



## BHA Makes Plans for Belmont Village



COURTESY OF GLORIA LEIPZIG AND MATT ZAJAC

The 7.2-acre site currently hosts 100 homes situated 0.3 miles southwest of Belmont Center.

*By Gloria Leipzig and Matt Zajac*

The Belmont Housing Authority (BHA) has recently started work with a Boston-based architecture and urban planning firm, DREAM Collaborative, to create a master plan that could serve as the blueprint for redeveloping Belmont Village.

The Belmont Village site north of Town Field and west of Thomas Street currently has 100 affordable homes for Belmont families across 25 fourplexes. BHA has diligently maintained the homes since their construction in 1949, but funding through the state's public housing program has been insufficient to support any major renovations over the past 75

years. The buildings and site are dated and require significant capital reinvestment.

### Typical buildings at Belmont Village

Under Belmont's MBTA Communities-compliant zoning, passed at Town Meeting in 2024, up to 200 homes are permissible on the site. Given the acute need for affordable housing in Belmont, the BHA aims to create a master plan that will implement this zoning, likely across a multiyear and multiphase redevelopment. This redevelopment is expected to commence in 2028 or later. The master plan is being funded through a Community Preservation Act award from the Spring 2025 Town Meeting.



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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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COURTESY OF GLORIA LEIPZIG AND MATT ZAJAC

Engagement board from the May 2025 resident meeting show residents' priorities.

The master plan will involve creating multiple options for the layout of housing on the site, as well as various types of housing: townhouses, duplexes, a mid-rise building, etc. The architect will provide concepts for landscaping and the massing of the buildings. Detailed design of the buildings and site will become available later in the process.

The master planning process will involve a robust resident engagement process. Belmont Village residents shared their priorities and opinions in a kickoff meeting in May 2025. They will be asked for feedback on preliminary site plans in fall 2025. BHA has also gauged residents' thoughts through individual conversations and print and electronic communication. In late fall, neighborhood residents will also be invited to review some possible site layouts and the architect's 3D massing images.

BHA's overall goal is to have a master plan available for review and approval by its board by the end of 2025.

*Gloria Leipzig is chair of the Belmont Housing Authority Board of Commissioners. Matt Zajac is deputy director of planning for the Cambridge Housing Authority.*

# State Tackles Housing Crisis with New Laws

Massachusetts takes major steps to expand affordable housing—and Belmont responds

*By Representative David M. Rogers*

While Massachusetts is regularly ranked among the most desirable places to live in the United States, it is also ranked among the most expensive. It is widely agreed that the state is experiencing an affordable housing crisis. Communities from Pittsfield to Provincetown are affected by the housing crisis—and it certainly impacts Belmont as well.

In Belmont, 28% of homeowners and 36% of renters are considered “cost-burdened,” meaning they spend more than a third of their income on housing. According to Belmont's Housing Production Plan, last revised in 2024, nearly 60% of the Belmont housing stock was built before 1940, and just over 6% since 2000. Building fewer homes over the last 25 years has created the conditions we see now: high home

prices and rents, an emphasis on single-family homes, and old housing stock.

Statewide, one of the answers to our housing affordability crisis is to ramp up production. Earlier this year, the Healey-Driscoll administration released a report finding that, to keep up with demand and address affordability, Massachusetts will need to produce at least 222,000 housing units over the next decade. To tackle this daunting challenge, the Legislature enacted the Affordable Homes Act (AHA),

which was signed into law by Governor Healey on August 6, 2024. The AHA will increase housing production, creating and preserving an estimated 65,000 units in Massachusetts over the next five years.

To achieve its goals, the AHA allocates \$5.16 billion to boost production and creates nearly 50 policy initiatives to address high demand and limited supply. The \$5.16 billion in funding is assigned to projects and programs such as \$2 billion to refurbish and renovate our public housing stock (\$150 million of that total supports decarbonization), \$800 million for the trust fund that supports affordable housing development, and \$275 million for sustainable and green housing initiatives. The AHA also assigns \$100 million to support the creation of affordable homeownership



Typical buildings at Belmont Village, site of 100 affordable homes in Belmont across 25 fourplexes.

COURTESY OF GLORIA LEIPZIG AND MATT ZAJAC



units and \$100 million to support the creation of mixed-income rental housing, including units that are affordable for households whose incomes are too high for traditional subsidized housing but are priced out by market rents.

Sherman Gardens, a state-funded senior housing development owned and operated by BHA, will also undergo redevelopment . . . . The new site will be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and will have over 50% more units for seniors, those with disabilities, and families.

To further support people struggling with high rent prices, the AHA creates the Extremely Low-Income Housing Commission (under an amendment I filed). The Commission will make recommendations on how to expand housing options for low-income residents. Other highlights of the AHA include a new tax credit to encourage homeownership for households with incomes up to 120% of the area median income (AMI) and ensuring the continuation of the Community Investment Tax Credit (CITC). The CITC spurs funding for Community Development Corporations that help deliver affordable housing.

Provisions of the AHA continue to be rolled out, with two coming into effect earlier this year. Authorization for building accessory dwelling units (also known as “in-law units”) by-right in a single-family housing zone came into effect in February 2025. Defined as “secondary residential living space located on the same lot as a single-family home,” this provision would allow families to add a new rental property of up to 900 square feet to their property without special permission. Another new policy that took effect on May 5, 2025, opens the door for sealing past eviction records, lowering the barrier for renters to find new accommodations. This provision allows courts to make case-by-case decisions on no-fault eviction cases that might bar renters from future housing opportunities.

The AHA also incorporates legislation I filed establishing the Office of Fair Housing to create a more equitable housing system. In advancing

the Office of Fair Housing, I worked with the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association, led by Belmont’s own Rachel Heller. The new office will coordinate with local fair housing organizations, which are nonprofits that work to end housing discrimination through legal services and education programs promoting renters’ rights. These programs are particularly focused on vulnerable groups, such as disabled people, families with children, survivors of domestic violence, and housing voucher holders.

To fund the Office of Fair Housing, my amendment for \$1 million was adopted in the FY 2025 supplemental budget, which Governor Healey signed into law in August 2025. These funds will offset some of the impact of the misguided federal cuts enacted by the Trump administration, which recently sent federal funding termination notices to fair housing organizations across our state. Without these critical state funds to counter the federal cuts, Massachusetts’ fair housing organizations would have been in danger of closing their doors.

Preventing evictions

Another major success for housing justice was the allocation of \$2.5 million in the FY 2026 budget to provide tenants with access to counsel. Based on legislation I filed with Representative Michael Day (D-Stoneham), these funds will provide legal assistance and representation to low-income individuals involved in eviction proceedings. In 2023, almost 40,000 households were served eviction papers in Massachusetts. Only 3% of those tenants were represented by a lawyer, while the vast majority of landlords had legal representation. The Pledge of Allegiance concludes with the words “and justice for all,” but for too many, this is an aspirational ideal rather than a reality. This funding will help right the balance on the scales of justice.

In addition to the AHA, the MBTA Communities Act, enacted in 2021, is a landmark law that will generate more housing production. The law mandates the creation of zoning regulations that permit “by right” multi-family housing in each of the 177 cities and towns served by the MBTA. Due to Belmont’s status as a “commuter rail community,” the town is required to zone a minimum of 1,632 multifamily homes over 28 acres, with at least half of the units being within a

half mile of public transit stations. As readers likely know, the town proposed two overlay options for modifying Belmont’s zoning map in August 2024, and one was adopted by an overwhelming majority vote at Town Meeting in November. Earlier this year, both Attorney General Andrea Campbell and the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities approved the adopted overlay.

The overlay zoning introduces select “mixed zones” for businesses and homes, addressing a broader conversation about expanding the commercial tax base in Belmont, which is considerably smaller than in neighboring towns. The overlay also includes planning authorization for the extensive renovation of some of Belmont’s public housing stock, such as Belmont Housing Authority’s Belmont Village and Waverley Oaks sites. Sherman Gardens, a state-funded senior housing development owned and operated by BHA, will also undergo redevelopment, in part, thanks to the new zoning regulations. The new site will be compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and will have over 50% more units for seniors, those with disabilities, and families.

