



Problems with Massachusetts E-Bike Laws and a Possible Fix

By David Chase

Decades of improvements in batteries and motors have made e-bike assists practical and affordable, putting far more of them on the road today. People use them to commute, transport children, shop, make deliveries, and just for fun. These same advances have spurred a variety of other motor-assisted “micromobility” devices—e-scooters, e-skateboards, hoverboards, and monowheels—increasingly popular for commutes and short trips.

Unfortunately, cheaper motors and batteries have also enabled what are effectively electric mopeds and motorcycles, marketed and sold as “e-bikes.” Because they carry pedals and are called “bikes,” people ride them in bike lanes and on multiuse paths, and parents buy them for their children. These overpowered—and overpowering—machines can be dangerously fast for shared paths and young riders. Yet current Massachusetts law has no explicit category for them, leaving regulations inadequate and contributing to [fatal crashes involving children](#).

To address these problems, the Legislature formed the Special Commission on Micromobility, which delivered its [report](#) in February 2026 recommending legal changes. Governor Maura Healey filed the Ride Safe Act ([S.3077](#)) on May 4, 2026; the Joint Committee on Transportation redraft version is [S.3168](#). At the end of the formal legis-

lative session on July 31, the bill was still in the Ways and Means Committee. It may yet be considered during informal sessions later this year, though passage would be a steep hurdle because it requires unanimous consent.

The Existing Law and Confusion Around “E-Bike”

Current Massachusetts e-bike law defines and regulates electric bicycles ([General Law - Part I, Title XIV, Chapter 90, Section 1](#), [General Law - Part I, Title XIV, Chapter 85, Section 11B3/4](#)), but it does not define or regulate electric vehicles that fall outside that category. Less ethical manufacturers exploit this gap to market machines far more powerful than legal e-bikes under the same “e-bike” label—some boasting 3,700-watt motors capable of 45 mph to 55 mph. Some are sold to parents for children; children make the mistakes we fear from children, and the resulting crashes can be fatal. The lack of statutory definitions also hinders enforcement, as regulations are tied to defined vehicle classes. Social media has even reported cases of riders attempting to obey the spirit of the law by registering what is effectively an electric moped at the RMV, only to be turned away because it did not meet statutory registration criteria.

Under current state definitions, a legal e-bicycle has an electric motor rated at no more than 750

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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.

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watts and a speed limiter that removes all assistance above 20 mph. When meeting these criteria, an e-bike is treated almost entirely like an ordinary bicycle. This encompasses federally defined Class 1 (pedal-assist only) and Class 2 (throttle-assist, where pedaling is not required) e-bikes, but excludes federally defined Class 3 e-bikes, which provide assist up to 28 mph. The law also requires a manufacturer or distributor label certifying the e-bike's type, assist-limit speed, and wattage, and that the label be updated if these things change.

Bicycles and e-bikes are subject to standard rules of the road and posted speed limits, but many bike paths or mixed-use paths have no posted limit. Some local regulations ban e-bikes from certain trails, some ban Class 2 e-bikes, some depend on the road surface, and some post local speed limits, creating an ad hoc patchwork.

The core problem is that Massachusetts law stops there, leaving an unregulated gray area. Statutory definitions of mopeds use cylinder “displacement,” not power. Because electric motors have no displacement, those laws do not apply. While one can convert displacement to motor wattage, that is not what the statute says. State law is equally silent on handlebar-less, non-bicycle devices like e-skateboards, and monowheels. Scooters (with handlebars) have their own, different, old law. Cross a state line, and different rules apply, as federal law and neighboring states formally recognize 28 mph Class 3 e-bikes. Motorcycle definitions do not use displacement, but do require compliance with Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, which the faster e-vehicles do not meet (these are the least-likely-legal “e-bikes”).

We might assume that an undefined vehicle is prohibited on public roads, but roads are public ways where travel is a fundamental right (taken for granted in the Bill of Rights after appearing in Article IV of the Articles of Confederation). Highway access may be restricted only because alternative routes exist; by default, the public may use roads to travel. While Massachusetts regulates cars, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, and horses, those rules apply only to defined vehicle classes. Without clear statutory categories for other electric vehicles, enforcement is legally fraught.

Consequently, there is virtually no regulation governing the sale or speed of high-speed e-bikes, e-scooters, or e-skateboards. Devices that are effectively electric motorcycles with pedals are sold freely. As prices drop, their popularity has surged, alongside news reports of an “explosion” in injuries—largely tracking ridership, but exacerbated by speed.

The popularity of these vehicles can trap well-meaning parents. Seeing pedals, a bike frame, and an “e-bike” label, parents may assume a machine is as safe as a bicycle, when it actually possesses motorcycle power. Under current law, a parent must know to ask: “How fast can it go?” and “How easy is it for my kid to get around that limit?”

What the Proposed New Law Provides

The proposed law removes this gray area. Drawing on the Special Commission's recommendations, the proposed legislation (S.3077 / S.3168) defines four speed-based tiers, with increasing restrictions tied to each tier.



Seeing pedals, a bike frame, and an “e-bike” label, parents may assume a machine is as safe as a bicycle, when it actually possesses motorcycle power.

Tier 0, 0–20 mph, maintains existing e-bike rules (“treated like a bicycle”) and extends them to other low-speed micromobility vehicles whose motors do not assist past 20 mph, including e-scooters, e-skateboards, and hoverboards, as well as unpowered kick-scooters and skateboards. Riders remain subject to bicycle laws, youth helmet mandates, standard rules of the road, and sidewalk restrictions (the current blanket ban on sidewalk e-bike riding will likely be preserved). Unpowered bicycles and boards may still exceed 20 mph under human power.

What's new: Formal “like a bicycle” treatment for low-speed e-scooters, e-skateboards, and hoverboards, alongside a new minimum operator age of 14 for motorized devices (the House version specifies 16).

Tier 1, 21–30 mph, covers faster small e-devices, mopeds, and Class 3 e-bikes. Operators must be at least 16 years old and wear helmets. Traditional mopeds retain their existing driver's license and RMV registration requirements.

What's new: Formal legal definition and authorization for Class 3 e-bikes, including minimum age and helmet mandates, and an expanded sticker system called “Mass Micro ID.”

Tier 2, 31–40 mph, covers high-speed micromobility devices and “limited use motorcycles.”

What's new: Explicit statutory definitions for faster electric two-wheelers, imposing all Tier 1 requirements (age 16+, helmets, Mass Micro ID) plus mandatory liability insurance.

Tier 3, 40+ mph, covers electric vehicles that are effectively motorcycles.

What's new: An explicit definition so that high-speed electric two-wheelers are regulated and insured as motorcycles, closing the pedal loophole.

Beyond the Tiered Restrictions

Beyond the tiered restrictions, the proposed law would:

- Impose a default speed limit of 20 mph on mixed-use paths, and ban mopeds (but not Class 3 e-bikes) from on-road bike lanes.
- Impose electrical safety regulations on batteries and motors for all these devices, addressing severe fire concerns.

- Establish a working group to standardize reporting of crashes involving motor vehicles, micromobility devices, or vulnerable road users (including pedestrians), while clarifying rules for dealers and manufacturers.

Hoped-for Benefits: Enforcement and Safety

A simplified, speed-based classification will make these laws easier to understand, obey, and enforce. For small vehicles, safety is closely tied to speed. Legitimizing and regulating low-speed Tier 0 devices while restricting higher-speed machines should significantly improve safety.

Classification by speed simplifies police enforcement: radar guns easily clock small vehicles traveling faster than 10 mph. On flat ground, an unpedaled vehicle moving faster than 20 mph is clearly not in Tier 0, giving officers a definite, objective standard.

Clearer classification at the point of sale and universal age restrictions on motorized tiers will prevent children from riding dangerously fast vehicles. For parents, the new law provides a welcome “blame the law” justification to refuse unsafe purchases, much like youth helmet laws.

Better battery safety standards will be a major improvement. Cheap, uncertified lithium-ion batteries are prone to catching fire, sometimes causing catastrophic building fires. Without state standards, transit agencies and landlords have strong reasons to ban e-assisted vehicles from buildings and trains. Robust standards protect riders and preserve access.

A 20 mph speed cap on multiuse paths will also help. Relatively few path users exceed 20 mph today, but those who do create outsized risks: less control, less reaction time, and more severe crash impacts. High-speed passes are also deeply uncomfortable for pedestrians. A clear limit establishes mutual expectations and discourages reckless riding.

Hoped-for Benefits: More Adoption and Wider Use

Headlines about battery fires and reckless riding might tempt some to ask: why not simply ban e-bikes? In practice, ordinary legal e-bikes are extraordinarily practical for short trips. Compared to driving,

an e-bike is cheaper, quiet, nonpolluting, safer for bystanders, and trivial to park. During rush hour in Greater Boston, an e-bike is often faster than driving. While regular bicycles share many of these benefits, electric assist is what makes cycling broadly feasible for carrying children, tackling steep hills, commuting without sweating, or replacing a car. Families across Boston and its suburbs already rely on e-cargo bikes to haul kids to school, run errands, and eliminate second cars.

This transition is well documented. A focused UK study of 42 households found that 60% of trips taken on newly provided e-cargo bikes directly replaced car trips (“[Understanding e-cargo bike substitution of car, cycling, and walking through domestic trials in three UK cities](#)”,

A clear legal framework should also encourage commercial short-haul delivery. In congested cities, cargo e-bikes deliver goods faster, cleaner, and more safely than vans, avoiding competition for loading zones (*The Guardian*, August 2021). Clarifying which vehicles are legal removes regulatory uncertainty for logistics businesses. Furthermore, app-based food couriers currently using loud, polluting mopeds could transition to legal, regulated e-bikes, making streets quieter and cleaner.

Summary

Much of the confusion surrounding “e-bikes” arises because Massachusetts law defines standard e-bicycles but leaves faster, bicycle-shaped electric vehicles and smaller micromobility devices unregulated. This loophole has allowed dangerously fast motorbikes to be marketed as bicycles to parents and children, contributing to fatal crashes and leaving police without clear enforcement authority.

Pending legislation would establish a comprehensive, speed-based classification system that clarifies the rules for riders, parents, and law enforcement. By setting sensible speed tiers, establishing age limits, enforcing battery safety, and capping path speeds at 20 mph, the Ride Safe Act would improve public safety while supporting the practical, climate-friendly benefits of e-bikes.

