

Belmont Citizens Forum

Vol. 2, No. 3

A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

May 2001

Town Confronts Affordable Housing Shortage

By Eva Patalas

Recently, an advertisement from a local real estate agent proclaimed that this spring was a great time in which to sell. According to the ad, the average selling price of a single-family home in Belmont increased from \$397,027 in 1997 to \$591,506 in 2000. This is great news for someone who bought a home in Belmont some years ago and is considering selling. But it also means that many people who grew up in town, as well as town employees, such as teachers, firemen, and police officers, are being priced out of the market.

Elderly residents who can no longer afford to maintain their homes and families who are renting and have children in the Belmont school system may also be forced to move. In this climate, the issue of affordable housing takes on greater urgency.

State has set 10 percent goal

In an effort to increase the supply of moderately priced housing and prevent it from being concentrated all in one place, the state passed a law in 1969 that encourages every town in the Commonwealth to make 10 percent of its housing stock affordable. The law defines affordable housing as housing assisted through state or federal pro-

grams, including technical assistance. Such housing is usually limited to households with incomes below 80 percent of the local median; rent or home ownership costs must not exceed 30 percent of this amount. To qualify for affordable housing in the Boston area, a family of four may earn no more than \$56,000. (See chart on page 9.) The maximum monthly housing cost for such a family under these guidelines would be \$1400.

In communities that have not met the 10 percent affordable housing goal, the law permits developers of such units to seek a limited suspension of density and other zoning restrictions through a comprehensive permit process. If a community rejects the permit application, the developer can appeal to the state, which can override the rejection if it finds it unreasonable.

Lincoln is an example of a nearby town that has

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Summary: *Skyrocketing housing prices are forcing people with moderate incomes out of town. To keep the town diverse, the Belmont Housing Trust is exploring ways to buy, build, or rehabilitate affordable housing.*

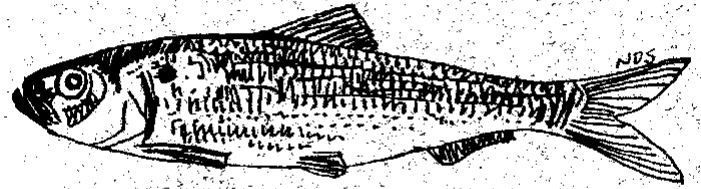
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Environmental Events Calendar

Learn How to Monitor Water Quality. The Mystic River Watershed Association collects water samples once a month from 10 sites in the watershed, including Winn Brook in Belmont, and is hoping to sample even more streams. A new two-session training program for samplers starts Tuesday, May 29, at 7 p.m. in the association office at 20 Academy Street, Arlington, Suite 203. The evening session is an introduction to the program and procedures. It is followed by a practice sampling session on a stream on Saturday, June 2, at 1 p.m. For more information, call Libby Larson, Mystic Monitoring Network coordinator, at 781-316-3438 or e-mail her at libbywiz@yahoo.com.

Walk the Alewife Land in Belmont. On Saturday, June 2, at 1 p.m., Naturalist Ralph Yoder will show walkers the natural wonders we usually glimpse only from our cars as we maneuver through the highway tangle at Alewife. Wear long pants, long sleeves, and hats. Carry water and, if you like, binoculars. The walk, sponsored by the Belmont Citizens Forum, will last 2 to 3 hours. To sign up, please call 617-484-1844 and leave a message.



Blueback Herring

Enjoy Biodiversity Days at Alewife. Would you like to see even more of Alewife? On Friday evening, June 8, at 6 p.m., go birding with Ralph Yoder. The walk starts near Jerry's Pond in Cambridge, at the bus turn-around on Rindge Avenue in the parking lot next to Cuomo Field. Three events are scheduled for Saturday morning, June 9. At 10 a.m., meet Mary White and Stew Sanders at the passenger pickup behind the Alewife T station. Mary will discuss life forms in the MDC Alewife Reservation and nearby, and Stew will discuss the area's flowers. Or if trees are your preference, meet Larry Acosta at the Bertucci's Pizza at the Alewife T on June 9 at 10:30 a.m. The events are sponsored by the Friends of Alewife Reservation and the Mystic River Watershed Association.

Clean up Belmont. An official town Clean-Up Day has been declared for Saturday, June 16, starting at 10 a.m. Meet in the high school parking lot near Hittinger Field.

Fight Global Warming Locally. John Bolduc, environmental planner for Cambridge, has developed an action plan to help his city curb greenhouse gas emissions, taking advantage of grants from Cities for Climate Protection. He'll speak on Sunday evening, June 3, at the annual meeting of Watertown Citizens for Environmental Protection. Bring a main dish, salad, or dessert for the potluck supper at 6 p.m. at Church of the Good Shepherd, 9 Russell Avenue, Watertown. The program begins at 7 p.m. For more information, call 617-924-5723.

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Rock Meadow: Past and Future

By Margaret Velie

Rock Meadow is a parcel of land, approximately seventy acres, located on the western edge of Belmont. It is bounded by Waltham (Beaver Brook), Concord Avenue, Mill Street, the Kendall Gardens subdivision, and Town of Belmont land that was formerly the site of the town incinerator. Rock Meadow, which connects with the open lands of Habitat, McLean Hospital, Metropolitan State Hospital, and Olympus Hospital, forms a greenway through Belmont, Waltham, and Lexington, and contains streams and woodlands as well as a meadow. Its walking trails, accessible from a small parking area off Mill Street, are popular with bikers and birders.

Today, the Belmont Conservation Commission manages the land for Belmont. In 1968, the town purchased from Massachusetts General Hospital what was then called

