

# Alewife, The Great Swamp

## Planning, Participation and Practice

### Introduction

The Alewife region has served as the subject of extensive research and numerous papers. Several college courses have also undertaken case studies of Alewife, including at least two at MIT. Perhaps the most famous research is Lawrence Susskind's accounts of his role as mediator in the Alewife T station construction dispute; including the thinly veiled tale of RiverEnd in Breaking the Impasse. Alewife has been under the microscope for the past 30 years and the natives are growing restless. First contact with a resident activist concerning research for this paper met with the following message.

I'm a member of the Alewife Study Group (ASG), whose website you emailed, and the Coalition for Alewife, and I'm responding to your request. While the two groups' memberships overlap, the Coalition is more relevant to your request.

Both groups have previously received requests like yours from other researchers. They have included environmentalists concerned with the area's ecology and sociologists concerned with the dynamics of community organizations, and even a legislative intern.

Speaking only for myself, I've appreciated their interest and have given freely of my time and knowledge. I've had to spend much time teaching "Introduction to Alewife", the area's background and history needed to understand current issues, before getting to those current issues.

More often than not, I have generally received nothing in return, not assistance in my efforts, not a copy of their research output, not even a thank you. In some cases, I have been left wondering whether those with whom I shared my knowledge benefited financially from my help. (personal communication, 2003, April 14)

The situation in Alewife has been described by some as “homerule gone awry”. Local politics has resulted in a highly fragmented system that addresses issues individually, out of context, if at all. The resulting planning process(es) would seem to lack both process and a plan. Assisted negotiation could unstick the planning process for the Alewife region, while encouraging public participation and providing a more just and equitable outcome.

## **Stakeholders**

There are a large number of stakeholders in the Alewife region. Larry Susskind has indicated that previous negotiation efforts, concerning the citing and design of the Alewife T station, included some 45 representatives. An inclusive mediation process at the present time would likely require at least as many individuals. The following is by no means neither an authoritative nor exhaustive list.

### **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)**

“The Federal Emergency Management Agency ... is tasked with responding to, planning for, recovering from and mitigating against disasters.” (FEMA, 2003 Mar. 26)

FEMA has commissioned a watershed based Flood Insurance Study of the Mystic River Basin, within which Alewife lies. (ENSR, 2003 April).

### **Department of Environmental Management (DEM)**

DEM's Mission -- The Department of Environmental Management is dedicated to improving the quality of life in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts by

- **Conserving** our natural and cultural resources through professional stewardship, and
- **Connecting** people to these resources through recreation and education.
- **Cooperating** and partnering with others who share our common purpose.

(DEM, n.d./2003)

DEM is an agency within the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA). Recent

budget cutting proposals by Governor Romney would merge the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) into DEM.

### **Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA)**

The EOEA is the Massachusetts state equivalent of the federal EPA.

### **Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)**

The MBTA is owner and operator of the Alewife T subway station, a major transportation center for the region.

### **Massachusetts Highway Department (MHD)**

MHD is responsible for Route 2 and several other roadways in the region. However the Alewife Brook Parkway is under MDC jurisdiction.

### **Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA)**

MWRA is a Massachusetts public authority established by an act of the Legislature in 1984 to provide wholesale water and sewer services to 2.5 million people and more than 5,500 large industrial users in 61 metropolitan Boston communities. (MWRA, 2003)

### **Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)**

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) is a regional planning agency representing 101 cities and towns in the metropolitan Boston area. Created by an act of the Legislature in 1963, it serves as a forum for state and local officials to address issues of regional importance. As one of fourteen members of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), MAPC has oversight responsibility for the region's federally funded transportation program.

Council membership consists of community representatives, gubernatorial appointees and city and state agencies who collaborate in the development of comprehensive plans and recommendations in areas of population and employment, transportation, economic development, regional growth and the environment. The

Council also provides technical assistance and advocacy to its member communities (MAPC, 1997).