David Chase is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Controlling Invasives Along the Future Community Path

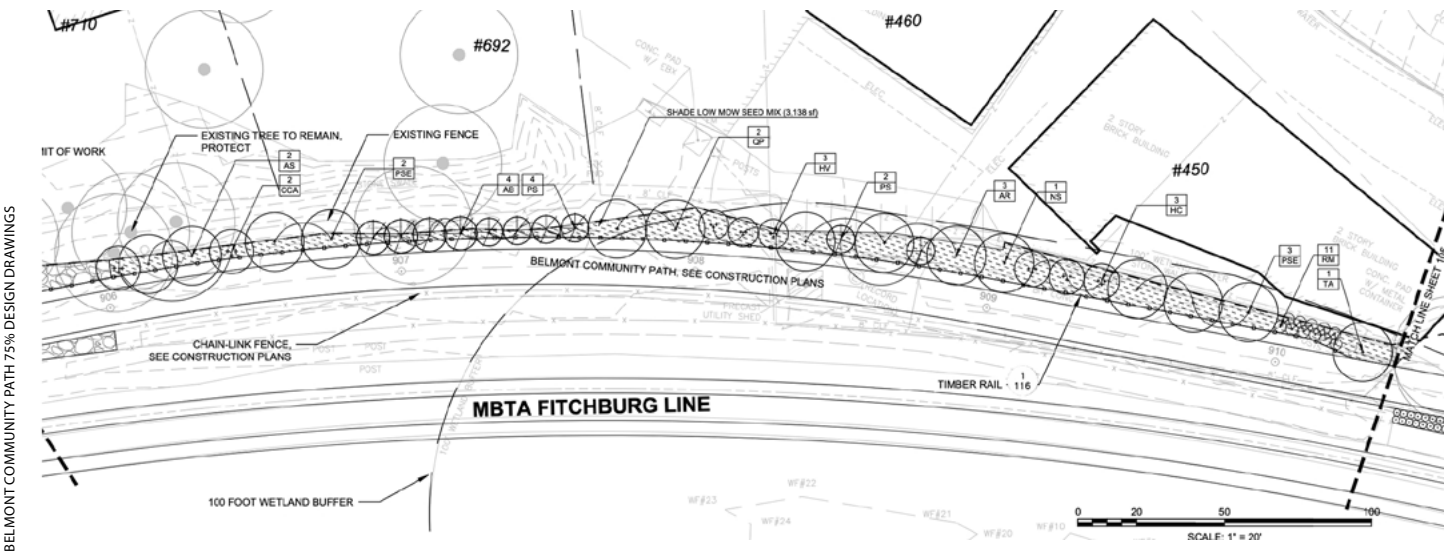
By Vincent Stanton, Jr.

Construction of the Belmont Community Path (Phase I) will encompass significant landscaping work, including planting 354 trees and 478 shrubs along the path. For example, 32 new trees and 11 shrubs will be planted along a 425-foot section of path behind the old BMLD building, the Belmont Police Station and the house at 710 Pleasant Street (see below). Tree and shrub varieties were selected from Belmont’s Preferred Trees List developed by the Shade Tree Committee (see “[Belmont Has a New List of Preferred Trees](#)” in the May/June 2024 Newsletter). Tree type (e.g., deciduous vs. coniferous) and placement along the path were determined in close consultation with path abutters by landscape architect Sean Sanger and his team at [Copley Wolff Design Group](#), the landscape design subcontractor to Nitsch Engineering on Phase I of the community path.

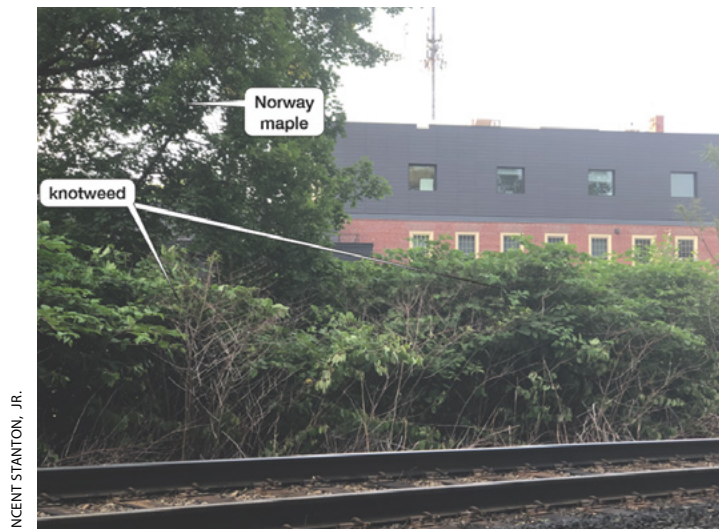
Most of the community path will traverse land owned by the MBTA, which, apart from its interest in poisoning plant life along the ballasted railroad right-of-way (as described in the MBTA’s five-year [Vegetation Management Plan](#) and annual [Yearly Operating Plan](#)) has had little interest in what grows

on the rest of its land (or resources to address it). As a consequence, much MBTA land is overgrown with aggressive invasive species, which thrive in disturbed soil. For example the area behind the police station (partially town land) is colonized by Japanese knotweed, tree of heaven, and Norway maple. The community path landscape plan calls for planting eastern white pine, pin oak, and common witch hazel in that area. However, the non-native Norway maple and tree of heaven can outgrow and shade those species, while the knotweed tends to form a dense monoculture shading everything below 10 feet and inhibiting growth of any other plants. Without a plan to control the existing invasive species, the viability of the new plantings will be threatened.

Discussions with the town’s path design consultants had created the impression (at least in the author’s mind) that the state and federal funds that will pay for path construction (via the Transportation Improvement Program, or TIP) could not be used for invasive plant control. It turns out that is not the case; indeed, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA, a source of federal TIP dollars) has a [guidance document](#) on controlling invasive plants that states, in part: “The FHWA recommends use of Federal-aid funds for new and expanded invasive



Detail from Sheet 104 of the Belmont Community Path 75% design drawings, showing the landscaping plans behind 710 Pleasant Street, the police station (460 Concord Avenue) and the old BMLD building (450 Concord Avenue). Each tree is specified by a two-letter abbreviation and a circle approximating the size of its mature canopy. For example, QP is *Quercus Pallustris*, or pin oak.



Invasive species behind the police station, on and adjacent to the route of the future community path. Immediately to the left of the photo is a large stand of tree of heaven.

species control efforts under each state DOT's roadside vegetation management program."

More important, in the recently published Belmont Community Path bid document, MassDOT details the scope of work that contractors must accomplish to meet project requirements, with nine pages of instructions on how to treat invasive plants. Section 102.33 "Invasive Plant Management Strategy" states, in part:

"[Provide] an Invasive Plant Management Strategy (IPMS) for the control of invasive plants currently existing on the project site ...the IPMS shall be submitted in the form of the MassDOT Invasive Plant Management Strategy Report Form"

Further, Section 102.3 of the bid instructions, titled "Herbicide Treatment of Invasive Plants" states, in part:

"Control of invasive plants shall begin immediately with the initiation of construction activities and prior to any clearing or site disturbance. Treatment areas ...may, upon approval of the Engineer, extend outside the project limit. Treatment shall be done each consecutive year for the duration of the contract unless specified otherwise..."

There are two encouraging aspects of those instructions: first, because the infestation of knotweed and other invasive plants extends beyond

the path right-of-way to adjacent town, private, and MBTA land, the ability to "extend outside the project limit" (with permission, of course) is important, and second, the planned project duration is three years, with treatment to be applied in each year, which is arguably enough time to get most invasive plants under control.

Only a Comprehensive Approach Can Succeed

The largest and most mature knotweed colony along the path is actually on the south side of the Fitchburg tracks (opposite the path) where a 12-foot-tall stand on MBTA land leans into the right-of-way. Seeds from those plants are likely the source of knotweed on town land north of Belmont Center Station. (The timeline feature of Google Earth shows that knotweed first appeared on town land north of the station around 2015, decades after it was present on the south side of the tracks.)

Ideally, the contractor's Invasive Plant Management Strategy will address that source, perhaps with some prodding from the town. In concert, the town should consider tackling the contiguous knotweed infestation on its land at the bottom of Royal Road where there are wetlands, a favorite habitat for knotweed. The MBTA land between the Fitchburg tracks



12-foot-tall dense colony of knotweed on MBTA property, inbound (south side) Belmont Center Station boarding platform, opposite the BMLD building at 450 Concord Avenue.

and Pleasant Street near the Clark Street Bridge is another area heavily populated by knotweed, tree of heaven, and Norway maple where the town should encourage a comprehensive IPMS.

Getting a Head Start on Town Land North of Belmont Center Station

Last fall, with the approval of the Select Board and a financial contribution from the Belmont Citizens Forum, Parterre Ecological, a local landscaping firm, targeted knotweed and tree of heaven on the town land north of Belmont Center. Concentrated glyphosate foam was applied to knotweed leaves, and triclopyr was painted on tree of heaven bark. This year, the knotweed biomass was down over 95% (see before and after photos, Figs. 4 & 5) and all of the large tree of heaven specimens (concentrated near the BMLD building) were dead. Still, some small knotweed and tree of heaven plants remained viable so in September 2026, again with



Fig.4 - Knotweed on town land north of Belmont Center Station, June 14, 2025, view southwest towards "Belmont Center" sign.



Fig. 5 - Same view as below 14 months later (August 7, 2026), following glyphosate treatment of knotweed on October 3, 2025.

permission from the town and support from the BCF, Parterre re-treated the knotweed and tree of heaven.

Those are not the only invasive plants on that land; there is also Asian bittersweet, black swallow wort, European privet, Japanese honeysuckle, and more. For the last two years (and again on October 12, 2026) those plants—which are not quite as

aggressive as knotweed and tree of heaven—have been manually removed by a group of Belmont Serves volunteers acting in concert with, and under the direction of the Belmont Conservation Volunteers, a group of trained volunteers who work on controlling Belmont's invasive plant population every Saturday morning from March to October (see "Belmont Conservation Volunteers Need Help" in the August/September 2025 Newsletter).

In conclusion, the upcoming construction of the community path could serve as a catalyst – with external funding from MassDOT via the TIP– to tackle the serious invasive plant problem on public lands flanking the path close to Belmont Center.