Despite the progress on housing issues in Belmont and across the state, much work remains. I have filed several initiatives related to housing, including a local-option rent stabilization bill (H.2328), which offers cities and towns the option to create rent stabilization rules with just-cause eviction protections. I believe this idea will allow cities and towns to slow the displacement of their residents due to unprecedented rent increases. While some may find it controversial, the bill provides a sensible tool for locally elected officials to make their communities more affordable places to live.

Ultimately, to build thriving communities, we must squarely address the affordable housing crisis. There is no quick fix, but by combining local innovation, state investment, and public resolve, we can move Massachusetts—and Belmont—toward a more affordable and equitable future.

*Dave Rogers represents the communities of Arlington, Belmont, and Cambridge in the 24th Middlesex District of the Massachusetts House of Representatives.*

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The Belmont Citizens Forum is looking for writers at all experience levels and all ages.

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# Belmont’s Electricity Comes from NE Power Pool

By Dave Beavers

To further explore the question, “Where does my electricity come from?” (See “[Follow Belmont Electricity From Source to Socket](#)”, BCF Newsletter, July/August 2025), this article considers what happens upstream of the Belmont Light substation at Blair Pond.

## Beyond Blair Pond

Our Blair Pond substation is supplied by a transmission line from Alewife which connects Belmont to the New England grid. The Independent System Operator of New England (ISO-NE) operates the grid and administers the wholesale electricity market in New England. It is one of seven regional grid operators in the United States. Belmont Light is a stakeholder and has had a voice

(albeit limited due to its small size) in supporting policies that enable the easier integration of new renewable resources.

## The New England market

Imagine a setup where consumers draw water from a reservoir as needed and replenish the water they’ve used through contracts with wells and other sources that pump water into that reservoir. On balance, the water level stays even. Contracts may be with independent sources for 20 years or more, or with a water company that combines many sources. Some water may be purchased on a real-time market, and at the end of the month, any differences in water consumed versus water contracted for are settled.

Like this fictional water market, Belmont Light must contract for electricity or buy it on the real-time market and balance consumption against purchases over a month. Unlike larger utilities such as

Eversource, Belmont Light has a wide latitude in when and how to buy electricity. To avoid price shocks to customers, Belmont Light employs a hedging policy that calls for diversified energy sources and limits real-time purchases to about 20% of the total electricity purchased. This policy has blunted the rapid rate increases that customers at other utilities have experienced.

Voluntarily, Belmont Light has been procuring Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs) to help meet the 100% fossil-free electricity goal prescribed in [Belmont’s Climate Action Roadmap](#). Electricity generated or imported into New England’s grid is tagged with emission attributes (e.g., the amount of carbon released during electricity production). Electricity derived from qualified renewable energy resources is designated as an REC. Procuring and retiring RECs (either bundled with electricity or as a separate product) allows an organization to claim that its share of the power pool is renewable and fossil-free.

How we manage the transmission system in a physical, not market, sense is difficult to describe in

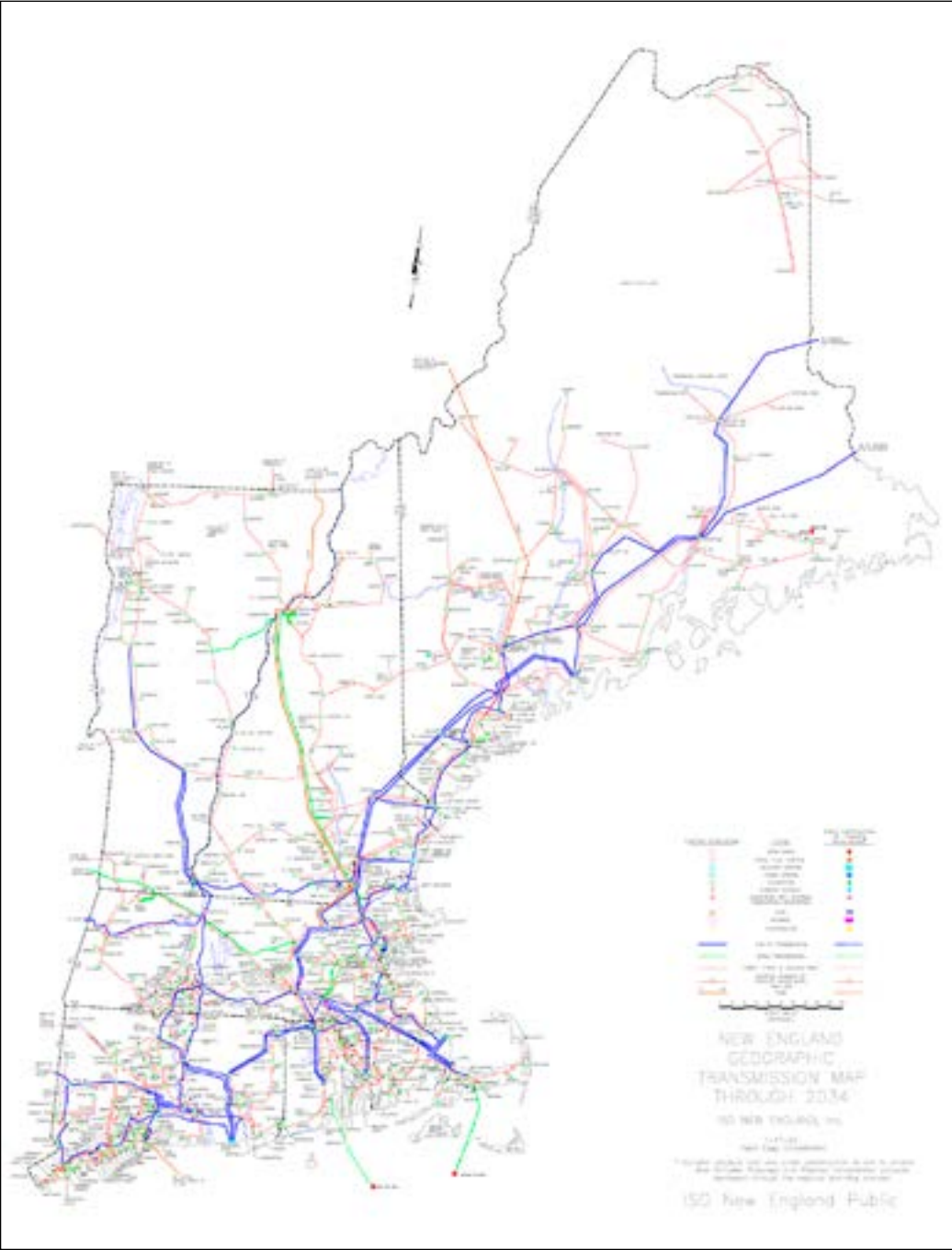
a simple analogy and won’t be attempted here. The question, “Where does my electricity come from in a physical sense,” is not easy to answer.

## Issues facing Belmont Light

### Lack of renewable resources

Belmont Light, when possible, contracts with new renewable energy resources. These contracts are typically for 10 to 20 years and come bundled with RECs, which Belmont Light retires. Unfortunately, due to the lengthy interconnection study process, the number of new renewable energy resources available is currently not meeting the demand in New England, and this issue is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon.

For a sense of scale, the region is currently served by 28 MW of resources—largely natural-gas fueled generators—while 20 GW of offshore wind projects are in [the ISO-NE interconnection queue](#), pending interconnection studies and authorization. Recent changes in federal policy, such as attacks on offshore



The ISO-NE Transmission map.