### **Metropolitan District Commission (MDC)**

On June 3, 1893, the Metropolitan Park Commission (renamed the Metropolitan District Commission in 1919) was established by the Massachusetts state legislature to oversee and maintain the Metropolitan Park System. Some of metropolitan Boston's most scenic and historic sites are part of the Metropolitan Park System, including the Charles River Esplanade and the Blue Hills Reservation.

This system was the first regional organization of public open space in the United States and is internationally recognized as a model for multi-jurisdictional park systems designed to encourage public appreciation of open space. As a whole, the Metropolitan Park System is currently eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. (MDC, 2003)

The MDC is an agency within the EOEI. Recent budget cutting proposals by Governor Romney would merge the MDC into the DEM, another EOEI agency. Alewife Brook Parkway, the Alewife Brook Reservation and several other open spaces in the area are owned by the MDC.

### **Metropolitan Planning Organization, Boston (MPO)**

The Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization is one of the 13 Massachusetts regions established to carry out federally funded transportation plans and programs. Home to nearly three million people and covering roughly 1,400 square miles, it is made up of 101 cities and towns... (MPO, 2003).

### **Concord-Alewife Planning Study Committee**

In January 2003 the City embarked upon a multidisciplinary planning study of the Concord-Alewife area in the western part of Cambridge, including the areas known as the Triangle, Quadrangle, and the Fresh Pond Shopping Center. The Study Area is bounded by the southern edge of the Alewife reservation, Alewife Brook Parkway, the

Fitchburg line of the commuter rail, the Watertown rail line, Concord Avenue, and the Cambridge/Belmont city line (Cambridge, 2003).

### **Tri-Community Working Group**

The Tri-Community Working Group, ... is headed by elected representatives of Arlington, Belmont and Cambridge. ... On April 22, the committee sponsored a symposium on Alewife Flooding, with an hour and 1/4 of official "Powerpoint" presentations (Kaiser, 2003, April 24).

The presentations were given by the MDC, FEMA, MWRA and others.

### **Arlington**

Portions of the Alewife Brook Reservation, owned by the MDC, are located in Arlington as is the Mugar site.

### **Belmont**

Portions of the Alewife Brook Reservation, owned by the MDC, and the O'Neill site are located in Belmont. Belmont has shown itself to be quite interested in the revenue from property taxes stemming from further development, as is indicated by the development plans for the Belmont Highlands and the coup-like removal of incumbents that opposed the development in recent elections.

### **Cambridge**

Much of the undeveloped land in the Alewife region lies in Cambridge, as well as the majority of the MDC owned Alewife Brook Reservation. This land is also some of the last open space in the diminutive municipality.

Cambridge's interests in Alewife are varied. The City is particularly interested in property tax revenue which could result from development. Cambridge is also concerned with flooding, in particular as it relates to the CSO (common sewer outlet) separation mandated by court order as part of the effort to clean Boston harbor. Part of the City of Cambridge's water supply, Fresh Pond, is in the Alewife area as well. Finally, adequate access for emergency services is of some concern as the road network in Alewife is not

only often gridlocked, but also contains many inadequate private ways and dead ends. Despite the large, and ever increasing, amount of traffic for the region Cambridge does not wish to see road capacity increased.

### **Alewife Study Group (ASG)**

Concerned neighborhood residents

- works to preserve and enhance the quality of life in the Alewife area of North Cambridge, Massachusetts, especially on and near the W. R. Grace site
- works to ensure an inclusive, participatory process on quality of life issues including (but not limited to) hazardous waste (such as asbestos), excessive traffic, flooding, and protection of habitats and natural resources
- researches information
- communicates information from the neighborhood to the relevant parties (and vice versa) in many ways, including
  - hand-delivers flyers to the neighborhood
  - sets up and encourages public meetings
  - speaks at official city (and other government) meetings
  - meets with Cambridge City Councilors
  - writes letters and opinion-editorials for newspapers

(ASG, 1999)

### **Coalition for Alewife**

The Coalition for Alewife is a joint undertaking of a number of civic organizations in Cambridge, Arlington, and Belmont which have come together to protect and enhance the area's environmental quality in the face of ongoing pressures from economic and transportation development. The Alewife Watershed Trust, the brainchild of that Coalition, will be governed by a board of directors made up of representatives from the three towns, including members of their respective Conservation Commissions, business communities, and neighborhood residents, as well as the MDC (Coalition for Alewife, 2002, February 28).

