



City of Cambridge Conservation Commission

147 Hampshire Street
Cambridge, MA 02139
Ph. 617.349.4680

Jennifer Letourneau, Director

jletourneau@cambridgema.gov

Public Meeting – Monday, November 18, 2024, at 7:00 PM Zoom MEETING MINUTES

The following meeting minutes were taken by Lena Frappier and are respectfully submitted.

Present Commission Members: Jennifer Letourneau, Director; David Lyons, Chair; Elysse Magnotto-Cleary, Vice Chair; Erum Sattar; Kathryn Hess; Lorie Graham; Khyati Saraf; Jim Gerstle, Associate; Sean Bedingfield, Associate

Absent Members: John Leo

Attendees: Lena Frappier, DPW; Kara Falise, DPW; Joe Rigney, MBTA/Delve; Ronald Guillotte, MBTA; Joseph Rigney; Brad Nicoll, MBTA; Brittney Ferber, MBTA/Nitsch; Debra Darby; Janis Kearney, MBTA; John Michalak, MBTA/Nitsch; Christina Gabriel, IQHQ; Marian Rambelle.

Ann McDonald; Anthony Colletti; Carol Agate; Charles Teague; Cynthia Hibbard; Danny Frias; David Bass; David Denison; David Nowak; Diane Martin; Eppa Rixey; James Williamson; Jan Innes; Jeremy Fontaine; Jess Dausman; Jodi Kurilla; Joel Nogic; Kristin Anderson; Lisa Birk; Madeleine Aster; Maya Bickel; Melissa Ludtke; Mike Nakagawa; Nonie Valentine; Rebecca Ramsay; Sarah Adkins; Stefan Surette; Stevan Orzack; Tom Gould; Vicki Paret.
GM

David Lyons opened the meeting and introduced the first item of business as it is a continuation of the previous meeting. He also stated a site meeting was held, and additional written public comments have been received.

Jennifer Letourneau interjected with a point of information stating the DEP has acknowledged the receipt and no technical comments have been issued

7:06 – Notice of Intent

DEP File #123-325

Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA)

New Red Line Access Tunnel within the 100-year Floodplain

Joe Rigney from Delve Underground started by answering previously submitted questions. He stated they will have a braced excavation that's going to be watertight and all the soil that's excavated will be removed immediately from the site. All access will be through Alewife Center Road. Joe pointed out these areas in their submitted documentation. He also explained an image profiling the tunnel where trucks will enter and locations of plantings. To further elaborate on the structure Joe stated the boat wall extends 42" above ground for flood control and shrinks in thickness as it rises due to compensatory flood storage. He specified the sheet piling would be cut down three feet and the property owner had been made aware of this. Joe stated the erosion control fencing will be installed first and it will delineate the work zone where trees outside this fencing should not see impact. He commented on Kara's questioning last meeting concerning elevation and flood storage, saying they fixed that by re-grading the soil over the tunnel and they have provided the contours foot by foot. Joe stated they also adjusted the thickness of the walls to help correct that and confirm the floodgate was also included in the calculation. He also confirmed the stormwater report has been stamped and resubmitted. Joe also referred to questions concerning trench strain, operation and maintenance and answered there will be biannual tunnel inspections and informal inspections anytime the tunnel is accessed. He also stated documents were submitted concerning water quality, in particular phosphorous levels. He also walked through some images showing the floodgate operation and design while referencing some measurement demonstrations at the site visit. The way the doors open is due to their safety study and ensuring no one on the multi-use path will be struck. Joe stated another recent tree survey was conducted, and the impact zone will be limited to 28 trees instead of 30.

David asked to clarify the caliper inches.

Joe stated the new calculation is 279 inches. He also stated the plan images have been updated to show the easement lines as the area is larger than the work limits if the MBTA needed access in the future. Joe also stated the driveway apron plans have been updated to city standards and confirmed everything is ADA compliant. Concerning compensatory flood storage, he stated site function remains the same with the paved access road the water continues to flow to the wetlands to the south and the tunnel side will flow to a low spot where IQHQ is forming culverts to spill out. There is just a slight increase in the runoff rate as less than one CFS.

Jennifer interrupted to announce to meeting attendees that public comment is still open and will be heard after the participants presentation and commission questions as numerous comments and questions were being submitted already during the meeting.