2025 vs. 2024 Power Supply Policy Comparison			
		2024 Policy	2025 Policy
MA RPS Class 1 Renewable Port- folio Standard (RPS) Class 1	Mostly solar, wind, and some small hydro	28% of the load	27% of the load increases each year, <i>reaching 60% in 2050</i>
New England — Other Class 1 & 2 (Various NE state RPS laws and regulations)	Varying defini- tions by state (CT, ME, NH, VT)	In 2024, Belmont Light purchased ME Class 2 RECs (hydro) to help meet a 100% non-emitting goal	Belmont Light may purchase RECs to achieve 100% non-emitting status (similar to 2024) or utilize the funding for other priorities, such as incentives for energy storage, heat pumps, and other initiatives
Non-Emitting (GGES) Greenhouse Gas Standard	Includes MA Class 1 RECs, other NE RECS, large hydro, nuclear, biomass, and some limited types of natural gas-based generators	Belmont Light is required by state law to cover 50% of the load with qualified resources starting in 2030	





wind or eliminating tax credits for solar projects, make solving this challenge even more difficult.

### *Rising transmission cost*

Transmission is the fastest-growing cost for Belmont Light, with an expected increase of 31% in 2026 over 2024. Federal trade tariffs on copper, aluminum, and steel, implemented on July 31, 2025, could accelerate the rise in costs as these are the primary materials used in conductors, transformers, pylons, and other transmission equipment.

Charges are assessed based on Belmont Light's load during the Greater Boston area's peak hour each month. These peak hours largely fall between 4 and 8 PM, except during the summer months, when they may start as early as 2 PM. Moving energy use to off-peak hours can save money for Belmont Light and its customers. Advanced rate policies such as Time-Of-Use (TOU) rates and the [Connected Homes Program](#) are two efforts Belmont Light is pursuing to shift load to off-peak hours.

### **Generators**

All but a small portion of Belmont's electricity comes from generators tied to the New England grid. Approximately one-third is generated from a mix of hydroelectric, wind, and solar plants. The rest is a mix of the grid, primarily fueled by natural gas. From 2022 to 2024, Belmont Light's [Power Supply Policy](#), which follows [Belmont's Climate Action Roadmap](#), called for 100% coverage of Belmont's load with New England-derived RECs. Thus, a 100% "non-emitting" power supply was achieved.

However, questions have been raised regarding the environmental benefits of this policy and whether funds could be used to reduce carbon emissions in the region more efficiently. With input from the town's Energy Committee, Belmont

Light has revised the policy to reflect this evolved thinking.

### **Reasons behind the changes**

The idea behind the new 2025 Power Supply Policy is to provide Belmont Light flexibility in moving toward two long-term strategic goals: electrifying heating and transportation, and supplying renewable energy.

### **Do our share**

According to some people, municipal utilities are not doing enough to utilize renewable energy. To fulfill our obligations, Belmont Light is voluntarily complying with the Massachusetts Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) Class 1 requirements, which are mandatory for Eversource and other large utilities. In 2025, Belmont Light will source electricity from qualified renewable sources or purchase Class 1 RECs to cover 27% of its load. The percentage increases to 40% in 2030, then to 60% in 2050. The Massachusetts Climate Action Network promotes this as a [best practice for municipal utilities](#).

### **Invest strategically**

Does it make sense to acquire and retire Maine Class 2 hydro RECs to reach a 100% goal? Are there more effective ways to invest funds in reducing carbon emissions and promoting electrification? These questions will be answered by Belmont Light and its commissioners this fall. Each year, opportunities may arise to make progress, and having the flexibility to direct funding toward these opportunities should ultimately benefit Belmont Light in the long term.

### **The Greenhouse Gas Emission standard**

Under [state law](#), Belmont will be required to cover 50% of its load with resources identified in the Greenhouse Gas Emission Standard (GGES). As the GGES has a broad definition of what qualifies as a resource, Belmont Light expects to meet and exceed this requirement easily.

*Dave Beavers is an elected member and the vice chair of the Belmont Light Board and a Belmont resident.*

# **Judy Record Conservation Fund Cares for Land**

*By Roger Wrubel*

The Judy Record Conservation Fund (JR Fund) was founded in 2001 in honor and memory of Judy Record by her friends and family. Judy Record worked tirelessly and effectively from 1995 to 2000 as the leader of the McLean Open Space Alliance (MOSA), which began when eight apprehensive Belmont citizens met to discuss the rumored development of over 190 acres of woods and meadows surrounding the McLean Hospital campus. She stepped forward to lead the effort to preserve as much of the undeveloped land as possible.

Record grew MOSA into an effective grassroots organization with 800 members. And she was politically adept, guiding MOSA as it emerged as a force in the ensuing heated debate, both within the town itself and between the town and the hospital corporation, to determine the property's future. Judy took on her volunteer role as a full-time job and, along with other MOSA members, spent the next five years vigorously advocating for the preservation of the most significant unprotected natural habitat in Belmont. After a town-wide referendum, agreement between the Town of Belmont and the McLean Hospital Corporation was reached in 1999 creating the McLean overlay district, permitting development of land in proximity to the hospital campus in exchange for preservation of 123 acres of open space, now the Lone Tree Hill Conservation Area, and 14 acres for what is now the Highland Fields Cemetery.

In the 26 years since the agreement was reached, only one of three building zones has been developed: the residential subdistrict of condominiums. Additional development has been approved for the remaining two building zones: a complex with condominiums, an apartment building, and a school for McLean.

### **Record Players celebrated legacy**

Judy tragically died in a bicycle accident 25 years ago this September. Between 2001 and 2017, Judy's friends organized annual classical music concerts to benefit the fund established in her name, which aided local land conservation. The talented musicians who participated pro bono in these benefit concerts named themselves the Record Players.

The mission of the JR Fund is to support Belmont and its neighboring communities, including Waltham, Watertown, Lexington, Arlington, and Cambridge, in protecting, restoring, enhancing, maintaining, and acquiring conservation land to benefit both wildlife and people. The fund supports the creation and maintenance of off-road hiking, biking, and universally accessible trails, as well as grants for environmental internships to develop the next generation of environmental leaders. Over the last 24 years, the JR Fund has issued a wide range of grants, from small to large. Below are some of the most notable projects that provide a flavor of our grantmaking.

### **Lone Tree Hill**

The JR Fund has focused on Lone Tree Hill in Belmont because of Judy's commitment to protecting this land. The JR Fund supported an assessment and management plan for what is called the Great Meadow, where the "lone tree" stands,



Pine Allee, Lone Tree Hill.

COURTESY OF ROGER WRUBEL



and where it placed a granite bench in Judy’s memory with approval of the property’s governing body, the Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill (LMC). Perhaps you have stopped there to rest and take in the view.

The Pine Allee at Lone Tree Hill consists of four rows of white pine trees, a quarter mile long, parallel to Concord Avenue, planted at the end of the 19th century when McLean Hospital moved from Charlestown to Belmont. It is a distinct cultural landscape feature that the JR Fund board determined was in decline. The JR Fund financed a study to assess the condition of the white pines. The arborists recommended pruning some trees to prevent storm damage and removing others that were diseased or dead. The JR Fund provided the town with a grant to implement the plan’s recommendations to protect the remaining trees.



Planting pines at Lone Tree Hill.

During the study, an arborist’s inventory showed that more than 180 of the original trees were missing. From 2017 to 2023, the fund and the Belmont Citizens Forum cosponsored six volunteer days to replace all the missing trees. If you walk through the Allee now, you will see the success of this work, as the young white pines are thriving under the tall canopy of 100-year-old trees.

The volunteer days were so successful in terms of community building and the results so satisfying that the JR Fund and BCF decided to support annual volunteer days. Most recently, volunteers planted trees in the southern end of the Great Meadow near the border with the private residential development.

The LMC has been using an ecological management plan to restore and enhance the meadow through brush mowing, mechanical removal of invasive plants, spot herbicide treatment, and the planting of suitable native species. The fund shares the cost of that work with the LMC.

Habitat

The JR Fund has made several grants to Mass Audubon’s Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary. It contributed to two land purchases, adding four acres to the sanctuary, and to the construction of a half-mile-long, universally accessible trail. The JR Fund recently made a grant to Habitat for enhancements to the sanctuary’s entryway, including improvements for handicap accessibility. This project focuses on refining the visitors’ entry experience by making it easy to navigate, more welcoming, and, most importantly, accessible for visitors of all abilities.

