



CITY OF MELROSE

CONSERVATION COMMISSION

City Hall, 562 Main Street
Melrose, Massachusetts 02176
Telephone - (781) 979-4312
Fax - (781) 979-4290

MEMORANDUM

Date: 5/17/2023

To: City Council

From: Eric Devlin, Conservation Agent

Subject: FY2024 Annual Budget – Conservation Commission

In preparation for the review of the Fiscal Year 2024 budgets, I am pleased to provide the Honorable City Council with a summary of the proposed changes to the Conservation Commission's budget.

The Conservation Commission FY24 operating budget (171) reflects an 18.8% increase over FY23. The main cost drivers for this increase are Conservation and Education & Seminars. The Conservation line item has been adjusted to reflect the minimum funding level required to carry out the City's current chemical aquatic treatment strategy for Ell Pond, Towners Pond, and Swains Pond. The increase to the Education & Seminar line item is to cover the cost of handbook access, training/professional development opportunities for Commission members, and to cover the Commission Victorian fair/Healthy Melrose fair table space.

- *Briefly describe what your department's responsibilities are. Include how and at what frequency your department interacts with residents, how many staff, etc.*

The Melrose Conservation Commission is a 7-member volunteer board created under the authority of Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40 Section 8c "for the promotion and development of the natural resources and for the protection of watershed resources." It is principally involved in administering the MA Wetlands Protection Act M.G.L. Ch. 131 sec. 40 originally passed in 1972, the 1996 Rivers Protection Act and the City of Melrose Wetland ordinance Chapter 231 (Ord. No. 07-008, 5-7-2007).

Under these laws, no one may “remove, fill, dredge, or alter” any wetland, floodplain, bank, land under a water body, or land within 100 feet of a protected resource (the “Buffer Zone”) without obtaining a permit from the Conservation Commission.

The Conservation Commission also has responsibility for the care and control over many of the City’s conservation lands, which are open space parcels available for passive recreational use. These include the conservation areas surrounding Towners and Swains Ponds (also known as Flagg Acres, Seaview Trails, and the Rocky View Trail/Knox Memorial Trail), the Ferdinand Woods and West Hill Terrace conservation areas in the northwest corner of the City, and various isolated parcels of land throughout the city. A major portion of the Commission’s conservation maintenance budget is spent on managing nuisance vegetation and algae treatments for Towners Pond (which is under the control of the Conservation Commission) and for Ell Pond and Swains Pond, which are Parks Department properties.

The Commission frequently organizes cleanup days where volunteers and members maintain the hiking trails within the conservation areas. The Commission also continues to support the Outdoor Classroom at the Hoover School. One commission member is part of the group assessing the redesigned sports fields by Ell Pond.

There is one part-time staff person. Residents routinely contact the office for guidance on proposed projects and open space concerns. At least one resident either calls, emails, or stops by the office in person per week with a concern to be addressed.

- *Have there been any noteworthy changes or events that took place during FY23 in your department (staffing changes, technology upgrades, new regulations or procedures, etc.)?*

Year 1 of a \$92,925 3-year contract with Solitude Lake Management for a multi-year invasive Water Chestnut control program at Ell Pond for the mechanical harvester and hydro rake treatment from (2022-2024). Treatment started in July 2022(FY23). Funding was previously secured via state earmark and free cash appropriation for years 1 and 2 of the contract. Year 3 funding has still not been secured. Year 3 (FY25) funding

has still not been secured; the projected FY25 budget is short approximately \$21,000 based on the current funding level.

More attention to the Towners Pond and Swains Pond treatment plan will be required.

- *Do all of your department's salaries come from the same budget? If not, please identify the split among multiple budgets.*

All Department salaries come from the same budget.

- *Are there any significant changes to your FY24 budget compared to previous years? Please explain.*

The Commission is now pursuing joining efforts with Melrose Parks to commission a holistic study on the First, Second and Third Ponds at Mt. Hood and Towners and Swains Pond together as a system. The goal is to better coordinate the management of these ponds since all these ponds are hydraulically connected. Ell Pond has had a major outgrowth of invasive water chestnut in past years that will require continuation of the multiyear management strategy. A \$92,925 3-year contract with Solitude Lake Management was signed for a multi-year invasive Water Chestnut control program at Ell Pond for the mechanical harvester and hydro rake treatment from (2022-2024). This multi-year program began treatment in July 2022 with DPW support for the onshore material removal. Funding has only been secured for FY23 and FY24 currently.

The Commission will continue to explore allocating additional conservation maintenance funds toward assessing and implementing preventative measures to improve the health of the ponds in addition to evaluating appropriate treatment options. The Commission has reached out to Representative Lipper-Garabedian and Senator Jason Lewis to inquire about sponsoring additional state earmarks for this work. We have also researched federal, state, and private grants for invasive species removal. None of these efforts has been successful to date.

The Commission's historic practice of treating nuisance vegetation in the three main ponds we oversee (Swains, Ell, and Towners) with herbicides, while a common practice and effective at maintaining aesthetics and function of the ponds, is essentially treating a symptom rather than the underlying problems that are common to urban ponds. A long-term goal

is to stabilize the ponds and transition to devoting more funding to preventative measures.

This effort will be completed within our requested budget structure for FY24. The Commission would also like to note that the health of the ponds is related to activities of the Department of Public Works, particularly related to stormwater management, and is impacted by many activities of residents and businesses within the watersheds to these ponds.

The Commission has contracted with a different pond treatment vendor this year, Water & Wetland, LLC, for Towners Pond and Swains Pond.

With the loss of several long-time members in recent years, additional funding will be necessary for education and training for new members.

- *Any events or changes you anticipate in your department for FY24?*

We are currently engaged to utilize volunteers to fulfill a couple of action items from the recently updated Melrose Master Plan. We will continue the Trail Stewardship volunteer program. It has been very successful in aiding the Commission to address issues in a timely manner and both improve the trail user experience and protect wetland resource areas from damage.

\$92,925 3-year contract with Solitude Lake Management for multi-year invasive Water Chestnut control program at Ell Pond with mechanical harvester and hydro rake treatment from (2022-2024) to continue this July. On-shore component of material removal will continue to require DPW support and staff coordination. Expanded volunteer hand-pulling efforts to augment Ell Pond Water Chestnut management with hand-pulling events this summer.

We currently have about 7 active trail steward volunteers that have been able to give the commission direct feedback on the trail areas throughout Melrose on a regular basis and identify areas that could be improved. Some ideas for trail improvements have begun to be implemented by this program.

The Open Space and Recreation Plan update also establishes goals and action items for the City to acquire additional open space, from among the small amount of remaining privately held undeveloped area in Melrose. The Commission would welcome contact from any City Councilors who have an interest in this issue.