“McLean Farm”
for the

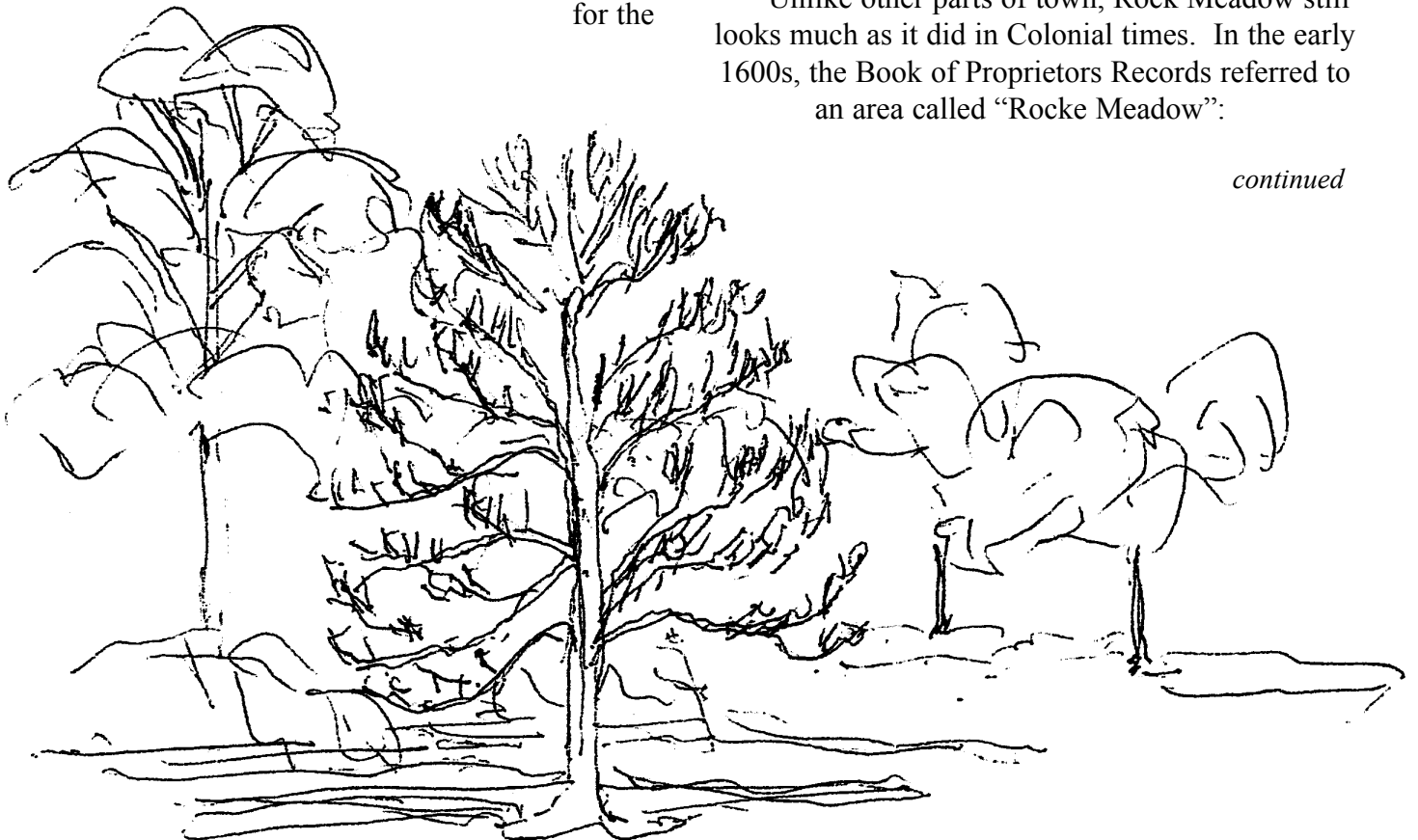
sum of \$555,800. The United States Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, Department of the Interior, funded 50 percent of the purchase, and the Massachusetts Department of Natural Resources funded 25 percent. The 1968 Belmont Annual Report stated: “The need for preserving this last piece of available land in the congested and over-built town of Belmont was recognized by the Commissioners.” The following year the commission changed the name to Rock Meadow, which it stated was the “historically correct and older” title.

What the glaciers left behind

Rock Meadow was shaped by the Wisconsin glacier that covered New England between 10,000 to 80,000 years ago. John L. Alexander, writing in 1879 in the *History of Middlesex County*, stated that the area was “evidently a lake during the glacial period, but was drained by cutting a channel down a rocky gorge, in which now flows a rapid stream, called Beaver Brook.” More recently, Rock Meadow was described by a Boston University Preservation Studies team as a gravel-filled fresh water meadow with boulders, or “erratics,” left by the glacier.

Unlike other parts of town, Rock Meadow still looks much as it did in Colonial times. In the early 1600s, the Book of Proprietors Records referred to an area called “Rocke Meadow”:

continued



Rock Meadow, continued from page 3

“The country in this section was generally open. The frequent burning over by the Indians had left the largest trees but no underbrush, and the country looked like an English park.” A 1640 reference stated that “the great Rock Meadow above the mill pond supplied meadow hay, which attracted settlers at an early date.”

Over 250 years later, the naturalist William Brewster wrote in his 1906 book *Birds of the Cambridge Region*:

This fine, large meadow, upwards of one hundred acres in extent, has changed but little, either in character or surroundings, within the past thirty or forty years. It lies partly in Belmont and Waltham, but chiefly in the southeastern corner of Lexington, near the source of Beaver Brook. Although for the most part open and grassy, it contains many swampy thickets, several tracts of low-lying maple woods and a few wooded ridges and ‘marsh islands.’ The Concord Turnpike crosses it from east to west on an ancient causeway bordered by pollarded willows. Through the long and alluring vista formed by the trunks and overarching branches of these fine old trees one may walk or drive in cool and unbroken shade during the hottest June day, listening to the songs of Bobolinks, Red-winged Blackbirds, Swamp Sparrows, Yellow Warblers, Maryland Yellow-throats, Catbirds and other marsh- or thicket-loving birds. . . . As the meadow is also bordered on every side by sparsely populated country, abounding in woods, thickets, cedar pastures and grassy fields, it offers to the bird lover one of the most attractive and interesting resorts to be found anywhere, at the present time, within easy reach of Cambridge.

McLean dairy farm kept 150 cows

During the first half of the last century, the Belmont portion of Rock Meadow was used as a dairy farm by McLean Hospital. The hospital moved to its present location in the late 1800s and shortly afterward purchased land in the Rock

