

Charles River Dam Advisory Committee | Meeting #10

June 14, 2021 (Virtual)

Meeting Summary

This meeting summary was prepared by the Consensus Building Institute (CBI), a nonprofit entity contracted by the Town of Natick to facilitate the Charles River Dam Advisory Committee process. This summary is not intended to be a meeting transcript. Rather, it focuses on the main points covered during the meeting.

MEETING IN BRIEF

The Charles River Dam Advisory Committee (AC) convened virtually for its tenth meeting on Tuesday, June 14, 2022, to review and discuss conceptual park design elements as well as project updates from town staff. Fifty-four people attended this meeting: 18 AC members (plus one new member), 1 invited presenter, 2 CBI project staff, and 33 interested members of the public. **The agenda, presentation slides and the recording of this meeting are available on the project's webpage: <http://natickma.gov/crdam>.**

NEXT STEPS

- The next Advisory Committee meeting will be Monday, June 27, from 4:00-6:30 PM ET and feature a presentation from Stantec on their preliminary spillway removal technical work, as well as a presentation from Town staff on cost and financial considerations.
- Advisory Committee members are encouraged to share their outstanding questions with the Planning Team.
- The Planning Team will expand FAQ to summarize learnings from meetings to-date and new technical work (may incorporate video from meeting recordings).
- The Planning Team will post the AC Meeting #10 recording and slides on the project webpage.

WELCOME & COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ona Ferguson, CBI Facilitation Team, welcomed participants. AC members approved the meeting summary from their ninth meeting on January 25. Ms. Ferguson briefly reviewed the work of the AC to date, highlighting the different topics explored and experts engaged in previous meetings. She shared key themes from the individual check-in calls the facilitation team had with AC members this spring, noting that members are appreciative of and comfortable with the work that has gone into the AC process to date and are looking forward to learning more information from technical work at the June meetings. Ms. Ferguson and Jon Marshall, Deputy Town Administrator, briefly reviewed the decision making process of the AC, as well as how the Town will incorporate the AC's recommendation in its decision making process. Membership change: Karen Partanen, former Town Recreation and Parks Director, is no longer on the AC.

PROJECT UPDATES FROM TOWN STAFF

The AC received a variety of project updates from Town staff on: a recent dam inspection report and change of status, the Emergency Action Plan for the South Natick Dam, and new information around fish passage. *Slides are available [here](#).*

Review of recent dam inspection report and change of status: William McDowell, Town Engineer, presented on the recommendations and safety issues noted in the December 2021 inspection report of the dam, completed by GZA GeoEnvironmental, Inc. and available [here](#). He reviewed how the South Natick Dam's condition rating was changed from "fair" to "poor" by the Massachusetts Office of Dam Safety, which increases inspection requirements from every two years to every six months and may require the dam to be monitored during anticipated rain/runoff events.

Review of the Emergency Action Plan for the South Natick Dam: Mr. McDowell then reviewed the Emergency Action Plan for the South Natick Dam, available [here](#), highlighting the notification procedures for informing local emergency agencies in Natick and neighboring towns as well as downstream residents if dam failure is imminent. Mr. McDowell shared a table that captures the number of residential properties and assessed property values within the inundation zone and presented on the dam failure inundation map included in the plan. He reviewed the difference between typical flooding and inundation¹, stressing that the risk of inundation would be eliminated in a spillway removal scenario, but the risk of flooding remains similar in either scenario, with downstream flood risks remaining the same and upstream flood risks being marginally reduced in a spillway removal scenario.

Review of new information around fish passage: Claire Rundelli, Town Conservation Agent, presented an updated policy received from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection in May 2022 on diadromous (fish that live in saltwater but feed/breed in freshwater) fisheries stream management. She summarized that, if the Town repairs the dam, the state may require replacing the existing fish ladder, which does not currently meet state standards for diadromous fisheries management. In addition to the cost and time considerations of replacing the ladder, the Town may also need to dedicate ongoing resources to document each fish run season.

