

REPORT TO CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

March 29, 1999

Ralph Yoder

Concerning the Genetics Institute/200 Cambridgepark Drive issue: There is one great last chance to recreate "The Great (Alewife) Swamp. 200 Cambridgepark Drive is the heart of it. The state now has the vehicle to make it work; the Wetlands Reclamation Act. What a shame if this chance is lost forever. More than 75 persons have signed an appeal to the DEP. Most of them are from Cambridge, Belmont, and Arlington. The majority of signers did not necessarily support building of any kind at that site. There has been talk over the years of the site being used for a nature center/historical museum. While there is sympathy for that ideal, even that type of construction greatly impacts on the wild ecology. Most recognize the benefit of retaining a company with the importance of Genetics Institute. They just don't like the idea of it supplanting the ground-hog village or the American woodcock mating ritual area currently on the site. Woodcocks have the most interesting of all mating antics to observe in North America. Grab a naturalist who knows where to find them and you'll never forget it.

Contrary to popular fable, ground-hogs are not awake on Feb. 2, but are in the torpor of deep hibernation. They likely couldn't be aroused with an electric prod. This year they surely didn't hear the bulldozers coming. However, Ground-hogs Day 1999, The Great Ground-hog Massacre had begun. The site is abundantly strewn with ground-hog dens. Many ground-hogs were, undoubtedly, sacrificed along with the lush green, grassy vegetation covering much of the site, as well as trees and important underbrush at both ends of the site. The red fox seen recently near the site surely was born in a ground-hogs den. Snakes, field mice, skunks, rabbits and weasels also favor these holes.

Being adjacent to the Alewife Reservation, Red-tailed Hawks and Great Horned Owls are often observed as well as such rare species as the gliding endangered Cooper's hawk, and the shy, but perky, Yellow-breasted Chat.

Twenty years ago land nearby was set aside specifically and added to the reservation because of all the significant wildlife. How sad that this site is now in danger from nightlights, car engines, exhaust, urban gasoline run-off as well as other intrusions, if Genetics Institute moves in to 200 Cambridgepark Drive.

A transcendent idea is to add 200 Cambridgepark Drive to an expanded wildlife reservation. The Wetlands Restoration Act could be implemented to return swampland to the tract. Removal of the abandoned railroad berm and a section of the nature trail adjacent to the 200 Cambridgepark Drive site to allow mingling with current swampland. The current nature trail and proposed bike path should be redirected to the edge of the current rail line so that it departs from the current path as it approaches the 200 Cambridgepark eastern property line. This would leave the delicate western end of the Alewife Reservation relatively undisturbed and expanded. Traffic through the middle of a vibrant wildlife community is detrimental. An observation tower would be an aid to undisturbed views of the natural community. Biological research could be performed to introduce wild populations into the area. While most of the site would be optimal for wetlands reconstruction, the higher portion of the site could be sown into a grain such as oats. Initiatives could be made to introduce bobolinks or meadowlarks. Very few people want to alienate Genetics Institute, myself included. Nor do we want to harbor bad feelings with Triangle Associates or Spaulding and Slye. An enlightened suggestion is to move the Genetics Institute plan to the west end of the current parking lot area that stretches along rail tracks between the parkway bridge and the Spaulding and Slye building. If they construct their laboratory on one-third less of a footprint, perhaps they would be allowed additional floorspace horizontally. There is also some sentiment for allowing tiered parking there for workers in the Alewife triangle area. The eastern half of the parking lot could then be returned to greenspace. Plans allowing for a stable and horse grazing area could be implemented. Additional space for this use could be made adjacent to Thorndike Soccer Field in Arlington. The grainfield and an alfalfa site on a section of the W.R. Grace property would serve the dual function of enticing wildlife (and study) and feed for the horses could be instituted to open a channel to Fresh Pond and Black's Nook as contemplated in the past. Perhaps Genetics Institute could be convinced to make their current two-story building available for the nature center and a hiker and bicyclist dormitory. It is situated perfectly.

There is a triune consideration that should be made regarding a wildlife corridor in the area.

- 1.) From the North ----- Tidal bypass at the Amelia Earhart Dam, on the Mystic River allowing free travel to spawning grounds for migrating fish, including those that don't use fish ladders such as smelt, sturgeon, and perhaps even salmon (A real possibility now considering the successful reintroduction in the Westfield River. A 1981 Mystic River Hydrological Report showed that the Alewife area of the watershed was the most prone area for flooding. If harnessed naturally, it could be very beneficial to re-establishing the former Great Swamp tidal basin. 200 Cambridgepark Drive fits the bill wonderfully for a tidal pan.
- 2.) From the south ----- Atlantic Flyway migration route, including world reknown songbird stopover points at Mt. Auburn Cemetery, and duck and other waterfowl stoppingplace at Fresh Pond. The Alewife Reservation is only a short distance from both of them. The reservation, and privately owned parcels adjacent to it, provide diffuse, multi-habitat areas frequented by birds of prey, a variety of rare protected species and many of the wildfowl using the aforementioned sites. The exception seems to be the rule. At least eight species listed on recent Mass. Fish and Wildlife protected lists have been sited. The Cambridgepark Drive site is a multi-habitat zone itself, featuring lush tall grass areas, sparse short grass areas with gravel. Many species hone in on these sites during migration stops. Protecting important stopover areas is most important, especially in a flyway. Many tens of thousands of songbirds were lost on the Gulf of Mexico coastline two years ago during a freak tornado at the height of the bird migration season.
- 3.) From the west ----- A wildlife corridor of interconnected green spaces loosely connecting Cambridge, Belmont and other vicinities. It is from these areas with uplands and woods that fox and many other species come into the area.

Another important consideration is the bikepaths that join areas together. Blue Hills Reservation, south of Boston has horse trails. A horse usage, as well as bike trails, is a good consideration for the minuteman trail. Importantly, this trail extends nearly all the way to Great Meadows National Wildlife Reserve, part of the National Park Service. This area is only a day trip away for most hikers and bicyclers, and to the surprize of many, it is home to bears, moose and fishers. It also nearly connects to the Mystic Watershed.

An ecological sylvan think tank has received some consideration for the Arthur D. Little site if that location comes up for alternative use. Other considerations either at the A.D. Little site or along a reopened brook between Alewife Station and Fresh Pond is a habitat biosphere, such as is in Montreal (not on current green space), and an organic fish hatchery. Additionally, Tufts biologists have agreed that it is a splendid site for an ecological park. Area naturalist, Stewart Sanders, sends a note of appreciation every year in December to officials at Arthur D. Little Company thanking them for their respect of crucial upland habitat on their land.

Other areas of vital ecological significance in the Alewife area include the Martignetti Property, Mugar Woods, the W.R. Grace site as well as other sites linking the Alewife Reservation to Fresh Pond, Danahy Park and other spots.

What a great way to bring in the millenium, by securing unsecured open spaces for habitat on Cambridges western front.

Ha ha ha. What a disaster could happen if we lose this opportunity. Unless we use perception this chance will be lost forever. We just might lose. Speedy all-out action is called for NOW.

OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

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Consent Communication #9

A communication was received from
Ralph Yoder, transmtting a report
concerning the Genetics Institute
/200 Cambridgepark Drive issue.

In City Council April 5, 1999

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