Rock Meadow

A grant to the Belmont Conservation Commission funded the Rock Meadow Master Plan, and the JR Fund has made an offer of a \$100,000 matching fund to establish an endowment for Rock Meadow maintenance and improvements, provided the town will place a conservation restriction on this special property. The Conservation Commission



A class of Biodiversity Builders.

received an allocation from the Belmont Town Meeting in May to initiate work on placing a conservation restriction on the property, which includes legal work to draft the restriction, a title search, and a survey and resource mapping of the property.

Environmental Internships

In 2019, the JR Fund began supporting two land stewardship interns each year at Habitat. These internships provide learning opportunities and hands-on experiences for young people interested in careers in environmental fields. Land stewards receive valuable professional development and training, enabling them to continue performing important work in conservation after their commitment to Habitat has ended. Tasks include trail maintenance, invasive plant identification

and control, wildlife and vegetation inventory and monitoring, animal care, and assisting in the management and education of volunteer groups.

Since 2019, the Fund has also provided up to 12 stipends for Belmont and Arlington high school students participating in either the Meadowscape for Biodiversity or the Biodiversity Builders six-week summer learning programs. Biodiversity Builders includes Cambridge high school students who receive stipends from Cambridge Summer Recreation. Students learn how to

- Build and restore biodiversity in local ecosystems
- Identify and remove invasive plants
- Install native species, design gardens using native plants
- Operate a business where they collectively define mission, vision, and values, and





Universally accessible trail at Habitat built with support from the Judy Record Fund.

implement a large native plant sales event, and

- Advocate for nature-based solutions to climate change.

Below are several additional projects the JR Fund has supported.

- Remote photographic equipment for a Lexington high school student to capture images of wildlife on local conservation properties. This student then used the equipment to assist a neighborhood advocacy effort to prevent the development of a wooded parcel in Belmont. The student turned this project into a video ([bit.ly/BCF-JRFvideo](https://bit.ly/BCF-JRFvideo)), which won a Slingshot Challenge award from the National Geographic Society.
- Wellington Park and Mill Brook Revitalization Project in Arlington, focusing on benches, invasive plant removal, and the purchase of native plants.
- A three-year grant to the Belmont Public Library for Japanese knotweed removal.

more about the Judy Record Conservation Fund, make a donation, or discuss a potential grant for a project, contact me at [roger\\_wrubel@msn.com](mailto:roger_wrubel@msn.com) or visit our website at [www.massaudubon.org/jrfund](http://www.massaudubon.org/jrfund).

*Roger Wrubel is the executive director of the Judy Record Fund and a Belmont resident.*



The Judy Record memorial bench at Lone Tree Hill.

- Contribution to building a canoe and kayak launch at Magazine Beach in Cambridge.
- Interpretive materials for the Magazine Beach Nature Center in Cambridge.
- An engineering plan for the construction of a trail and bridge to extend the Western Greenway to connect with the Wayside Rail Trail in Waltham.
- A grant to Belmont to purchase and install eight benches along the trail at Clay Pit Pond.

The JR Fund continues to fulfill Judy Record's vision of keeping nature within close reach for all the residents of our region. If you would like to learn

## Lone Tree Hill Restoration Continues

*By Jeffrey North and Joe Hibbard*

For over a decade, Lone Tree Hill has been a focal point of community-led ecological restoration in Belmont. The Belmont Citizens Forum, the Judy Record Conservation Fund, and many dedicated volunteers, all under the aegis of the town's Land Management Committee for Lone Tree Hill, have shared this effort. Since the restoration work began, this conservation land has transformed from a neglected patch of invasive thickets to a thriving habitat increasingly dominated by native species.

Last April 26, despite steady rain, more than 50 volunteers gathered at Lone Tree Hill's Meadow Edge Trail for the 11th annual Lone Tree Hill Volunteer Day. The commitment of the volunteers shone through the drizzle as they planted 50 white pine saplings and 10 Eastern red cedar saplings.

Volunteers also replaced five white pines that had not survived since last year's planting and carefully transplanted seven saplings from the end of the Pine Allee to fill gaps where trees had died or gone missing.

This year's saplings are flourishing thanks in part to their shaded location, which has protected them from the recent dry spells and intense heat waves. These young conifers should gradually outcompete invasive understory plants, helping restore the forest's natural balance.

Visitors who are familiar with the history of this area may recall that, before these plantings, the Meadow Edge was an impenetrable thicket. Thanks to the forestry mowing done by Parterre Ecological Services, the site was prepared for new growth and opened up for effective invasive plant removal. Volunteer efforts are planned to continue focusing on this area, making it easier to manage invasive species.

### New frontiers and ongoing maintenance

The restoration of Lone Tree Hill proceeds along two intertwined paths. New frontiers involve opening new areas of the conservation land to restoration, clearing invasive growth, and initi-



JEFFREY NORTH

Joe Hibbard plants a white pine at the April 2025 Lone Tree Hill volunteer day.

ating native plantings. Meanwhile, ongoing efforts maintain and nurture previously treated zones, with decreasing intensity as native ecosystems become more resilient.

For example, patches of the invasive black swallowwort persist stubbornly in the Great Meadow, requiring vigilant attention. In contrast, the invasive purple loosestrife appears to be under control, likely benefiting from the ongoing [Purple Loosestrife Biocontrol Project](#).

Elsewhere, bittersweet vine still clings to the emerging quaking aspen colony in the southeast corner of the lower meadow. That area was recently cleared during a hands-on training exercise for recruits of the horticultural services company responsible for much of the invasive species removal on LTH. This practical training both advances the restoration and builds skilled capacity for future efforts.

### Native Plants Take Root in Upper Meadow

The upper meadow—also known as the North End or the upper section of Area A1—is showing



remarkable signs of recovery. Native species such as wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), giant hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), mountain mints (*Pycnanthemum muticum* and *Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*), and warm-season grasses such as Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) and little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), planted in April 2023, have established healthy colonies. Many of these plants have strong natural defenses against deer and other browsers. They are thriving and helping to restore ecological function. Following the removal of invasive species, large areas have also been naturally reclaimed by native species. Chief among these are Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pennsylvanica*) and several species of Goldenrod (*Solidago spp.*).

This area is also suitable for cost-effective long-term maintenance. Regular mowing can suppress invasive species such as buckthorn, black swallowwort, and garlic mustard without requiring expensive interventions.



Joe Hibbard observes growth of seedlings planted in April.

### Looking Ahead

The restoration journey on Lone Tree Hill is far from over. Each year brings new challenges, new areas to reclaim, and new volunteers eager to leave a positive mark on Belmont’s landscape. Whether through planting native trees, clearing invasives, or supporting hands-on training, the community’s stewardship is gradually but steadily improving Lone Tree Hill’s natural beauty and ecological health.

If you’re interested in joining future volunteer days or learning more about the ongoing work, keep an eye on the Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter*, Belmont Conservation Volunteers, and the Judy Record Conservation Fund announcements. Together, we can ensure Lone Tree Hill remains a vital and vibrant for generations to come.

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

## Belmont Conservation Volunteers Need Help

*By Leonard Katz and Dean Hickman*

For several years, Belmont Conservation Volunteers has led spring Saturday morning garlic mustard pulls, which are succeeding in controlling this damaging plant in the most high-priority affected areas of the Lone Tree Hill Belmont Conservation Land. However, there remains much else to do to protect Belmont’s conservation lands from other plants that threaten native plant communities.

In the past year, we broadened our group activities to go after *Akebia quinata* in September, October, March, and April. This ‘chocolate vine’ displaces native ground cover. It also threatens to end natural forest renewal by smothering the young trees needed to replace old trees as they die.

Volunteers have made good progress. However, complete extirpation is needed to protect Lone Tree Hill’s woodlands from *Akebia* spreading from the small area that is currently infested. This spot is across the seasonal Junction Brook from the kiosk above the Pleasant Street entrance to Lone Tree Hill (below marker 12.)

