurian legend in literature and poetry. Decades later, a master's degree thesis at Boston College took on virtue ethics. Writing well served her well, even if her father, an engineer, "couldn't wrap his head around my being an English major." When she taught American Studies to high schoolers, art and music were ancillary aids to literature.

Her closest friends met in their high school glee club; it was the deep Belmont roots again. They married their husbands together, had their children together, became widows together, and are still dear to one another. Life proceeded as expected, and maybe a bit more than expected: Anne Marie was a wife, teacher, mother, director of religious education in local parishes, family seamstress, family baker. Around Christmas, when her kids were growing up, she used to make more than 2,000 cookies, and when two of them were stationed in Iraq at the same time, she mailed 452 cookies overseas—gingerbread men, gingerbread women, and one gingerbread Tom Brady.

For such a community-oriented being, town committees were a natural step—many, many town committees: among them, Town Meeting member (26 years, with an interruption), School Committee (12 years), Select Board (4 years), Capital Budget Committee (15 years), Community Preservation Committee (7 years).

Since COVID-19 has turned Town Meeting into a hybrid experience, it's changed from the physical gatherings of the earliest New Englanders, when "people came together to govern themselves." This has caused her to lament. "It's different when members haven't experienced being together, as the community celebrating itself," Anne Marie says. "People don't know each other if they're home in their sweats."

These many directions — bereavement groups, local politics, family — require balance. She finds hers through dancing; three days a week of ballroom lessons and more recently, group tap. In 2020, she was drafted into a fund-raising Dancing with the Stars extravaganza ("the only exercise where you can wear sequins") and wanted to acquire some competence in order to sustain her dignity. The pandemic's onset cancelled the dance competition, but sequins remain.

We are unbalanced by grief. It lingers. All these years later, Anne Marie's own still rises and falls at times. But there are groups to run, committees to attend, a church calling for involvement, muffins to bake, causes to support, dances to dance. This is her balance.

Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.

BCF Editor Retires

By Sue Bass

Meg Muckenhoupt didn't invent the Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter*. It was already nearly four years old when she answered an ad for a new editor. Sharon Vanderslice, who had suggested creating the newsletter and had designed the first iteration, was tired of doing it. The first issue with Meg's name as editor was Volume 5, #1, of January 2004, quite a while ago. Now she has announced that the last issue she'll edit is this one, Volume 27, #3, of May 2026.

Meg announced this on February 16. "I am not facing grave illness, and I am not on the verge of moving to another continent," she said. "It has

Hamilton of the Belmont Police Department's traffic department. He said that when the Belmont police had tried to enforce safe driving at the bridge, traffic "was backed up through Arlington and Medford." (I hope that's not a preview of what'll happen if the town goes through with a plan to put traffic signals on both sides of the railroad bridge.)

Evie Malliris, a longtime BCF board member and *Newsletter* committee member, called Meg smart and efficient. She said one of Meg's concerns was making sure the *Newsletter* was balanced among the topics that are part of BCF's mission: an issue should not contain three articles about bikes, for example. When the March 2026 issue turned out to



simply become clear to me that at this stage of my life, it is time to focus my efforts elsewhere."

In the past 23 years, in addition to editing the BCF *Newsletter*, Meg has done quite a lot else. She has written at least five books: *The Truth About Baked Beans*, *Cabbage: A Global History*, *Dorothea Dix: Advocate for Mental Health Care*, *Sigmund Freud: Explorer of the Unconscious*, and *Boston Gardens and Green Spaces*. Her freelance articles have been published in dozens of newspapers. Her Facebook page shows that she's a hiker and talented wildlife photographer.

In the early years, Meg wrote many articles for the *Newsletter*. Looking through my collection, I find a September 2004 article that might have been written yesterday: "Why doesn't Belmont fix the Concord/Common/Leonard Street intersection?" It was thoroughly researched, as was typical. It included an anecdote from then-Sergeant Kenneth

be heavy on the costs of adding school children to Belmont's population, Meg balanced it by writing an opinion piece, "What is a Town For?" about the value of children and young families to the town and the region.

"I think it's time for someone with a fresh vision for Belmont to have the opportunity to create the BCF *Newsletter* anew," Meg said. "I would like to thank the BCF board, our generous authors, artists, and photographers, and my stalwart co-editor Jeff [North] for all their work over the years, and I wish everyone the energy and clarity to see the newsletter into a new era."

Sue Bass is one of the Belmont Citizens Forum's cofounders who served on the BCF board and Newsletter Committee for many years. She was also a long-time Precinct 3 Town Meeting member.

Miyawaki Forest Grows Through Two Seasons

By Fred Bouchard and Jean Devine

An expanded version of this article is available at www.belmontcitizensforum.org

By Clay Pit Pond's bridge on that brilliantly sunny October morning, dozens of eager planters — aged 12 to 80, armed with shovels and trowels — were swarming among hundreds of potted saplings and bushes at Belmont's inaugural Miyawaki Forest. (Akira Miyawaki, 1928-2021, was a Japanese botanist who developed the practice of restoring small plots of degraded land with densely planted pocket parks.) Curious joggers, dog-walkers, strollers, and pram-pushers who paused for a look-see or polite query barely slowed the feverish activity that unrolled all day long, from 8 AM to 6 PM.

