

CONSERVATION COMMISSION

The Conservation Commission is an appointed Town board responsible for the implementation of the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act, a state law that is administered primarily by municipalities throughout the Commonwealth. While the regulation of activities within the jurisdiction of the Wetlands Protection Act is the primary function of the Commission, the Conservation Commission is also the responsible agent for Conservation lands in Belmont, and spends a great deal of time and energy in promoting and sponsoring the stewardship of Rock Meadow. With the considerable assistance of an active group of volunteers, the Commission also runs the Community Gardens at the southern end of Rock Meadow, and provides low cost plots for the growing of produce or flowers.

As in recent years, much of the Commission's efforts have been towards the management of Rock Meadow, with the long term goal of restoring the traditional grassland character of the area. The Commission has recently contracted with the Ecological Extension Service of the Mass Audubon Society to prepare a detailed ecological analysis of the meadow. The Commission was fortunate to receive partial funding for this study from a Partners for Fish and Wildlife Service Program grant. This analysis is a critical step in the pursuit of any grant applications to fund meadow restoration. The report has identified several issues, including the need to better manage the ecosystem to maintain the early successional cover that has historically characterized the Rock Meadow grasslands, as well as the need to effectively control non native and invasive plant species within the meadow. Based on this report, the Commission is working to develop a formal maintenance and management plan for the Meadow.

The restoration of the historic meadowlands and the control of damaging invasive plant species is a considerable undertaking. In conjunction with the Friends of Rock Meadow, a local non-profit organization, the Belmont Conservation Commission is actively pursuing grants to fund the maintenance and management plan. The Commission is in the process of applying to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for a Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) grant to fund a ten- year improvement program. WHIP is a voluntary program that encourages the creation of high quality wildlife habitats to support wildlife populations of local significance. The NRCS has been working with the Commission to develop a wildlife habitat development plan, and this plan will then become the basis of the cost-share agreement between NRCS and the Town. While the application process has only recently been completed, the Commission is hopeful that Rock Meadow will be a successful contender for the funding. Should this funding be offered to the Town, the Commission will likely sponsor a bill at Town Meeting to set up a revolving account with seed money for the grant-sponsored activities.

The Commission will also use the Mass Audubon report to pursue funding through the Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program. The Commission has been working with this agency to develop the maintenance plan and design a funding-eligible program for Rock Meadow. The Commission fully expects to apply for these funds during the 2007 grant application process.

In September of 2006, the Commission cosponsored a Rails to Trails grant application with the Friends of the Western Greenway, New England Mountain Bike Association and the Massachusetts Audubon. If received, this grant will fund maintenance and improvement of over 2 miles of existing trails, the reconstruction of the bridge linking the Meadow to the Met State campus as well as the purchase of a brush cutter to aide in the maintenance of the Meadow.

The Conservation Commission also submitted a Water Quality Management Planning Grant application to conduct a watershed assessment of Little Pond, Blair Pond and Claypit Pond within the Town of Belmont and the City of Cambridge. The grant proposes to evaluate the various sources of nonpoint source pollution in an effort to better understand the causes of the apparent degradation within these water bodies. This project is aimed at serving as the basis for future grant funding for the implementation of prioritized best management practices within the Mystic River Watershed.

A subcommittee of the Commission continued to work on a Wetlands By-Law. The By-Law project envisions offering additional protection to the quality and level of the ground water and water recharge areas for existing or potential water supplies; to protect persons and property against the hazards of flood water inundation; and to provide for the reasonable protection and conservation of certain irreplaceable natural features, resources and amenities for the benefit and welfare of the present and future inhabitants of the Town of Belmont. This project began in 2005, and the draft has undergone several public reviews, and continues to be modified and tailored to reflect the specific resources of the Town.

The Commission consists of seven (7) regular members, as well as several dedicated associate members. The members of the Commission, as well as the associates, commit to attending regular, monthly meeting of the Commission, as well as site visits to inspect each property subject to a wetlands permit. The Commission meetings are well attended and the Commission notes that they continue to benefit from the participation of many well informed

and interested Townspeople. Notices of meetings, and agendas, are posted by the Town Clerk, and on the Town web site, and the Commission notes that all are welcome and participation encouraged.

This year also brought the addition of a part-time Conservation Agent to the Town. Mary Trudeau, an experienced wetlands administrator, keeps regular office hours in the Homer Municipal Building and is available by appointment on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Respectfully submitted,
Miriam Weil, Chairman