AC discussion: AC members emphasized that the future of the spillway will not impact general, seasonal flood risk and also highlighted that changing climate conditions may bring more frequent or severe storms and flooding. When asked why the dam's condition rating was changed now, Mr. McDowell noted that ODS expressed surprise that Natick had been "getting away with" a "fair" rating up until now; state regulators are looking at the South Natick Dam with a more critical eye given the repair and remedial measures, including removing the mature tree growth, needed to bring the dam into better compliance. AC members also expressed renewed interest in learning from Stantec's work on a preliminary spillway design to better understand how the river profile could change and how wetland delineation could change up and downstream.

CONCEPT ELEMENTS FOR POTENTIAL PARK IMPROVEMENTS

Iris Yung-Ching Lin from Halvorson's Tighe & Bond Studio presented concept elements for dam repair and spillway removal scenarios, showing visualizations of how the Charles River Dam area could be designed under either scenario to remain a special place for the community. She reviewed the elements of this area that community members indicated are both cherished and missing, pulling from public input shared in the Community Use and Recreation Survey. Ms. Lin then shared conceptual elements and renderings of how this area could be designed to meet community needs if the dam is repaired or the spillway removed. The conceptual elements are preliminary, illustrative, and subject to change, and Mr. Marshall noted that park improvements in either scenario would follow a separate process of funding, design work, and public engagement.

Discussion

Key themes from AC member discussion included:

- *Conceptual elements* - AC members highlighted some of the conceptual elements they liked, including safe launch areas for paddlers, the terraced stone, and interpretive signage to show the history of the area.

¹ "The "inundation zone" is the area downstream of the dam that would be flooded in the event of a failure (breach) or uncontrolled release of water, and is generally much larger than the area for the normal river or stream flood event." Source: FEMA, [Living with Dams](#)

- *Future design considerations* - AC members suggested the Town explore if a footbridge connecting South Natick Dam Park and Grove Park was feasible, following a suggestion from public comments, and recommended that the Town pay close attention to the kinds of materials that would eventually be used in park design, prioritizing durable materials that require less maintenance.
- *Looking at the big picture* - A member emphasized the need for the AC to look at the big picture to assess how either scenario can meet the needs and aspirations of the community, not just focusing on design or implementation details.
- *Cost considerations* - A member shared a desire to learn more about costs of implementing both options and better understanding if certain design elements under either scenario are more costly. Ms. Lin noted that the conceptual elements shown in these renderings could be pursued at a large or small scale in either scenario based on budget, and that the spillway removal scenario would create more opportunities for different elements and a more naturalistic space.
- *Delineation of the earthen dam structure* - Members raised questions on where the state regulators delineate where the dam ends and how that impacts the potential future of the surrounding trees that may or may not be on the earthen dam. ODS has been clear that all trees and woody undergrowth must be removed from the earthen dam structure, but they have been less clear about whether trees that are along the southern property line of Grove Park between the park and 17 Pleasant Street are “on the dam.” Mr. McDowell noted that the town asked ODS this question a few times and have yet to receive an opinion on where the dam “stops being a dam.” GZA’s initial impression was that all trees in the Grove Park area need to be removed.
- *Safety considerations with designing a park area if the dam is repaired* - A member noted that the conceptual elements show people engaging directly with the water close to the spillway, but having open access to the water that close to the spillway is a large safety concern. Direct engagement with the river would be safer in a spillway removal scenario. Mr. McDowell shared that, were the Town to maintain the dam, there would need to be floating barriers or buoys for boaters installed.
- *Impacts of construction* - A member noted that construction to implement either option would impact the area, and Mr. McDowell shared that the contractor would be required to do restoration and clean up as part of their work, which would be overseen in part by the Conservation Commission.
- *How conceptual elements inform decision making* - Members described the challenge of developing a recommendation on this binary decision without knowing how many resources the Town will commit to designing a park here and making this area a special place for the community. There is a gap between the decision the AC is making here and the ultimate future of this site. Members emphasized that Ms. Lin’s work demonstrates that both scenarios can result in beautiful parks that meet community desires, and there is some need to trust the Town’s decision making process. One member noted that Wilson Middle School students did a role play of the AC’s decision process and boiled down their primary concerns to costs, safety, honoring Indigenous perspectives, and environmental impacts. Ms. Ferguson noted that many AC members indicated in individual calls that they had sufficient information to make a decision. Mr. Marshall noted that, in the AC’s recommendation to the Select Board, there could be a suggestion for funding to enhance the design of the park areas.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

Below are verbal public comments shared live in the meeting. Additional public comments submitted in writing are captured in Appendix B.

