Belmont Citizens Forum

Meet Belmont's Natural Resources Manager

William "Will" McPhee brings a background in forestry, horticulture, and municipal land stewardship to his new role as Belmont's new natural resources manager. A graduate of Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical High School's horticulture program, McPhee went on to study parks, recreation, and tourism at the University of Maine, where he later earned a master's degree in forestry.

McPhee worked with the City of Bangor, Maine, on its emerald ash borer response program, helping the city plan for a pest that has damaged ash trees across much of the country. In Belmont, he first took on the role of tree warden and since March, he has added responsibilities as natural resources manager and succeeded longtime Conservation Agent Mary Trudeau.

In this interview with Jeffrey North, McPhee discusses Belmont's urban tree canopy, invasive species, climate resilience, open-space stewardship, and the role residents can play in caring for the town's natural resources.

How would you describe your new position to town residents?

I have been serving as tree warden for Belmont, which has been a busy role in itself. That job involves managing the town's urban canopy and helping ensure the safety and health of both residents and trees. A large part of that work is minimizing the risk that trees in public rights-of-way could damage property, fall on passersby, or interfere with traffic.

More recently, I have also taken on the role of conservation agent, replacing Mary Trudeau, who served the town for many years. The two jobs overlap in some respects, but in other ways they are quite separate.

As the conservation agent, I work primarily with publicly owned spaces, including wetlands, wetland resource areas, conservation lands, and other open spaces in town. These include Rock Meadow, wetland aspects of Lone Tree Hill, Clay Pit Pond, Beaver Brook, Little Pond, portions of Fresh Pond, and other parcels.

MATTHEW MCPHEE

William "Will" McPhee.

It is a dynamic role. I work with the Conservation Commission and serve as an intermediary between the Commission and the town, helping ensure that projects affecting these properties are carried out safely, ethically, and in an environmentally responsible manner.

That can involve filings by private residents or cooperation with various town departments, depending on the project.

What drew you to urban forestry and municipal conservation, and what appealed to you about Belmont?

My background has been in this "neck of the woods," no pun intended, since I attended Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical High School, where I majored in horticulture. That started me on this path. After Minuteman, I went to the University of Maine, first in forestry and then in parks, recreation, and tourism, which is where I earned my bachelor's degree. I later returned to the University of Maine for a master's degree in forestry.

One thing led to another, and eventually those experiences brought me toward Belmont. Before coming here, I worked in Bangor during my master's program on its emerald ash borer response program. When I finished that work and returned to Massachusetts, the opening for Belmont's tree warden position seemed like a logical next step. At my core, I have a love for nature. I have always preferred spending time outdoors to being inside. Working for a town gives me the chance to apply what I have studied while staying connected to the outdoors.

What are your top priorities for the next one to three years?

My priorities remain focused on the safety and health of Belmont's trees and on maintaining a healthy urban canopy. One of the biggest issues is that Belmont's canopy has a large component of maples, including Norway maples (see September/October 2021 BCF Newsletter). We are not removing trees simply for the sake of removing them; there must be disease, decline, or a defect that poses a risk. But many Norway maples in town are nearing the end of their lifespans and beginning to decline. As we remove those trees over time, we are trying to replace them with a wider variety of species. In a nutshell, my priority is to improve biodiversity in town with new native species. That helps improve not only the safety of our urban canopy but also its resilience against plant pathogens and pests.

We are already seeing those pressures. Belmont has beech leaf disease, and we must remove the copper beech that has stood on the town green for as many years as Belmont has been a town. Emerald ash borer is also present in town. Improving biodiversity is one way to help us deal with these and future issues.

Rock Meadow and Lone Tree Hill are beloved open spaces with complex management needs. How do you envision your role in guiding their care?

The invasive species present at those locations are similar in many ways, and the overall response is broadly similar as well. The town works with contractors and other partners to manage invasive species, and part of my role is to help direct available town funds toward that management.

At Rock Meadow, for example, we have worked on invasive species such as glossy buckthorn and bittersweet, as well as numerous other invasive plants, including phragmites and black swallow-wort. We work with contractors when needed to reduce those populations. We have also partnered with others on more holistic management approaches, including limited use of livestock grazing to control certain species.

The specific method depends on the site and the problem. In some places, livestock grazing may be appropriate. In others, we use targeted mechanical removal or other control methods with help from contracted invasive-species specialists. The goal is to use the right tool for the right location while continuing to protect the character and ecological value of these open spaces.

How will you approach Belmont's urban tree canopy amid climate-related stresses such as heat, drought, and intense storms?

Our primary strategy has been to use native species. At the same time, as the climate continues to warm, some species that are native to this region may become less well adapted to local conditions. One approach is to use species that are still native to the eastern seaboard but come from somewhat farther south.

We look for trees that are better adapted to hotter temperatures and drought while still tolerating cold weather. That may include species from Virginia or Delaware, where winters can still bring snow but summers are hotter and more humid. Sweetgum is one example of a species we have planted that is better adapted to warmer conditions. The goal is to build a more resilient canopy by selecting native or regionally appropriate trees that can handle the environmental conditions Belmont is likely to face in the coming decades.

How do you balance habitat protection with public enjoyment of open space?

We try to work with the public as much as we can. For organized events, such as a cross-country running race on Rock Meadow, for example, we are open to allowing appropriate use of open spaces when events can be properly permitted and managed. There is nothing wrong with that as long as we can do it within the town's guidelines.

At the same time, issues such as off-leash dogs, unofficial trails, and unmanaged recreational use create real management concerns. These activities can disturb wildlife, damage habitat, and spread invasive species. Seeds can get stuck in people's boots or dogs' fur and be carried to new areas, where a new patch of bittersweet or another invasive plant can take hold.

Off-leash dogs are a particular concern at Rock Meadow and Lone Tree Hill. Off-leash dogs can disturb wildlife, run through invasive plant patches, and contribute to seed dispersal. Pet waste is also a management issue. The town provides disposal facilities near parking areas, and we ask residents to use them.We recognize that people value these spaces and want to enjoy them. Our job is to make that possible while also protecting the land's ecological health.

What are the most pressing invasive species or ecological threats facing Belmont's trees and conservation lands?

The answer depends on the location. Each site in town has its own issues, whether those involve neighboring properties, wetland impacts, invasive species, or other concerns.

Among invasive plants, buckthorn and bittersweet are two of the most dominant species we are actively working to manage. There are many others as well. In some wetland areas, Phragmites is becoming a significant issue.

Another important challenge is ensuring residents understand when their property is in or near a wetland resource area and which regulations apply. When projects, development, or other activities affect wetlands, residents and the town need to be on the same page about the requirements of the Wetlands Protection Act and local conservation rules.

How can residents help with trees, wildlife, and land stewardship?

I have not yet had as much time as I would like to work with community organizations, but that is a goal of mine. So far, much of my community interaction has involved Rock Meadow and the Victory Gardens.

For the urban canopy, one of the easiest and most helpful things residents can do is report concerns about town-owned trees. The DPW appreciates calls from residents who see something that looks wrong with a public tree. That could involve a limb that needs trimming, a tree that appears diseased or damaged, or a question about whether a tree may need attention.

On the wetlands and open-space side, several organizations offer opportunities for citizen science and volunteer involvement. These include state agencies such as the Department of Conservation and Recreation, Mass Audubon, the Mystic River Watershed Association, and the Charles River Watershed Association. Mass Audubon's Habitat property in Belmont is one local place where residents can get involved with volunteer efforts.

Looking ahead 10 or 20 years, what would success look like for Belmont's trees and open spaces?

For the urban canopy, success would mean a more environmentally resilient canopy made up of many different species. Ideally, no one species would make up more than about 15 to 20% of the canopy. That is a long way from where we are now and not something that we can achieve in just a few years, but it is a useful long-term goal.

Over time, I would like to see an urban canopy that includes many native and regionally appropriate species, with greater biodiversity and stronger resilience to climate change, pests, and disease.

For open spaces, success would mean land managed effectively to control invasive species while still allowing residents to enjoy these spaces. That includes minimizing the spread of invasive plants, keeping dogs on leash, discouraging unofficial trails, and protecting the natural character of the landscape.

It also means having a community of residents who are involved with public spaces, whether by volunteering to help maintain them, serving on committees, reporting problems, or sharing concerns and ideas. Community involvement is essential.

BCF ARCHIVES

The Library Garden's New Look Goes With The Flow of Wellington Brook

By Fred Bouchard

Whenever you visit the new Belmont Public Library, take time to visit the garden. Time out a bit from words and pages. Sit on a bench or rock wall. Amble about the paths. Read a poem aloud. Breathe in the trees' oxygen. Quiz a robin. Play a wooden flute.

FRED BOUCHARD

Landscape architect Glen Valentine in the Belmont Public Library garden, designed to capture roof runoff while preserving Wellington Brook.

Admire the bright azaleas. Look up at the seductive magnolias. Worship the majestic Dawn Redwood. Declaim from the amphitheater. But, above all, be sure to watch (and listen to) the Wellington Brook burbling by.