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

At One Year Old, Belmont’s Miniforest Rewards a Closer Look

By Nicole Estvanik Taylor

An intergenerational group of locals gathered on Saturday, October 3, to sing happy birthday to the pocket-sized forest in front of Belmont High School. The party, organized by [Miyawaki Forest Action Belmont \(MFAB\)](#), marked the first anniversary of the lively October 2025 planting day that drew hundreds of participants.

The Miyawaki method aims to give a head start to the formation of a mature forest ecosystem through dense planting, on a prepared site, of a careful selection of native trees and shrubs. Though botanist Akira Miyawaki began developing his approach in the 1970s in Japan, most such projects in the United States are younger than a decade. The method is often used in urban contexts to turn small patches of land into what are popularly termed “miniforests.”

Accounts of how Belmont came to have its own Miyawaki miniforest have appeared in [this publication](#) and others, but our young forest is just beginning its story. In honor of its first 12 months, here are a dozen conversation-starters for your next stroll past the high school or around Claypit Pond.



An intergenerational group of locals gathered on Saturday, October 3, to sing happy birthday to the pocket-sized forest in front of Belmont High School.

Roughly 97% of the More Than 1,100 Trees Planted Last October Have Survived.

Some 30 trees didn’t make it to their first spring. A majority of these were sugar maples and shagbark hickories, which were among the smallest saplings planted. Some have been replaced, but since competition is a tenet of the Miyawaki method, MFAB leaders plan to hold off on further replanting and allow the forest to develop naturally.

Every Sapling Is Accounted for on a Massive Spreadsheet.

Each tree and shrub has an identifying number and can be located using coordinates on a grid. Belmont High School student Jason Zhao used this info to create an [interactive map](#) for the MFAB website, packed with facts about each species. The plants started out wearing ID bracelets, but to prevent damage to growing branches, volunteers labored this summer to move the metal tags onto chopsticks inserted in the ground.

There’s a Selfie Station and a Really Big Ruler.

A phone stand next to the forest provides an easy way to snapshot yourself on a solo walk, or a fun backdrop for an annual family photo. Mounted on a nearby lamppost is a tall stick marked in footlong increments, useful for tracking the growth of kids and trees alike. On planting day, the average tree height was roughly 3 feet. Most now exceed 4.5 feet, and some high-achievers have shot up past 9.

The Miniforest Has Its Own Irrigation System, Though It Hasn’t Been Needed Much So Far.

Throughout a summer with drought conditions across much of Massachusetts, periodic testing of soil moisture levels at the miniforest revealed little need for extra watering. While the site is

exposed to drying winds and full sun, an abundance of moisture-retaining clay and organic material lies beneath the surface. Embedded sprinklers come in handy on hot days for cooling off the canopy with five-minute showers.

That Colorful Collar Is an Invitation to Bees and Butterflies.

A strip of native perennial flowers and grasses encircles the forest, with more planting to come. Twenty-five species were selected for site-suitability and their value in supporting at-risk pollinators, bolstering the lure of the adjacent native plant garden tended by the BHS Climate Action Club. The collar is designed to bloom across three seasons; this summer, *Rudbeckia* (Black-Eyed Susan) and Partridge Pea stole the show with their cheerful yellow petals.

Pollinators are Welcome—Bunnies, Not So Much.

For rabbits, the miniforest is a too-tempting buffet of berries and tender stems. When other food is scarce, they’ll resort to stripping away bark. The forest’s robust fence, already reinforced multiple times, defends against ruin-by-a-thousand-nibbles. Even so, there are indications that a few furry snackers have found their way in.

The Forest Has a “Lollipop” and a Weather Station.

You may notice a lollipop-shaped path jutting into the center of the site from the pond-facing side. That area was left unplanted to allow the town emergency access to water valves. Using funds from the Belmont Cultural Council, the MFAB team took advantage of the open space by installing a weather station that measures wind, rainfall, temperature, humidity, and other climate indicators at the forest’s interior.

Experts are Examining the Forest From Above and Below.

Landscape designer Jenifer Tidwell and Salem State University professor Nicholas Geron have contributed their expertise in drone imaging to help document and analyze the Belmont forest’s early development. This summer, Geron captured thermal images from overhead as part of his studies on how different surfaces, from concrete to mulch to trees, affect temperature. At ground level, University of Delaware ecology grad student Melory Brandao has

collected data from the Belmont site for her research on insect activity and biodiversity in urban green spaces.

Ever Heard of Phenology? It’s Happening Here.

Volunteer citizen scientists are using the Nature’s Notebook app to track designated specimens of 10 of the forest’s plant species. They’re engaged in what’s called phenology: studying the plants’ progress through seasonal milestones like budding, leaf growth, and fruiting. Their observations augment a nationwide dataset, managed by the USA National Phenology Network, that may shed light on how climate change affects ecosystems.

Students Are Learning From the Forest on Their Doorstep.

BHS students, including from the Climate Action Club, have been a key part of the miniforest effort from the start. The most prolific contributors to the phenology project so far are students of biology teacher Bonnie Chen, who brings her classes outside to observe and record the plants’ development. High-schoolers led forest scavenger hunts for younger kids through the Belmont Summer Enrichment program. Poems by students across all grades, inspired by their time in and around the forest, are displayed along the fence.

Belmont Was Featured on a Miniforest Bus Tour.

In July, the nonprofit Biodiversity for a Livable Climate brought Miyawaki method practitioners together for the 2026 Northeast Miniforest Summit. The itinerary included a tour of Boston-area miniforests, with stops in Belmont, Everett, Winchester, and Somerville. Despite rainy weather, visitors lingered to ask questions of MFAB committee members Jean Devine, Jessica B. Smith, and Sarah Wang. “We emphasized how much we engaged and built community through every phase of the forest’s creation,” says Devine.

There Will Be Plenty to See and Do in Seasons to Come.

The forest has at least a couple of years to go before it can tend to itself. MFAB welcomes interested volunteers to email miniforestbelmont@gmail.com or sign up via the project’s website: <https://miyawaki->

forestbelmont.netlify.app. More hands are needed for weeding and maintenance, to expand the phenology program, and to launch new efforts related to local history and STEM education. The committee also seeks people with finance, marketing, and social media expertise to take on roles. The simplest thing anyone can do to engage with the forest is to pause and look closely, at any time of year. At this October's birthday celebration, a touch of autumn crimson had begun to emerge. Once leaves and snow have fallen, tracks will provide clues to bird and animal activity. When spring arrives, the race is on to spot the earliest buds.

In her emails to volunteers, MFAB chair Sarah Wang sometimes includes little details she's noticed on her own visits to the forest: colorful swamp rose

hips, or swallowtail caterpillars rolled up in spicebush leaves. "I try to share the things I take delight in, to see if it sparks any interest for people to come visit," Wang says. "I want to say, 'Hey, look! See what you missed!'"

Writer and editor Nicole Estvanik Taylor lives in Belmont. Her family was among the many who helped to plant the miniforest.

A Miyawaki Forest Takes Root Near Alewife



JEFFREY NORTH

Fans of Belmont's Miyawaki forest, planted last fall in front of Belmont High School, will be glad to hear that the method is spreading. On Wednesday, September 23, a new native planting in the Miyawaki style went into the ground beside the Jerry's Pond restoration site on Rindge Avenue in Cambridge, near Alewife Station.

The work was led by Offshoots Inc., the landscape design, planning, and installation firm subcontracted to oversee planting around Jerry's Pond as part of the site's restoration. Offshoots staff trained and directed about a dozen crew members from PowerCorps Boston, the City of Boston's paid "learn and earn" green-workforce program for residents ages 18 to 30, which provides hands-on training in urban forestry, green infrastructure, and climate resilience.

The site now holds about 60 young native trees, each roughly one inch in trunk diameter, including white pine, gray birch, swamp white oak, red maple, and tulip tree.

The Alewife planting joins a growing regional network: Cambridge's first Miyawaki forest was planted at Danehy Park in 2021, and at least 20 Miyawaki-style plantings now grow in Massachusetts.

Restoration of Jerry's Pond: A Master Class in Restoring Urban Wilds or a Missed Opportunity?

By Jeffrey North and Eric Grunebaum

The abbreviated answer is both.

Jerry's Pond sits behind a chain-link fence on Rindge Avenue in North Cambridge, a short walk from the Alewife MBTA station, across the street from Cambridge's largest environmental justice community, and near the Belmont line. Since 1962, the pond and surrounding land have been visible but off-limits: a nine-acre remnant of The Great Swamp, and later a site of clay extraction, industry, and outdoor recreation.

The site's inaccessibility is now changing due to the advocacy of Friends of Jerry's Pond (FOJP) beginning in 2015, which encouraged the property owner, lab developer IQHQ, to advance a public access plan. The Cambridge Conservation Commission reviewed the plan at length and received significant contributions from community groups, including, principally, the Alewife Study Group (ASG), which focused on pollution concerns, as it had for more than 25 years. The resulting project offers a useful case study for how communities across Greater Boston, including Belmont, might approach the restoration of damaged urban wilds and those perceived to be damaged.

A Site Shaped by Nature First and Then by Industry

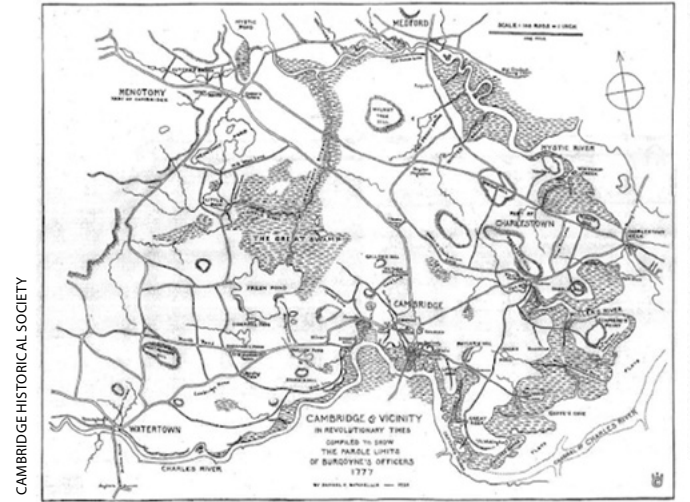
Jerry's Pond is one of the remaining remnants of "The Great Swamp"; lowlands formed after

the glaciers' retreat 25,000 years ago, leaving a tidal estuary running north to the Mystic River, a name meaning "Great Tidal River" in Algonquian, pronounced "Missi-Tuk." The swamp stretched from the Mystic to Spy and Fresh Ponds and provided rich hunting and fishing grounds for the indigenous Massachusetts people. Alewife refers to the saltwater, anadromous fish which spends its life in the ocean, swimming upriver only to spawn in freshwater.