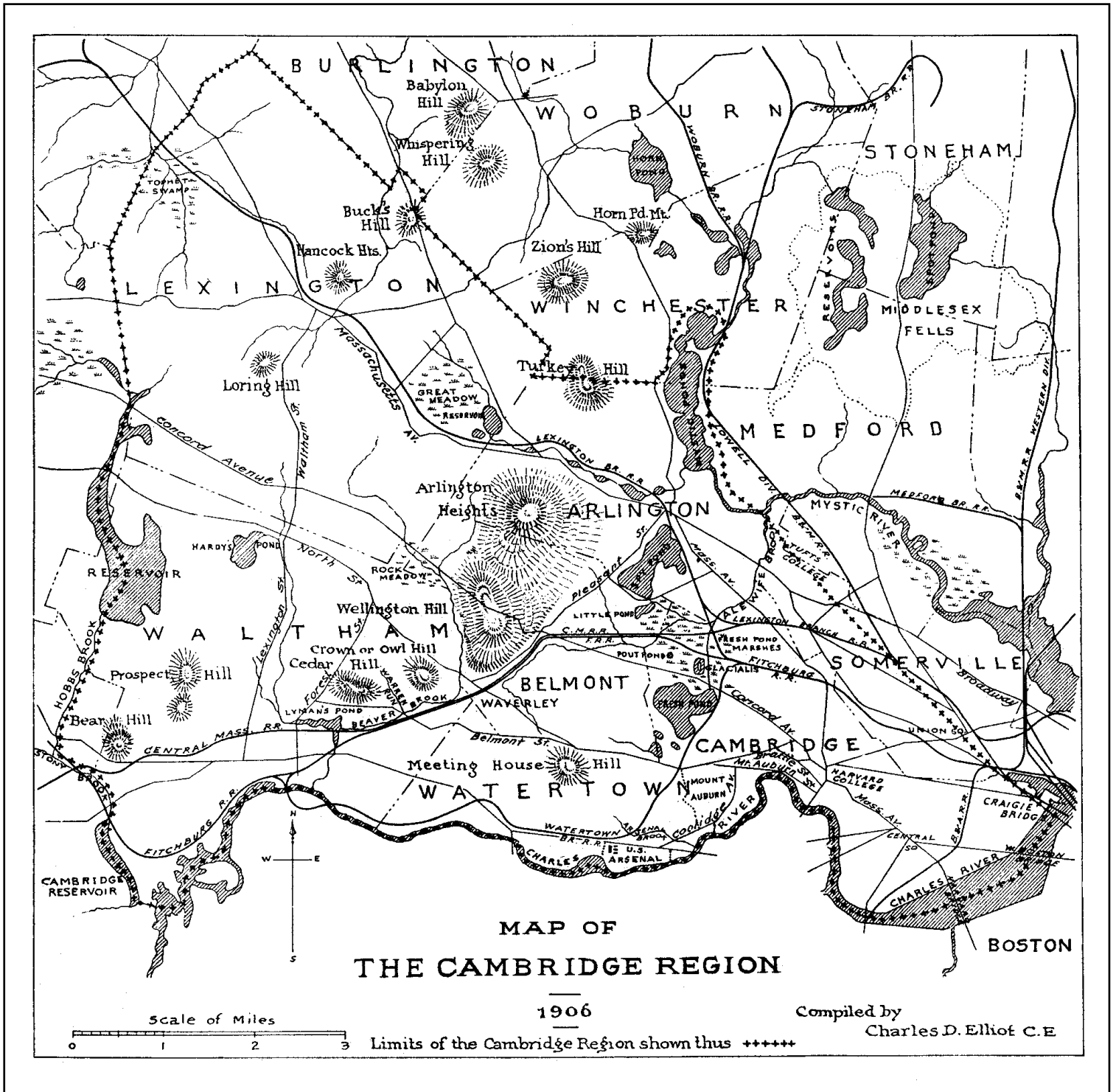
Meadow area from Jonas Kendall and Edward Brown. In 1908, it purchased an additional 56 acres west of Mill Street from the Brown family. By 1927, the area included “a farmhouse, two stables, a stone crusher, cow barn, dairy barn, silo, two piggeries and a pump house,” according to the town historian Richard Betts. When McLean abandoned the farm in 1944, due to the labor shortage occasioned by World War II, there were 150 cows that supplied 500 quarts of milk to the hospital daily. The farmhouse and stable are still standing on land owned by McLean and abutting Rock Meadow. This 4.58-acre parcel west of Mill Street is part of the 105.7 acres of public open space in the proposed McLean Hospital redevelopment project.

Since 1968, when Rock Meadow was purchased by the town, the Conservation Commission has maintained the meadow portion of the land by mowing. Over the years, volunteer groups have provided additional maintenance. In May 2001, the commissioners and the contractor who mowed the previous year agreed that a plan was needed to control the encroaching woodlands and invasive plant species, such as bittersweet and poison ivy.

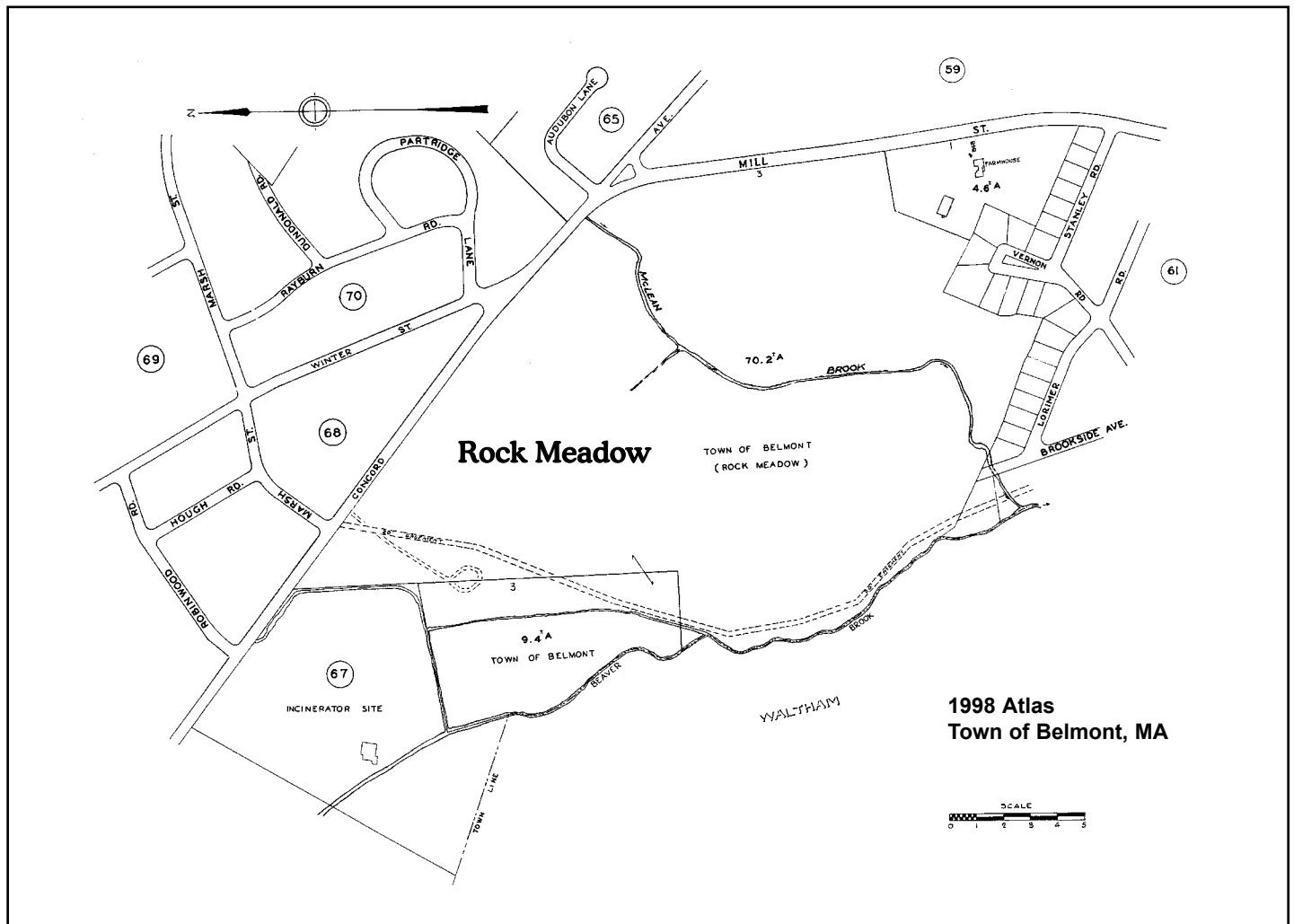
Gardeners, bikers, dog walkers share space

The Belmont community gardens, called the Victory Gardens, were moved in 1969 to Rock Meadow from what are now the high school playing fields. At a recent Conservation Commission meeting, the organizers of the Victory Gardens reported that Rock Meadow has become much more heavily used in the last few years, especially by mountain bikers and dog walkers. They noted that concerns have been raised about the effect of unleashed dogs on wildlife, especially ground-nesting birds.