The group spearheading the effort to create this BHS "mini forest" is Miyawaki Forest Action Belmont (MFAB), an intergenerational team of

Belmont residents. They started working together in May of 2024 and have shown little sign of letting up. The highly collaborative MFAB united the efforts of Belmont High and Middle School (BHS/BMS) students, local scout troops, families, citizens, and church groups, all advised and directed by Miyawaki veterans and Bio4Climate professionals who'd planted mini-forests in Cambridge, Somerville, Watertown, and Worcester.

Historically, the site of the forest had been a brickyard, a landfill and a baseball diamond. It was the original location of Wellington Brook before it was channelized, culverted, and rerouted in the 1930s to prevent stagnation in Clay Pit Pond, and the site of a path to Little and Blair Ponds long before the railroad came in the 1840s.

Sarah Wang, MFAB leader, had managed its myriad details with determination. She invented several solutions that made engagement and staging successful. She created the foster-a-tree program where nearly 100 Belmont families baby-sat tender saplings over the summer. "On the day before planting," said Sarah, "we staged and spaced the plants using a novel technique: 1,100 chopsticks marked each tree location. That helped us to manage the scores of volunteers on planting day and keep them all organized."

On planting day, Sarah and native landscaper Jean Devine, owner of Devine Native Plantings, instructed the volunteer planters (some of them proud tree fosterers) in planting techniques. Devine had been advising BHS Climate Action Club students on the creation and maintenance of the campus native plant garden since 2021.

In August, she supervised students and volunteers in relocating the native plant garden from the center of the new forest to an adjacent plot closer to Concord Avenue. "The point," said Jean, "is to show us how trees can thrive when nurtured and grown closely together to form a living community rather than exist in lonely isolation. Since Miyawaki Forests restore biodiverse habitats, our stormwater will be a little bit cleaner, our air a little bit cooler, and our residents a little bit wiser."

Sarah Wang gave further background: "The Conservation Commission approved the siting as long as we added erosion control. We consulted with Bio4Climate on tree research, final plant selection,



Planting day at Belmont's Miyawaki forest.



Species at the Belmont Miyawaki Forest. For a complete species list, visit Miyawaki Forest Action Belmont, miyawakiforestbelmont.netlify.app

and sourcing of all materials—soil, mulch, biochar, wood chips, and tree seedlings. We organized small volunteer groups for preparatory steps including laying cardboard and wood chips around the border and hanging fences to keep rabbits out."

BHS students Holly Kong, AJ Shaw, Sophia Miao, and Albert Ying worked hard with signage and interaction with the school to ensure a good turnout of peers. Jessica Hausman implemented the PR campaign that proved so effective in building awareness and participation from business owners, young families, and scouts; 275 volunteers showed up to plant on planting day! Michelle Oishi handled many of the technical details including irrigation. Ranganath Nyack and Kirsten Waerstad provided funds and advice throughout the process.

Jean explained, "We view the forest as a 'Living Lab,' a key place in Belmont for citizen scientists, budding artists, and natural historians to observe

and appreciate nature." The learning began by observing and taking lessons from other Miyawaki forests (aka mini- or fast-forests) in the area. The first to be planted in New England, in 2021, is in Cambridge's Danehy Park. The lesson from that site was one of avoidance: do not plant sumac, an early successor and aggressive plant.

Monthly Miyawaki Log

Jean Devine undertook to record month by month the forest's progress. Here are excerpts from her log.

October

At first we watered the forest several times per week. By the third week, seasonal rain rendered irrigation unnecessary. We replanted some of the trees to optimal growth depths, and checked that each tree had a metal tag containing a unique

COURTESY OF JEAN DEVINE

COURTESY OF JEAN DEVINE



Belmont's Miyawaki forest after planting.

number and species code. At least 20% of the tags had fallen off during planting or subsequent wind. We started the process of digi-mapping the entire forest to collect baseline data on each specimen. We laid a grid onto the forest using orange twine and working in teams, manually recorded the location of each specimen, square by square. Sarah entered this information into a spreadsheet useful for matching tags to trees. Meanwhile, an Arlington friend, Jenifer Tidwell, took a drone photo to precisely map the location of each tree.

November

We affixed to the fence a beautiful BHS-student-designed sign depicting the 32 native species in the forest and we replanted more trees. Strong winds and rain knocked many ID tags off trees, so we reattached what we could. Sarah, Jenifer, and Judy Sheldon worked to reconcile trees shown in the drone photo with those in the database. The MFAB Education team of Jean, Sarah, two MFAB students, juniors AJ Shaw and Albert Ying, and college freshman Holly Kong met to outline ideas for ways teachers, students, and community members could study and appreciate the forest.