The Great Swamp, including Jerry's Pond and the land around it, had many uses in the 18th and 19th centuries; famously, the rich marsh clays were mined to make the bricks that built much of Boston. As the clay ran out, many pits filled with water and, from the late 19th century onwards, some, including Jerry's, became popular swimming holes; a respite from the city, frequented by Irish and French-Canadian immigrants living nearby.

In the early and mid-20th century, land around the pond hosted a factory using pond ice to make ice cream, a metal fabricator (later used as the band Boston's practice venue), and a burger joint.

Meanwhile, more nefarious activities were taking place on the other side of the light rail tracks, which later became the "rail-to-trail" corridor of Alewife Linear Park. A series of chemical companies used the approximately 18 acres north of the tracks, leaving hazardous pollutants behind. Later, this area was



1777 map of The Great Swamp



"Jerry's Pit," 1945. Bath house built by Dewey & Almy Chemical Co.; brick drying sheds in the distance.

conflated with the nine-acre Jerry’s Pond site south of the tracks, especially after the infamous polluter, W. R. Grace & Company, purchased land on both sides. In 1962, the thriving swimming hole and natural areas of Jerry’s Pond were closed, and an MDC pool (now DCR) opened—no more access to nature. Concrete pools and the perception of danger ruled.

Yet Cambridge’s long-time Historical Commission director, Charlie Sullivan, related in 2022, “I remember a study from the 1970s or ’80s that gave Jerry’s a clean bill of health. I think the urban legend about a grossly polluted pond was maybe a product of the actual pollution discovered nearby during construction of the Red Line Extension combined with W. R. Grace’s terrible environmental reputation, which supported the city’s perception that it wanted nothing to do with owning the property.”

In 2020, Grace’s successor company agreed to sell all 27 acres to lab developer IQHQ and, knowing the pond would receive intense oversight due to FOJP’s long advocacy for reopening the pond and watchdog group ASG’s asbestos monitoring, in March 2021, IQHQ hired VHB to prepare a wildlife

habitat assessment, which described Jerry’s Pond as an approximately 4-acre water body bordered by 5 acres of vegetated wetland and mature trees, and steep or vertical banks. Despite the disturbance, the assessment recorded great blue heron nesting (ending in 2020), waterfowl, turtles, muskrat, and a range of birds and small mammals. It also found heavy stands of invasive plants, including phragmites, knotweed, buckthorn, garlic mustard, tree of heaven, and multi-flora rose.

That combination—real ecological value paired with mostly perceived contamination and real degradation (much of the land is paved below the invasives), along with the city’s active disinterest, and backtracking on a grant to study the site—has made Jerry’s Pond a challenging restoration project. Though consulting engineer Haley & Aldrich’s 2021 testing for IQHQ showed that the nine-acre Jerry’s Pond site was not greatly polluted with hazardous waste, much of the 18 acres north of the Linear Path contains asbestos related to the former industrial use. That fact has shaped nearly every design decision that followed.

The Approved Restoration Plan

IQHQ’s approved plan does not attempt to remake the pond from scratch and re-naturalize it. Instead, it relies on above-ground interventions designed to open the site without undertaking a broader ecological restoration as proposed by FOJP; one which would remove most of the pavement, create natural banks, and reshape the pond, creating a large greenspace on Rindge Ave. The construction plan, now underway, includes raised, board-walk-style pedestrian paths along Rindge Avenue, pond overlooks, seating areas, and links to the city’s Alewife Linear Park and bicycle routes.

The plan also calls for removing pavement and replacing it with clean soil and a conservation seed mix, adding trees, and installing two floating wetlands intended to improve habitat and water quality. An ecological education pavilion, developed in partnership with Mass Audubon (introduced to the project by FOJP) is planned. IQHQ has also committed to a communal garden effort with Green Cambridge.

A design review commissioned through the Alewife Study Group in 2023 described the IQHQ plan as “minimalistic,” noting that it relies on above-ground boardwalks rather than shoreline regrading. That restraint was deliberate, although perhaps overly founded on fear. Reviewers and city staff repeatedly pointed to the value of keeping construction off the “contaminated” bank and away from an area in the northwest corner of the site that functions as a “wildlife refuge.”

However, rather than avoiding digging along the pond’s banks, a nearly half-acre water detention basin was excavated next to the pond without the highest “tent and vent” asbestos protections because, as FOJP, Sullivan and Haley & Aldrich had noted, there was no substantial asbestos here. FOJP had proposed instead to de-pave the banks, creating biodiverse wetlands in this location with the underlying logic, that if we’re going to excavate, why not restore and create new wetlands? Instead, the excavation of a water detention basin was designed to support the lab development’s water storage obligations and will remain mostly dry except during rare “25-year” storms.

How the Plan Moved Through Permitting

Jerry’s Pond improvements became a formal requirement of the Plan in May 2022, when Cambridge granted IQHQ a special permit for its broader Alewife Park lab development. The pond work then went through separate review under the Wetlands Protection Act, since the site includes bordering vegetated wetland and other regulated resource areas.

At a February 2024 hearing, IQHQ presented a revised design that added twenty trees over the previous version, expanded the depaved area intended for flood storage, and outlined how vegetation would be protected during construction. (As of fall 2026, IQHQ now states that many of the trees proposed along Rindge Avenue cannot be planted due to “clay and wood conduits” along Rindge. FOJP had instead proposed an approximately three-quarter-acre green-space with room for 150 to 175 trees, without the need to plant close to the street.)

The Cambridge Conservation Commission voted to approve the project and issued its Order of Conditions on March 18, 2024, under Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) file number 123-322. That approval requires a formal operations and maintenance plan covering the floating wetlands, plantings, and other regulated features, including a process for removing them if they fail. The ConCom however was not responsive to DEP’s statement that boardwalks cast shade detrimental to the wetlands below nor require mitigation. Had the design been of clean fill, rather than boardwalks, there would be no shade. (Mass-DEP’s Environmental Notification Form review stated: “Shading impacts to Bank and Land Under Water are likely to be deemed alterations and should be evaluated in the NOI. Mitigation may be required.”)

The Unresolved Debate

Not everyone considers the current plan sufficient. Friends of Jerry’s Pond had pushed for years for a more ambitious restoration: re-grading the pond’s steep banks into sloped wetland habitat, planting well over one hundred additional trees, and creating a public greenspace on one of Cambridge’s busiest streets and in the city’s largest environmental justice neighborhood. Some versions of that alternative carried estimated costs in the 10 to 15 million dollar



range, a small fraction of the billion dollar lab development's value.

A Cambridge City Council vote in January 2024 declined to restore the city's grant offered to study that larger vision. The tension between the two visions, a constrained improvement plan and a more expansive public investment in habitat and climate resilient greenspace, remains the central unresolved question at Jerry's Pond.

Why It Matters Beyond Cambridge

For Belmont readers, Jerry's Pond is worth following for reasons that go beyond geography. It sits in the same Alewife Brook watershed that touches Belmont's own conservation concerns, and it illustrates a challenge many towns will eventually face: how to treat land that is ecologically valuable, publicly desired, and environmentally compromised – or at least perceived to be compromised – all at once. And to keep a clear-eyed view of facts, rather than fear-based legends.

The Cambridge approach landed on a somewhat limited vision rather than leaning into a full ecological transformation. It permanently locks in paved land, allowed excavation of a water detention facility, and casts large sections of the pond's banks

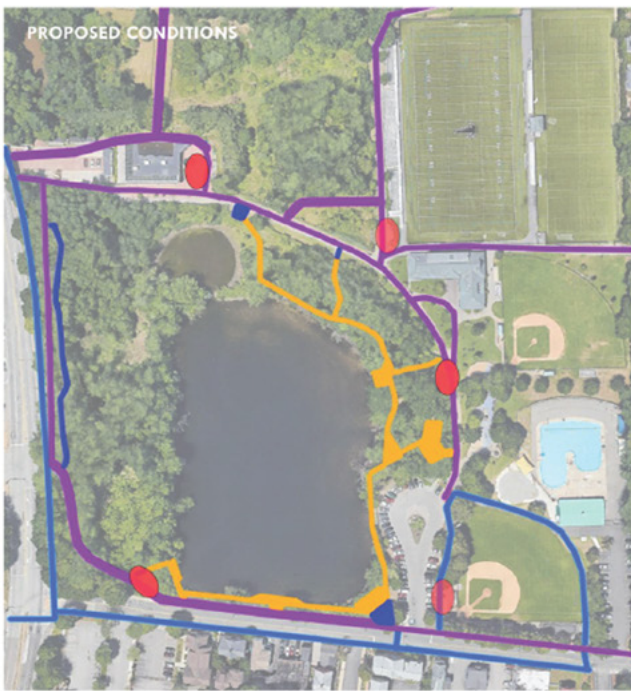
into permanent shadow. Whether the constructed boardwalk approach qualifies as a master class in reopening urban wilds depends in part on what happens after construction: will the floating wetlands persist? will the newly planted trees survive? can the sensitive habitat remain undisturbed once the boardwalks open?

While not restoring the pond's banks and creating a new greenspace with over 100 trees providing heat and air pollution relief, the plan does create many positive qualities. It reopens a long-closed site, creates access through the woods on both sides of the pond, adds an "EcoCenter" staffed by Mass Audubon, and potentially enacts a Conservation Restriction to be held by Audubon in perpetuity. With the land forever unbuilt, future stewards of Jerry's Pond may someday entertain more enlightened views of ecological restoration, environmental justice, habitat improvement, and climate resilience.

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

Eric Grunebaum is a cofounder of Friends of Jerry's Pond, a community group formed in 2015 to explore ways to revitalize and restore Jerry's Pond and reopen it to the community.

