

## Mystic River Watershed Open Spaces Subcommittee

June 18, 2015 | 9:00 - 12:30 pm

5 Post Office Square | Boston, MA 02109 | Court of Appeals, 15<sup>th</sup> Floor

DRAFT MEETING SUMMARY

Prepared by the Consensus Building Institute

### Overview

Dan Driscoll, Senior Planner with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), presented an update on the 2009 Mystic River Master Plan to the Open Space Subcommittee and any interested member of the Mystic River Watershed Initiative Steering Committee. The presentation focused on pathways/recreational area and conservation maps, and highlighted actions completed, ongoing, and to be completed for each section of the plan. The presentation slide deck can be accessed here:

<http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/204466/26330989/1434978738940/Mystic+Master+Plan+2015.pdf?token=%2BdVAEcsuZT6kdjUtxbfZ80X0J6l%3D>.

### 2009 Mystic River Master Plan Presentation

Key points from Dan Driscoll's presentation and the question and answer period are summarized below:

Mystic River Master Plan Goals – the primary goals of the master plan were to:

- Restore river banks and edges to promote both increased recreational use and the river's ecological health.
- Develop a continuous multi-use pathway system along both banks of the river from Harvard Avenue Bridge to Malden Bridge.
- Determine areas most suitable/desirable by location and type for recreation, education, and preservation.
- Protect and enhance the wildlife habitat by improving natural areas.
- Increase opportunities for water related activities, including fishing and non-motorized boating.
- Strengthen the open space network with links to adjacent public open space and neighborhoods.
- Develop guidelines and techniques for management and operation of the parkland.<sup>1</sup>

Section 1: Harvard Avenue Bridge to Auburn Street – Several elements of the plan have been completed in Section 1 since 2009. Pathways were constructed on both sides of the Alewife Brook to connect the Minuteman bike trail and the Alewife T station to the Mystic River. Pathway construction was completed using federal stimulus money, which was awarded largely because of the stakeholder collaboration that enabled the DCR to propose permitted, shovel ready plans and demonstrate strong stakeholder backing for the project when the stimulus money became available. He noted that restoring linear pathways with federal or state dollars present major opportunities to complete ecological work. For example, the funding enabled the DCR to plant native plantings and complete wetlands restorations beyond the required mitigation levels.

In collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT), the DCR restored a deficient bridge at the confluence of Alewife Brook and the Mystic River and widened the sidewalk to accommodate both pedestrians and bicyclists. Dan Driscoll noted that MassDOT has been a great partner and worked with the DCR to leave a footprint around the bridge that allow for public safety amenities and transportation improvements even when it is not required of them to leave the bridge footprint.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Mystic River Master Plan is available on the Mystic River Watershed Association's website:

<http://mysticriver.org/mystic-river-master-plan/>

Dan Driscoll talked about the recent installation of a 10-foot wide path from the confluence of the Alewife Brook and Mystic River to the MBTA commuter line bridge and its relationship to the Master Plan and funding needs. The pathway was field designed and constructed, which eliminated design and permitting costs. Approximately \$250-300 thousand dollars are needed to design the pathways from the Alewife Brook and Mystic River confluence to the Amelia Earhart Dam. The design would enable pathway repair and the implementation of conservation elements such as wetland restoration, invasive species removal and control, and native plantings. The pathway was installed because the DCR now has a million dollar budget per year to repair pathways throughout the Commonwealth. The DCR will continue to make incremental improvements to the primary pathway system, but additional funding is needed to design the ADA compliant paths along both sides of the river and the secondary paths closer to the river's edge.

Future work will be needed on the access part of the plan, which strives to find ways to overcome the roadway system that disconnects communities from the river. The purple corridors illustrated on the maps indicate areas where improved access could be created; but much of the work recommended in those areas is outside the DCR's jurisdiction. Community partnerships will be needed to implement a continued program of improving access along those access corridors.