## **Friends of Alewife Reservation (FAR)**

FAR is a multileveled stewarding and advocacy group that desires to protect the public Reservation land owned by the MDC and to preserve it for wildlife and for future generations, providing a highly accessible area in limited wilderness areas for passive recreationists. The group is run by a board of overseers that oversee activity and help advocate for Reservation needs (FAR, 2003).

## **Commuters**

Alewife is an important transportation hub, traversed by Route 2 and Alewife Brook Parkway. The Alewife T station is the northern terminus of the MBTA Red Line and lies at the intersection of Route 2 and Alewife Brook Parkway. 70,000 vehicles per day enter Cambridge via Route 2; some 40% of which have a destination beyond Cambridge (Cook, 2002, p.27). The T station also serves as a bus depot for an extensive network of routes. The 11 mile long Minuteman Commuter Bikeway, a converted rail line, connects Cambridge to Arlington, Bedford, and Lexington. Commuters interests lie in maintaining if not improving access to and beyond Alewife as well as levels throughput.

## **Recreationists**

Alewife, home to the Alewife Brook Reservation, has an abundance of open space, nature, and water bodies that makes it an attractive location for many recreationists. There are several paths used by joggers, bicyclists, and walkers alike. The natural resources are also used by bird-watchers and fisherman. Recreationists seek greater access to the facilities at Alewife, while preserving much of its richness. There is also concern about safety crossing the high-traffic motorways and the lack of adequate lighting after dusk. Finally, cleanup of many of the spaces, particularly the reservation, would make the area more enjoyable.

## **Residents**

Thus far many of the residents of Alewife seem to have taken positions to defend, although they have expressed some interests as well. One of the individuals interviewed has deemed the description of Cambridge as "land-starved" irrelevant in the discussion regarding the non-viability of a "no build" approach to Alewife. Landowners possess as-of-

right privilege to develop their land, to deny them this would be illegal. The funds to exercise a taking of the parcels in question are not available, particularly in the present economic climate.

The actual interests of residents of the Alewife are numerous and include; property value, flooding, open space, environment, traffic and safety. Flooding affects property value and in some cases health as the sewer system is known to backup during large storms. Many residents are concerned the CSO separation plans which will divert millions of gallons of rain water from North Cambridge to the Alewife Brook Reservation will contribute to flooding. Property value may be affected (in an unforeseeable direction) if strong restrictions are imposed on further development in the region. Pedestrian safety is affected by the high volume of traffic and poor lighting throughout most of Alewife.

### **Businesses**

Local businesses have two primary concerns, traffic and property value. Contrary the other stakeholders businesses value traffic, to a point, as it means potential customers. In fact many businesses have explicitly chosen a site in Alewife because of the high volume of visitors. Businessmen which own their property are also concerned about property value, likely more so than residents as strong restrictions on future development decrease the resale potential of their land.

### **Landowners**

There are several large parcels in the Alewife area including the Bulfinch, Martignetti, Mugar, Oak Tree, O'Neill, W.R. Grace

O'Neill Properties is a developer of commercial properties with operations centered in Philadelphia. O'Neill purchased the 30 acre former AD Little campus in June of 1999 for \$24 million. O'Neill resold the ADL lot to Bulfinch, excluding the 15.6 Belmont Highlands still in its possession, 15 months later for \$65 million. (Cook, p. 41-45) Landowners are interested in property value. They are consequently desire greater access to their land, and are concerned with contamination as many Alewife have previously served industrial



roles. The W.R. Grace site in particular is known to be contaminated with asbestos.

## **Analysis**

While Alewife has received much attention of planners, developers, and activists in recent years there has been a lack of appropriate scope, focus and accompanying commitment. Multiple master plans have been produced for the region or subsections thereof while little of them have come to fruition. This lack of focus and scope are exemplified by three recent projects, the Concord-Alewife Planning Study Committee, the Tri-Community Working Group and an imminently released MDC Master Plan for the reservation. All these efforts focus on small sections of the bigger picture; it would seem the various stakeholders cannot see the forest for the trees. The organization best suited for and intended to guide them through the forest, MAPC, seems all but absent from the discourse.