SITE CIRCULATION & BIKE PARKING



JERRY'S POND

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE
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IQHQ

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The Municipal Light Building: Belmont's Beautiful, Expensive Mess

By John Beaty

Anyone who has walked past Belmont Center's Town Hall complex has seen it: a stately 1934 brick building on Concord Avenue, its Colonial Revival/Georgian Revival lines echoing the Police Station next door. Fewer people have been inside—and for good reason. Behind its handsome facade, the old Municipal Light Building is, by every recent account, a mess.

The building sits on a quarter-acre lot next to the Police Station at 450 Concord Avenue and across the street from Town Hall, the Town Hall Annex and the School Department Building. Some of the land behind the BMLD building will be used for Belmont's Community Path, Phase I ([Belmont Community Path project plans](#)). Designed by architect George Robinson (who also designed the Winters Block in Cushing Square), the two-story office building was constructed in 1934 on the site of the old Adams Store, with Public Works Administration funding, and dedicated on BMLD Superintendent Edwin "Ned" Taylor's 70th birthday. It was built onto an earlier 1925 substation designed by Francis Galaher ([Town of Belmont, "Representative Distinctive Areas"; Belmont Light history](#)). It is listed on the state's historic-resources inventory.

And it needs help.

What the Engineers Found—and Wouldn't Go Near

In 2022, the town hired the structural engineering firm LeMessurier to assess the building's exterior. Notably, the engineers inspected only from the outside. Their report states plainly: "LeMessurier's knowledge of the building is based on visual assessment. Forensic analysis to determine the building's construction or affiliated exterior assemblies was not performed." The team had also decided, before the inspection even began, that any hazardous materials inside would be "collected and tested at a later date," testing that, as far as we can determine, was never done. LeMessurier's engineers stated they did not review all interior areas because of "potential organic growth" in the interior space, a clinical way of describing the mold and mildew that years of water damage have left behind (the engineers appear to have been reluctant, even wary, to spend much time



The Municipal Light Building from Concord Avenue.

inside). This 2022 facade assessment remains the most recent evaluation of the building.

The complex is really three connected structures (see LeMessurier illustration, next page)—the original 1934 office building, a brick-faced west wing, and the older concrete substation—and they are not aging well together.

- **The brick walls:** "performing adequately but suffering from movement-related stresses," visible as cracking, delamination, and planar movement where the main building meets the west wing. The two sections expand and contract in different directions and are slowly pulling apart; without an expansion joint, engineers found, the damage will continue.
- **The concrete substation:** "spalling and delaminating in multiple areas." Where the concrete has flaked away, the steel reinforcing bar underneath sits close to the surface and has corroded, most likely because water seeped through cracks over the years and reached the rebar, which then expanded and forced the concrete to crack further. LeMessurier called for further investigation, including ground-penetrating radar, to determine how much of the structure is affected.
- **Windows, doors, and roofing:** largely original, failing, and, in the case of many older steel-framed windows, broken outright, allowing water and air infiltration.

In short: the outside requires extensive, costly remediation, and the inside may not currently be safe to occupy without protective equipment.

Whose Building Is It, Anyway?

The building’s ownership history is almost as tangled as its structural problems. Belmont Light built and long operated the facility, but at some point handed maintenance responsibility to the Town without ever completing a formal property transfer through Town Meeting. During the years the Town maintained the building, a burst pipe caused significant water damage, utilities were eventually shut off altogether, and the resulting moisture created the mold problem that persists today. According to Belmont Light General Manager Craig Spinale, the building has not been formally declared surplus by Belmont Light, so ownership legally remains with the utility even though the town has long used parts of it ([Light Board Advisory Committee minutes, May 2021](#)). About four to five years ago, responsibility for the building reverted from the Town back to Belmont Light.

Today the building is mostly unoccupied, though not entirely vacant. Belmont Light still operates an active substation, transformers, and network switching equipment in the west wing and a portion of the concrete substation, and the Town has used parts of the building for offices, file storage, and a teen center. Because live electrical equipment remains on site, the building is not available for full reuse or redevelopment, and workers still should not enter without personal protective equipment because of the mold.

Belmont Light has spent five to seven years gradually shifting its equipment out of 450 Concord Avenue to its Flanders Road facility, which came online in 2016 as part of the utility’s broader “Project



C” modernization effort ([Belmont Light, Projects](#)). Spinale told us the transition should take another four to five years to finish; then Belmont Light expects to hand the building over to the town. In the meantime, he said, the utility plans largely to maintain the building as-is. Parking behind the building is already limited, and what remains will eventually be absorbed by the Community Path.

What Could Belmont Do With It?

The building’s fate has been studied before. A 2008 Belmont Center Planning Group (BCPG) study, commissioned by the Select Board, examined the site and proposed several options for reuse once the electrical infrastructure is fully relocated or decommissioned ([Belmont, “A Planning Vision for Belmont Center”](#)).

- Mixed-use redevelopment combining residential, retail, and/or restaurant space and parking, potentially in conjunction with the adjacent former Police Department building and nearby public land on Concord Avenue.
- A two-level parking structure that would preserve the historic facades, capitalizing on the site’s proximity to the commuter rail station and Belmont Center’s businesses.
- Alternative municipal uses, such as an expanded library or police station.

The BCPG’s report was candid about the constraints: the lot’s irregular shape and its tight proximity to the railroad tracks limit what kind of redevelopment is realistically achievable.

Two longtime Belmont civic figures we asked about the building’s condition told us they’d heard little beyond its reputation. Wesley Chin, MPH, Belmont’s Health Department director, said he has “always been fascinated by the elegance of that building” but has never been inside and hadn’t seen any condition reports, adding only that he understood it “would require significant renovation to be repurposed for anything other than storage.” Belmont’s Inspector of Buildings, Ara Yogurtian, said he wasn’t aware of any reports either. Their responses underscore how little public information has circulated about the building’s actual condition; most of what’s known comes from the 2022 facade report and conversations with Belmont Light staff.

A Building Stuck in a Historic Gray Zone

The Municipal Light Building’s protected status is as murky as its ownership. Town planning documents state outright that it is “not part of the Pleasant Street Historic District,” even though, alongside the Police Station, it “contributes significantly to the character of the municipal center” ([Belmont, “Representative Distinctive Areas”](#)). In 2022, the Historic District Commission recommended folding both the Police Station and the Light Building into the Pleasant Street Historic District, a proposal that, by implication, confirms neither building had formal historic-district protection up to that point.

A 2015 update to the town’s survey of historic buildings only muddies things further. That update removed 36 properties from the prior “Buildings Subject to Demolition Delay” list because they had “significantly changed” or were judged “not as significant as others” on re-evaluation, and it notes that municipal buildings within existing historic districts are handled separately from that list altogether ([Belmont, “Significant Buildings & Sites by Location”](#)). There’s no single, clearly documented vote or explanation of a formal “delisting” of the Light Building specifically. Instead, the record shows a building that has spent decades in a gray zone: architecturally significant enough for the state register and for repeated preservation advocacy, yet excluded from local historic-district protection and, per the 2015 review, possibly reassessed downward in significance compared to earlier inventories.

What’s Next?

The building is a mess, responsibility has bounced between the town and Belmont Light without ever being cleanly resolved, and multiple studies over nearly two decades have floated ideas without producing a plan. At some point, Belmont needs to face this building squarely — to demolish what can’t be saved, remediate whatever hazardous debris and contaminated soil is discovered, and free up the land for the Community Path and other public or private uses. A full building-and-disposition reassessment probably makes most sense once Belmont Light’s substation relocation is complete and the building is fully vacant, but that is still four to five years away, and the underlying costs will only be better understood once someone actually goes inside and does the forensic testing that’s been deferred since 2022.

Whatever gets done, it won’t be cheap. Demolition, hazardous-material remediation, and soil cleanup are all significant, and no comprehensive cost estimate has yet been made public. Someone will eventually need to put a number on what it will take to make this land usable again.

It’s worth being honest about what that number means for Belmont taxpayers. This is our mess — the citizens of Belmont’s mess. If the town hands the building back to Belmont Light, or Belmont Light hands it back to the town, the cost doesn’t disappear; it simply resurfaces later as higher property taxes or maybe higher electric rates. Belmont Light has served the town well since 1898, offering competitive rates and steadily expanding capacity to meet a more electricity-dependent world. It maintains a reserve fund, but that fund exists for genuine emergencies and future infrastructure needs, not for absorbing a legacy building’s remediation costs. Town government, likewise, does a good job under real constraints, stretching limited resources across schools, roads, water, sewer, and much more. Neither institution has a hidden pot of money set aside for this. Eventually, Belmont’s residents, not some abstract “government,” will pay to solve this problem, one way or another. The sooner the town faces that reality and plans for it, the less painful the eventual bill is likely to be.

John Beaty is a Belmont resident.

Sources:
LeMessurier facade assessment report (2022);
Interviews with Belmont Light General Manager Craig Spinale, Health Director Wesley Chin, and Inspector of Buildings Ara Yogurtian;
Town of Belmont, [A Planning Vision for Belmont Center](#)
Town of Belmont, [Representative Distinctive Areas](#);
Town of Belmont, [Significant Buildings & Sites by Location](#);
Belmont Light, [Our History and Projects](#);
Belmont Citizens Forum, [20 Years of Historic Preservation](#);
Belmont Community Path Phase I [project materials](#).

Homer Building Gets a Facelift

The Homer Municipal Building at 19 Moore Street, known to many as the Town Hall Annex, is midway through its first major exterior restoration since 2005. The 1899 building, originally constructed as a high school, has served as town office space since 1937 and holds a prominent place in Belmont's civic architecture.

A 2023 facilities assessment by Spencer Preservation Group identified urgent maintenance needs: a discolored, mildewed eave line; loosening wood brackets that were never properly fastened; water infiltration; and a failing east-side gutter. The Historic District Commission approved the restoration plan (case HDC-26-01) in January 2026, with Facilities Project Manager Marta Kabalin and architects Doug Manley and Meghan Rodenhiser presenting the scope of work (Belmont HDC minutes, Jan. 27, 2026).

The project includes repairing the wood brackets, soffits, and eave woodwork; removing and reinstalling snow rails and slate (with 5% to 10% of slates needing replacement); installing a new copper gutter and downspouts on the east elevation; selectively repointing the brick and stone at the cornice; and repainting all restored woodwork. To preserve the building's historic character, no new materials are being introduced; replacements will match the existing slate, copper, and mahogany. North stair repairs and additional masonry work were deemed outside the current budget.