Recently, the selectmen appointed an Athletic Field Study Committee to search for possible sites for additional organized sport fields. Four to five acres of land are needed. One possible site is Rock Meadow. A dozen or so citizens attended the April 3, 2001, Conservation Commission meeting to express their disapproval of the use of Rock Meadow for organized sports. Additionally, the Belmont Citizen-Herald has published letters to the editor on this issue, both pro and con. A request from the Athletic Field Study Committee has yet to come before the commission. *Continued on page 6*



This 1906 map by Charles Elliot shows the marshy area called Rock Meadow northwest of what was then called Wellington Hill. The elevated land to the right of Rock Meadow is the site of McLean Hospital. For a closer view of the area, see the map on the next page.



Margaret Velie regularly observes Belmont Conservation Commission meetings for the League of Women Voters. For further reading, she suggests the following sources, many of which are available in the Claflin Room of the Belmont Public Library:

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Rare Crustacean Found on Conservation Land

By Sue Bass

The Mystic Valley amphipod is only one-eighth of an inch long, but in terms of environmental protection it could have a big impact. The tiny, shrimp-like crustacean was recently found at two sites in Rock Meadow, the town conservation land that has been proposed as a site for soccer fields. The creature was also found on portions of the former Metropolitan State Hospital land.

Because the amphipod, formally known as *Crangonyx aberrans*, is "of special concern" under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act, it could provide an increased measure of protection for Rock Meadow's wetlands. It's also possible that wetlands elsewhere in Belmont may shelter the creature.

The discoverer of the Mystic Valley amphipod, Douglas Smith, a lecturer at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, found the crustacean in Belmont on May 15 and confirmed his findings by microscopic examination of the specimens he collected.

His reports and other paperwork documenting the location of the species will be filed with Natural Heritage, the state agency that administers the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act. A species listed as "of special concern" under the act enjoys the same level of protection as threatened and endangered species. The designation makes it more likely that wetlands where the amphipod is found will be protected under the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act.

Smith's visit to Belmont was jointly sponsored by the Belmont Land Trust and the Belmont Citizens Forum. Roger Wrubel of the Massachusetts Audubon Sanctuary at Habitat and the naturalist Stewart Sanders selected the

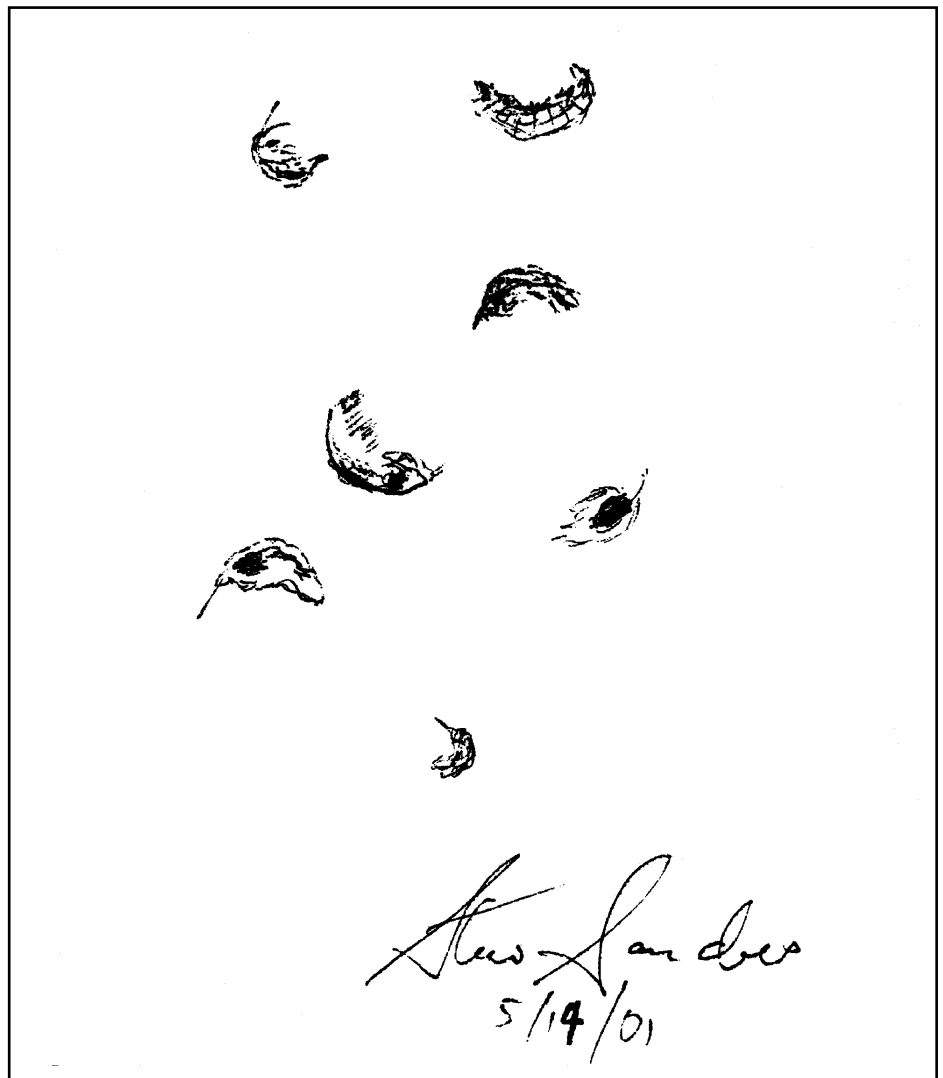
sites for Smith to inspect.

Smith, who grew up in Winchester, originally discovered the Mystic Valley amphipod in Medford in 1977. He had the honor of writing the first formal description of the new species, which was published in 1983.

"For a long time I thought it was just a variation of the common amphipod," Smith recalled over lunch at Habitat recently. But as he got more information, he realized that he was dealing with a different species: "Its morphology, behavior, and life history are very different."

Smith also checked several sites in Belmont and Cambridge on the Metropolitan District Commission land at Alewife but did not find the amphipod there.

Sue Bass is a Town Meeting Member in Precinct 3.