Joe returned to present a table with volumes of runoff water. He also stated they looked at existing trees and numerous species listed are suitable for floodplains where these increases should not be a problem as they are able to take high moisture and drought. Joe stated the 2070 flood reaches elevations over 21.2 and they made the decision to focus on the 2050 flood horizon where future decisions could be made on extending the walls or installing flood doors. He moved on to elaborate on site selection. Joe stated they viewed five sites and referenced an image where the red line extends underground at the Alewife Station and comes back up as it approaches downtown Boston. This site was optimal in terms of a shorter tunnel length and furthest from residences. The site's proximity to the Alewife station was favorable along with site openness relative to overhead wires, utility constraints, and traffic impact. Joe stated the second site looked at is being converted into an electric bus facility and the third and fourth sites are storage areas

where the logistics of entering an exiting did not make sense. Whereas this project is seen as a necessity and needs to be completed relatively quickly they did not look at launching it on the same project as the Alewife Station where most of the work will be above ground. Joe stated the fifth site they addressed was more impactful and riskier to existing nearby structures. He moved on to explain an image depicting elevations and water receding directions relating to flood storage.

Elysse Magnotto-Cleary stated she was thankful for the site visit and asked about the status in public process and future steps for this project.

Joe responded they are looking for approval of the NOI and are working through alternatives on the RAM plan seeking resolutions on both before the end of the year. They will then move more aggressively with the real estate process taking roughly nine months and advertise a job in full 2025. Joe stated they would look to give a notice to proceed in spring of 2026 with approximately a two-year construction duration. He also stated they will be looking to hold another public meeting hosted by MBTA after the NOI and RAM plan.

David asked for the tracking number for the RAM plan.

Jennifer commented in the chat the DEP Release Tracking Number: 3-00277 3-0017014.

Joe stated they submitted a RAM plan, non-traditional work plan in August and received feedback from a meeting in September. They have also been meeting with the Alewife Study Group to find resolutions. He stated where public comment is supposed to end November 30th, they will look to have responses within 30 days for an updated RAM plan over to DEP. Joe also informed the commission at that point the RAM plan is still considered a draft until the bid is awarded and the contractor develops the official Ram plan.

Kathryn Hess asked for clarification on the amount of impermeable vs permeable land.

Joe responded it's about 120 feet for the ramp and then 100 feet for the roadway and it might be vice versa. And if you assume 20 feet for the average of both of those around 4,400 square feet.

Kathryn stated even though their analysis said this is a low impact site it still really is a high impact project to this specific area.

Joe did state they do want to clean it up and beautify it as the intent was to be a natural area.

Kathryn also asked if they will be taking on responsibilities asked of IQHQ in beautifying the Alewife Station house and to clarify the site location in relation to the two outlooks planned by IQHQ.

Joe stated that has not been part of their discussions and the site is located between the two outlooks but closer to the southern outlook near the culvert for flood storage.

Kathryn asked Jennifer if there were any conditions for IQHQ in this area already permitted that may now be violated with this project.

Jennifer stated from a Conservation Commission perspective there are no violations.

Erum Sattar asked for specifications on height or inches of the plantings as they see drought and being labeled as moderately tolerant.

Joe said as that is not his expertise he would need to come back with an answer and only gave the general shrub heights of 4-7 feet and trees 15-40 feet.

Khyati Sarraf stated she has some recommendations on the planting list and would like to understand how some of the deciduous and ornamental trees were selected. She gave the example that the river birch is not as drought tolerant as the gray birch. Khyati also stated some of the ornamentals do not emit the appropriate naturalistic theme in the area. She stated she would recommend viburnums, high bush blueberries or winter berries, things that are more naturally occurring, over the cornice alba ivory halo. Khyati also stated the layout of trees in a row may want to be mixed up for the more naturalistic approach. She also stated going with lower caliper trees but more trees overall would help in the long run replacing the calipers lost and also reinforce the naturalistic look.

Lorie Graham asked for the status of the permanent easement and confirmation if it will be exclusive where the MBTA will be responsible for maintenance.

Joe stated they have not really begun the process as they are looking for the NOI and PAP first.