Landscape architect Glen Valentine of Stimson, principal on the garden redesign in collaboration with Oudens Ello Architecture, was intrigued by the idea of revealing and celebrating Belmont's beloved brook. A 20-year town resident and University of Virginia graduate, Valentine's local career highlights include designing the gardens at the Arnold Arboretum, Boston College, and MIT, and nationally with Stimson, a 60-acre floodplain park in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and a wildlife land-bridge in San Antonio. He enjoys architectural drawing with his son.

Though Belmont's system of streams and brooks threads throughout town, nearly all of these wonderful waterways have been culverted and buried. Behind Belmont Library flows the only stretch of Wellington Brook on public town land that sees the light of day. Valentine explains: "Throughout the library's 70 years on this site, this precious 200-yard stretch has been ignored and abused. Polluted runoff from old parking lots ran directly into its waters and Japanese knotweed choked out native flora. Here was an opportunity to reveal and celebrate this stream and give it a voice. I worked with the team to make this happen by designing a set of waterways to celebrate the stream, make it visible, and let people interact with it in various ways. Essentially, I saw it as the most important 'book'/'volume' in the library's collection."

In several public meetings, Valentine worked closely with town committees, planning board, Conservation Commission, Historic District Commission, and the Shade Tree Committee (STC) to share design concepts and welcome and incorporate community feedback. The committees and town engineer reviewed all plans carefully. The Library Building Committee, a dedicated team of volunteers, and library director Peter Struzziero, were the primary public body throughout the process and made critical decisions.

Though convinced that the stream was the heart of the site, Valentine discovered that when the team showed images of Wellington Brook, few people had ever actually seen it and some barely knew of its existence. 'What began as proximity issues," he said, "became assets to bring people closer to the water." Beyond its tight size, the site presented few challenges.

"The STC helped us celebrate the diversity of Belmont's native trees," said Valentine. "Pawpaw, Big Leaf Magnolia, and Catalpa trees are, I believe, the first of their species to be planted in Belmont's public landscape. We connected the new garden's paths to the Belmont Garden Club's existing wonderful collection of native woodland plants, now accessible in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). To complement the Garden Club's native plants, we developed a palette that reflects a stream-side wetland community. This community suits the sunny microclimate of the new spaces and the town's maintenance limitations, and provides habitat and food for many species of insects, birds, and mammals."

Existing flora of the garden site were largely prized and showcased. "The Dawn Redwood," enthused Valentine, "is at 80 feet the site's tallest tree and one of Belmont's true giants. To protect this beloved community member, we carefully built the adjacent ADA walkway with minimal impact on the land. We planted over 30 trees: Tupelo, Tulip Tree, and Pin Oak. The Underwood Estate's woodland, an amazing town resource, beautifully complements the library's park spaces. We preserved open vistas into this landscape and historic home from both the outdoor gathering spaces and from spaces within the library." Two-story 30-foot glass walls permit dramatic long and wide views straight through the entire complex, from Concord Avenue through the Morrissey Room concert space to the mixed deciduous forest out back.

When a wild and windy storm rolls in, the whole ensemble flows with magnificent force. Rocky rivulets (framed by blue flag iris and Indian rhubarb) trickle under pedestrian canals from Concord Avenue; cascade in hidden downspouts from the "green" roof; wind their way through boulder-lined verdant channels thick with a riot of grasses, sedges, rushes, and ferns; and seethe into the Wellington Brook. On cue, the Underwood Estate's looming grove of lindens, oaks, and maples wave and sway beyond the rocky berm.

The STC is known to be on a constant crusade to increase diversity among native trees and to improve the health and scale of the town's tree canopy and biome. "The Library Garden," says Valentine, "is just one patch connecting that much larger quilt of the town's green spaces.

As a major new link along Belmont's green artery, the garden may instill wonder and delight in a setting

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where people can slow down and contemplate the world around them."

Yet it's mainly the kids who command Valentine's attention. "My hope," he says, "is that children will be drawn to the brook now that they can see it, hear it, sit next to it. I hope they'll notice that all the water flowing from the sky and the library itself is gathered in a series of iris-filled channels that all flow together, feeding the plants in a series of swales and pools and then finally flowing into the stream. Maybe this will fire kids' imaginations to realize that we're all connected—library, roof, rocks, cars, trees, people—in this larger interconnected system. Every drop of rain that lands on site goes into the brook, so everything we do there contributes." Even the slender, bark-brown light-posts remain unobtrusive—until they illuminate.

"My hope is that kids will come to understand this intuitively, by seeing the water splash into the swales from the roof downspouts; or stepping on the stones to explore the big rainwater basin, whether it's dry or flooded. Maybe they'll get wet! When they're sitting in the amphitheater right by the stream, they hear the water flowing over the rock and are drawn to the edge to catch a glimpse of our neighbor, the muskrat! At a curve in the brook, a lean-rail vista looks upstream, where the banks are still being eroded by Japanese knotweed. Maybe teens will lean on the rail, talk on their phones, and see we've got a lot to do to repair damage already done."

The wider ecological picture harks back to the romantic pragmatism of proto-naturalist Charles Eliot, the landscaping genius of Frederick Law Olmsted, and locally the insightful vision and philanthropy of Judy Record. "Let's talk about the failure of imagination in the modern age and the loss of contact with nature," Valentine concludes. "My firm belief is that our science-and-technology driven culture has completely blown it over the last 100 years. If we can't get our kids off their screens to engage with the natural world, one day soon they will look up and say, 'Hey, what happened to our planet? Are you telling me it can no longer sustain us and we are all going to die? When did that happen?' Hopefully we can open their eyes."

Fred Bouchard, a Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter Committee member and regular contributor, is a long-time avid bird- and butterfly-watcher, a fairly keen naturalist, and a so-so newbie gardener.

Balancing Play and Preservation: Inside Belmont's Open Space Plan Update

A Summary of OSRP Virtual Public Meeting, Thursday, May 28, at 6:30 PM

By Jeffrey North

Belmont's Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is nearing completion after eight months of technical analysis and public engagement. At the final public meeting on May 28 residents called for a balance between recreational uses and the protection of natural resources. The 10-year plan will now be refined and submitted to the state's Division of Conservation Services (DCS), within the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.
Upon DCS approval Belmont will become eligible for important open space and recreation grants. Belmont's last OSRP was completed in 2000 and has expired; plans should be updated every decade.

The Select Board formed a comprehensive plan committee last spring (see March 2025 newsletter), whose scope of work includes updating the town's OSRP. Then last fall an OSRP Advisory Committee started work, and hired consultants from Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., (VHB), a multidisciplinary civil engineering consulting and design firm headquartered in Watertown, to help develop the plan.

What the plan will do

An OSRP is intended to guide decisions on land use, growth, and climate resilience through high level goals and action plans, rather than to dictate the exact design of individual projects.

The OSRP also serves as a funding tool. A current, approved plan is required to access certain state grant programs, including:

- LAND (Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity): Helps municipal conservation commissions acquire land for conservation and passive recreation.
- PARC (Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities): Funds the acquisition of parkland and the development or renovation of public parks.
- Conservation Partnership: Assists non-profits in acquiring interests in land for conservation or recreation purposes.Landscape Partnership: Supports the preservation of large, contiguous blocks of forested and other important conservation lands.
- Land Acquisition for Forest Reserves: Helps municipalities and non-profits acquire forest lands to protect them as reserves.
- Massachusetts Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): A federal/state matching program for acquiring and developing public outdoor recreation areas

How the plan was developed

The planning process began in late 2025 and was designed to include substantial front-end public engagement. VHB and the committee conducted topic-focused stakeholder interviews, held an initial in-person public workshop on existing conditions and opportunities, and administered a town-wide online survey.

The survey drew just over 600 responses, providing planners with a robust sample of residents' open-space uses, the facilities they value, and the investments they would prioritize. In parallel, the team reviewed prior planning documents, GIS data, and other records to understand what has been done over the past decade and what efforts are underway.

This second public meeting was the final formal engagement step before submission to the state, but both VHB and committee members said that comments received at the meeting and by email will still shape the final draft.

Major themes from earlier outreach

VHB project manager Julia Mintz summarized the key themes that emerged from the first meeting, survey, and stakeholder interviews. Residents and stakeholders highlighted:

- Heavy demand on athletic fields and concerns about maintenance capacity and staffing.
- Strong interest in better bicycle and pedestrian connections, including shared-use paths and trail access.

- Support for native plantings, habitat restoration, and protection of wetlands, wildlife habitat, and tree canopy.
- Desire for basic amenities such as improved signage, bathrooms, seating, better trash management, and more accessible facilities.
- Persistent tensions among user groups in shared spaces, including dog owners, youth sports, and casual park users.

Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of planning for climate resilience and coordinating the use of open spaces so they remain safe and enjoyable for all.

Six goals for the next decade

Mintz and VHB planner Nour ElZein presented six overarching goals, each supported by specific actions. They are:

1. Enhance, connect, and steward Belmont's trail network for recreation and mobility.
2. Maintain and improve recreation facilities to support safe, flexible, high-quality use.
3. Improve shared use of parks and reduce user conflicts.
4. Improve safe, equitable access to parks, schools, and conservation areas.
5. Strengthen governance, protection tools, and long-term capacity to steward and expand open space.
6. Protect and restore Belmont's natural systems and water resources.