Residents and activists have made a poor assessment of the alternatives to negotiation. If they do not enter into negotiations they risk fighting many battles on a per-project basis, and having little to no input in the outcome. However citizens are reluctant to negotiate. When negotiation was suggested stories of recent ineffectual “negotiations” by a panel of experts without the power to follow through with their decisions. Furthermore, some citizens feel disadvantaged handling technical information, or more exactly suggesting solutions to technical problems. They have reportedly been shot down and become gun shy. Many are wary of participation as they or others have been SLAPPED (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation).

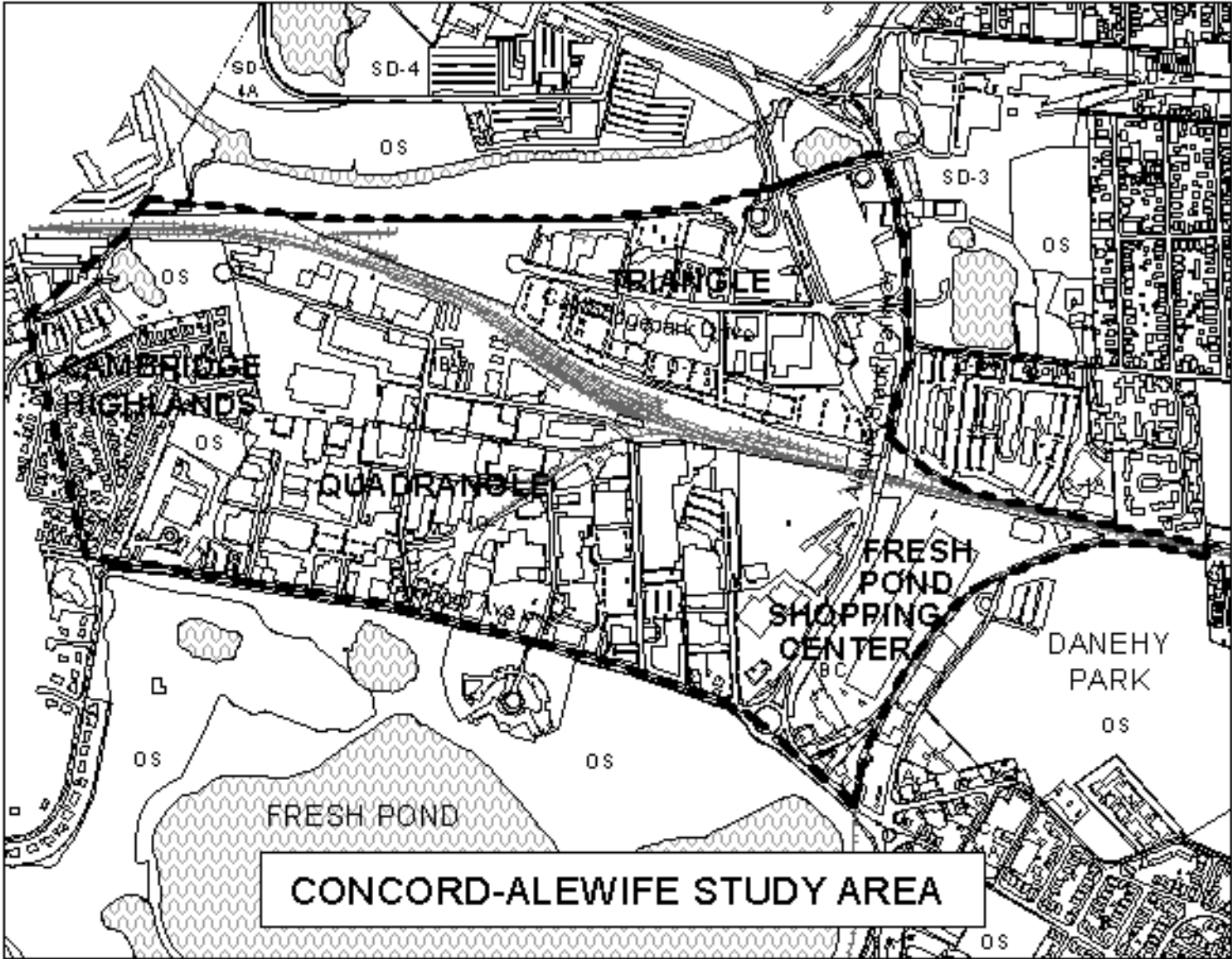
## **What Can Negotiation Do?**

Assisted negotiation could avoid the costly, stressful, and ethically questionable practice of SLAPP-ing activists. SLAPP, or Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation, is the practice of filing or merely threatening to file a lawsuit against activists to dissuade participation. SLAPP suits are often frivolous and may rely upon the application of legislation in

unforeseen manners or manners which may be compliant with the letter of the law but contrary to its spirit. The lawsuits are often based upon technicalities and are rarely won if they are even pursued. SLAPPs are an all too effective of diverting the attentions of opponents. Inclusive planning can stem opposition, thereby avoiding a resort to heavy-handed tactics such as SLAPP-ing and avoiding costly project delays. If city planners and developers can avoid costly delays and schedule slips, some risk can be removed from projects making them more appealing.

Joint planning can allow for managed growth and maximize joint gains. The consultants for the Concord-Alewife Planning Study Committee advocate the application of various contingent restrictions in order to “extract an entrance fee”. The fees would be applied to infrastructure improvements and public works. The extraction of these fees ought to be feasible as Alewife is a premium location, some of the last remaining undeveloped space in Cambridge. The improvements funded by the fees would improve the Alewife area for all and add to the desirability of Alewife. However, these fees could only be acquired if all parties participate with a cooperative spirit and respect the negotiation process. An added benefit of such an approach would be the development long-term relationships and open lines of communication.