The work is funded by a \$550,396 Community Preservation Act grant, initially requested by the Facilities Department in December 2024 and later reflected in the town's FY2026 capital budget at \$605,396 (FY2026 CPC application; 2026 Annual Town Meeting CPC report). The town issued a public bid in late February 2026, with a pre-bid conference held at the building itself in early March. By late May, work was visibly underway. And by late August, another restoration project, a new iron railing and paving around the site, had been completed.

The Homer Building restoration is separate from the recently completed renovation of the William Flagg Homer House, the Belmont Woman's Club mansion on Pleasant Street, a common point of confusion given the shared name.

— *Belmont Citizens Forum*



The Homer Building, not to be confused with the William Flagg Homer House across the street.

Citizens Forum Donates Land to Belmont for Community Path

By Vincent Stanton, Jr.

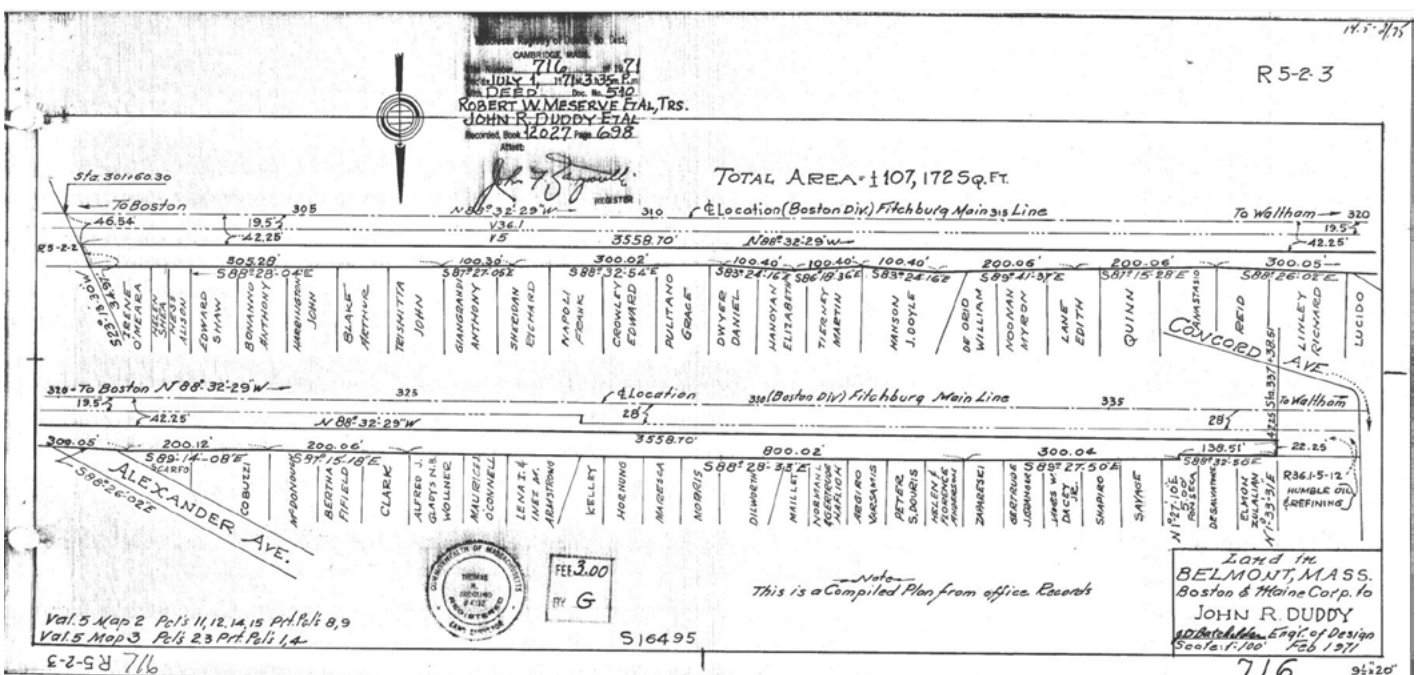
On August 10, 2026, the Belmont Select Board approved the land transfers and easements necessary to secure the right of way for the Belmont Community Path. Right-of-way acquisition, together with path design, constitute the town's obligations with respect to financing the community path. It now becomes a MassDOT construction project, 80% funded by the federal government, 20% by the state.

The final “Right of Way” plans, representing the 11th revision since December 2022, were posted to the Belmont Community Path website (www.belmontcommunitypath.com) on February 20, 2026. They show that 25 temporary easements affecting 80,652 sq ft and 30 permanent easements encompassing 275,805 sq ft were required. (Note that “permanent easement” encompasses a broad spectrum of potential uses, many of which do not prevent enjoyment of the land by the owner, as explained by Select Board member Matt Taylor at the August 10 meeting).

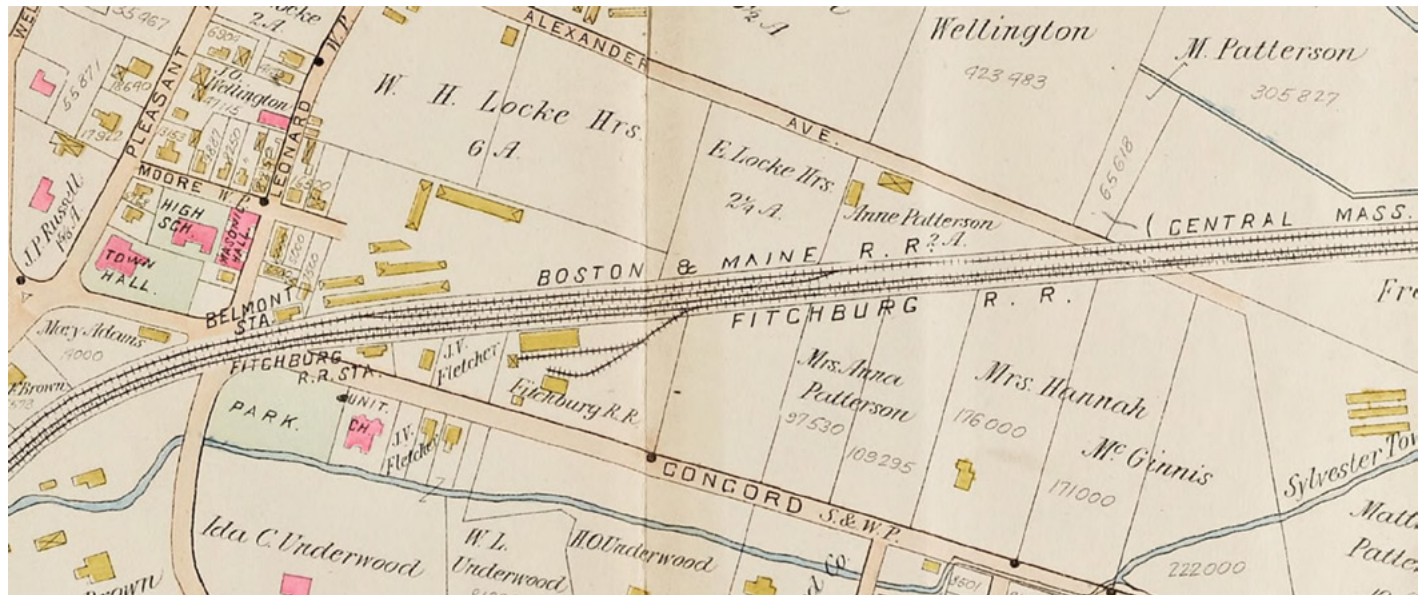
Altogether 19 property owners were affected: 4 by temporary easements, 15 by both temporary and permanent easements. The three largest property donors were the MBTA (120,243 sq ft), on whose land most of the path will lie, the Belmont Citizens Forum (BCF) (107,172 sq ft), whose land will include part of the path but mostly buffer Channing Road back yards from the path, and the town of Belmont (32,845 sq ft, including 9,182 sq ft provided by the School Committee, where the path will cross the high school campus from the Alexander Avenue underpass to Concord Avenue). Together those three entities contributed 260,260 sq ft, or 94.36% of the permanent easements, at no cost to the town. An additional 12,633 sq ft of permanent easements (4.58%) were acquired from two businesses along with 1.054% from residential property owners.

Decline of the railroads

How did the BCF come to own a 3,558.7 foot long parcel of former Central Massachusetts Railroad



This 1971 Land Plan (#716), filed at the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, accompanies the deed conveying BMRR to John R. Duddy. It was drawn by the engineering department of the BMRR and depicts, in two rows, the dimensions of the "Duddy parcel" donated by the BCF to the town of Belmont for the path. (The left end of the bottom row is contiguous with the right end of the top row.)



Detail from the 1900 Atlas of Middlesex County (George W. Stadly & Co., Boston, MA) showing the parallel tracks of the Fitchburg and Central Massachusetts railroads. The Fitchburg Line was double tracked throughout Belmont, while the CMRR was only partially double tracked. The former CMRR right of way east of 7 Channing Road was sold by the Boston & Maine Railroad to John Duddy in 1971.

(CMRR) right of way? The story starts with the long, slow decline of the Boston & Maine Railroad (BMRR), the largest rail system in New England during the first half of the 20th century, having acquired or merged with 111 mostly smaller railroads over its long history. During the years of economic distress leading up to bankruptcy in 1970, the BMRR was closing loss-making train lines and selling off surplus property, including railroad right of way.

The BMRR had acquired the CMRR via its purchase of the Boston & Lowell railroad in 1887, then leased the Fitchburg railroad in 1900, making the parallel trackage of those two rail lines in Belmont redundant; the two rail lines converge at Beaver Street in Waltham. The CMRR right of way in west Belmont became an even more obvious candidate for disposition following the 1952 depression of Waverley Station and adjacent track to address the unsafe at-grade railroad crossing that had existed since 1844. Much of the former CMRR land in that area became part of a steep embankment on the north side of the tracks. Consequently, in the 1950s and 1960s, the BMRR sold many parcels of former CMRR right of way in Belmont.

- 1958: a long, thin 10,226 sq ft parcel of former CMRR land was sold to Walter Vannasse, now

owned by the City Side Subaru car dealership at 800 Pleasant Street.