Town of Belmont Explores Ways to Buy, Build,

Continued from page 1

met the 10 percent requirement and, as a result, now has full control over its development decisions. In Belmont, on the other hand, just 2.6 percent of the housing is considered affordable.

To address this issue, Town Meeting approved the creation of the Belmont Housing Trust in 1999. This trust is eligible to apply for state, federal, and private funds to acquire real property and to develop, sell, and manage affordable and mixed-income housing. The trust focuses on assisting Belmont residents—to allow elderly people to remain in town, to enable families who rent to become homeowners, and to ease the way for employees of the town or local businesses to live here.

Inclusionary zoning bylaw proposal

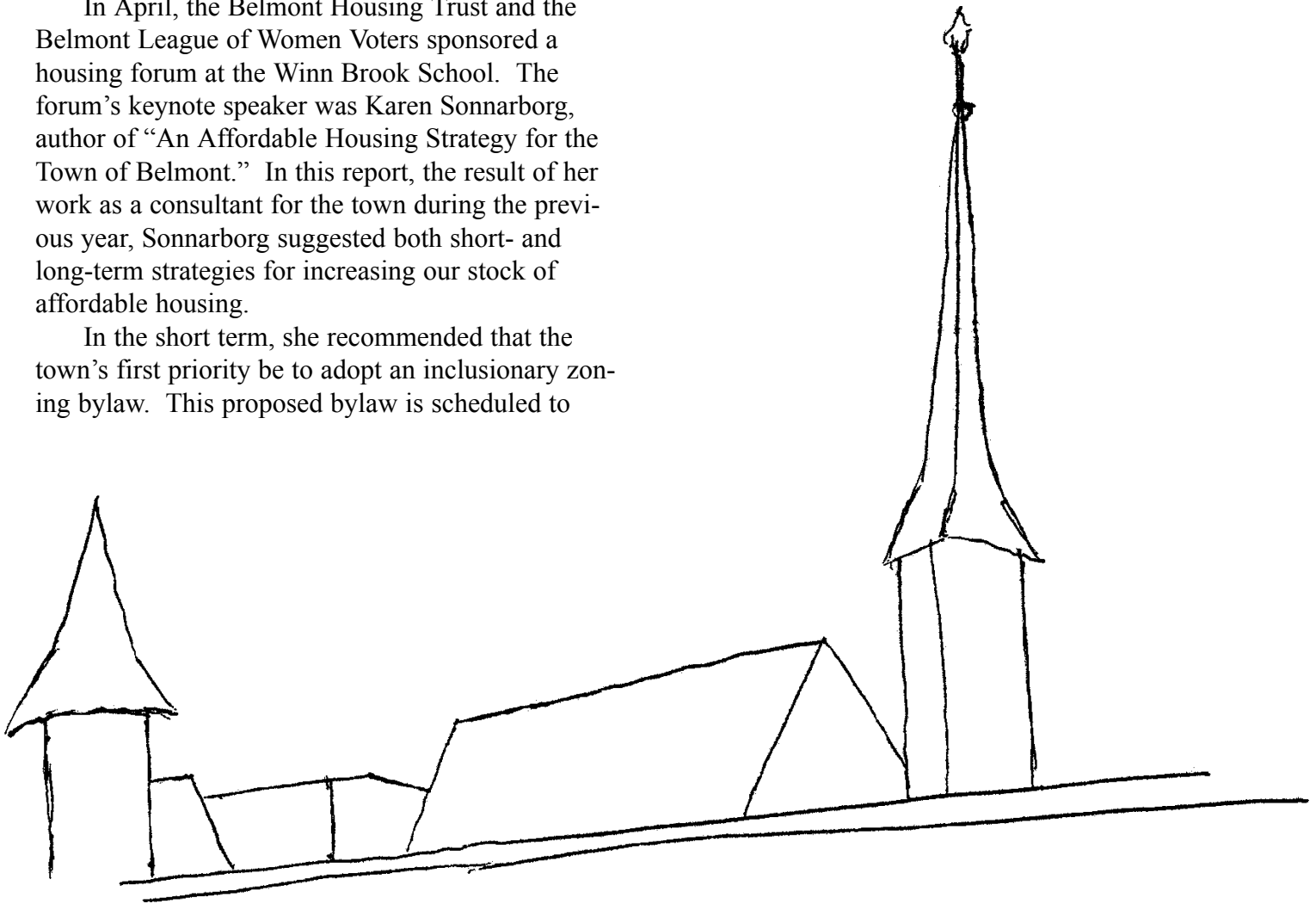
In April, the Belmont Housing Trust and the Belmont League of Women Voters sponsored a housing forum at the Winn Brook School. The forum's keynote speaker was Karen Sonnarborg, author of "An Affordable Housing Strategy for the Town of Belmont." In this report, the result of her work as a consultant for the town during the previous year, Sonnarborg suggested both short- and long-term strategies for increasing our stock of affordable housing.

In the short term, she recommended that the town's first priority be to adopt an inclusionary zoning bylaw. This proposed bylaw is scheduled to

come before Town Meeting in June. If approved, it would require developers of all residential and mixed-use properties consisting of five or more units on a single site to provide 20 percent of the total units as affordable housing units.

Alternatively, the developer could make a cash payment to the town's Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Developers of commercial business properties, who are covered by the law if they require a special permit, would also be allowed to contribute to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund in lieu of building housing units. (A similar bylaw in Lexington has generated approximately \$1 million, which the town has used to buy and rehabilitate housing.)

The Belmont bylaw would apply to new developments as well as to redevelopment of existing property. Sixty percent of the resulting affordable



Rehabilitate Moderately Priced Housing

units would be reserved for Belmont residents. This is defined as people who live or work in town, have children attending Belmont public schools, or have been qualified to register in Belmont schools during the last 10 years. The bylaw would not apply to the McLean Hospital development, since it does not apply to any development for which a complete application for site plan review has been submitted to the Planning Board on or before February 5, 2001.

Some grant money available

Money is also available from state and federal sources. By joining a regional housing consortium, Belmont will, starting in July 2002, receive \$100,000 a year from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. This money, controlled by the Board of Selectmen, will probably be used initially to fund the development of 1.34 acres of affordable housing (about eight units) on the McLean property at the intersection of Trapelo Road and Mill Street.

The Belmont Housing Trust may also participate in a home-improvement and lead-paint-removal program in cooperation with a neighboring town.

In order to compete more effectively for affordable housing grants from the state (as well as other discretionary state funding, including money for road improvements and land conservation), Belmont has applied for housing certification under the governor's Executive Order 418. This incentive program gives preference for state funds to towns that

make a commitment to affordable housing. Adopting an inclusionary zoning bylaw will help Belmont maintain its priority status under this program.