Under Goal 1, recommended actions focus on infrastructure upgrades and stronger coordination with the Department of Conservation and Recreation, local volunteers, and regional trail partners at places such as Rock Meadow and Lone Tree Hill, with the aim of creating a better maintained and more connected trail system.

Goal 2 combines site-specific improvements at facilities like Belmont High School fields, the Winn Brook area, the rink complex, and the "Golden Bowl" (the large grassy pit between the pool and Concord Avenue) with policies on field maintenance, waste management, and oversight.

Goal 3 addresses shared-use conflicts, especially involving dogs. Actions include reviewing the "Paws in the Park" shared-use program, clarifying off-leash hours and locations, improving signage around leash rules, and evaluating options for a designated dog park or smaller fenced dog areas.

Goal 4 focuses on safe and equitable access, particularly for youth and seniors. Proposed actions include better bike parking at schools, village centers, and major parks, safer crosswalks, and improved wayfinding to connect neighborhoods to parks and community destinations.

Goal 5 emphasizes governance and legal protections. Potential actions include creating a permanent open space committee, pursuing stronger protections for key conservation lands like Rock Meadow, tracking Chapter 61 and 61A properties (forest land), and considering tools such as zoning overlays, conservation restrictions, and formal stewardship structures.

Goal 6 centers on ecological protection and climate resilience, focusing on habitat corridors such as Rock Meadow, Lone Tree Hill, the Beaver Brook corridor, wetlands, the Western Greenway, and possible vernal pools. Actions include invasive species management, habitat mapping, and stronger buffer protections.

Public comments: skate park and dogs

The public comment period opened with a detailed statement from Seetha Burtner of Townsend Road, who criticized the omission of skate park questions from the town-wide survey and framed it as an equity issue for youth in "wheeled sports." She cited a 2021 Friends of Belmont Skate Park survey—distributed through schools, PTAs, and social media—in which over 90% of 579 student and 246 adult respondents supported building a skate park in town.

Burtner argued that without a local facility, children and teens skateboard, rollerblade, ride scooters, and ride BMX bikes unsafely on streets or in prohibited spaces, or must be driven to other towns. She contrasted the one-time capital cost of about $500,000 and modest annual maintenance of a few thousand dollars for a skate park with the higher ongoing costs of the new ice rink, and urged the committee to clearly include a skate park in the plan. Chair Paul Cowing responded that Burtner's concerns and earlier advocacy had already been incorporated into the draft and that he had spoken with Recreation Commission chair Mike Capitani about how to move a skate park project forward.

Several commenters focused on dogs and fields. Town Meeting member and dog owner Kelly Michaud of Precinct 1 urged the town to add a simple, low-maintenance dog park, noting that Belmont has more than 1,200 licensed dogs yet is one of the few nearby communities without a dedicated dog park and one of the few that allows off-leash dogs on municipal fields. She argued that a fenced gravel area with benches and shade could provide a safe space for dogs and owners, relieve pressure on heavily used athletic fields, and build community among residents.

Youth soccer coach and dog owner Cedric Dubois of Richmond Road strongly supported the dog park goal and described driving to dog parks in other towns so his dog could run without disturbing children, some of whom he has seen frightened by dogs on Belmont fields. In contrast, resident Enrique Pizaña praised off-leash spaces for keeping geese off fields and said he values children playing on real grass rather than synthetic turf.

Former Recreation Commission member Steve Warner of Oxford Avenue argued that in a built-out town, Belmont must make existing space available to as many people as possible by investing in current parks, improving maintenance, and re-using "dead" areas, such as an old shed at Grove Street, potentially through small "pocket parks." Town Meeting member Ira Morgenstern of Precinct 7, a dog owner who helped craft the earlier Paws in the Park shared-use plan, urged the town to try that compromise before committing to a separate dog park and warned that a distant dog park could be less accessible to older dog owners.

Next steps

Committee member Erin Rowland thanked participants and said the committee is committed to incorporating public feedback into the OSRP. Mintz explained that VHB will now integrate comments from this meeting and any additional written input into a refined draft, which will then go to the Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services for review and approval.

Cowing closed by emphasizing that the OSRP will guide Belmont's open space and recreation decisions for the next 10 years and encouraged residents to work with the boards and commissions identified as "champions" in the plan to move specific projects forward once the plan is adopted.

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

BCF ARCCHIVES - DAVID HURLEY

Grove Street Park: Spectators enjoy performances by the BHS Marauders Marching Band and School of Honk.

Traffic Jam! TAC Raises Transportation Issues

By Chip Gaysunas

Due to Belmont's central location in the greater Boston area, its streets experience significant cut-through traffic and congestion daily. Many of Belmont's streets date to the 1800s and were not designed to handle the speed, weight, and volume of vehicles currently using them. Unfortunately, motorists cutting through Belmont rarely consider the impact their speed and distracted driving can have on pedestrians, cyclists, and other motorists.

Streets leading to and through Belmont Center, Waverley Square, and Cushing Square typically see the highest daily traffic volume. However, streets serving schools, parks, and other town amenities also experience significant daily traffic volume. For example, Concord Avenue provides daily access to thousands of motorists traveling to destinations north and south of the MBTA Commuter Rail bridge. It is also the primary travel corridor for those looking to access public amenities,near the center: Belmont Middle School/High School, Harris Field, Belmont Sportsplex and Skip Viglirolo Ice Rink, Underwood Pool, Belmont Public Library, and US Post Office.

Belmont residents understand the issues in their neighborhoods and share an interest in improving safety on roadways, crosswalks, and sidewalks across the town; however, each situation is unique and solutions that might make sense for one street may negatively impact the next or lead to other unintended consequences. With limited funds available for transportation-related projects, the town tries to focus resources in those areas where meaningful improvements in safety and accessibility can be expected.

Belmont's Transportation Advisory Committee

Belmont's Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) is charged "to make recommendations to the Select Board for improving the safety of public ways in Belmont for pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists." The TAC has nine resident volunteer members appointed by the Select Board and acting under the direction of the town engineer, who is an ex officio, nonvoting member.

As a TAC member, I've worked with Belmont residents, the town engineer, Select Board members, and officers from the Belmont Police Department on a wide range of transportation issues These issues range from relatively simple parking and signage issues to more complex issues related to cut-through traffic, congestion, and vehicle speed and volume.

The TAC and town officials have designed and adopted traffic calming and crosswalk safety improvement policies, which guide residents on steps they can take to voice their concerns. Adoption of these policies was an important step forward for the town; however, these policies will need to be revisited as new information and technologies become available.

For example, the 85% percentile speed, a widely accepted measure of motor vehicle speed and a key criterion for evaluating speed on Belmont's streets, is considered effective for establishing highway speeds. However, it has limitations which may not fully address motor vehicle speed in heavily intersected residential neighborhoods and numerous pedestrians and cyclists.

The TAC has benefited from working with town engineers who understand the importance of prioritizing safety on Belmont's streets and who have deep experience with transportation issues in Belmont and other Massachusetts communities. Wayne Chouinard, Belmont's town engineer, brings years of experience from his work with Arlington and has proposed changes including setting aside time for public input at each TAC meeting and establishing TAC working groups to complement Belmont's Engineering Department.

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TAC focus areas for 2026 and beyond

Belmont Center Overlay

The town and Select Board are committed to supporting commercial development in Belmont. The recently adopted zoning overlay districts in Belmont Center (the MBTA Communities Act overlay adopted in November 2024 and the two business-oriented overlays adopted in March 2026) would likely entail significant parking and traffic impacts. In 2025, the town commissioned studies addressing these potential parking and traffic impacts. The results of the studies were presented in a joint public meeting of the TAC, the Select Board, and the Planning Board in October 2025; however, significant questions remain around the impact of future development on traffic and parking.

MBTA Rail Bridge and Underpass

The transportation engineering firm BSC Group has been working with the town and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT), through the state's Local Bottleneck Reduction Program, to study improvements, including installing traffic signals, at the intersections of Common Street, Concord Avenue, Leonard Street, and Channing Road on either side of the MBTA Commuter Rail bridge. Updates on the status of potential improvements are anticipated this year.

Concord Avenue and Neighboring Streets

Concord Avenue is a primary arterial roadway within and through Belmont. As a result, the corridor experiences significant daily traffic volume, with several problematic intersections. Area residents have expressed concern with increased vehicle volume, especially at the intersection of lower Goden and Concord Avenue. With the town's new rink and library facilities bringing players and families to this area, traffic volume and congestion on Concord Avenue and neighboring streets is anticipated to increase.

Improvements to pedestrian crossings along Concord Avenue, including at the new library and the post office, are planned for 2026, with grant funding under the MassDOT's Complete Streets Funding Program.

Grove and Huron

Grove Street is a high-volume north/south corridor between Belmont Street and the roundabout at Washington Street and Blanchard Road. It borders Grove Street Park and intersects Huron Avenue (Cambridge). The town has been working with transportation consultants from Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc., (VHB), to design improvements along this corridor, including installing traffic signals at the intersection at Grove and Huron. VHB's 75% design plan for this corridor was presented to the public at the December 2025 TAC meeting.