Brad Nicoll of the MBTA interjected no formal details have been worked out yet, but they are willing to work with IQHQ and take input from the community, but they are committed to being the best neighbor they can be.

Jim Gerstle stated he supports the comments about more trees, maybe smaller trees to improve your chances of survivability.

Sean Bedingfield said Kathy's feedback was particularly important, and he also agrees explicitly stating who will be responsible for land management after the easement is important.

David questioned how much of the tunnel will be visible above grade from the IQHQ lookout.

Joe responded that it is 120 feet from the fence line and the highest point will be 14 feet high as it slopes down to 8 feet and then makes a hard face down and asked Jennifer to display an image submitted.

Kara Falise of DPW described an image submitted to show the length of the access road of 120 feet and start of the roofed structure starting at depth. She also stated the graphics have been particularly helpful for the commission to understand the impacts along with the calculations provided for water quality treatment. Kara went on to describe compensatory flood storage, as people understand it, is intended to be provided with a foot-by-foot increment so the flooding that is compensated for is provided back. For example, you can dig a 30-foot-deep hole, but if

the top of that hole is two feet above grade, the water's never going to get to the bottom of that hole. So, there is some effort when you're replacing flood storage to have it contiguous, so the low areas fill first and then the flooding fills up. That said, the volume of compensatory storage impacted by this project in relationship to the flood storage rose a question but not worth flagging. She also stated it's nice to understand there's some connection or that volume would be filled by an area that's tributary to it so you're not providing flood storage somewhere where water can't get to it again. The volumes being provided here in relationship to the broader floodplain storage provided isn't a significant amount of storage as it relates to the broader floodplain that's in the area, so it's not worth spending any more time on. Kara also explained the resiliency discussion was just to make sure the MBTA is aware of the flooding information the city has available as it relates to precipitation and sea level rise-based numbers. She said they are in complete agreement with the MBTA and are continuing to advocate for those regional interventions we hope will be in place by 2050, never mind 2070. Since there is an acknowledgement if these interventions don't happen and sea level rise as a result of flanking or overtopping of the Amelia Earhart Dam become a reality, the MBTA is acknowledging that they will have to take additional steps at this location to protect their infrastructure. Kara said technically in terms of regulatory requirements, the questions were answered with their initial submission package or their resubmission.

Jennifer stated Khyati's comments on the planting plan are extremely important. She also said numerous public comments also supporting further ecological conversations have all been forwarded to the whole commission.

James Williamson stated they found themselves wondering where we would be if there weren't so many good, talented, knowledgeable, vigilant people, commissioners, and especially some of the people involved with ASG. They said it is so impressive as a non-specialist to hear the questions and the interrogation. James questioned the frequency of use of the access road. They also said after just receiving the alternatives summary there are still questions remaining where the best location is as the garage option has some plausibility. James also brought up the most important part, over the beauty of the site, is the impact of digging on the contaminated location. They stated the alternatives analysis should have been a public process, and it still could be corrected.

Jodi Kurilla questioned if there was a demo plan showing trees to be removed as a new tree sapling does not come close to replacing a mature tree. They also questioned whether there is a way to preserve existing trees on site and if natives are specified in mitigation. Jody also stated they are concerned the Alewife area will become developed like Kendall Square making an intense urban heat island effect.

Kristin Anderson stated Save the Alewife Brook is a growing grassroots environmental advocacy group with supporters in Cambridge, Arlington, Somerville, Medford, Belmont, and beyond. Their main interests are water quality and flooding. Last year, in 2023, the combined sewer overflow outfall at the MBTA's Alewife parking garage discharged over 20 million gallons of untreated sewage pollution. This is from outfall number CAM 401A. Twenty million gallons of combined sewage discharge is 20 times the volume of this outfall in 1992. Per the second stipulation of the Boston Harbor court case, the permitted annual volume of for this one CSO outfall is 1.61 million gallons. Kristin also stated there is a long history of flooding in the area. Historically, the area used to be called the Great Swamp, and the sewage pollution is a serious

public health concern because of the area's flooding. They said sewage pollution flooded over the banks of Alewife Brook at least five times last year, sending sewage flood water into the Alewife Greenway path. The Alewife Greenway is a widely used multi-use path that connects residents from Medford, Somerville, Arlington, and Cambridge to the Alewife T Station and passes through multiple environmental justice neighborhoods. Kristin said Save the Alewife Brooke documented folks bicycling, jogging, walking, and pushing baby strollers through untreated sewage flood water during these storm events last year and the sewage floodwater also flooded out multiple homeless encampments. Climate change is expected to increase flooding and exacerbate combined sewer overflows by two to four times by 2050. They stated they had personally been exposed to the Alewife's sewage flood water as it came into their house through the back door with them and their neighbors getting sick. Kristen asked the Conservation Commission and the MBTA to take advantage of every opportunity to reduce flooding and to take advantage of opportunities to eliminate untreated CSOs.