Zoning changes could affect supply

Karen Sonnarborg recommends that, when it comes time to rewrite the town's zoning bylaw, we promote mixed-use development (i.e., first floor retail and upper floors affordable housing) in neighborhood business districts like Cushing and Waverley Squares. Another, more controversial, recommendation is that the town consider legalizing existing accessory apartments and making it legal to create new ones.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act, of course, would also generate money to buy or build affordable housing. Under the provisions of this act, the town could vote to increase property taxes by up to 3 percent in order to pay for open space conservation, historic preservation, and the development of affordable housing. Matching funds are provided by the state. (A more complete description of this act appeared in the May 2000 issue of the *Belmont Citizens Forum*.)

Working effectively with developers

Other opportunities to expand the affordable housing stock come, sometimes unexpectedly, from developers. Roger Colton, chair of Belmont's Fair
continued

Affordable Housing Standards

Annual standards published by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the Boston area (2001 figures):

<u>Upper Income Limit</u>	<u>1 person</u>	<u>2 persons</u>	<u>3 persons</u>	<u>4 persons</u>	<u>5 persons</u>
Low (50% HUD Area Median)	\$24,500	\$28,000	\$31,500	\$35,000	\$37,833
Moderate (80% HUD Area Median)	\$39,200	\$44,800	\$50,400	\$56,000	\$60,533
Middle (110% HUD Area Median)	\$53,900	\$61,600	\$69,300	\$77,000	\$83,233

Earth Day Volunteers Tidy Up Town

A small army of volunteers collected over a hundred bags of trash on two Saturdays in April. On April 21, the Belmont Citizens Forum organized a cleanup of the woods along South Pleasant Street between Trapelo Road and the Clark Street Bridge. And on April 28, the Chenery Middle School Ecology Club, led by Nancy Davis and sixth-grade teacher Benjamin Ligon, sponsored a cleanup around Clay Pit Pond. Both cleanups were sorely needed.

The one on South Pleasant Street, which attracted approximately 30 volunteers, netted hundreds of plastic grocery bags, supermarket coupons, and sales receipts apparently blown there from a nearby parking lot; innumerable coffee cups, candy bar wrappers, and cigarette butts; and, farther off the road, glass liquor bottles of all shapes and sizes. In the stream that rushes down the hillside from McLean, volunteers found oily paper towels left over from a recent oil spill cleanup on the property.

The largest finds were made on the steep hill between Pleasant Street and the railroad tracks, where volunteers found a rusted bed frame and the mangled remains of a metal shopping cart.

Around Clay Pit Pond, spring flood waters left large chunks of debris on the shore, in addition to the usual litter that accumulates in front of the high school. The Belmont Highway Department had carried away much of the flood debris. But the 65 volunteers who arrived on Saturday found plenty of trash left. Plastic water bottles were everywhere, remarked the co-coordinator Nancy Davis.

“Now so many people carry them—cyclists, walkers, kids—and they’re not covered by the bottle bill. Often they just end up on the ground.”

Other ubiquitous items were pens, straws, bottle caps and rings, and chunks of Styrofoam. Davis pointed out that all the storm drains in that area of town drain into Clay Pit Pond, so trash is carried there from surrounding streets.

The group even borrowed a boat from the Belmont Fire Department so that they could fish objects out of the water with hooks. They hauled up a car battery and a bicycle, among other things.

Now, a month later, the pond area still looks pretty and pristine. But South Pleasant Street began accumulating new trash within days of the cleanup.

—Sharon Vanderslice

Affordable Housing, *continued from previous page*

Housing Committee, says that, rather than be caught unaware by such proposals, the town should try to use them to its advantage.

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Permit Law (the famous Chapter 40B) allows developers of affordable housing units to seek a limited suspension of density and other zoning restrictions in towns that have not yet met the state’s 10 percent goal. While this law is sometimes used as a threat by landowners who want to have their properties rezoned for commercial use, Colton said the law can be used to the town’s advantage if we have an established process to deal with such proposals. This would include specific guidelines for what is or is not appropriate in a town of our size and mandated reviews by the Conservation Commission, the Fair Housing Committee, the Historic District

Commission, and the Planning Board, as well as the Office of Community Development.

Colton believes that Belmont would also benefit by having a standardized process for reviewing and disposing of properties owned by the town. Some of these properties have the potential to be developed or converted into moderately priced housing. There is a firm in Jamaica Plain, for example, that specializes in converting old fire stations into affordable housing.

The development of affordable housing in Belmont has many advantages, advocates say, including the preservation of a diverse community and the control of future development in the town. They say Belmont should choose the proposals it favors and slowly build up the number of units to reach the goal of 10 percent affordable housing.

Eva Patalas is a resident of Belmont.

McLean Issue: When Is a Brook Not a Brook?