We have not yet succeeded in recruiting the volunteers needed to finish this work—or to become a sustainable community group and to achieve our goals of restoring and maintaining the health of our woodland and meadow conservation land.

Please join our Google Group at [groups.google.com/g/belmont-conservation-volunteers](https://groups.google.com/g/belmont-conservation-volunteers) to receive our event email announcements and join us and perhaps help lead our efforts.

We plan to restart weekly Saturday morning *Akebia* control again on Saturday, September 13. We are also active in less regularly scheduled ways, such as going after winged-knotweed especially after rains (when digging it out is most effective).



Belmont Conservation volunteer Leonard Katz holding up *Akebia* vine removed from Lone Tree Hill.

Please help us build our Belmont community group to protect our local plant communities and restore our natural spaces for you and everyone to enjoy!

If you have any questions or suggestions, please reach out to us at [belmontconservationvolunteers@gmail.com](mailto:belmontconservationvolunteers@gmail.com). You can find out more here [www.sustainablebelmont.net/belmont-conservation-volunteers/](http://www.sustainablebelmont.net/belmont-conservation-volunteers/) or contact us directly via email.

For more information on our group, some of our leaders, and our work on *Akebia*, see [belmontvoice.org/volunteer-group-tackles-invasive-species-at-lone-tree-hill/](http://belmontvoice.org/volunteer-group-tackles-invasive-species-at-lone-tree-hill/)

*Dean Hickman and Leonard Katz are leaders of the Belmont Conservation Volunteers.*



# Habitat Renovation is Underway

By Thomas Phillips

Mass Audubon’s Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary is currently renovating its entry circle to enhance visual appeal and incorporate accessibility accommodations for people with disabilities. The first phase of this project began in late April when the walkway was repaved and the entry circle widened. In early fall a new path will be built for people with disabilities with new plantings.

The staff at Habitat are hopeful that, in addition to promoting inclusiveness for individuals with disabilities, the renovation will increase the check-in rates among visitors to the sanctuary. Staff believe that increasing check-in rates at Habitat will enable Mass Audubon to learn more about the number of people visiting Habitat, popular visit times, and how visitors become aware of the sanctuary. Staff wish to increase check-in rates because it may increase foot traffic in Habitat’s art gallery, which is located near the check-in area.

## A long history of education

The property at 10 Juniper Road in Belmont was the home of Ruth Hornblower Atkins, also known as Ruth Atkins Churchill, to whom it was given as a wedding present in 1914. Ruth Atkins Churchill was an early proponent of environmental education, and she left her Georgian Revival-style home and the surrounding estate to be used for environmental education. Over the decades, it evolved into a center for environmental education, eventually becoming Mass Audubon’s Habitat Education Center and



Habitat’s driveway.

JEFFREY NORTH

Wildlife Sanctuary in 1994. Among Habitat’s varied biomes are grassland, vernal pools, formal garden, and forest, all in closer proximity than they would typically be in nature. Habitat encourages visits from school groups and families interested in learning about New England ecology.

Habitat offers a wide variety of educational programs. Two programs serve preschool-aged children: the preschool naturalist program and the new accredited preschool. Habitat also offers school field trips, school presentations, and programs for homeschooled children. A variety of Mass Audubon educational and volunteer opportunities also exist for older children and adults, including owl prowls, garden group, and goat tending. Events such as the goat gala and the plant sale are another way the sanctuary educates the public about nature.

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

# Belmont Boasts Bountiful Owls

by Fred Bouchard

Let’s open with, then qualify, two generalizations about Barred, Snowy, and Saw-Whet Owls. Females run a bit larger than males; one might (erroneously) surmise that their voices are somewhat deeper in pitch. Most owls are strictly nocturnal. That said, our first two are crepuscular and diurnal, respectively.

## Barred Owl (*Strix varia*)

Ubiquitous and crepuscular (active and vocal from dusk to dawn), Barred Owls rank among our easiest woodland owls to see. They tend to roost in outer branches, exposed. They don’t hug trunks for camouflage like Great Horned Owls or snuggle in holes like Screech Owls. Their unique brown eyes (other species’ eyes are yellow) seem to me somehow candid and inviting, with an inquisitive gaze and behavior. In April 2021, one swooped down into Habitat Belmont’s parking lot and perched calmly above the solar array, unperturbed by the summoned arrival of delightedly animated schoolchildren.

One or more Barred Owls have spent recent years among tall evergreens at Hall’s Pond Sanctuary, Brookline. Early one April morning in 2022 birders watched a large female perched above Isabella Gardner’s crypt by Auburn Lake at Mount Auburn Cemetery. They often roost near water and may skim ponds for fish and shellfish. Seek them—as with most owls—by scanning the trees for silhouettes, whitewash (feces), and pellets (regurgitated packets of prey fur and bones). Come May, in the white pine forest at Woburn’s Horn Pond, you’ll find birders with spotting scopes spying on Barred Owl hatchlings.

Listen for Barred Owls’ clear, signature eight-hoot—Who cooks for yoo / Who cooks for yooooo—all?—mainly between dusk and dawn. Last fall, however, at 10 AM at Pine Hill Grasslands in Leicester, a “Barry” eventually responded to my ragged imitation. Their varied vocals include upward slurring of a set of whoos, or duos engaging in bizarre maniacal cackles and howled hootenannies.

From my Winn Brook yard, here’s my elaborated eBird post of May 3, 2024: “We got out of

the car at 8:40 pm (last dusk) just as a Barred Owl was calling lustily near the corner. It uttered a few drawn-out eight-hoots, then took off up Cross Street. Resisting a temptation to respond, I ran after it. It landed briefly atop a spruce, then flapped northward out of sight.”

Birder/musician Steve Geraci reported colorfully from Needham Forest on January 26: “During an afternoon walk, I again questioned my sanity as I navigated uneven trails, my neck craned to scan the crowns of towering hemlocks and evergreens. Many times I had walked away with little more than a stiff neck and fading hope. But not today. Thirty feet above me, motionless yet magnificent, perched the prize: a female Barred Owl. Though still, she exuded a quiet awareness, swiveling her head sharply at the faint approach of a dog walker before



Barred Owl.

JEFF TEITELBAUM





Norman Smith with a Snowy Owl.

resuming her calm vigil, alternating between shut eyes and watchful squints. The next day, further down the trail, I found her again—40 feet high, soaking in the winter warmth. She remained still but ever observant, her graceful swivels capturing every movement below. I felt a profound sense of privilege, standing beneath ‘Brigitte Barred-O’ to witness her splendor.”

### Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*)

North America’s largest owl (by body mass), this distinctive white owl breeds and summers in the Arctic tundra. Most frequently seen in the Bay State during years of irruptive (erratic, usually hunger-driven) migrations southward, “snowies” often winter at Plum Island, Newburyport, on Logan Airport’s windswept ‘tundra’, and along grassy dunes of Duxbury Beach. Mass Audubon’s Snowy Owl Project, directed by Norman Smith since 1981, nets and tags snowies with temporary tiny transmitters that track their travels around New England.

Here are edited comments from Norman Smith [2/25/25]:

“This winter has been an average winter for snowy owls at Logan Airport. I have captured and relocated 13 to date, 12 hatch-year birds and one adult. The previous two winters were very poor,

with only four owls in 2022-23 and only two owls in 2023-24. My best winter was 2013-14 when I captured 179 snowy owls. An incredible lemming explosion in the arctic in the summer of 2013 produced lots of breeding and numerous owls to travel south as far as Florida, Texas, and Bermuda. I have relocated over 900 Snowy Owls from Logan Airport over 40+

years, for the safety of both owls and planes.

“Snowy Owls usually show up in early November after traveling up to 3,000 miles from the Arctic, and begin their journey back north in March or April. Some stay till May with the latest state record July 7. In 2013–14 however two snowy owls stayed between Logan Airport and the Boston Harbor Islands, throughout that whole year, a first, and left in the spring 2015.