Conservation efforts in Section 1 include wetland creation, bioengineering for erosion control, and mowing management/meadow development. To better manage stormwater, some efforts have been taken to evaluate headway and culvert replacement.

Section 2: Auburn Street to Mystic Valley Parkway Bridge (Craddock Bridge) Just West of Medford Square – Some progress has been made in Section 2 since 2009. In partnership with the DCR, the City of Medford implemented many of the improvements outlined for the Condon Band Shell area in the plan including pathway work, retreat of the parking lot from the river, installation of a canoe access area, and landscaping improvements.

Some of the goals for this section of the river have not been completed. For example, restoring the Condon Band Shell has not occurred. The City of Medford has approval to demolish the shell since it is in an unsalvageable state and, although the City has some funds remaining, they are insufficient to complete the design of a new shell. Additionally, little work has happened on the Southside of the river between Winthrop and Auburn streets, where improved sidewalk access is planned.

Dan Driscoll commented on DCR's efforts to consider the installation of bike lanes when completing pathway repairs. In collaboration with the Toole Design Group, the DCR recently started a parkway study for the metropolitan region to assess all parkways for the ability to accommodate bike lanes and determine the necessary crossing improvements. The entire Mystic Valley Parkway will be included in the study. The first public meeting will be held in September. The study will produce short term and full depth reconstruction plans for how to retrofit parkways to include bike lanes as the parkways are maintained (short term plans) or upgraded (full depth reconstruction plans).

Conservation efforts in section two include mowing management and increasing riparian buffers.

Section 3: Craddock Bridge to the Wellington Bridge – Some improvements have occurred in this section, despite a property ownership issue that challenges the continuity of the master plan. Little work has been completed at Macdonald Park, or on the Southside of the river due to Interstate 90.

Medford completed some pathway improvements along Clippership Drive, and some pathways and a canoe access area were built a while ago when a school was constructed. However, Clippership Drive is also the only section of riverbank not owned by the DCR. Collaboration with the property owners and the community of Medford will be required to find a solution that provides continuity of the pathway. A potential solution is a permanent conservation easement, either gifted or bought from the property owner, which would then allow DCR to design the pathway with the community. Dan Driscoll is working

with the DCR Land Acquisition program to include this area in their program; once that happens, a land survey, title and appraisal work, and a negotiated agreement process will be completed. In response to a question of whether or not the recreational use statute would cover people walking across the yacht club's driveway, Dan Driscoll said that liability would shift to the Commonwealth if the private abutter grants the Commonwealth a conservation easement with public access.

The DCR is currently working with a couple of partners and advocates to identify funding for work at Macdonald Park, a central focus of the master plan where little work has occurred. The funding would be used to upgrade access, improve parking, install infrastructure such as an ecological or historical themed playground to draw people to the seldom-frequented park, and/or improve a deficient dock and potentially install kayak or canoe access. The pathways also could be improved after completing a design study to identify conservation opportunities and the potential to remove some of the pathways.

The group discussed opportunities and challenges to increase the use of Macdonald Park. In response to a question about whether or not a process could be launched to explore programmatic uses of the park and to invite developers to participate in the future of the park, Dan Driscoll said he thought this would be possible and that public engagement would be needed once the design phase starts. A participant suggested that a partnership with Mass Audubon could be pursued, and attractions such as educational kiosks or sprinkler features could be attractive to potential park users. Another participant noted that use is possibly limited because the access to the park seems dangerous and scary due to the vehicle traffic. A participant also said the park does not feel safe because it is so big and isolating. Dan Driscoll acknowledged that large open areas can be isolating and that the isolation will dissipate as more access is provided, connectivity of the entire pathway increases, and more people are present. He also noted that once it is more accessible, the state police will also be able to patrol it on bike.