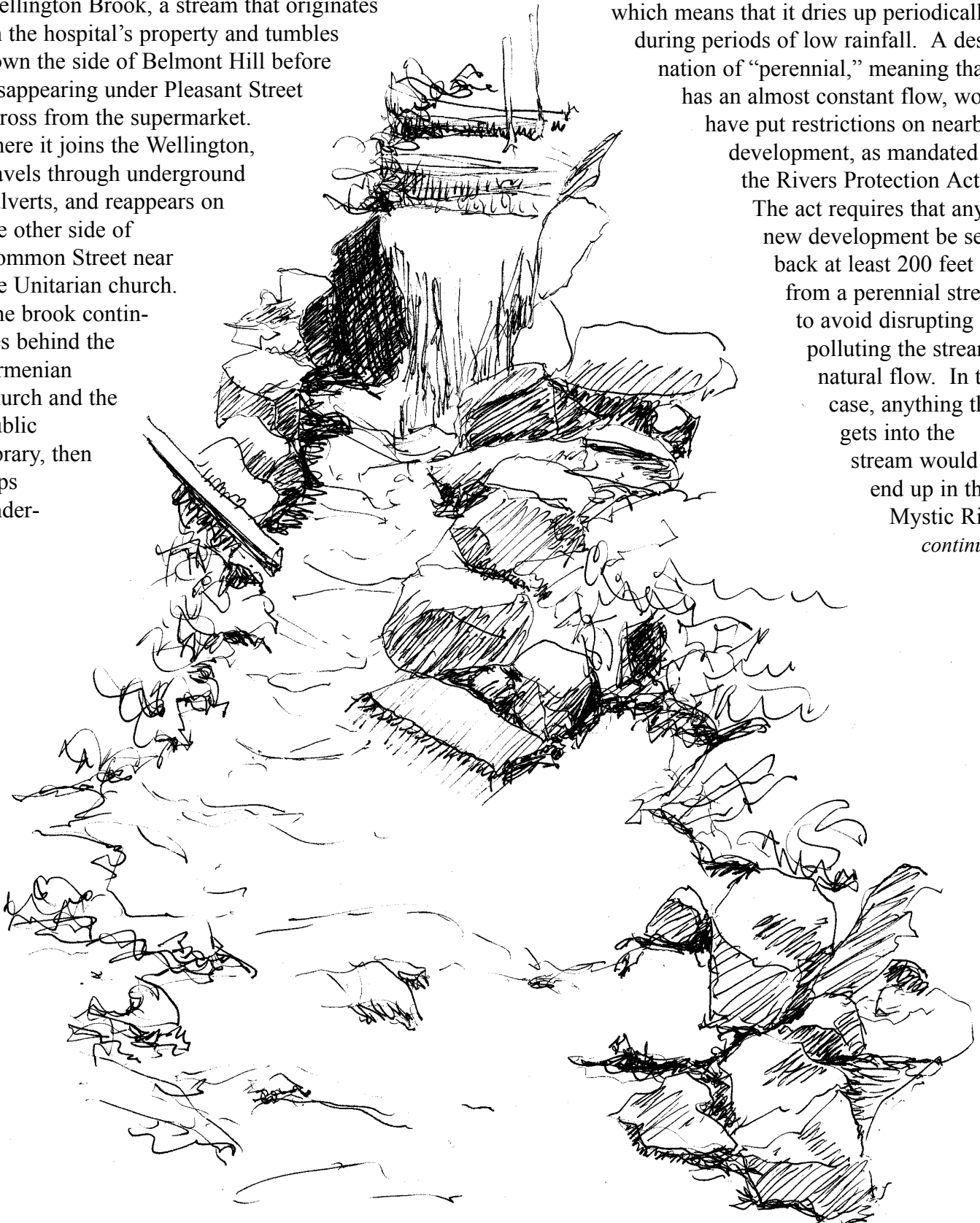
By Sharon Vanderslice

The latest controversy over the McLean development has to do with a tributary of Wellington Brook, a stream that originates on the hospital's property and tumbles down the side of Belmont Hill before disappearing under Pleasant Street across from the supermarket. There it joins the Wellington, travels through underground culverts, and reappears on the other side of Common Street near the Unitarian church. The brook continues behind the Armenian church and the public library, then dips under-

ground again before flowing into Clay Pit Pond.

Three years ago, the Belmont Conservation Commission declared the portion of the brook that is on the McLean land to be "intermittent," which means that it dries up periodically during periods of low rainfall. A designation of "perennial," meaning that it has an almost constant flow, would have put restrictions on nearby development, as mandated by the Rivers Protection Act.

The act requires that any new development be set back at least 200 feet from a perennial stream to avoid disrupting or polluting the stream's natural flow. In this case, anything that gets into the stream would end up in the Mystic River
continued



Junction Brook, *continued from page 11*

and eventually in Boston Harbor.

Already, pollution in this brook is a problem. This past winter, it tested positive for high levels of *E.coli*, an indication that sewage is leaking into the water. In February, Belmont resident Barbara Passero reported that it was polluted with heating oil. McLean maintains that no more than 10 gallons were spilled, and thus no formal report had been filed with the town. But as of last month, there were still large booms in the stream, put there to absorb leaking oil. Incidents like this are one reason why the Rivers Protection Act was passed in August 1997.

Setback Could Reduce Size of Development

In December of that year, in response to concerns raised at the time, McLean volunteered to keep development 100 feet back from either edge of the stream. A 200-foot setback, on the other hand, would likely mean a reduction in the size of its proposed senior housing facility. This development is currently planned to hold 482 units.

On March 14, 2001 an abutter to the McLean property, Martha Eakin of Trapelo Road, asked the Conservation Commission to re-evaluate the status of the brook, which comes up for renewal every three years. Although the stream was observed to be dry on least one day in July 1997, Eakin believes that this was an aberration, as the data were collected during an unusually dry summer. Even perennial streams can dry up in a drought of sufficient duration, one in which precipitation is considerably below normal for four months or more.

To present Eakin's case to the Conservation Commission, the Belmont Citizens Forum hired a professional hydrologist and wetlands scientist, Patrick Garner, to study the six-acre watershed and make recommendations. Garner is a technical adviser to the Department of Environmental Protection on storm water issues and on questions having to do with intermittent and perennial streams.

Waverly Spring Is Original Source

During his presentation in April, Garner showed maps of the McLean property dating as far back as 1893. The maps show the source of the brook,

which the Conservation Commission calls Junction Brook, to be a spring (labeled Waverly Spring) north of what is now Higginson House. The surrounding wetlands were at some point covered over to create a tennis court and later paved for a parking lot. "The spring itself," Garner reported, "has been capped with a manhole."

This does not mean that the water has disappeared, however. A report from the McLean consultant Frank DiPietro says that before 1939, when the hospital was hooked up to the municipal water system, well water from the spot was diverted to make steam heat for the campus. Garner believes that water from the spring is still flowing under the parking lot and emptying into the brook. He recently asked permission to conduct a red-dye test in order to prove his assertion, but the hospital denied the request.

McLean maintains that the brook is primarily fed by storm water, and thus is more likely to flow intermittently.

De-watering Operation Questioned

Questions have been raised about an existing de-watering operation on the property, a pumping system for drawing off ground water and funneling it into the storm drain system. Garner said this could artificially decrease the flow in a brook that is perennial under natural conditions. Stephen Kidder, a lawyer for McLean, has countered that the "de-watering at the Hospital has been approved by the DEP and the Environmental Protection Agency."

Additional arguments presented to the Conservation Commission by both sides focused on how and where rainfall is measured, whether the stream has dug its own course or has been artificially channeled, and how much organic material still exists under the Higginson parking lot, which is due to be torn up when the R&D facility is built.

On May 15, the ConCom voted 4-1, with two members not voting, to designate the stream as "intermittent" once again. Any appeal of this decision would be heard by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

Sharon Vanderslice is a Town Meeting Member in Precinct 2.

Payson Park Music Festival 2001

This summer, Belmontians will once again enjoy free concerts in Payson Park. Now in its eleventh season, the Payson Park Music Festival offers music for every taste, including two Friday noontime concerts especially for children. Bring a blanket or lawn chair. Picnickers are welcome.

The music starts at 6:30 p.m. unless noted otherwise. This year, there will be four “bonus” programs on Tuesdays in addition to the usual Wednesday performances. Raindates are typically on the Thursday following a scheduled performance.

Concerts are made possible through the generosity of local businesses and community organizations. If you need more information or would like to make a tax-deductible donation, please contact the festival producer, Tommasina Olson, a Town Meeting Member from Precinct 5.