“Snowy Owls are opportunistic and will hunt during the day, but they prefer to hunt after the sun goes down like most owl species. They prey upon an assortment of rodents, small mammals, passerines, waterfowl, herons, and fish. They will even take other raptors including American Kestrel, Northern Harrier, Saw-whet Owl, Short-eared Owl, Barn Owl, Long-eared Owl—or Peregrine Falcon.

“Most owls that show up here are in good shape, not starving to death as some speculate without capturing and examining live owls. Not all owls make it, as is true with all species, especially hatch-year birds. Some owls do not survive due to being hit by cars or jets, electrocuted, poisoned, starved, or diseased. In February 2022 bird flu showed up in Massachusetts for the first time and nine owls died from it. Again last January some owls died or tested positive for bird flu.”

A note: Gary Menin, Sr., reports that studies have found Snowy Owls to be profoundly vulnerable to rodenticides, and that one Project SNOWstorm study participant said that among Snowy Owl specimens examined worldwide, those in Massachusetts had the highest rates of poisoning.

Male snowies may attain that pure ivory; females and juveniles are variably sprinkled with black chevrons. If they don’t hop onto wooden staddles to extend their view over ice-bound Plum Island, they may prove nearly invisible to telescopers diligently scanning from the road. Few sights thrill New England birders more than watching a Snowy Owl skim gracefully over a vast expanse of frozen marsh on downy-soft, deeply flapping wings.

Sightings in Middlesex County are usually rare and brief: last winter en-route birds made eye-popping cameos on a harbor buoy in the Mystic River by Earhart Dam and atop Watertown Exploratory Labs.

### Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*)

Mass Audubon ornithologist Strickland Wheelock gives a telling thumbnail sketch about his bird-banding activities in Uxbridge. “Saw-whet Owls are uncommon, tiny, strictly nocturnal owls, slightly smaller than our Eastern Screech Owl. They can be found in most Bay State townships, primarily in the winter, roosting in dense evergreens (favoring cedar groves) or tree holes for protection from larger owls and other raptors. Their population is fairly stable. During the fall, through mid-November, they migrate from boreal forests on northeast winds. On clear nights when we’re banding, we play the male Saw-whet call loudly from a high elevation and what we capture are 90% females, both adults and immatures. On good nights we might net anywhere from 20 to 50 Saw-whets.

“They are calm and passive in the hand. As you are gripping their legs, they are not struggling to get away, not trying to bite you. When you open your hand to release, they just sit there looking around. Finally, you have to move your hand around

to get them to fly away. If you venture at night around Saw-whet habitat, you might hear their monotonous repeated single-note whistle. When you whistle back the same notes, they often fly in quietly to check out who might be visiting their territory.”

The ‘saw-whet’ moniker relates to that simple toot, quaintly akin to honing a saw blade on a whetstone. I recall soft autumn evenings on Nantucket, perched on my porch across a dirt track from Miacomet Pond, thrilling to a Saw-whet chorus from the cedars – gently, if less shrilly, insistent as spring peepers -- and calling back to them.

### Owl’s well that ends, well . . .

At 4:30 AM on August 15, during final edits for this issue, I was awakened by eight soft whinnies outside my open window, the welcome call of an Eastern Screech Owl. More like a warbling coo than a screech, it’s likely the 20th such visit over this decade. Despite losing three majestic deciduous trees within 50 yards of our house in as many years, our commonest little owl still sees fit to haunt our ‘hood. And I for one am grateful beyond measure.

*Fred Bouchard is a member of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter Committee.*



Northern Saw-whet Owl



# Where Does the Water Go?

## Understanding Clay Pit Pond and Belmont’s Hidden Rivers

By Ry Emmert

People don’t often think about where a raindrop goes after it hits the ground. It may splash on the pavement, flow toward a storm drain, and then seemingly disappear. However, if that droplet falls outside Belmont High School, it embarks on a complex and unexpected journey. This journey connects Belmont’s sidewalks to kayakers on the Mystic River, fish in the Charles River, and ships in Boston Harbor.

The story begins with Clay Pit Pond, a shallow and iconic body of water situated between the high school and Concord Avenue. For many residents, it serves as a scenic backdrop, a place to walk, jog, or sit and take in the surroundings. To others, it appears as a polluted pit, clearly marked with health warnings. What most people don’t realize is that Clay Pit Pond is not a closed system. Instead, it acts as a gateway, a crucial pass-through point in a vast and often hidden network of stormwater infrastructure.

### Belmont’s hidden waterways

Clay Pit Pond is part of the Mystic River watershed, a 76-square-mile area that drains parts of 21 cities and towns into the Mystic River and, eventually, the Boston Harbor. When rain falls in Belmont, it doesn’t soak quietly into the soil. It moves over sidewalks and rooftops, through storm drains and pipes, into ponds and streams. The infrastructure guiding this water is largely hidden in old underground culverts and stormwater mains that weave beneath neighborhoods and town lines.

Near Belmont High School, stormwater outfalls on the west side of Clay Pit Pond collect runoff from roads, parking lots, and rooftops. The water picks up everything it touches: oil drips, pet waste, fertilizer, road salt, and sediment. It briefly enters Clay Pit Pond, then exits via a culvert beneath Concord Avenue, flowing into Wellington Brook. From there, it travels underground again to Blair Pond, Little River, Alewife Brook, Mystic River, Boston Harbor, and, eventually, the Atlantic Ocean.

All of this movement happens mostly out of sight. Few people realize that Belmont stormwater connects directly into Cambridge’s system, or that

Belmont’s runoff travels through Wellington Brook into Alewife Brook. The result? A system where responsibility is shared, and consequences are, too.

### A pond under pressure

Despite progress across the Mystic River watershed, Clay Pit remains persistently polluted. Why? The answer lies in both what’s visible and what’s hidden.

One major issue is aging infrastructure. In some cases, sewage is leaking into stormwater pipes through cracks or illicit connections, or old pipes that are mistakenly tied into the wrong system. These cross-connections are hard to find and expensive to fix. Yet they’re a major reason why nearby Winns Brook, which shares this system, received a “D” for bacteria on a recent Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA) [report card](#). Clay Pit Pond likely faces similar contamination from diffuse wastewater sources.

Another problem is sedimentation and nutrient loading. Water running off Belmont’s streets carries phosphorus from leaf litter, pet waste, and fertilizer. That water settles into Clay Pit Pond where it delivers nutrients that can lead to algae blooms and other ecological imbalances.

Sediment from erosion—including from disintegrating banks and disturbed soils—builds up, making the pond shallower. You can see the effects yourself: short-legged ducks and geese now wade far from shore, closer to the high school’s grounds.