Mill, Concord, and Winter

Mill Street, Concord Avenue, and Winter Street are primary arterials for motorists and cyclists traveling to and through Belmont. These intersections have been studied for years, but to date, limited progress has been made on implementing changes due in part to the lack of adequate buffers between these streets and the northeast edge of the Rock Meadow Conservation Area.

White Street

White Street is a primary north/south corridor between Waverley Avenue in Watertown and Trapelo Road in Belmont. Butler Elementary School, at the intersection of White Street and Sycamore Street, draws more than three hundred students daily from the neighborhood. Despite the installation of traffic-calming measures along this corridor, residents express continued concerns about traffic volume and speed.

The TAC provides a forum for residents to raise concerns about transportation-related issues in their neighborhoods. TAC meetings are open to the public, and residents are encouraged to attend. Most TAC meeting agendas now provide an opportunity for public input. TAC meeting minutes and links to the town's traffic calming and crosswalk safety improvement policies can be found here.

Chip Gaysunas is the vice chair of Belmont's Transportation Advisory Committee.

Profile in Belmont: Cabell Eames

By Elissa Ely

Most of us work in one profession; maybe two, if there's a second chapter. A rare number find themselves in three. But vanishingly few have led so many lives that it's hard to keep count (and for that matter, hard to limit the words on their profile).

If someone introduced you to Cabell Eames today, it would be as founder of Castling Strategies, a woman-owned policy consulting and advocacy firm. The public interest initiatives she shepherds include climate change, social justice, and immigration reform. Her position requires a polymath: someone with scientific comprehension, political and interpersonal sophistication, adeptness in writing legislative briefs, policy fact sheets, press releases, op-ed pieces. Altogether, it's like playing three-dimensional chess.

But if someone had introduced you to Cabell when she was young, you would have met a different person. She grew up, an only child, in a neighborhood between the Phillip Morris tobacco plant and the Dupont chemical facility in Richmond, Virginia. Her parents smoked (of course), and town residents were stricken with autoimmune diseases. Maybe relatedly, her mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when Cabell was in the fourth grade. She became an involuntary caretaker; the two of them lived on scarcity, food stamps, and Swanson TV dinners. Salisbury Steak was the favorite.

Even when home life wasn't revolving around her mother, it was turbulent. Her parents had divorced contentiously, and Cabell was their unwilling peacemaker. Respite came in a Pekinese named Sugar and the great world outdoors. "The environment lives, breathes, and gave me companionship," she says. "I had grass, soil, river. I could

sit under a tree and have a hundred friends. I had peace around me." Neighbors from the Lumbee Tribe cemented her bond with the earth. "I'd walk into the woods and listen to the conversations. It was all alive."

If someone introduced you to Cabell as an adolescent, she was already acting and in her first television commercial. Her father, a restaurateur in Richmond, needed publicity—thus, the commercial—and she needed money. Like the creek and woods, acting was freedom. She decided to become a stage performer.

Working in a series of restaurants her father owned, including one in the former home of Robert E. Lee (where the entire Richmond legislation would descend after 5 pm), she started as a dishwasher at 14, graduated to coat check girl at 15, then hostess, waitress, and bartender. By 22, she was managing a restaurant in New York and financing an incipient actress's life. Joey Ramone and Iggy Pop were neighbors. There were movement classes ("I was a terrible dancer"), singing lessons, and courses in Shakespeare. Her grandfather had been a Shakespearean scholar at the Virginia Military Institute, and she learned early that "the words move in beats."

She formally began her career in activism in New York, knocking on upstate doors for the Sierra Club's rainforest initiative. Meanwhile, she was working as a makeup artist for drag performers on the side. If you're paying attention, by now you've started to understand the multiplicity of her life. But in New York, Cabell also saw crime, drugs, and friends diminished from addiction. "If I hadn't left, I could have been sucked into it," she recalls. She left for Los

ANNIE VALVE

Cabell Eames.

Angeles where, when not in tryouts, she organized a successful door-to-door recycling campaign and opened a makeup business ("drag makeup artists are the best of the best. You literally create a face"). In the ashes and shock of 9/11, she let go of acting. "It was such a raw time," she says. "I'm an activist at heart, and always knew there was an underbelly I had to fight. Acting felt selfish when so much was at stake. That's when the shift happened."

"I'm an activist at heart, and always knew there was an underbelly I had to fight. Acting felt selfish when so much was at stake. That's when the shift happened."

"I'm an activist at heart, and always knew there was an underbelly I had to fight. Acting felt selfish when so much was at stake. That's when the shift happened.

The shift has guided a path since then. It took her to Massachusetts with her future husband (an actor!), to work on a mayoral campaign in Haverhill, to meet Bob Massie and eventually to run his gubernatorial campaign. When they were babies, her kids knocked on doors with her.

The shift took her to an immigration law firm in Boston, where she wrote Elizabeth Warren's immigration policy and partnered with congress to secure H-1B visa approvals (working so fast and hard that eventually she worked herself out of a job). "If I can't get hold of someone, I just show up," she explains. "Sometimes I skip the phone calls."

Next came the Better Future Project and a roadmap bill about climate regulation. That job had some irony. "All these people had EVs," she says. "But I was an environmentalist, and I couldn't afford one."

Then, further expansion. She helped a national company run focus groups on solar energy, filed anti-artificial turf legislation, and with the Charles River Watershed Association, collaborated with local, state and federal leaders on climate resiliency policy. Most of the organizations she once worked for have become her Castling Strategies clients. These are causes and people she came to care for; a Venn diagram connecting who she was then to who she is now.

In 2013, Cabell and her family moved to Belmont. "I remember driving down Concord Street, loving the green space and the trees," she says. She figured it was only a stop on their way back to LA, but 13 years later, they're renting the same place. In Belmont, she found what she calls "Hobbit town charm." Of course, there are ambitions as well. She wants a moratorium on artificial turf, and every time a tree comes down, she wishes one would be planted in replacement. "The tree bank is anemic," she argues. Also, more farms. "Everybody should have fresh food. We've gotten so far away from the land."

All these hours and days and months, all this lobbying and advocacy and strategizing, all these meetings and events (the floors of the State

House in the middle of the night are very familiar), leave little time for being outdoors. Cabell once sat among trees in Virginia and found a hundred friends. She misses "the sound of cicadas." But through countless lives, she has become herself. Few of us can say we do what we are.

Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.

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Thank you, Elissa Ely, for more than three wonderful years of "Profiles in Belmont."

With curiosity, warmth, and a journalist's patient attention, Elissa has introduced *Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter* readers to a remarkable range of neighbors, volunteers, public servants, artists, advocates, business owners, and quiet community builders. Her profiles have helped us see Belmont not just as a place of issues and institutions, but as a town shaped by individual lives, memories, commitments, humor, grief, generosity, and service.

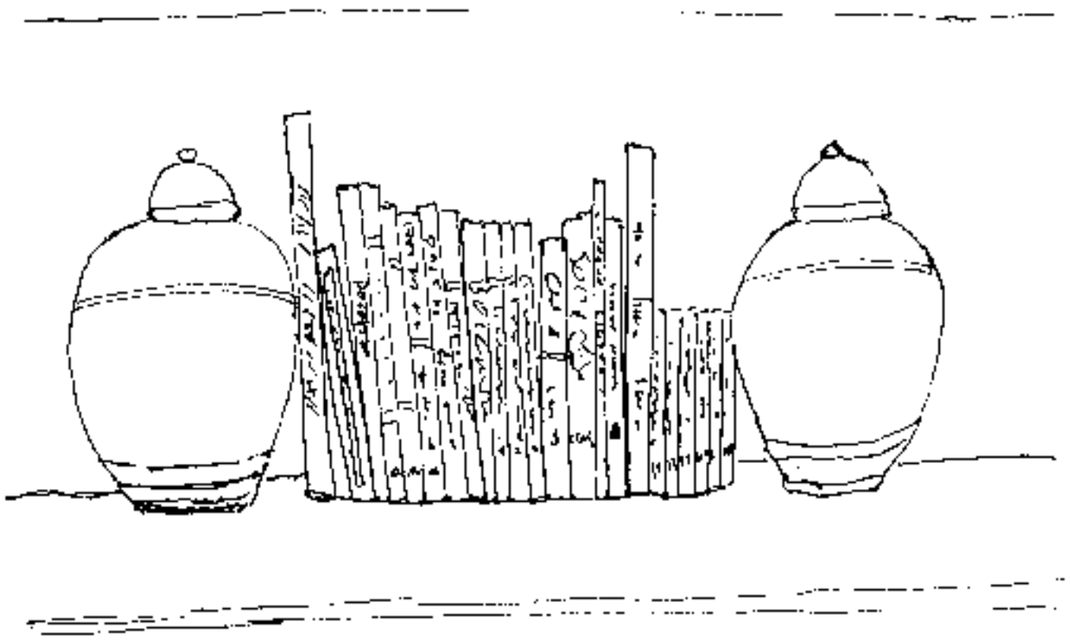
Readers have cherished these pieces because Elissa has a gift for listening. She finds the telling detail, the unexpected turn, the human moment that makes a profile stay with us. Again and again, she has reminded us that civic life is made personal by the people who show up, contribute, and care.