The group briefly discussed MassDOT's use of the parking lot for snow storage after a participant noted that there was little cleanup response after the snow melted. Another participant commented that Medford agreed to the snow storage with the request that clean up occur, but it didn't and volunteers were used to clean up parks instead. Dan Driscoll noted that snow storage seemed an appealing option in the depths of the winter season when extenuating circumstances required additional snow storage sites. He commented that this is an issue that they need to focus on to determine appropriate snow dumping sites even for normal winter conditions.

Section 4: Wellington Bridge to Malden Bridge – Much of the work completed in this section was done as part of a mitigation package with Federal Realty, which took responsibility for IKEA's mitigation obligation in exchange for the riverside location. IKEA's mitigation obligation was to build the Wellington Bridge underpass with a cap of one million dollars; but Federal Realty decided to build a park with the mitigation obligation, which cost approximately 4 million dollars. The final outcome resulted in DCR receiving approximately 5 million dollars in improvements as part of the mitigation package. Dan Driscoll noted that extraction of mitigation dollars from developments but that also are used to benefit developers might be a future model for securing funding. He added that some development on the Wellington Greenway occurred along the Malden River thanks in large part to John Preotle, a private developer who went above and beyond expectations.

Future work includes the development of underpasses on two bridges. The MassDOT will rebuild the Woods Memorial Bridge in the next couple of years and create pedestrian and bicycle pathways at that time; this will facilitate the interconnectedness of the Wellington Greenway. The Greenway currently goes under the Orange Line, then terminates on the left side of the bridge. DCR would like to create underpasses on both sides of the bridge. Some design work was completed 5 years ago as part of a mitigation agreement with National Development, but it is only about 25% complete.

Federal Realty mitigation funding will also be used at Draw Seven Park. Approximately \$500,000 will be earmarked for repair and design work at Draw Seven Park or to finish design and construction of the link

between Route 99 and Draw Seven. Dan Driscoll commented that before the money is spent the new DCR leadership must be briefed and then a public process must be launched. The hold up on this critical link was that the bulkhead wall deteriorated and the design consultant would not approve the plans. The MBTA received federal funds to redesign the wall and it is now on the fast track for completion. The bike path may be designed and permitted as part of the wall design; but it remains undecided who will pay for which portions of the design and construction. DCR is coordinating with Somerville to determine how to reinstate a RFP for design. Dan Driscoll's recommendation is to complete design on both Draw Seven Park and the linear corridor since the \$500,000 is not sufficient for design and construction; then search for capital funding. The DCR is discussing with Wynn Casino the potential for development mitigation to help fund this work.

Dan Driscoll responded to questions about the City of Somerville's obligation for mitigation in Draw Seven before the snow farm permit expires. The DCR is in contact with the City but no decision has been made. The orange line expansion staging area expanded, so this also will be considered in mitigation.

Dan Driscoll described some other ongoing work of interest. The DCR recently completed a feasibility assessment of pedestrian and bicycle pathways across the Earhart Dam. Due to how water flows through the system and how open locks would limit use of the pathways 40% of the time, the DCR concluded it would promote and advance an independent pedestrian and bicycle bridge further up river from the dam. In response to a question about fly over bridge considerations, Dan Driscoll said the MBTA and homeland security were not thrilled with a fly over bridge option.

Dan Driscoll noted an additional topic of interest; after completion of two more links—the aforementioned bulkhead wall and an easement for a bikeway from the Charlestown Bus Yard—a greenway will connect Arsenal Street and the Charles River to Fresh Pond to Alewife T Station to the Minuteman to the Alewife Greenway to the Mystic River and to Boston.

There are limited conservation opportunities in section four. Since this area was heavily industrialized, the focus is on public access and working with developers to implement improvements.