- 1961: 4,917 sq ft of former CMRR land sold to Burton Whitestone, now part of the 1000 Pleasant Street multi-business property.
- 1962: 48,705 sq ft of former CMRR land sold to Paul L. Tocci, now the Belmont Car Wash.
- 1962: 12,870 sq ft of former CMRR land to Amedeo DeMilia at 1000 Pleasant Street.
- 1964: 39,536 sq ft of former CMRR land sold to Nicholas Sacca, now part of the F.E. French Construction Company property at 40 Brighton Street.
- 1967: 8,552 sq ft of former CMRR land sold to Warren Farrell, now behind the former Artifact Home & Garden at 1000 Pleasant Street.
- 1971: 107,172 sq ft of former CMRR land sold to John R. Duddy, a real estate developer. This parcel runs parallel to the Fitchburg tracks starting from the eastern border of Chase Bank at 7 Channing Road to behind 291 Channing Road, where it abuts the 1964 Sacca parcel.

How BCF Acquired the Land

BCF board member John Dieckmann became aware of the Duddy parcel in the mid-1990s at a public meeting of the Belmont Bikeway Planning

Committee, appointed by the Select Board in October 1994. That committee, cochaired by Bob Livermore and Don Becker, had developed considerable momentum by 1997, when the town commissioned a feasibility study for a bicycle-pedestrian path to be part of the Massachusetts Central Rail Trail (MCRT) then being planned by the Central Transportation Planning Staff (CTPS) of the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). A 1997 CTPS MCRT feasibility study also included Belmont, at the town’s request. Much of that momentum dried up in December 1997 when Weston Town Meeting voted against participating in the MCRT (reversing a May 1997 vote), a decision only formally changed in 2017. The five-mile Weston segment of the MCRT opened in 2019.

Notwithstanding the lack of any active Belmont effort to implement the MCRT in 2008, Dieckmann, with the support of the BCF board, contacted the then-owner of the Duddy parcel, Walter Duddy, who was prepared to sell. By the time the BCF board voted to acquire the Duddy parcel, the MCRT project had been dormant for a decade, and the future route of any path through Belmont was

uncertain. Nonetheless, the BCF had adequate funds, having recently settled a lawsuit against Northland Residential Corporation over a sewer connection permit for “The Woodlands” (Phase I of the McLean development) for \$300,000 (for details see “Litigation Was Not in the 20 Year Plan” in the January/February 2020 *Newsletter*). The BCF acquired the Duddy parcel for \$77,000 as described in (“Rail Trail Gets Back on Track to Belmont Center”) in the November-/December 2008 *Newsletter*. Dieckmann recalls hearing that the “Duddy parcel” was a throw-in, along with several other more attractive parcels the BMRR sold to John Duddy and partners in that period. The parcel is landlocked (lacking the frontage required for a building permit) and probably unusable for any purpose other than the path.

The BCF was also instrumental in securing the easement along the former Sacca parcel, connecting the Duddy parcel to Brighton Street; Dieckmann learned from realtor and long-time MCRT supporter Craig Della Penna about the section of Massachusetts law (Chapter 40, Section 54A) that forbids municipalities from issuing a building permit for any structure on former railroad right-of-way without



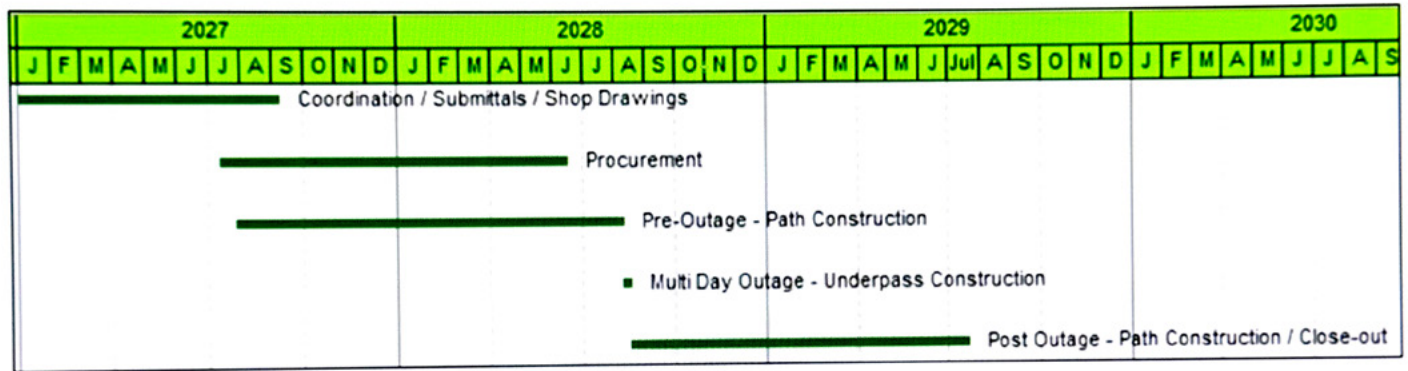
John Dieckmann standing on a portion of the land the BCF donated to Belmont for the path (behind 17-19 Channing Road). Note the railroad tracks and the back of the Vartan Gregorian Building in the background.

first obtaining written consent from the Secretary of Transportation. He brought that information to the attention of the Belmont Select Board and then Representative Will Brownsberger. That led to the negotiation of an easement across the Sacca parcel for a possible future path. The easement was granted to the Massachusetts Division of Conservation and Recreation by F & M Investment Enterprises, LLC (James Mahoney and Frank French) as a condition of obtaining a building permit for 40-42 Belmont Street.

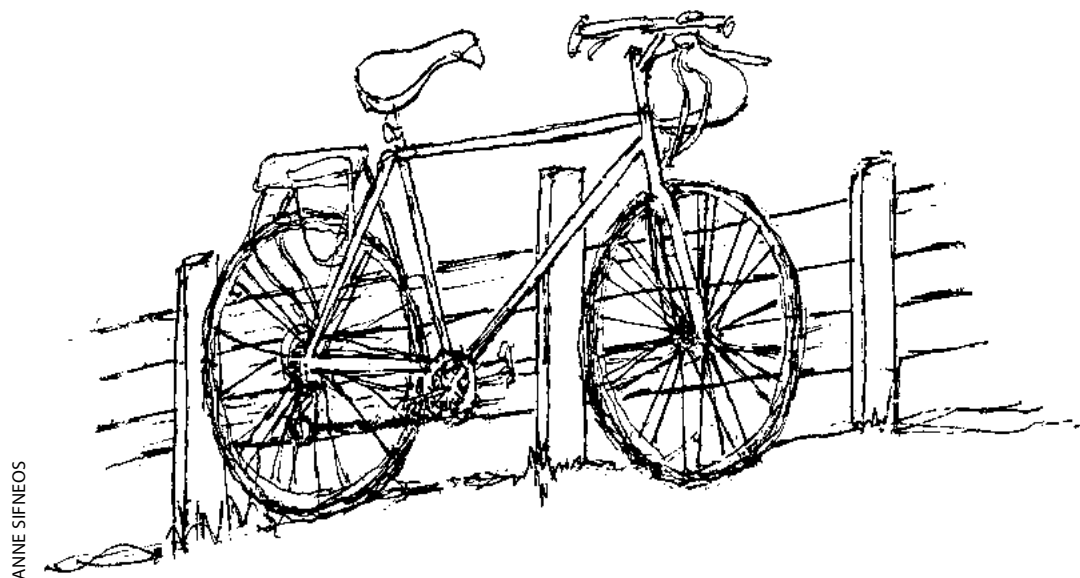
Vincent Stanton, Jr., is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Next Steps

The Belmont Community Path was advertised on the MassDOT construction bid portal on September 12, 2026, meeting the budgetary requirement that the project be advertised in Federal Fiscal Year 2026, which ended September 30, 2026. (In 2023 the Boston MPO allocated funds for construction of the Belmont path in FFY2026; if that deadline had been missed those funds would have returned to the MPO.) The deadline for contractors to submit bids was November 10, 2026. On that date, at 2 PM, bids will be opened and a winner selected. A preliminary timeline for the project was displayed by Select Board member Matt Taylor at the August 10 meeting.



Preliminary project schedule for construction of the Belmont Community Path. This slide was displayed by member Matt Taylor at the August 10, 2026, Select Board meeting.



Our Environmental Stewards: Casey Bowers, Environmental League of Massachusetts

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

The Environmental League of Massachusetts (ELM), founded in 1898 as the Massachusetts Forestry Association, is the Commonwealth’s oldest environmental advocacy organization. Working at the state level on Beacon Hill, ELM advocates for policy that meets the scale and urgency of today’s environmental challenges, from decarbonizing the electric grid and transportation to protecting land, water, and public health.

The Belmont Citizens Forum spoke with Casey Bowers, interim president. Bowers joined ELM in 2018 and stepped into the role of interim president in September 2026. She is also the executive director of the ELM Action Fund and has previously served as the executive vice -president for Government Relations. As a key member of ELM’s leadership team, she has helped shape the organization’s overall trajectory while leading legislative and political efforts. Jeffrey North conducted the interview, which has been edited here for length and clarity.

ELM is described as the Commonwealth’s oldest environmental advocacy organization, working for Massachusetts’s environment since 1898. What does that long institutional history allow ELM to do particularly well today, and what does it require the organization to do differently in a rapidly changing climate and political landscape?

Casey Bowers: Our history gives us the benefit of sustained relationships and a deep understanding of how decisions are made at the Massachusetts State House. We know how to turn an environmental priority into a policy proposal, build support, and keep working through a process that can take years. I take very seriously the responsibility that comes with that. That means choosing our priorities strategically and sharing what we know with partners, from grassroots organizations to large corporations, so we can be more effective together.

Our longevity also requires us to keep learning. We must remain nimble, creative, and resourceful with our community engagement and coalition building. For example, our experience helps us communicate effectively with lawmakers and their teams. Reaching people who don’t follow the State House closely requires a different approach. For instance, while Instagram wasn’t a resource for our first 11 decades, we are now using it to educate a wider audience about how environmental decisions affect our economy, health, and communities. It’s been great to see that those same approaches are catching lawmakers’ attention, too!

Massachusetts faces a broad environmental agenda, from clean energy and transportation to PFAS, drought, land conservation, and environmental justice. How does ELM decide where to concentrate its time and political capital?

Bowers: We were proud leaders within the coalition that helped pass the Next Generation Roadmap Law, which requires Massachusetts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 50% by 2030, and to become net-zero by 2050.