Figure 1



Note ([http://www.cambridgema.gov/~CDD/commplan/zoning/concalew/concale\\_maps.html](http://www.cambridgema.gov/~CDD/commplan/zoning/concalew/concale_maps.html))

## References

- Alewife Study Group (ASG) (1999). *Alewife Study Group - about the group* [WWW document]. URI [http://www.alewife.org/alewifestudygroup\\_about.html](http://www.alewife.org/alewifestudygroup_about.html)
- Cambridge, City of (2003, May 2). *Concord-Alewife Planning Study* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.cambridgema.gov/~CDD/commplan/zoning/concalew/>
- Coalition for Alewife (2002, February, 28). [WWW document]. *ALEWIFE: near Boston, Mass.* URI [http://www.alewifeighbors.org/alewife\\_info.html](http://www.alewifeighbors.org/alewife_info.html)
- Cook, S. (2002). *The Great Swamp*. Cambridge, MA: Sheila Cook
- Department of Environmental Management (DEM) (n.d./2002, May 15). *DEM's Mission and Strategic Plan* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.state.ma.us/dem/strategy.htm>
- ENSR International (2003, April). FEMA Flood Insurance Study Mystic River Basin, Massachusetts
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (2003, March 26). *FEMA History* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.fema.gov/about/history.shtm>
- Friends of Alewife Reservation (FAR) (2003, May 15). *Friends of Alewife Reservation* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.friendsofalewifereservation.org/>
- Kaiser, S. (2003, April 24). Summary and Observations on April 23 Flood Symposium
- Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) (n.d./2003, May 15). *facts, figures and organization* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.mwra.state.ma.us/02org/html/whatis.htm>
- Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) (1997). *Quick Facts* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.mapc.org/MAPC%20Web/Active%20Web/About%20MAPC/Quick%20Facts.htm>
- Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) (n.d./2003, May 15). *MDC History* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.state.ma.us/mdc/history.htm>
- Metropolitan Planning Organization, Boston (MPO) (n.d./2003, May 15). *Boston MPO - What is the MPO* [WWW document]. URI <http://www.ctps.org/bostonmpo/mpo/what.htm>