Wednesday, June 6	Rick Barron & the Quavers
Wednesday, June 13	John Penny Band
Wednesday, June 20	Java Jive
Wednesday, June 27	Concord Band
Tuesday, July 10	BubbleLand Family Night 6:45 to 7:45 p.m.
Wednesday, July 11	Michael Shea Quartet
Tuesday, July 17	BackBeat Blues Band
Wednesday, July 18	Inca Son
Tuesday, July 24	New New Orleans Jazz Band
Wednesday, July 25	Arlington Belmont Chorale
Tuesday, July 31	To Be Announced
Wednesday, August 1	Roy Nutile Big Band
Wednesday, August 8	60's Invasion
Wednesday, August 15	Ted Wirt's New England Swing Orchestra
Wednesday, August 22	Horns in the House
Wednesday, August 29	Black Sea Salsa

Children's Programs

Friday, July 20	Noon	Alladin with Gingerbread Players & Jack
Friday, July 27	Noon	Gary Rosen's Teddy Bear Picnic

Fire Stations, continued from page 16

the entire town, drawn up between 1960 and 1963, recommended that by 1968 Belmont should “construct a new central fire station and drill yard on Penney land. Present headquarters facility is very inadequate and egress is hampered by heavy traffic on Leonard Street.” Additional studies followed in 1972, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, and 1985. Many of them noted the disadvantages of having a fire station in the middle of a busy business district and proposed new locations. The same locations came up again and again, partly because of the town’s predilection for using town-owned land rather than buying private property.

How Many Stations?

One key question is how many fire stations the town really needs. At less than five square miles, Belmont is small enough to be served by a single fire station—if it weren’t for the railroad tracks. With only three places for vehicles to cross the tracks, there is a strong argument for a station on each side of the tracks. Even if the Clark Street bridge were rebuilt, providing a fourth crossing, it seems unwise to have half the town on the wrong side of the tracks from fire engines and ambulances.

A cut in the number of stations is desirable for many reasons, the most significant of which is staffing. It takes four firefighters to fill a single job position around the clock and on weekends. Three firefighters are required to staff a fire engine. Therefore, each engine requires 12 firefighters. Unless the department has enough staff to assign at least 12 to a station, no fire engine from that station can race off to a fire. That’s the situation now at the Harvard Lawn station. Though it is open in name, only two men are normally present. Chief Osterhaus says the neighbors have the illusion of protection but not the reality.

The most rational decision, therefore, would be to cut back to two fire stations, one on each side of the railroad tracks. Chief Osterhaus would like to buy a site on Trapelo Road between Beech and Slade streets for a new central fire station. He has identified four possible sites in that area, some of them large enough to accommodate a new police station as well. From there, a fire engine or ambu-

lance could quickly reach either the Harvard Lawn neighborhood or Waverley Square and McLean. On the other side of the tracks, Osterhaus proposes one of several locations for a smaller satellite station just outside of Belmont Center. One would involve building a station into a new parking deck on the Claflin Street municipal parking lot. According to Assistant Chief David Frizzell, a consultant determined that the parking deck would pay for itself in a few years if it charged a reasonable rate, perhaps \$4 or \$5 a day per car.

The Fire Station Consolidation Study Committee agreed this spring that the town should cut back to two fire stations but could not reach agreement on where they should be. Four of the six members favored building a new fire headquarters on a small vacant lot adjacent to the police headquarters at the intersection of Pleasant Street and Concord Avenue and rehabilitating the Harvard Lawn station.

Chief Osterhaus opposed both proposals. The Pleasant Street/Concord Avenue intersection is a dangerous one, he notes. And the Harvard Lawn station is convenient for neighboring communities—it’s within 500 yards of Cambridge and 300 yards of Watertown—but not for Belmont. The response time from the Harvard Lawn station to the other end of town is 10 to 12 minutes, he noted. That’s far too long to wait for a fire engine or ambulance.

Preserving the Old Buildings

Of equal importance is the disposition of the three old stations. All three are handsome buildings, built in the era when fine brickwork was affordable and a town took pride in the solidity of its municipal structures. It would be wonderful if they were converted to new uses rather than simply demolished.

Bob Reardon, the town’s assessing administrator, who interviewed candidates to do the appraisals, said he stressed that they’re to look at the conversion possibilities, not just at demolition. Reardon said the Waverley station might make a good apartment building, perhaps for elderly housing. The Harvard Lawn station on Fairview Avenue could make appealing residences. And the Belmont Center station has strong commercial possibilities.

Richard Cheek, co-chair of Belmont’s Historic District Commission, is primarily concerned with

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the two older stations. "It would be a helpful to the future preservation of the buildings if we could put the central fire station and the one on Trapelo Road on the National Register of Historic Places." Such listing, Cheek pointed out, makes commercial uses, including apartment buildings, eligible for tax credits. While it doesn't prevent demolition, it provides an incentive for preservation.

Some Boston University graduate students who studied Belmont 19 years ago took the first step toward such a listing for all three buildings by filing building inventory forms with the Massachusetts Historical Commission. But the applications were incomplete. Philip Bergen, National Register Assistant for MHC, said considerably more information would be needed for MHC to judge whether the buildings were eligible for National Register listing.

If we want to preserve these buildings as part of Belmont's architectural heritage, now is the time to fill in the blanks.

—Sue Bass

Take on an Archaeology or Historic Preservation Project.

The Belmont Citizens Forum's Archaeology & Historic Preservation Committee will meet on June 13 at 7:30 p.m. at the home of Barbara Passero, the committee's chairman. On the agenda are discussions on 1) protecting the archaeological resources of the McLean Hospital site, 2) initiating cooperative projects with students at Belmont High and Chenery Middle Schools, 3) protecting Belmont's historic buildings such as the town hall annex and fire stations, and 4) designating some of Belmont's historic roads as scenic roads. Anyone who is interested is welcome to come to the meeting. Please contact Barbara at (617) 484-6961; email barbarap@thecia.net.

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People Are Asking

Should We Replace Our Old Fire Stations?

A yellow flashing light blinks constantly in a dormitory hallway on the second floor of the Belmont Center fire station. Is it some kind of sophisticated alarm system? No. It's a warning to firefighters of a weak spot in the floor. If they were to jump out of bed and hit the hallway while running to a fire, they might crash through the floor.

That's just one of hundreds of problems with the town's three old fire stations. At the 1899 Belmont Center station, rotting cedar posts caused part of the second floor to drop several inches. At the 1873 Waverley station, new posts had to be installed in the basement last year to keep the fire engines from falling through the floor. And even at the newest station, Harvard Lawn, built in 1928, there are termite problems, exposed wiring, and

windows that let in cold air in the winter. Two of the three stations are polluting our streams, because they lack oil separators in the floor drains: wastes flow unimpeded into the town's storm drains. None of the stations is the right size for modern fire apparatus.

Nearly two years ago, in the fall of 1999, Fire Chief Bill Osterhaus made a presentation for the selectmen entitled "Belmont Needs New Fire Stations." Osterhaus argued that the three current stations could be replaced by two new ones for Belmont's favorite price: free. The proceeds from selling the old stations would pay for constructing two new ones, he said. Last year, a town committee was formed to study the issue, and now a feasibility study of the new stations and a professional appraisal of the market value of the old stations are about to be made. A fire station proposal is supposed to be ready for consideration next fall.

The fire station issue has been studied often by town committees and consultants. A master plan for

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