

BELMONT CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

APPROVED

November 4, 2003

Members Present: M. Flamang, M. Weil, R. Foster, K. Baskin, J. Curro, J. Smith.
Associate Members Present: M. Velie, S. Sanders, N. Davis, M. Moore.

Additional Attendees: See attendance sheet.

K. Baskin called the meeting to order at 7:08 pm.

Old Business

K. Baskin suggested that the vegetation control guidelines prepared by R. Foster be considered by the Commission at one of the next few meetings.

New Business

N. Davis and M. Velie reported on the MACC conference on vegetated buffers. Their primary function is the prevention of pollution in surface water and groundwater, both particulates and microbial (pathogenic). Various factors relate to the effectiveness of the vegetated border, including the slope of land, the width of the border and the permeability of soil. A large proportion of wetlands species also require uplands (and some, more than the prescribed 100 feet). They will provide references in a written summary of the lecture.

They noted that 760 acres of wetlands have been lost by permit since 1991. New rules are about to be proposed. We should watch for those, because they are expected to reduce the amount of control that conservation commissions have. N. Davis suggested that we draft a wetlands by-law, because this will help us retain some control over wetlands that might otherwise be taken away.

M. Flamang proposed that the Commission form a subcommittee to draft such a by-law and to keep track of the impending proposed changes. R. Foster suggested that it be tailored to Belmont's particular needs. We have some needs that other communities don't have, and vice versa. Someone from the audience noted that MACC has a model by-law package. Elsie Fiore suggested that the Arlington Conservation Commission may be able to talk to us about the by-law they have adopted.

Public Hearing – O'Neill Residential Project (7:35)

Ellen Mass of the Friends of Alewife Reservation introduced Ernie Kerwan, who was a partner in Keys Associates. His specialty was site planning. He presented an overlay of the proposed building footprint over a topographical map of the site. He thinks that there

is a good bit of fill on that site. Much of the area of the project is either garage or corridors that are required because the garage is in the center of the building.

Roger Wrubel of the Massachusetts Audubon Society also spoke. He is primarily concerned about the extent of intrusion of the building into the buffer zone. Because of the road, much of the buffer zone will be disturbed. He's concerned about the extent of loss of wildlife habitat. He is also concerned that this building would disturb the western greenway, an uninterrupted stretch of undeveloped land. Other places like this greenway have slowly been left as islands, isolated from each other, and he would not like to see this happen here.

David Brown, who did a species survey for the Friends of Alewife Reservation, also spoke. He stated that he had found ninety species of birds there, about half of which were present during nesting season, and 17 species of mammals. The proposed site is the only significantly forested habitat in the reservation. Mink can prey on meadow voles in the upland when they can't catch fish, and there is some anecdotal evidence of mink being there. The woodcock would probably not remain there if the project is built. One pair of wood ducks and many other birds are present in the area.

Charles Katuska, ecologist, spoke about the silver maple forest. It is an approximately 15-acre forest, which is an important food source for beaver and an important wildlife habitat. The root systems of the tree stabilize the soil and reduce erosion.

Urbanization of the area and the changing course of Little River have drained the site. Size and shape are important, because so much of what is undeveloped here is a corridor in nature. The corridor serves to connect larger areas of habitat such as this. Development, whether commercial or residential, on this site will destroy the core function of the site as habitat. Noise and light pollution and windthrow (i.e., the protection a group of trees provide for each other from the wind) will adversely impact the remaining habitat. The loss of trees also degrades the air quality. N. Davis asked how much water a single maple takes up daily. He is not sure how much, but it is a lot.

Peter Alden noted that he has seen mostly stranded growth (i.e., the trees growing in a row), but this large mass of silver maples is unique. Development will make flooding in the area worse. Little Pond is a wintering area for bald eagles and ospreys in migration. If an eagle nest was built, they might nest there. Beaver have been spotted there, and coyotes as well. The coyotes are nocturnal, roaming from about midnight to 4 a.m. It's possible that great blue heron could colonize it; they need trees for nesting. There will be a mural at the Alewife T station with images of nature, including silver maples.

R. Foster raised the question of how to fund a purchase of the land. Peter Alden replied that the state has no money for it, but there is a possibility of a public/private partnership.

Russ Cohen of the Massachusetts Riverways Program stated that he thinks there can be wetlands mitigation on the old MDC ice rink site, or perhaps there could be a land swap

so that the O'Neill development could take place there instead. He also thinks air rights over Route 2 would be a better place to put that development. He has a master plan for the Alewife reservation. We should think about the future development of the whole area, including the Mugar and Martignetti parcels.

K. Baskin pointed out that we are expected to express our concerns, not just regarding the Wetlands Protection Act but regarding environmental concerns generally. She wants to know what opinions they have if the development goes forward. J. Smith asked whether there are ways to minimize the intrusions of light, noise, etc. on the wildlife. Peter Alden suggested a swap of the MDC rink site. Elsie Fiore stated that that site should be used as a holding pond instead, as has been proposed.

Roger Wrubel suggested that full cut-off lights could be required. They have been required on the McLean development. K. Baskin asked whether the project can be sited so as to mitigate the cutting of trees. Ernie Kerwan replied that the project is so huge that you can't move it so as to minimize the cutting. Peter Alden pointed out that they could sink the garage into the ground, except that the groundwater is too high.

K. Baskin noted that November 25 is the next Planning Board meeting at which the zoning bylaw and Memorandum of Agreement will be considered. Fred Paulsen noted that the Selectmen and Planning Board have asked the Commission to make recommendations based on its environmental concerns. If the state hears that the Town of Belmont wants O'Neill to cooperate with others, that will make a difference.

Nancy Hammett, the president of Mystic River Watershed Association, stated that she is concerned about the impact of the proposed development on flooding problems in that area, as well as the impact on the quality of water. There is contamination in the area already. She thinks those impacts deserve study.

Charles Katuska said that his e-mail address is cjkwetlands@aol.com. S. Sanders asked whether he studied the impact of the loss of the forest on spawning at Little Pond. Mr. Katuska agreed that it may well have an adverse impact. M. Moore asked him to estimate the water uptake of silver maples. He replied that he would estimate the amount for the forest and not tree by tree.

Elsie Fiore said that three years ago, Arlington voted to negotiate for the Mugar parcel. It seems that the wheel is constantly being re-invented.

R. Foster suggested that each Commissioner write a letter of three or four paragraphs. M. Flamang stated that he would prefer to have another meeting. November 13 was agreed upon as the date of the next meeting. All Commissioners should be prepared to make comments under various categories such as "stormwater."

Fred Paulsen outlined the process the Town is following. They will approve a revised zoning by-law permitting the development and a Memorandum of Agreement requiring

certain things from the developer. He will advocate in favor of putting more details in these documents before they are finalized, because O'Neill's plans are not detailed. Town Meeting will need a two-thirds vote to approve the zoning by-law and a majority vote to approve the Memorandum of Agreement. The Memorandum of Agreement is being negotiated now, and the planning board will discuss it on November 25.

The meeting was then adjourned. The next meeting will be held on Thursday, November 13, 2003.

Prepared by:
Johanna Smith