As Elissa moves on to other projects, we want to express our deep appreciation for her time with the Newsletter as an adjunct journalist. Her "Profiles in Belmont" have enriched our pages and our understanding of the community we share.

With gratitude and best wishes, thank you, Elissa.

COURTESY PHOTO

Elissa Ely has written some 20 profiles for *BCF Newsletter.*



McLean Hospital Zone 3 Housing Breaks Ground

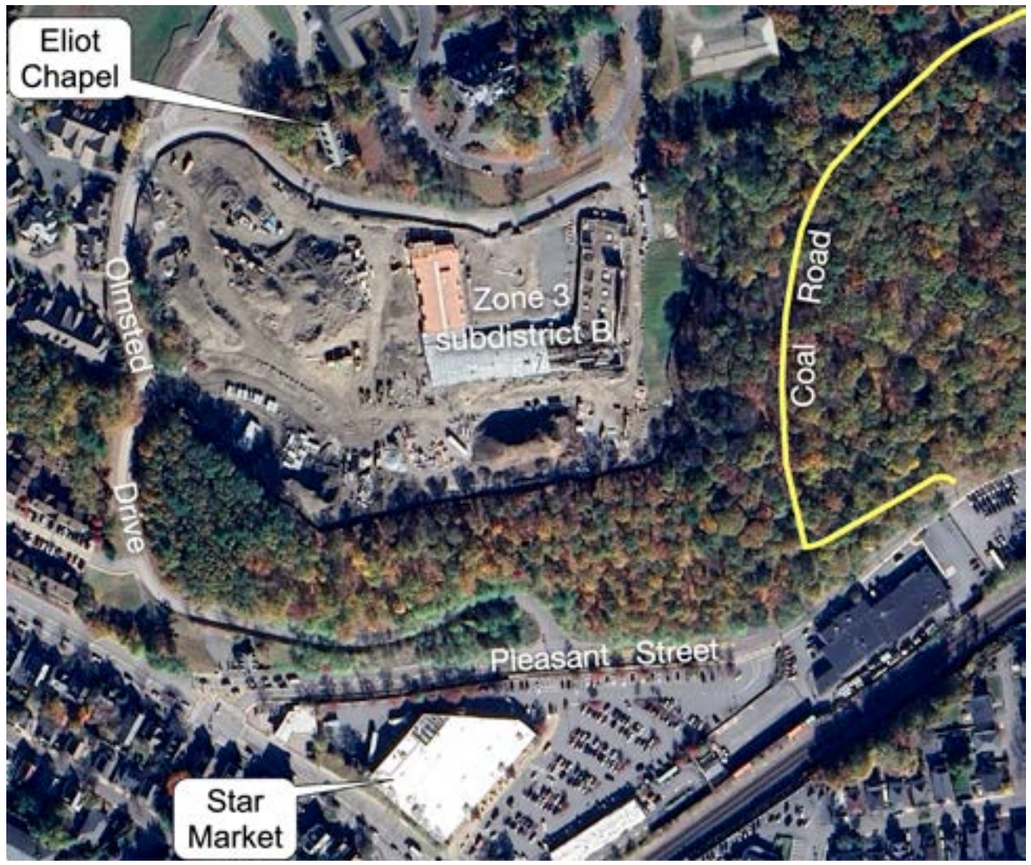
By Jeffrey North

The long-planned "Zone 3" housing on McLean land is finally moving forward with construction of a 150-unit, all-electric housing complex poised to become one of the town's most significant new sources of both market-rate and affordable homes. Construction is visible from the Coal Road as it winds up Belmont Hill from Pleasant Street.

Brief History of Zone 3

In 1999 Belmont and McLean Hospital consummated an agreement that rezoned 238 acres of McLean land. In exchange for upzoning some of the undeveloped land surrounding the McLean campus to permit commercial development Belmont received 119 acres of conservation land (now known as Lone Tree Hill) and 14 acres for a cemetery. McLean land was rezoned to allow three new commercial developments (townhouses, an R&D facility and a senior living complex) which were projected to net the town $1,818,425 in recurring annual revenue, approximately 4% of the town's annual budget in 1999. (For details see the 1999 report of the "Belmont McLean Hospital Land Use Task Force," Fiscal Impacts chapter, page 75; *BCF Newsletter* September 2022).

Among the three proposed developments the biggest financial contributor to Belmont was projected to be a 480 unit senior living complex in Zone 3 ($1,191,085 in recurring revenue; 74% of the total). Rights to develop the continuing care retirement community were licensed to American Retirement Corporation, but the market became saturated as similar facilities in nearby communities



GOOGLE EARTH PRO

Aerial view of McLean Zone 3 construction in October 2025.

VINCENT STAINTON

Samuel Eliot Memorial Chapel, view from upper Olmsted Drive.

opened, and no viable development proposal was ever advanced (see BCF newsletter May 2019).

In 2018 Northland Residential Corporation proposed to instead build more housing in Zone 3, leading to a long and productive negotiation with the town that culminated in the present project. Town Meeting rezoned Zone 3 in 2020, creating the "McLean District Zone 3 Overlay District."

What is being built now?

Formally known as The Residences at Bel Mont, the new development will create 150 residences on roughly 13 acres off Olmsted Drive, the same access road used by The Woodlands at Belmont Hill.

While today's plan entails only about one-third as many units as the original senior living facility, the units will be larger. Still, the original facility was expected to be a six story monolithic structure, while the current plan allows smaller buildings scattered over a wider area, and requires that "wall finishes shall be compatible with the existing historic architecture …in the McLean District." Also, while the original development would have contributed more net tax revenue, it also would have entailed significantly more traffic as a continuing care facility includes beds that require nursing support.

The 2020 Zone 3 overlay district (chapter 6B of the town's bylaws) divides the project into two subdistricts. Subdistrict A will contain 38 age-restricted (head of household 55 or older) townhouses plus two units created by rehabilitating the historic Samuel Eliot Memorial Chapel. Subdistrict B will contain 110 multifamily units, 53 of them age-restricted, in two 3- to 4-story buildings.

Affordability and climate commitments

After two decades of pressure for more affordable housing, the Zone 3 plan has a substantial affordability component than was lacking in earlier McLean residential development (zones 1A, 1B and 2). As part of negotiations leading up to the 2020 Town Meeting zoning vote on the overlay district Northland Residential agreed that 15% of the homes in subdistrict A will be deed-restricted units affordable to households earning 80% of Area Median Income (AMI), and 20% of the units in subdistrict B, while a further 5% of subdistrict B units will be affordable to households earning 50% of AMI. The new affordable units will help move Belmont closer to the state's 10%affordability threshold required for immunity to hostile Chapter 40B developments. (Belmont's subsidized housing inventory currently comprises 6.21% of all housing units; completion of Zone 3 will increase that to 6.77%.)

The project also reflects Belmont's climate priorities. As part of the zoning overlay the development must be all-electric, eliminating on-site fossil-fuel use for space heating and domestic hot water, and roofs must be "solar-ready." These requirements dovetail with the town's efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and with the Energy Committee's long-standing concern that large new projects do not lock in new gas infrastructure.

Traffic, access, and the revised agreement

Zone 3 could not proceed until the town and McLean updated a 1999 traffic management and mitigation agreement that governed vehicle trips from the campus onto Pleasant Street. The original agreement was crafted to protect the town from excessive traffic associated with a much larger senior-housing complex, and imposed strict trip caps and financial penalties for exceeding those caps that, according to Northland, lenders considered unworkable for the smaller 150-unit plan.

In July 2024, Town Meeting approved changes to the 1999 traffic agreement, waiving traffic volume caps and penalty fees, while mandating a traffic signal upgrade at McLean Drive and Mill Street and a new signal at Olmsted Drive and Pleasant Street. That action cleared the final hurdle for financing and construction.

How zone 3 fits into the larger McLean build-out

The Residences at Bel Mont sit between the existing Woodlands neighborhood (Zone 2) and land designated as Zone 4, where McLean is moving ahead with a new child and adolescent campus. The hospital's current plan for Zone 4 calls for two buildings totaling about 150,000 square feet: a 90,000-square-foot facility for the Arlington School and Pathways Academy and a separate research and development building for future clinical and scientific programs.

Together, Zone 3 housing and the Zone 4 school/R&D campus will complete the development program envisioned in the 1999 McLean Memorandum of Agreement, which permitted 1.2 million square feet of development across the campus and produced both high-end townhouses and deeply affordable housing at Waverley Woods.

For open-space advocates, this completion is a mixed blessing: while the new developments will add to the town's subsidized housing inventory, and to its tax base, the 119 acres of protected open space are increasingly encroached on by new construction.

What can neighbors and residents expect next?