### **Question and Answer Discussion**

After the presentation the group discussion generally focused on the following themes:

Ecological restoration, conservation measures, and invasive species – the group discussed opportunities to implement ecological conservation measures while upgrading or constructing pathways. Dan Driscoll noted that it is often possible to use transportation dollars to build bicycle or pedestrian pathways and completed ecological restoration work as part of the pathway development. Coupling ecological restoration with transportation improvements may be a strategy to implement more conservation measures. A United States Forest Service representative said they have grant funding available for green infrastructure installation and improvements and for riparian restoration.

The group discussed invasive species control in restored areas, river access, and management tools. Phragmites, the common reed, is a prolific invasive species that can impede river access. The DCR restored some areas in Macdonald Park that are now overgrown with Phragmites. Future management of phragmites to provide river access could include installation of an overlook and establishment of native species with strong invasive species management to control their proliferation. Participants noted that Phragmites is particularly hard to control, but they do uptake pollutants from the water. Given the intensity of management that is sometimes required, the DCR partners with groups to control invasive species. For example, DCR partnered with a hotel to provide management information and cut back invasive knotweed; this effort has proven successful for the past five years. The DCR now has three ecologists and they can provide partners or volunteer groups to manage invasive species. A representative of Groundworks Somerville expressed interest in partnering on invasive species removal.

Public Involvement and desirable park features – A participant noted that public interest in outdoor activities among Medford residents significantly expanded since completion of the Master Plan in 2009 and inquired about public input prior to starting work in Macdonald Park or other areas. Dan Driscoll said the DCR is committed to engaging the public when it seems relevant. Public process would be completed if funding is secured for pathway design and improvements in Macdonald Park or at Condon Shell. New groups can get involved and be notified of events by joining the email list through the DCR website.

Several commenters provided ideas for desirable park amenities. A participant reiterated community interest in a sprinkler feature in Macdonald Park and noted that Medford residents hope to create a playground near the community garden and Condon Shell. She added that several community groups collaborated to build the garden. A participant suggested that familial and intergenerational recreational facilities, such as a strength or balance training area next to a children's playground, are desirable. Finally, a participant highlighted the opportunity to use park areas as living laboratories and outdoor classrooms where mature and young people can learn about the watershed and complete projects together.

Partnerships for increasing connectivity and access, and implementing projects – The participants discussed the need for partnerships to increase community access and connectivity to the river. Some communities have developed river routes to connect the community to the river, but other strategies will need to be identified in some communities since signage and other methods to direct people to the river are outside the DCR jurisdiction. The Mystic River Watershed Association is actively following funding opportunities and willing to partner with community groups and the DCR to encourage legislators to allocate funding for Mystic River Master Plan associated projects. In response to a question about helping Chelsea develop a green space plan, Dan Driscoll said the DCR could provide technical assistance to groups.

The group discussed partnerships and engagement with developers, realty organizations, and communities. Dan Driscoll said he thinks opportunities exist for more partnerships with developers along the Mystic and that developer support could help to leverage state and federal funding opportunities too. A participant noted that early involvement with developers is crucial to help them understand the value of investing in park infrastructure with the Commonwealth. For long-term maintenance of park amenities and riparian zones and invasive species control, a participant suggested establishing partnerships with community and volunteer groups. A model for this partnership could be found in the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn, New York where the USFS created a bioswale maintenance-training program. This program provided the Gowanus Canal Conservancy with capacity to train residents in bioswale maintenance and is resulting in improved water quality, community access and appreciation of the resource, and stronger community connections. Dan Driscoll added the most successful models he has seen come with commitments from other groups to coordinate on maintenance of conservation measures. He added that the DCR and Medford have a formal agreement for Medford to assume stewardship of a DCR park; the community funded the improvements. A question was raised about whether or not the DCR would consider a long term commitment to cities that want to invest in DCR parks, to ensure they can develop significant capital funding. Dan Driscoll said they would consider it, but the parks must remain a regional resource open to all people of the Commonwealth. He cited the examples of Magazine Beach in Cambridge and of Simmons College, which will soon develop a multi-million dollar recreation complex on DCR property that will be open to the public.