Cynthia Hibbard of Green Cambridge stated a written comment was submitted and understands the MBTA as a state agency does not have to comply with the City of Cambridge's tree ordinance, however, appreciates the MBTA stating their interest in working with the community. They also quoted one of the MBTA's goals, "to cultivate collaborative and sustainable relationships with riders, community partners, and municipal stakeholders." Cynthia asked the MBTA to voluntarily comply with the city tree ordinance and the Conservation Commission add as a condition of approval the MBTA comply with the ordinance.

Eppa Rixey, 126 Harvey Street and member of the Alewife Study Group thanked Khyati for the comments concerning plant species and pointed out the community worked hard to protect 100 trees in this area and minimize soil disturbances in this area that was supposed to be protected as a habitat area. They also stated the proposed project sits right between two scenic overlooks. Eppa also thinks these various improvements to planting plans can be made.

The DBH being removed has now been increased by 10 inches to 279 inches, only being replaced with 74 caliper inches, just over a quarter of the inches being replaced. Eppa stated there's almost no way the trees replaced will ever have the habitat value or carbon sequestration of the larger trees being removed. In fact, most of these trees would have to live 30 years or more to be carbon sinks to offset the efforts of planting them and maintaining them. They also stated with perforated metal walls right next to a drainage ditch it will be ripe for invasive species growth and historically the MBTA's large concrete structure in the middle of the linear park that invasive management is not something they do a lot in this area so Eppa would like to see this ongoing maintenance concern addressed in advance of approval. They stated the potential impacts to their structure alone should make them want to come up with a good plan for how to maintain it and thinks there's actually a fantastic opportunity to turn this structure into something that is not an eyesore. Eppa stated there was a project done by the Harvard Design School called PolyNature that involved cloth sacks of pollinator friendly species that were arranged on scaffolding and set up with automated watering systems and bags with species were sent home to people in the community to spread these pollinator plants out and around the area to make a larger impact.

Charles Teague of Cambridge for Trees stated climate change is here by explaining the front page of the Boston Globe today was a picture of the Cambridge Reservoir so far down that we're about to switch to the MWRA water supply with a current water ban in Cambridge. They also

said this is the third historic drought in eight years and with the droughts and the heat waves, the mortality of the saplings and new plants will increase. Charles stated the City of Cambridge has a very aggressive drought program where watering trucks run 24 hours a day and still, 25% of the saplings die. They stated mature trees not only survive better, but they mitigate the effects of climate change. Charles reiterated that they disagree with the site selection and said the MBTA should also mitigate for trees previously cut down.

Ann McDonald of the Whittemore neighborhood and member of Save the Alewife Brook stated site number four with the potential new development hasn't been fully considered. They said there is going to be a lot of digging there already and there's also less disruption to the neighborhood. That much construction is too much for a site that is going to be a protected habitat area as negotiated with IQHQ. Ann echoed Eppa's concerns about the structure and asked for the MBTA to comply with the tree ordinance and tenting for asbestos removal.

Mike Nakagawa of Madison Avenue echoed the concern of a large structure rather than the conservation area promised. They stated they worked hard on keeping the area safe from digging for the neighboring Russell Field area and jamming a bunch of trees and shrubs in front of a 50-foot wall is not really a natural feel. Mike said replacing caliper inches doesn't replace the amount of heat mitigation or the leaf structure as heat mitigation in this area is needed because the Russell Field ball fields are turf, which are hot. They stated the commission is the official agency specifically charged with the protection of the community's natural resources including open space and wetland protection so looking at the other sites proposed should be discussed as this is not what is best for the community.