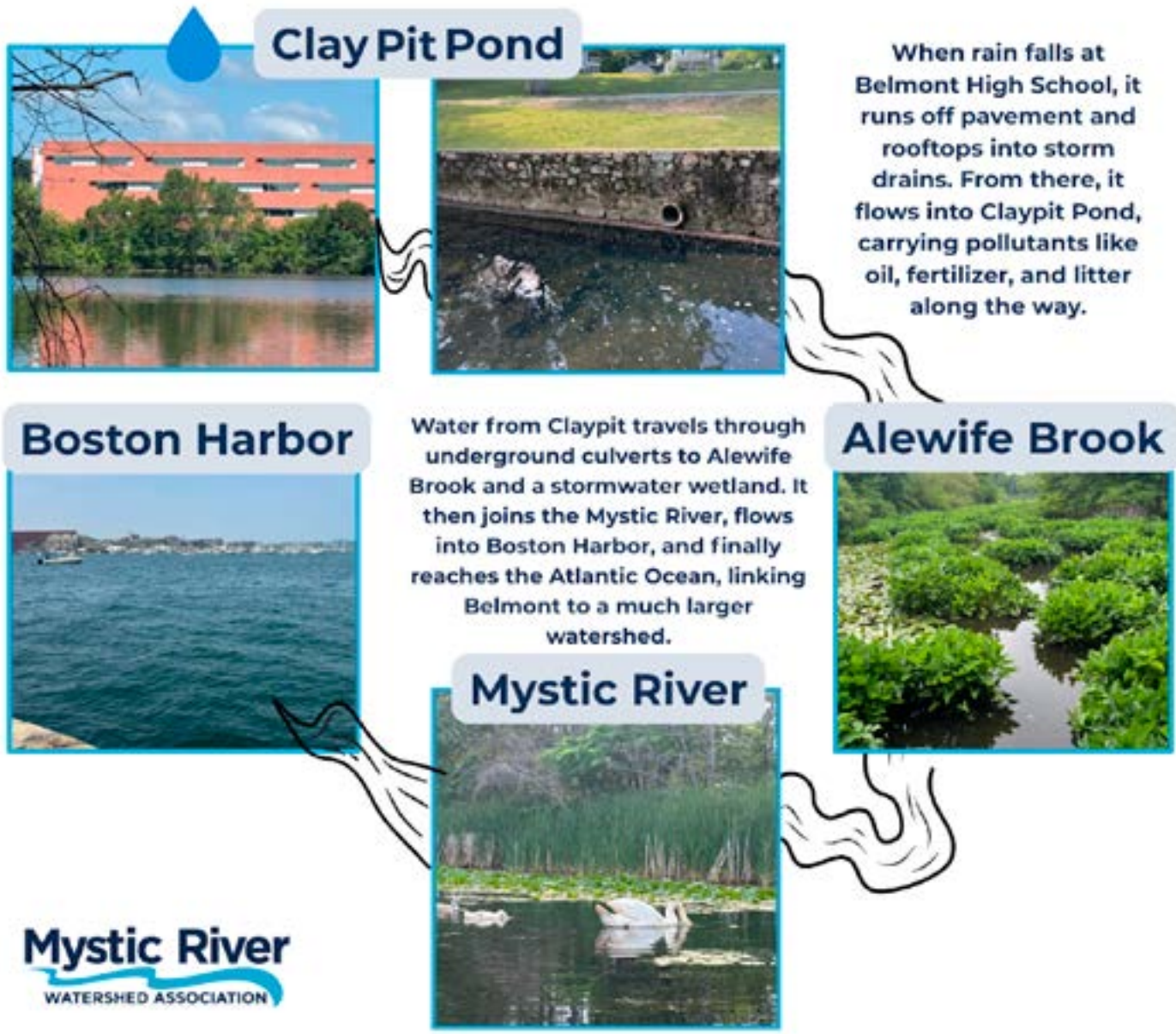
Finally, the pond carries a historical burden. Sediment cores have revealed pesticide residues from the 19th and 20th centuries. Long-banned chemicals are still lingering at the bottom.

### A path forward through collaboration

So, what actions can Belmont residents take to make a difference?

Longtime local advocates like Anne-Marie Lambert have consistently emphasized that real change starts with public awareness, and with caring enough to act. In her many articles for the Belmont Citizens Forum *Newsletter*, Lambert has traced how aging stormwater infrastructure, invisible culverts, and fragmented public under-

## When a droplet of water falls at Belmont High School, where does it go?



standing have hindered efforts to build momentum around water quality. Much of the problem, she’s noted, lies in what people can’t see: polluted outfalls tucked behind buildings, buried pipes that cross town lines, and sediment slowly accumulating out of sight.

Lambert is now helping to launch a new community group, Friends of Clay Pit Pond, in hopes of turning a familiar neighborhood landmark into a center of environmental engagement. The group aims to highlight how Belmont’s stormwater challenges are tied to a wider regional system, and

to show that local action, even on seemingly small scales, matters.

Other promising steps are underway. The town has invested nearly \$2 million over the past decade to identify and repair leaking pipes. Green infrastructure features like rain gardens and infiltration trenches are being explored as more affordable ways to slow and filter runoff. And the Department of Public Works (DPW) is proposing expanded public education including outreach to landscapers, homeowners, and neighborhood groups about small-scale actions that can reduce pollution at



the source. [The Belmont DPW Engineering Department recently hired a stormwater supervisor to ensure compliance with ever-changing requirements and MassDEP mandates, inspections and reporting. - Editor]

Still, the scale of the problem is significant. Much of Belmont’s runoff flows through just a few key outfalls, and only a small percentage have undergone full dry-weather inspections. With many pipes still uninspected and more breakages likely to emerge, sustained investment and public engagement will be essential.

But one thing is clear: restoring the health of Clay Pit Pond and the Mystic River watershed is not just the job of town staff or engineers. It’s a shared responsibility; one that begins with paying closer attention to the water beneath our feet and taking action in our own communities.

What you can do

Volunteer with the Mystic River Watershed Association:

- Sign up to become a water quality monitor or participate in local cleanups.
- Visit the calendar on the MyWRA website, [www.mysticriver.org](http://www.mysticriver.org), and subscribe to



MyRWA’s newsletter for upcoming volunteer events.

- Get involved here: [mysticriver.org/volunteer](http://mysticriver.org/volunteer)

Learn more

- Explore how stormwater impacts local ecosystems and what’s being done: [mysticriver.org/stormwater](http://mysticriver.org/stormwater)
- Track combined sewer overflows (CSOs) and their impact: [mysticriver.org/csos](http://mysticriver.org/csos)

Advocate locally

- Attend public meetings in Belmont and neighboring towns.
- Voice your support for green infrastructure projects and long-term investment in storm-water solutions.
- Encourage collaboration across town lines (especially with Cambridge and Arlington) to build a more resilient watershed.
- Join Belmont’s new Friends of Clay Pit Pond group. Email [bcpprogramdirector@gmail.com](mailto:bcpprogramdirector@gmail.com) for more information.

In the end, a raindrop that falls outside Belmont High School doesn’t just vanish. It flows through culverts, into ponds, along brooks, and down rivers. It picks up pollution from four municipalities. It passes kayakers, flows under the Earhart Dam, and enters the sea. Our responsibility to that water doesn’t end at our storm drain, and neither should our care for it.

*Ry Emmert is a rising senior at Williams College majoring in Geosciences and Coastal and Ocean Studies. Ry joined MyRWA as an Environmental Science and Stewardship Fellow for summer 2025 through the Yale Conservation Scholars Early Leadership Initiative program.*

Plastic Bags on the Way Out, With or Without Bans

By Janet Domenitz

If you’ve ever stood outside a supermarket and watched shoppers head to their cars, bags in hand, you’ll notice something striking these days: fewer and fewer plastic bags. That’s exactly what MASSPIRG Education Fund researchers set out to measure in a recent snapshot survey at grocery stores across Massachusetts—and the results are encouraging.

Over the course of two weeks this summer, we observed shoppers exiting stores in 12 communities: half with local plastic bag bans, and half without. What we found was that in towns that restrict or phase out plastic bags, just 1% of shoppers left with only plastic bags. In towns with no restrictions? That number was 13%.

Sure, 13% is higher—but it’s still a small fraction of the shopping public. In other words, most shoppers in Massachusetts are finding alternatives to single-use plastic whether their town has a bylaw or not. The shift is happening.

To put it another way, for many people, Plastic Free July isn’t just one month—it has become a mindset.

We tracked six bag categories in our survey: plastic only, paper only, reusable only, a mix including reusable bags, a mix without reusables, and no bag at all (just carrying items out by hand). From this, it’s clear that reusable bags are gaining real traction—and fast.

This is no accident. For years, advocates across the Commonwealth—from MASSPIRG and the Sierra Club to Surfrider Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Food Association—have worked to raise awareness about plastic pollution and push for smarter policy.

Currently, 163 Massachusetts cities and towns covering more than two-thirds of the state’s population have passed local plastic bag ordinances. As Clint Richmond of the Sierra Club’s Massachusetts chapter puts it, “These policies have succeeded. But it makes no sense to have a patchwork of local regulations. We need a comprehensive statewide law.”

We at MASSPIRG agree. A uniform statewide standard would both support what shoppers are already doing and would help level the playing

field for retailers and municipalities. It would send a clear signal: we can and should move on from single-use plastic bags.

Currently, 163 Massachusetts cities and towns covering more than two-thirds of the state’s population have passed local plastic bag ordinances.