February

The education team discussed the idea of implementing a phenology program where students and volunteers can collect data on seasonal phenomena such as bud break, leaf growth, flowering, fruiting, and leaf drop. This study runs spring through fall and data will be fed into the National Phenology Network's (NPN) database which helps citizen scientists study the impact of climate change in our region. Meanwhile, another team—Sarah, Jean, Kelly Schlabach, Pritha Mitra-Stiff, and Aparna Mujumdar—met to develop a list of native perennials and to sketch a design for the “perennial plant collar” that will surround the

forest. In 2026, we will plant half of this collar, the west and southern sides, approximately 130 linear feet. It's a large undertaking, and we want to ease perennials into place.

March

The education team, now expanded to include Barbara Garrity, Pritha Mitra-Stiff, Jessica Smith, and Mariloly Wood, began planning the phenology program. We identified 10 species that would be a representative sample. We took online tutorials offered by NPN. At the end of the month, with all traces of snow gone, we marked the trees (three samples of each species for a total of 30 trees) for the study, recycling our chopsticks now adorned with pink bows!

April

For Earth Month, we will launch three projects: the perennial collar, [Phase 1 soil preparation], the phenology program, and a Haiku contest for all students grades K–12. On April 4, volunteers raked wood chips, added premium soil, and scattered native annual seeds. On April 12, we started the phenology program with teams of volunteers observing the 30 specimens to identify bud burst and other signs of spring emergence. Throughout

the growing season, volunteers will meet weekly on Sundays at 4 PM (or their own schedule) to record phenology (plant life cycle) data.

Summer and Fall: Volunteers will weed the forest and selectively water if irrigation has missed certain spots. The phenology program will continue and forest visitors are encouraged to note signs of life, including lepidoptera, other insects, and birds, by using iNaturalist and/or adding notes to a laminated sheet affixed to the fence. Winning Haikus will be affixed to the fence!

May

We will continue the phenology program and give forest tours to teachers, students, and the public. Deadline for Haiku submission is May 24.

Winners in each age category will be announced on June 21 (first day of summer).

October

On October 3, the one-year anniversary of the forest, volunteers will plant the western and southern sides of the collar with native perennials, and on October 4, we will dedicate the forest!

Fred Bouchard is a member of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter Committee. Jean Devine is a Belmont resident, cofounder of the Mystic Charles Pollinator Pathways Group, and is executive director of the Biodiversity Builders youth environmental education program and Devine Native Plantings, LLC.



EVANTHIA MALLIRIS

Viktoria Haase, Belmont Historical Society president, provided an overview of the society's collection in its new digs in the Belmont Library, including old newspapers and census ledgers in the Local History Room. The Underwood Room is lined with books, including a variety of town records along with books by local authors. Find both rooms on the second floor.

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter,

The January/February Newsletter essay on Chicago real estate investments by Belmont-born Peter Chardon Brooks III led me to think your readers also might like to know of his activity as a Boston art collector.

In the mid-1860s, Brooks joined others acquiring paintings by French artists of the Barbizon School, coming to own important works by Corot, Millet, and Vermont-born William Morris Hunt, a Barbizon enthusiast. Quality was very important to Brooks, and he was aware of Boston's developing ambition as a cultural center, made explicit when the young Museum of Fine Arts set a goal to become a treasure house of masterpieces.

By 1890, this atmosphere helped London-based John Singer Sargent become "Boston's portraitist," and Brooks engaged him to paint portraits of himself and his family. After creating these at Brooks's West

Medford summer estate that fall, Sargent wrote Mrs. Anne Gorham Brooks praising the painting collection, singling out three Monets and a Corot. Brooks had bought the Corot in 1871 but only had obtained the Monets earlier in 1890. Descending to Brooks's heirs after 1920, two of them were given later to the MFA, adding to other local donations that have made Monet's work a notable strength at the museum.

However, other works Brooks brought to Boston had no prior connection to the city. When a major exhibition of Spanish painter Joaquin Sorolla opened in 1909 at the New York Hispanic Society, Brooks reserved four paintings and then gave the MFA one of them, the charming *Lighthouse Walk, Biarritz* of 1906.

Three years later, a very different work came to the MFA thanks to Brooks. In spring 1912, sculptor Cyrus Dallin offered Boston his 1909 *Appeal to the Great Spirit*, and it was placed at the museum's Huntington Avenue entrance to attract donations. A limited sum was in hand when Brooks paid the entire balance, urging that the work stay put and not be moved to a site in the Fenway park system. His view prevailed, and the Dallin sculpture still calls attention to the legacy of Native American culture, a more vital subject today than in 1912. His Chicago skyscrapers boldly foretold a future, but so did Brooks's art collecting.

Mary Crawford-Volk



Cyrus Dallin's *Appeal to the Great Spirit*, 1909, bronze and green patina; Museum of Fine Arts Boston, acc. no. 13.380. For thoughts on this sculpture, the "vanishing race" trope, and Indigenous visitors' views of the sculpture, see www.mfa.org/collections/americas/appeal-to-the-great-spirit

Dear BCF,

I'm a long-time supporter of the BCF, going back to the first McLean negotiations 25 years ago. I just wanted to thank you for your research, work, and articles on Belmont issues. I particularly wanted to call out Jeffrey North and Vince Stanton for their work and articles on the Community Bike Path, invasives removal, etc.

Your work is greatly appreciated; keep it up!

Art Kreiger



Thank you to our contributors

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