Joel Nogie, a resident near Russell Field and member of the Alewife Study Group, stated it would be great if the MBTA could make a commitment to come much closer to meeting the intentions of the Cambridge Tree Ordinance and the intentions of the special permit commission to have a restored ecosystem on that part of their site. IQHQ was planning not just to leave it entirely as it is, but to manage, so they hope more meetings including the landscape architect team from the T will help get closer to a more ideal plan. They said remediation could maybe expand a little bit wider on the sides of the outsides of the tunnel walls so there could be planting of trees growing up to 60 and 70 feet and higher rather than trees limited to 40 feet. Joel stated the commission should use its authority to require a more deliberative process and not a rushed process. They said dealing with the RAM plan process at the same time, there really was no process to introduce the public to the project and give any kind of say or local knowledge on the sighting of the site and the implications beyond the asbestos. Joel stated ASG also requested some additional renderings on October 29th via the commission that were not yet received and requested to continue the hearing.

David Lyons reiterated the landscaping plan can be reviewed as the existing plan for the area was designed as an environmental resource for the neighborhood.

Erum Sattar asked about the process and if the MBTA will be expected to submit a new planting plan.

David answered there have been good discussions but as they are going through the RAM plan process at the same time there doesn't seem to be a need to rush through the process.

Lorie Graham stated even if the MBTA ends up with an exclusive easement, this ability and willingness to work together moving forward being more articulated would be helpful.

Elysse Magnetto-Cleary stated given the duration of the project and many layers considering an accountability standpoint of updates being given as a condition.

Jennifer stated the duration of an order of conditions is valid for three years and ecological restoration projects can go as long as five. This is under the three-year order of conditions and if the schedule as presented is construction spring 2026 to spring 2028, they will have to get an extension before they're complete and then also an additional extension in order to get through the vegetation management and three years after the planting so there are three solid years of plant establishment before you can even close out the project. She states because the order of conditions gets linked to the deed, she is sure part of the real estate transaction will be the need to leave the deed clean when done meaning to go through the certificate of compliance process. Acknowledgement of the order of conditions by the contractor brought on, a copy of the RAM plan will be included as conditions in the order of conditions.

Kathryn Hess stated she needs to go back and look at the differences between the plans and maybe include IQHQ. She said there needs to be more context and due diligence concerning this is a pre-permitted area and is in favor of continuing the hearing.

David asked Jennifer if there is anything from IQHQ regarding this project.

Jennifer stated the commission has heard from them, and they are aware of the project and amicably working alongside the T. She said she just attended a site walk where she could see IQHQ working with the MBTA in a favorable relationship moving forward.

Kathy stated it would be beneficial to look at the previous plan as there are new members in the commission.

Brad Nicoll representing the MBTA asked to clarify what is specifically needed concerning the continuance.

Jennifer stated comments concerning the planting plan can be forwarded with a new submission required. She also stated a RTN number is still needed for the RAM plan and revisions to the landscape plan should be submitted.

Brad asked to clarify if the commission is looking for the MBTA to meet the ordinances they are legally not required to.

David stated making their best efforts to and justifying departures would be good for the process and the community.

Sean Bedingfield asked if it is appropriate to ask for the commitments from the previous plan to be met in the new plan.

Kathryn stated that is why she thinks we need to go back and look at the previous plans.

Janis Kearney, representing the MBTA, asked to clarify that all they are coming back with is the planting plan.

Jennifer stated it will eventually be a revised planting plan, but it's going to be looking at what we were committed to getting from IQHQ as a base plan as well as comments based on the plan presented to us. We didn't get a revised one with the new grades on it.

8:55 – The commission unanimously approved to continue to next meeting.

6 – In Favor, 1– Absent

Kathryn asked the Mass DEP release tracking numbers to be read into record for the public.

David stated the numbers are 3-000277 and 3-0017014.

Public comment will remain open.

James Williamson stated there was an undergirding of the analysis of alternatives and asked if the public would be able to see the documentation.

Jennifer stated everything submitted to the commission has been shared with the commission.

Joe stated that is all the documentation.

8:58 – Administrative Topics

Meeting Minutes Approved– October 21, 2024, as edited

6 – In Favor, 1– Absent

9:03 – Meeting Adjourned

6 – In Favor, 1– Absent