With zoning in place and the traffic agreement revised, Northland and McLean have shifted to implementation. The town's Construction Management Plan for Zone 3 spells out staging areas, truck routes, working hours, and noise controls, all intended to minimize disruption to neighbors in The Woodlands and along Pleasant Street as work accelerates. Residents can expect most construction traffic to use Pleasant Street and Olmsted Drive, with on-site worker parking and limits on early-morning deliveries.

For Belmont residents watching the project as part of the town's broader housing and climate debates, Zone 3 at McLean will be a test of whether Belmont can add new homes—especially affordable, all-electric ones—while protecting open space, managing traffic, and respecting the character of existing neighborhoods.

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

VINCENT STANTON

Zone 3 - subdistrict B building complex from further up Olmsted Drive. The building at the far left runs above and parallel to the Coal Road.

The William Flagg Homer House, a Quest for Escape, Community Service, Empowerment, Enjoyment, and Suffrage

By John Beaty

This story is the second article about the William Flagg Homer House in Belmont. The first, "Who Built the Homer House?" (BCF Newsletter, September/October 2025 issue), focused on how the house was financed, designed, and built. Here, we will describe the extraordinary effort local women made to purchase the grand old house for their Belmont Woman's Club (BWC). This purchase was made in the context of the suffragists' campaign for women's rights across the country. Women's clubs were established to free women from the home and to provide them refuge, empowerment, enjoyment, and opportunities to serve their communities.

Belmont's William Flagg Homer House owes its survival not only to a famous painter uncle and a handsome mansard roof, but to hundreds of determined women who decided that this place, and their own public lives, were worth investing in.

From private villa to women's haven

Boston merchant William Flagg Homer acquired the land and built his 1853 Italianate villa on Wellington Hill. In 1927, local women turned that grand home into a clubhouse and, in the process, claimed a new kind of civic space for themselves.

The cast iron cooking range is classic late 19th-century or early 20th century kitchen design.

Homer used the house first as a summer residence and later as his year-round home until his death in 1883; meanwhile his nephew, Winslow Homer, sketched and painted Belmont scenes inspired by the house and its surroundings. Today, the house anchors Belmont's Pleasant Street Historic District and its BWC owners use the property to host social gatherings, lectures, and community events.

A landmark passes from hand to hand

Between William Flagg Homer and the BWC, the house had a busy real-estate life. In 1884, neighbor Susan Blake bought the property for $21,000, added paneled woodwork and a grand fireplace, and installed etched "B" glass panels and stained glass that still catch the light today.

Over the next decades, the deed moved quickly. A string of sales and "conveyances" in 1893 ended with Lillian Russell, wife of Joseph B. Russell, brother of Governor William Eustis Russell, and uncle of Cambridge mayor Richard Russell. In 1904, Judge Arthur Stone purchased the property and, through same-day transfers, ensured that both he and his wife, Alice Stratton Stone, were recognized as co-owners on the deed. That detail quietly reflects changing thinking about married women and property.

In 1911, the Stones sold the house to "Miss" Martha Frost, who lived there until her death in 1927. That same year, her executors received court permission to sell, and developer Carl B. Stenstrom quickly drew up plans to demolish the house and subdivide the land into seven lots. Before any demolition could begin, however, Belmont women intervened.

A woman's club steps in

The BWC, formally established in 1920 as women gained voting rights, had already become a 600-member organization devoted to education, philanthropy, and civic work. When members learned that the Homer House was threatened, club president Belle (Emory) Chaffee and her colleagues moved even more quickly, working with town officials to buy the property from Stenstrom and save it from destruction.

On March 1, 1927, the BWC purchased the Homer House for $25,000, using $5,000 from club funds and two $10,000 mortgages, one from Belmont Savings Bank and one privately from Chaffee herself. The house needed work, from inadequate gas service to the lack of modern electrical wiring, but the club's leadership concluded that the acquisition was both a sound "business venture" and an important civic act.

At the time, women's clubs around the country served as crucial semi-public spaces where women, newly enfranchised but still constrained by expectations of domesticity, could organize, learn, and lead. Belmont's club followed that model, providing refuge, empowerment, enjoyment, and opportunities for large-scale community service in an era when many women had only recently gained the legal right to own property.

Nine months to retire the debt

The scale and speed of what followed are striking. In only nine months, from March through the end of 1927, the club retired both $10,000 mortgages, which represented 80 percent debt on the purchase price, while also contributing $3,640 to charity that same year.

To put that effort in perspective, $25,000 in the mid-1920s equates to roughly $450,000 to $500,000 in today's consumer purchasing power, yet that inflation adjustment still understates the change

JOHN BEATY

William Flagg Homer House staircase.

in Belmont real estate values since 1927. A 1850s Italianate landmark on a prominent site in an affluent town would almost certainly be valued in the multi-million-dollar range today.

If we assume a conceptual $5 million, the women of the BWC effectively took on the equivalent of a $4 million debt and paid it off in less than a year, while still funding significant philanthropic work. Their records note that the second mortgage's payoff was celebrated by "burning of the mortgage by the President and the three past-presidents," a ritual that underscored both relief and pride.

A whole town chips in

Club records show that the women did not act alone; Belmont residents and businesses rallied to help furnish, modernize, and maintain the house. The Marcy Coal Company supplied equipment and workers to move the club's possessions and discounted coal costs that first winter, while the Arlington Gas Company relocated and reconnected the gas stove.

Contractors and merchants donated labor and goods. A decorator offered to finish part of the house, a lumber company contributed materials for a stage, and an insurance agent provided fire insurance for an arts and crafts exhibition. Individual residents contributed items that still shape the interior today, including mirrors, rugs, light fixtures, furniture, artwork, and even a swinging outdoor sign bearing the club's seal.

The club's suggestion box generated an ongoing stream of fundraising ideas. Members ran food sales around meetings; operated a "woman's exchange" selling candy, cards, hooked rugs, and even mincemeat at 15 cents a pint; and staged dramatic performances whose profits helped paper and paint one of the rooms.

Women's Labor, Women's Leadership

President Emory Chaffee did not soft-pedal the obligation that came with owning a clubhouse. She told the 600 members, "If all of us are not going to share the responsibility of owning a clubhouse, then you had better vote against buying it," and the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the purchase.

Members backed that vote with time and money. Each pledged to contribute five dollars, a substantial sum at the time, while also buying dishes and participating in an endless schedule of bridge luncheons and suppers, some of which raised $75 to $80 per event. Six afternoon bridge luncheons organized by a single member generated $502.75, while a Harvest Bazaar contributed another $915.24.

Gifts of furnishings doubled as symbols of membership and care. Donations ranged from chandeliers and lamps for the halls and dining room to an eight-day clock for the boardroom, draperies and carpets, rattan furniture, tables and chairs, and a mahogany piano that arrived with moving and tuning already paid. In her will, one member left $500 specifically to be applied to the mortgage, a final gesture that literally helped pay down the debt.

Preservation as ongoing civic work

On the cusp of a centennial, the Belmont Woman's Club still owns and uses the Homer House, now as a 501(c)(3) organization open to all. In 2010, the club granted a conservation restriction on the property to the Belmont Land Trust, effectively donating the land's development rights to ensure that the house and grounds could not be carved up by future developers.

Recent landscape and restoration projects, supported in part by Community Preservation Act funds, have opened up new views of the house and stabilized deteriorating features. As restoration continues, every public event on the lawn or in the parlor rests on the financial and political groundwork laid by the women who, in 1927, burned their mortgages and kept showing up for meetings.

On the eve of the club's 100th anniversary of ownership, the Homer House stands as both a physical landmark and a record of what organized volunteers, most of them women whose names rarely appeared on deeds before the mid-nineteenth century, could accomplish together.

The question those early members posed implicitly with their actions still resonates: would we today take on the equivalent of a 5-million civic project and then work, month after month, to pay it off for the sake of history, community, and each other?

John Beaty is a Belmont resident and lives in the Pleasant Street Historic District. He is an alternate member of the Belmont Historic District Commission, and is retired from Northeastern University.

Lexington's Conservation Stewards

By Jeffrey North

Lexington's Conservation Division and its network of Conservation Stewards form one of the most robust municipal stewardship programs in the region. Together, they care for more than 1,400 acres of conservation land and more than 50 miles of trails. This partnership offers a useful model for towns like Belmont that are looking to stretch limited staff capacity and improve the ecology and public enjoyment of local open space.

The Conservation Division's core mission

Lexington's Conservation Division is the town department charged with administering state and local wetlands laws, managing town-owned conservation land, and supporting the appointed Conservation Commission, responsible for protecting wetlands and open space, as well as with Public Works and other departments. Its work ranges from reviewing development proposals under the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act and Lexington's local wetlands bylaw to planning long-term stewardship of conservation areas.

In practice, staff shoulder three broad responsibilities: regulatory review, land management, and public engagement.

Managing 1,400 acres of open space

Lexington's conservation land spreads across 26 conservation areas, with more than 50 miles of trails and many boardwalks through wet areas. These forests, fields, and wetlands provide wildlife habitat, store floodwater, filter air and water, while offering residents spaces for walking, birding, skiing, and solitude.