Since then, our primary focus has been smart, effective, and timely implementation to reach this goal. Frankly, we aren’t acting quickly enough. So, within ELM’s strategic plan, we have prioritized the biggest levers we can pull to reduce emissions with Massachusetts. That means decarbonizing our homes and transportation while bringing more clean energy online across the state.

How we make that transition matters just as much. We want policies and programs to improve health, lower costs, and deliver benefits to communities that have borne the greatest burdens from pollution. Environmental justice shapes how we approach each priority. We also put significant effort into securing state funding. Passing a law is a major milestone, but agencies and municipalities need resources to carry it out. That funding supports both decarbonization and the broader work of protecting communities, clean water, and the natural resources we all depend on.

You’ve said that finding shared value and building trust with unlikely partners is fundamental to making

progress. Can you share an example where a corporate partnership shifted a piece of Massachusetts environmental policy in a way ELM couldn't have achieved through legislative advocacy alone?

Bowers: So many corporations and institutions have climate and environmental goals, but need partnerships and government involvement to have a cost-effective path to achieve them, in part because we continue to need newer and evolving decarbonization technologies to deploy—and at scale. Our universities and tech incubators provide a wealth of knowledge and potential solutions, but we need to create conditions to rapidly scale these solutions, thereby reducing emissions and growing our economy.

We've seen health care blossom in Massachusetts and engaged our partners on a key question: could the same happen for climate tech? In 2024, ELM became the leading voice advocating for state investment in this burgeoning industry. Eighty-one leading businesses and institutions, including Takeda, Mass General Brigham, and many more joined us in urging lawmakers to include at least \$1 billion in climate tech investments in the state's economic development bill. It was a show of force to the Massachusetts legis-



Casey Bowers, interim president of the Environmental League of Massachusetts

lature that an expanded climate tech sector benefits the entire economy.

Climate and environmental policy can present real trade-offs among housing, conservation, renewable-energy siting, transportation, and affordability. How can towns choose between competing goals?

Bowers: These goals are often presented as competing, but they do not have to be. ELM's goal is that we plan for each of them in tandem so that experts and community members have a voice.

Consider public transportation. Investing in transit can make affordable housing possible, connect people to jobs, support our economy, and reduce traffic congestion and tailpipe emissions. Similarly, thoughtful clean energy siting and permitting helps us build these resources while protecting natural resources and ensuring communities have a say in what is built. All of these have been priorities to ELM.

When tough decisions arise, decision-makers need to be transparent about costs and benefits and listen to the communities impacted.

What can a town like Belmont, without direct control over offshore wind or grid-scale policy (although we do have our own electric utility company), still do at the local level to meaningfully advance ELM's net-zero agenda?

Bowers: Many communities, including Belmont, are weighing the imperative to build new housing with concerns about traffic, congestion, and altering the character of the community. Belmont can model leadership in building the transit-oriented housing we need while also protecting the green spaces and nature that people cherish. Density need not be at odds with the other values we have for our communities, and towns like Belmont can show the way.

Belmont Municipal Light Department gives residents an unusually direct connection to local electricity decisions. What questions should Belmont residents be asking their municipal utility as Massachusetts transitions to a cleaner grid?

Bowers: Belmont residents have a valuable opportunity to continue to shape how the Belmont Municipal Light Department responds to the clean

energy transition. I would encourage them to focus on affordability.

How can Belmont Light help residents use electricity more efficiently and reduce demand when the grid is under strain?

Bowers: Much of the cost of our electric system comes from meeting demand during a relatively small number of very hot and very cold hours. Programs that help people shift some electricity use away from those peaks can reduce costs for everyone. So can strong energy-efficiency programs, which help households lower their bills while reducing the need for more expensive infrastructure.

Residents should expect their utility to plan for a future where more of our homes and vehicles run on electricity. I encourage Belmont residents to be in contact with their elected municipal light board members and to vote in those small but mighty elections.

In the near future, name a major environmental success for Massachusetts—and what is one concrete action you hope Belmont and other communities will take to help achieve it?

Bowers: Offshore wind remains the biggest single potential source of clean energy for New England. Federal attacks on offshore wind have led to higher energy prices by blocking this major source of potential supply. One of the best opportunities for climate progress is to get responsible offshore wind development back on track, and we must be ready to act as soon as we have a more favorable federal administration. Everyone in Massachusetts, including those not directly on the shore, has a role in supporting these projects and working to dispel misinformation.

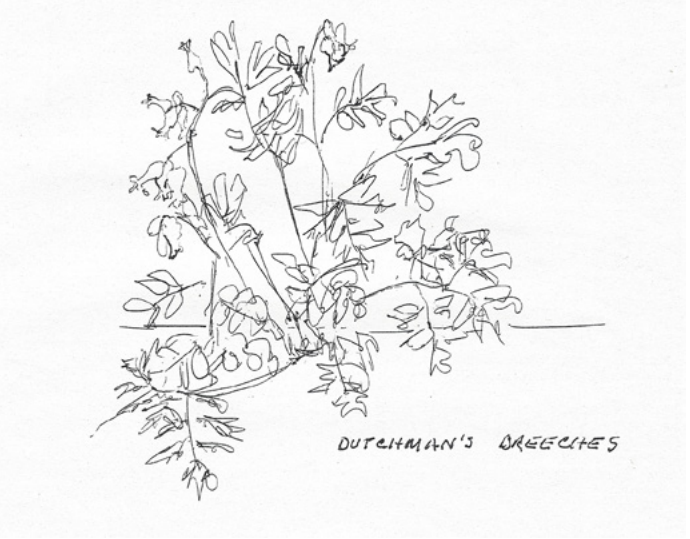
What questions would you ask peer leaders of other regional environmental and conservation organizations, about advancing shared environmental progress and strengthening our common natural wealth? What lessons from your experience at ELM would you most want to share with other environmental leaders across Massachusetts?

Bowers: I'd want to ask where they're seeing environmental wins make the biggest difference in people's

everyday lives. How can we better ensure that the benefits of clean energy reach every community? And how can we work together so that more people see themselves and their needs reflected in our agenda?

One lesson I'd share from ELM is that we find more opportunities when we look at these issues together. Housing, clean energy, transportation, and conservation are often treated as competing priorities. But at ELM we are seeing how thoughtful planning processes can make it easier for our towns and state to meet the needs of Massachusetts residents and our environment.

Readers can learn more about the Environmental League of Massachusetts at EnvironmentalLeague.org



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Nutty Nuthatches Are Cozy Little Creepers

by Fred Bouchard

For unfailing cheeriness, perky curiosity, and its amiably purring “henk-henk,” White-breasted Nuthatches get my vote for favorite yard bird. With no flashy looks, melodious songs, nor commanding calls to vouch for them, ‘nuts’ are your year-round, work-a-day, dependably peppy garden gremlins: twist this-that-a-way to grab a bug, glean a gnat, slam a seed, tipple sap.

The *Sittidae* family worldwide includes 24 nuthatches, mainly Eurasian; Concord nature author and bird-trip guru Peter Alden (sparkbirding.com) reports they have recently been merged with gnatcatchers and wrens. Its catchy English handle, Merriam & Webster tell us, “refers to the propensity of some species to wedge nuts or seeds in a crack and hack at them with strong bills.” I delight in watching nuthatches bang sunflower seeds on backyard lilac branches ‘til they cry “uncle!”

New England’s two species come in White and Red. White-breasted Nuthatches, widespread in woods and ‘hoods from city to deep suburb, are familiar to all yard-watchers. This year-round trunk-buddy sports a spiffy black-and-white pattern; its white face scoop surrounds a bare, candid black eye. You’ll likely hear one first: grittily grating calls, nasal “nyet” or “yank,” mid-pitched. Big-headed and stubby-tailed, it’s a chunky 5-incher; as it zig-zags down a trunk and zips arrow-fast to your feeder, glimpse its under-tail chestnut patch. You may get more than a peek: they also zoom along branches and feed upside down! (Another rare down-branch feeder in spring is our Black-and-White Warbler.)

Brookline Bird Club President Cliff Cook offers a note on nuthatch demographic fluctuations since the days of influential Harvard ornithologist Ludlow Griscom: “They were common locally in olden times, disappearing along with the cut forests. By the 1950s, they were present in some numbers during winter, but rare breeders. By the time I started birding here during the mid-80s, they were again widespread.”

Sprightly, strikingly eye-striped red-breasted nuthatches do their thing high in lofty evergreens, and largely avoid feeders—except for suet! They



SHAWN CAREY

With no flashy looks, melodious songs, nor commanding calls to vouch for them, Nutty Nuthatches are your year-round, work-a-day, dependably peppy garden gremlins.

prefer nesting in groves of White Pine or White Cedar (even Mount Auburn Cemetery’s ornamental conifers), where they pry open cones and nibble nibs. A tidy 4.5", with dashing black over white eye-lines and light ruddy chest, they utter a distinctive high, nasal “enk-enk” or bray like a “tiny tin horn” (thank you, Roger Tory Peterson).

Elsewhere across America, we find Brown-headed Nuthatches southward from the Carolinas, and Pygmy Nuthatches out west. Both are smaller yet (4") than Red-breasteds. All four ‘nuts’ nest in tree cavities (cracks, holes, even nest boxes) they may cover with sticky resin or stinky squashed beetles to deter invaders—like pesky squirrels and sneaky woodpeckers. And all four have slate-gray backs, pale tummies, sturdy bills; like most New England yard birds—titmice, jays, thrushes, chickadees—they’re monomorphic.

Fred Bouchard, a BCF staff writer, last May celebrated 50 years of Bay State birdwatching in a Plum Island “century count” with scores of fellow birders.

Shawn Carey, avian photographer and videographer, mans a website called “Migration Productions” and is a regular contributor to these columns.

Looking for a Tranquility Break? Visit Blair Pond

For a quick tranquility break, visit Blair Pond in the Alewife Brook Reservation, where a short walk brings you beside quiet water, wetland plants, and the chance to spot birds in one of our remaining urban wilds. It is a small pause from traffic and screens for a dose of nature without traveling far. Start from the trailhead just off Brighton Street near Comella’s and the Takeda building. Watch for a virtual Blair Pond nature tour in BCF’s spring issue.



PHOTOS: JEFFREY NORTH

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