As Alex Vai of the Surfrider Foundation Massachusetts noted, “This shows that meaningful, large-scale behavior change is possible when we combine strong public policy with public education.”

In Belmont, one of the 12 municipalities surveyed, environmental awareness runs high and residents are already making thoughtful choices every day.

The trend is clear. Most people want to do the right thing—they just need the tools and the policies to make that easier. Let’s build on this momentum and make Plastic Free July a permanent part of our future.

Janet Domenitz is the executive director of MASSPIRG.





# Profiles in Belmont: Angus Abercrombie

By Elissa Ely

Angus Abercrombie—21-year old Emerson College senior, Belmont Town Meeting Member, door-knocker on 850 Precinct 8 homes before his 2023 election victory--is so articulate, so quotable, that he should write his profile himself. Here are a scant few phrases to include in some future Abercrombie archive. The lucky person who assembles it will find themselves drawn in:

“I was the right kind of nerd, a lover of spreadsheets.”

“I love a good meeting! I’m never the guy who complains. A couple of times, I’ve voted NO to adjourn student government meetings.”

“You can’t be an idealist in local politics. It’s a place of pragmatics.”



Angus Abercrombie

“One of the good things about being a communications major is, I can create a message to convince myself.”

And finally, eight words that condense all the patience an unusual name requires:

“I have to spell out ‘Angus’ at Starbucks.”

Chai latte would take longer if he spelled his entire name: Angus James Benedict Abercrombie.

The first and last are from his Scottish father’s family. James was his grandfather, and as for Benedict, “maybe it came to them in a dream.” The length is no impediment, though. “In my line of business,” Angus says, “it’s useful.”

The Belmont Abercrombies are immigrants (though not current administration targets), and Angus has dual British-American citizenship.

Within the Abercrombie household, everyone in the family speaks to one another in their native British or Scottish accents. When his parents call the cell phone while he’s socializing, his end of the conversation can be nonplussing for friends to overhear.

His mother, a seismologist, grew up in the English Midlands, graduating with a PhD in geophysics. Angus remembers a class photograph: 20-30 aspiring young men, one woman. Afterwards, there was research in New Zealand, California, Hawaii: “If it shakes, she’s probably done some work there,” he says. “I don’t really understand what she does, but it’s incredible. She’s the kind of mother you don’t want to get in the way of.”

His father, a mathematician, “got in on the ground floor of software” and now works at Google. Across the ocean, his sister recently graduated with an advanced degree in linguistics and psychology. They’re all highly accomplished but, interestingly, none of them are highly political “though they do vote religiously.”

We go through life on a search for ourselves and, if we’re lucky,



find who we are before it’s too late. Growing up in Belmont, Angus happened to find himself early. He briefly held the traditional childhood ambition of becoming an astronaut and, also briefly, the other traditional ambition of becoming President (“I don’t want to be President anymore,” he says firmly). There were years of ballet, and volunteering at Habitat, where he was eventually hired for his first job. Meanwhile, it was public school straight down the ticket—Winn Brook, Chenery, BHS. Though he was not as academically exceptional as other family members, his mother once caught him reading the dictionary in the living room.

Angus was in the third grade when the 2012 Presidential election was held, and by coincidence one of his classmates was a Romney. A year or two later, he learned about an upcoming budget override vote in Belmont and decided to lobby on its behalf. He did the house leafleting, his mother drove the car. “Quite early on,” he says, “I saw that the world was built on systems and institutions.”

He became adept at understanding both; the middle schooler who had read the handbook on bullying and was able to help victimized friends file reports; the pragmatist who created outcomes for others. “I had the luxury of being able to say yes to things that take time. Now I’m just saying yes to things as much as I can.”

Political understanding grew more nuanced with age. “Interacting with local government is as easy as driving down your street and hitting a pothole,” he explains. (This sentence must go into the archives.) As his understanding enlarged, so did his involvement. Angus skipped the Belmont high school graduation in order to attend a Massachusetts State Convention and cast his vote for Sonia Chang-Diaz for senate.

Emerson College was near home (“if I was in England, it would have been a 6-hour flight back to Town Meeting!”). His political work continued

in Belmont but also began in a new locale. Angus served a semester as class president at Emerson, is about to become vice president, chaired the audit committee, worked on a series of million-dollar student organization budgets, and somehow managed a political communications major with minors in economics and environmental studies while heading to Belmont most weekends and some weeknights for town meetings and canvassing. It’s committed pragmatics in action, working within systems and institutions.

So many feet in so many communities require good balance, and a simple value keeps him upright: “I got involved in politics because it’s meaningful.” In 2023, Angus became the youngest member of Town Meeting. As a pragmatist, he believes in opportunities--“they’re going to come, and we’re going to get some of them right,” he says. Winning a No Turn On Red Sign is as much a victory as unlocking funds.

A few of the many, many causes dear to the Abercrombie heart—with a woeful understating of their details--are expanding the housing supply, increasing the tax base, securing support for conservation land, and improving schools (of course). Affordability is his biggest priority. And he is not unaware of a financial irony: as a young professional, he couldn’t afford to live in Belmont himself. “I’d love a nice little apartment close to our business center. But I don’t expect to be able to solve problems for me. I expect to solve them for the next person.”

As this piece is being written, Angus is on his way to Philadelphia for a Young Democrats of America convention. He is chief of staff for the Massachusetts chapter—“a very generalist role.” In meetings there, he will be passionate, articulate, and quotable. It’s hard to imagine they could start without him.

*Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.*



Letter To the Editor

To the Editor:  
“PILOT Program Could Ease Tax Burden,” by Max Colice (Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter, July/August 2025) is an interesting discussion of the possibility that entities exempt from taxes, such as religious organizations and private schools, could make a meaningful contribution to Belmont’s bottom line. As part of his piece, Colice lists the 10 top tax-exempt entities. Last on the list is the Jewish Community Center; the name is not one that is commonly known.

In fact, the Jewish Community Center is the Beth El Temple Center located at 2 Concord Avenue. It came into being when the Belmont and Watertown Jewish Community Center built and opened a Reform synagogue. The link that follows contains information about it provided by the Massachusetts Historical District Commission: [www.belmont-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/4916/2-Concord-Avenue-PDF](http://www.belmont-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/4916/2-Concord-Avenue-PDF).



Barred Owl.

Speaking as a Beth El congregant, I note that listing Beth El Temple Center as the Jewish Community Center is more than a little confusing. It seems improbable that Colice does not know that the address listed with the town is Beth El Temple Center; Beth El is the only synagogue in Belmont. However, in the unlikely event he did not know this, the difference in the two names should have prompted him to investigate this.

Of more serious concern is Colice’s apparent assumption that Beth El Temple Center is not contributing to the town. Again, please be aware that I speak as a congregant and do NOT represent the synagogue. I do, however, attend the various congregational meetings; budgetary information is some of the information provided to attendees.

Beth El operates on a very tight budget. Nevertheless, the congregation believes that it should be contributing to the town. Accordingly, it donates service by making the building available without charge to the town for a variety of activities. For example, the Belmont Department of Health has held many, if not most, of its vaccination clinics at Beth El since Governor Charlie Baker closed down an excellent three-town vaccination clinic set up by Arlington, Lexington, and Belmont during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the new library has been under construction, Beth El has been the polling place for Precinct 1.

That Colice appears not to have investigated this takes away from his article and the point he is trying to make. Colice should have investigated more deeply, and he should also have placed a monetary value on the contribution that Beth El Temple Center already makes to the town of Belmont, a contribution that amounts to a PILOT payment.

*Judith Feinleib, a Beth El Temple Center congregant, is also a Precinct 6 Town Meeting Member and writes the If I May blog. She has a doctorate in political science and, as an independent consultant, helps people with social media posting, writing, and in-house and external corporate communications.*

*Editor’s Note: The Belmont Assessor’s Office lists the owner of the property at 2 Concord Avenue as “Jewish Comm[unity] Center.”*



Great Horned Owl.

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