The town manages these lands for multiple purposes: passive recreation and education, habitat protection, ecosystem services (e.g., fresh air and clean water), trail and wildlife connectivity, and preservation of scenic and historic character. To guide decisions at both the town-wide and property scale, the Conservation Commission adopted a comprehensive management guide, Principles and Policies for the Management of Lexington Conservation Land, in 2015.

Origins and structure of the stewards program

Lexington's Conservation Stewards program began as a loose network of neighbors who took it upon themselves to adopt local conservation parcels in the early 1980s. Over time, the town recognized both the need for more coordination and the enormous value of sustained volunteer involvement in caring for conservation lands.

Today, the Lexington Conservation Stewards number more than 230 volunteers. A Stewards Directors Group, formed roughly two decades ago, has a full-time stewardship coordinator position to support monthly directors' meetings, project planning, and communication.

What conservation stewards do on the ground

Stewards take on much of the "boots on the ground" work that would otherwise overwhelm municipal staff. They build and maintain bridges and trails, improve wayfinding signage, restore meadows, remove invasive species, and repair wetland boardwalks.

Volunteers also help with neighborhood cleanups, trash removal, and small-scale erosion control, and they are the first eyes and ears to spot downed trees, damaged infrastructure, or emerging invasive problems. Though the town backs them up with a seasonal land management crew and occasional DPW assistance, volunteers do roughly 90% of the on-the-ground work.

Lead stewards and property-scale care

Each of Lexington's 26 conservation areas has one or more Lead Stewards who coordinate care for that property and serve as points of contact with town staff. Lead Stewards help develop work plans, organize volunteer days, and track recurring needs such as invasive plant hotspots, muddy trail sections, or aging kiosks.

The town encourages residents and local groups to become Lead Stewards. These roles are crucial to preserving and maintaining Lexington's conservation land. An online membership form allows residents to join the Conservation Stewards network. Staff then

connect them with a specific property or project that matches residents' interests and availability.

Partnerships, training, and community building

In addition to individual volunteers, the Stewards program partners with local scout troops, churches, temples, businesses, and civic organizations on larger projects such as boardwalk construction, meadow restoration, and trail reroutes.

Recruitment and retention depend on consistent communication. The Conservation Division publishes a monthly e-newsletter, several articles in local newspapers each year, and guided hikes. An annual open house shares projects and welcomes new volunteers. Stewards receive training in sustainable trail design, safe use of hand tools, and specialized skills, such as "Game of Logging," which helps volunteers work safely around downed trees. The town even has its own Lexington Conservation Stewardship Handbook.

Ecological benefits and public access

Stewardship efforts directly improve the ecological health of Lexington's conservation lands. Managing meadow succession and removing invasive plants helps protect and enhance biodiversity, while trail maintenance work reduces erosion and keeps visitors on durable paths, limiting damage to sensitive habitats.

At the same time, these projects expand and preserve public access by keeping trails clear, repairing boardwalks, and improving signage so that visitors can confidently explore new areas. Interpretive walks and informal conversations on the trail help build a constituency for conservation, connecting residents' daily experiences to broader questions of watershed protection, climate resilience, and regional habitat connectivity.

Funding, challenges, and lessons for neighbors

Funding for Lexington's conservation land management and stewardship comes from the town budget, Community Preservation Act funds, grants, and groups like the Lexington Nature Trust Fund (which the Conservation Commission uses to acquire, promote, manage, and maintain its properties). This patchwork enables both routine maintenance and more ambitious projects such as major boardwalk installations and ecological restoration plans for high-priority properties.

The program also faces challenges familiar to neighboring towns: aging volunteer leaders, the need to cultivate new generations of stewards, and the challenge of matching enthusiastic volunteer energy with townwide priorities. Lexington's experience suggests that investing in staff capacity to coordinate volunteers, providing clear management plans, and recognizing volunteers' contributions are key to sustaining a large-scale stewardship program over the long term.

A sterling model for Belmont

For Belmont residents, Lexington's Conservation Division and Conservation Stewards demonstrate how a small staff can successfully care for a large, ecologically diverse open space system by working closely with trained volunteers. The combination of clear policy guidance, professional oversight, and empowered citizen stewards has produced a network of well-maintained woods, fields, and wetlands that serve both wildlife and people in a suburban region.

As communities confront pressures from climate change, regional growth, and recreational demand, Lexington's model shows that volunteers are not just a nice addition but an essential part of long-term conservation land management. With thoughtful adaptation to local conditions, the core elements of property-based lead stewards, staff support for coordination, and a strong culture of training and appreciation could strengthen open-space stewardship in Belmont and beyond.

Jeffrey North is the managing editor of the Newsletter.

LISBETH BORNHOFF

Stewards remove invasive plants in Lexington, MA.

Our Environmental Stewards: Ian Cooke, NepRWA

This article is part of the Belmont Citizens Forum's series on environmental leadership in Massachusetts.

The Neponset River Watershed Association (NepRWA) works to protect and restore one of Greater Boston's most historically significant rivers, whose 30-mile course drains parts of 14 cities and towns from Foxborough to Dorchester Bay. Like its sister organizations on the Mystic and Charles, NepRWA combines scientific monitoring, community engagement, and policy advocacy to confront pollution, flooding, and climate impacts across a densely developed watershed.

The Belmont Citizens Forum spoke with Ian Cooke, executive director of NepRWA, about the organization's watershed-wide initiatives, its partnerships with municipalities and local residents, and his vision for a cleaner, more resilient Neponset River. Jeffrey North conducted the interview, which has been edited here for length and clarity: read the complete version at BelmontCitizensForum.org. *Readers can learn more about NepRWA's work at* neponset.org.

You've spent many years working on river restoration and watershed protection. Could you share a bit about your background and what led you to your current role as executive director of the Neponset River Watershed Association?

Cooke: The Neponset River starts in Foxborough near Gillette Stadium and flows northeast for 30 miles to Dorchester Bay at the painted gas tank by the expressway. Its watershed includes 14 cities and towns such as Norwood, Dedham, Milton, and the southern edge of Boston (Hyde Park, Mattapan, and Dorchester), as well as the northern edge of Quincy. I grew up in Dorchester just a stone's throw from the Neponset River, even played little league on the banks of the River, but never knew anything about it, because it was polluted, "dangerous," and inaccessible behind six-foot barbed wire fences in spite of being largely publicly owned. In college, my interests in nature and the outdoors drew me toward environmental issues and family role models inspired my interest in working with grassroots nonprofits. After graduation, an internship at the NepRWA evolved into a career, an opportunity to work with a series of extraordinary community leaders, and to see the river gradually transformed into a vibrant community asset, a transformation that is still underway.

Ian Cooke.

The Neponset River watershed spans both urban and suburban communities. What are the most pressing environmental challenges facing the river and its tributaries today?

Cooke: The Neponset River has come a long way since the days when it was fenced off, but it still has many challenges and opportunities ahead. These include pollution from stormwater runoff and aging infrastructure—particularly bacteria and fertilizers. About 120,000 people get some or all of their drinking water from groundwater sources in the watershed, but once withdrawn, almost all that water is transported to treatment plants outside the watershed. This causes serious problems with reduced streamflow especially during periods of drought, which further impact wildlife, recreation and water

pollution. While we no longer have uncontrolled industrial discharges to the River, a legacy of our historic industrial pollution is still hiding in the mud at the bottom of the Neponset and some tributaries. EPA has recently designated the Lower Neponset as a Superfund site to help address some of these issues. Opening the river up so that all our communities can enjoy it, especially in our historically neglected Environmental Justice neighborhoods along the River is a key priority. Finally, climate change overlays and complicates all these issues, from sea level rise impacting neighborhoods and our salt marsh habitats alike to rising temperatures and increasing rainfall intensity. Climate is already aggravating many long-term problems with flooding, water pollution, recreation, and habitat loss.

NepRWA has been deeply involved in river restoration and dam removal. Can you highlight some of the most impactful projects and what they've achieved?

Cooke: Protecting and restoring habitats for native wildlife is a key priority for us. While it's impossible to undo more than 400 years of development in our watershed, we have many intact natural resources, and there is tremendous potential to restore lost ecological functions that would benefit wildlife, people and our economy. We have secured Area of Critical Environmental Concern status from the state for the Neponset River Estuary along the coast, and the 8,000 acres of freshwater floodplain and wetlands in Fowl Meadow. Amazingly, we still have some 95 dams remaining along our small river and its tributaries, almost all of which are remnants of the industrial era with no modern purpose. We are lucky to still have wild native trout in several tributaries, including the best remaining trout stream in Eastern MA. Working with many partners such as Greater Boston Trout Unlimited, we have (so far!) removed five small dams from our trout streams to help reconnect aquatic habitats, improve water quality, and reduce flood risks.

One of our longest-running goals has been to restore historic runs of migratory herring and shad. These fish came upstream to spawn in the Neponset for millennia and have been permanently blocked from the River by mill dams since the early 1700s. We have been working to remove or modify the two most downstream dams on the Neponset, which are owned by the state. Doing so would restore 17 miles of spawning habitat, the single largest restoration opportunity for American Shad remaining in the state. It would also reduce flooding, improve water quality, enhance recreation, benefit numerous other species, and save money. With our advocacy, the state has recently agreed to remove one of these dams and is beginning a new study of what to do with the other, hopefully leading to the return of herring and shad in a few years.

Our stormwater challenge will only be solved when communities and private landowners upgrade stormwater infrastructure so that polluted runoff is filtered through plants and soils and infiltrated back into the ground.

Water quality remains a concern in many parts of the watershed (and others). What are the major sources of pollution, and what strategies are proving most effective in addressing them?

Cooke: Polluted stormwater runoff from roads and parking lots is our main source of ongoing water pollution. While we do have problems with antiquated sewer infrastructure in key areas, the Neponset is lucky that very few combined sewer systems or CSOs were built here as compared to the Charles and Mystic Rivers. That said, almost all roads and buildings in our watershed predate modern requirements to manage the polluted runoff and flooding caused by uncontrolled stormwater.

While some benefit is being gained by educating residents about picking up after pets and responsible lawn care, our stormwater challenge will only be solved when communities and private landowners upgrade stormwater infrastructure so that polluted runoff is filtered through plants and soils and infiltrated back into the ground. Reengineering our communities using "green infrastructure" techniques that absorb and slow down runoff rather than shedding it as quickly as possible is essential to not only getting the river clean, but for helping to absorb the dramatic increase in rainfall intensity that has started arriving with climate change, and that is already overwhelming storm drain infrastructure that was built for an earlier era.

Climate change is intensifying flooding and stormwater impacts. How is NepRWA working to improve resilience across the watershed?

Cooke: We work very closely with our cities and towns through our Neponset Climate Collaborative and the Neponset Stormwater Partnership, to help them prepare for and reduce the impacts of climate change. We have brought our communities together to develop detailed regional flooding models, for both inland areas and our coastal estuary, that map areas of increased flooding expected between now and 2070 and test ways to reduce those impacts.

We are helping communities inventory infrastructure such as dams and culverts that can be removed or modified to reduce flooding impacts. We are identifying locations where communities can retrofit existing pavement with green infrastructure to reduce runoff. We are helping them streamline the process of adding stormwater controls every time they are digging up streets for road, sewer line, or water line work. We advocate for cities and towns to adopt stormwater utilities so they have a dedicated source of funding for this work.

We help cities and towns update local development and redevelopment bylaws to ensure that the private sector is making upgrades and to reduce construction in flood prone areas. We are even studying the significant role that restoring and preserving our salt marshes can play in reducing coastal flooding of nearby properties and helping to buy time before communities are forced to undertake more challenging adaptation and relocation projects.

Making sure our work reflects the needs of everyone in all of our communities, including those who may have fewer resources or who may not be as well connected to traditional power structures, is a key part of our work.

NepRWA has a strong track record of engaging volunteers and local residents. How do you build and sustain that level of community involvement?

Cooke: We find that many people are eager to help make a difference on environmental and climate issues in their own communities. We now have about 1,000 individual volunteers and many corporate groups helping in all kinds of ways each year. Volunteers are central to everything we do, from gathering water samples, clearing debris on river cleanup days, revegetating stream banks, controlling invasive species, painting murals, helping with community outreach and education events, lobbying at the State House, leading committees and advisory groups that are building trails, identifying land acquisition opportunities, advising EPA on the Superfund Cleanup, and advocating for resilience measures among other activities. We invest significant time and effort in good communication and coordination with our volunteers, and the payback is tremendous.

The Neponset flows through a diverse set of communities. How does NepRWA work to ensure equitable access to the river and its green spaces?

Cooke: The Neponset encompasses some affluent communities and also some of the most socio-economically diverse environmental justice neighborhoods in the state. Making sure our work reflects the needs of everyone in all of our communities, including those who may have fewer resources or who may not be as well connected to traditional power structures, is a key part of our work. We do that by prioritizing where we invest our time and effort to ensure that our own resources as well as the resources of our municipalities and state agencies go to the areas of greatest need and not just to those with the greatest influence.

What are some of the most visible ways people can experience the Neponset River today—through recreation, restoration sites, or public programs?

Cooke: Everyone should explore the Neponset Greenway Trail, which stretches nine miles from the Boston Harborwalk and Morrissey Boulevard at the painted gas tank through Dorchester, Mattapan, Milton, and Hyde Park along the Neponset. This paved bike and pedestrian path weaves past parks,

salt marshes and wetlands, playing fields, playgrounds, splash pads, fishing spots, Tenean Beach, and almost reaches the 7,000-acre Blue Hills. The last link to the Blue Hills is hopefully coming in the next few years, which will finally realize the 50-year vision for linking Boston to the Blue Hills along the Neponset. There are many other lovely parks, lakes, and paddling spots to explore. For anyone who might be interested in exploring further, we have information on recreation and parks at Neponset.org, as well as a list of upcoming events from a free paddling day to bird walks to river cleanup days.

NepRWA has been active in addressing issues like stormwater management and PFAS contamination. What policy priorities are most important for the watershed today?

Cooke: Action on the policy front is extraordinarily important to creating healthy watersheds. Key areas where we need policy change from our state and local leaders include:

Updating our antiquated state stormwater policy to address the realities of climate change. State rules still rely on 1960s-era rainfall data. Even draft proposed rules, which have now been delayed for five years, while a step in the right direction, fall well short of what's needed, and the longer we wait to make these changes, the larger the costs to correct our mistakes will be down the road.

We need state government to recommit to fully funding our state environmental agencies. Our parks agency, the Department of Conservation and Recreation, is particularly underfunded, but all our environmental agencies are still hampered by lack of resources and staffing.

Helping cities and towns to invest in updating their stormwater infrastructure through innovative financing mechanisms like "stormwater utility" fees is also critically important. In most communities, stormwater lacks the kind of consistent fee-based funding sources that support our water and sewer systems, leaving stormwater infrastructure poorly managed.

Several key pieces of active legislation are pending in our state legislature right now, such as the H.103Drought Management Bill (formalizing drought management authorities), the S.559 Flood Disclosure Bill (requiring home sellers to disclose past flooding), the S.2542 Mass Ready Bill (to help fund climate resilience), and the S.597 Nature for All Bill (to fund land and habitat protection) are ripe for passage.

Finally, we need the Commonwealth to create new regional governance institutions that can raise money to plan and fund the significant infrastructure upgrades needed to help us manage climate impacts. Current state investments in climate resilience, while well intended, are not nearly adequate. What we invest now in preventing future storm impacts, will save 10 times that amount in future storm damage recovery costs.

What policy changes or investments would have the greatest impact on improving the health of the Neponset River?

Cooke: Investments in opening up new greenways and regional trail connections are hugely beneficial for the health and well-being of communities, especially those that historically have had less access to green space. They also help to build and diversify the constituency for cleaner water. There are few things you can do that benefit river health and wildlife more than removing an obsolete dam. The fact that doing so usually saves money and reduces flood risk is a bonus. Another much needed but seldom implemented change that can bring a river back to life is reducing seasonal water withdrawals that significantly impact the amount of water in nearby streams. In many cases, this is simply a matter of adjusting which of several water sources a community relies on during the dry summer season, but doing so often involves modest additional costs that municipalities are unwilling to incur voluntarily and state regulators have generally lacked the will to require. Massachusetts needs to be much more proactive in planning for how we can use regional water supplies most strategically to minimize the overall impacts of water use on the environment.

What lessons from your experience at NepRWA would you most want to share with other environmental leaders across Massachusetts?

Cooke: It is critical for regional conservation groups to find ways to build coalitions not only with like-minded allies, but also with unconventional partners from the private sector, from local government, and from populations that have historically been excluded or simply absent from our political decision-making processes but who are often most directly affected by pollution and climate impacts.

If you could sit down with your peers leading other watershed and conservation organizations, what questions would you most want to ask them about advancing shared environmental progress and strengthening our natural wealth?

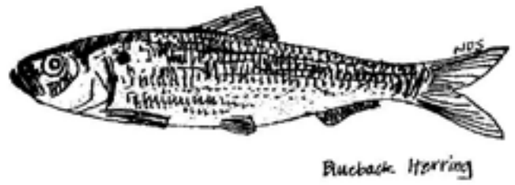
Cooke: I would ask what areas might be ripe for collaboration where we face similar challenges and could advance policy changes that would benefit all our rivers over the long term. I would also be curious to learn about what they see as some of their areas of success and the ingredients that came together to make those accomplishments possible.

Looking ahead 20 years, what is your vision for the Neponset River and its watershed if today's restoration and advocacy efforts succeed?

Cooke: Within 20 years, I expect to see a more free-flowing Neponset River teeming with native and anadromous fish, with a connected network of bike and pedestrian trails all the way from Walpole to the Blue Hills to Boston, where people can and do cool off with a swim in their local pond or waterway even in the City of Boston, and where restored floodplains and green infrastructure—from small rain gardens dispersed throughout our neighborhoods to large restored salt marshes and other habitats—keep us cool, protect people from flooding, and support thriving wildlife.

Ian Cooke is the executive director of the Neponset River Watershed Association.

Jeffrey North is the managing editor of the BCF Newsletter.



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