- Leslie Pano: I live at 8 Merrill Road, and I spoke at one of the earlier meetings about my concern about removal of the dam and possible flooding. The GZA presentation on page 46 shows the 100-year flood inundation area post-dam to include my garage, part of my backyard, most of my side yard, and my neighbor's house at 4 Merrill Road. I questioned that and someone indicated that, although the slide didn't show it, there really wasn't going to be any difference from what it currently was. I actually contacted a GIS specialist who provided me with a current FEMA flood map and it doesn't look anything like the drawing of what they say it's going to be post-dam removal. Looking at the map, the flood zone barely gets into the river side of the baseball fields and doesn't get anywhere near my property or the property of my neighbors. I'm just going to say again that I'm very concerned; I oppose removal of the dam. I don't want to risk flooding. I don't want to have to pay for flood insurance that I don't have to now. I'm going to ask again that we reconsider removal of the dam and consider that is not a viable option.
- Brad Peterson: I live at 7 Dover Road, not too far from the dam and have been involved in this process as a member of the public. I think it's absolutely wonderful that we're now able to look at professionally done conceptual renderings of either option, it really gives all those involved in the process a glimpse of what might be in the future. Although some previous speakers brought up some very important points that those conceptual renderings are dependent on funding from the town and, at the moment there is no funding from the town. They're sort of giant wish lists in a vacuum. It could have been more helpful to do professional renderings of either option if there was no material funding from the town because that's a very likely outcome. Either of those options seemed wonderful, but I can only imagine may run into millions of dollars, and I wonder what it would be like to go to Town Meeting and seek millions of dollars of funding for a park in South Natick. It was interesting to hear the gentleman from the town talk about the committee recommending funding for modest enhancement of either option after the work is being done. I think the conceptual renderings are wonderful, but just completely concerned and terrified that there won't be any money to do either of those things. And I think the committee will really have to contemplate in their decision as to whether it's one of the other, as to what it would look like absent any material funding from the town.
- David Parish: *[reading a letter submitted as written public comment]*

The future of the dam and spillway at the Charles River is a contentious issue—to put it mildly. There are very strong emotions about whether to remove or retain the spillway. We are writing to urge consideration of an approach that may somewhat reconcile these competing interests: and provide the sense of place that so many feel for the present park and spillway: "A Bridge Over Troubled Water."

The two of us have been involved with design and finance issues for many years. We have concluded that the underlying economic, environmental, and cultural issues argue for removing the spillway. However, we are very aware of the extreme sense of loss many will feel if this direction is recommended by the committee.

When people in Natick came together to build the spillway and dam on the river, they hoped to create a place of distinction, a place to gather and enjoy the beauty of the river; for many, they succeeded beyond expectations. The current dam and spillway have a strong draw: the graceful curve of the spillway, the sound of the rushing water, the tranquil water above, the large trees on the dam combine to create a sense of place—a place for enjoyment and contemplation. However, for many others, the dam on the Quinobequin is an interference with the natural flow of the river that disregards the history of the area: a history of commercial use, conflict and loss. It is difficult to imagine two more different cultures than the Native Americans and Puritans who met on the land along the river in the area that we now call

Natick. But, it is possible to imagine that the world might be entirely different if the resulting dialogue had focused on understanding rather than conversion.

We urge consideration of the construction of a bridge between the north and south shore of the river, a structure that would reiterate the arc of the present spillway: a bridge, in the middle connected by a section of clear glass that would allow a direct view of the river below—a bridge to serve as a reminder of the history of the site and of connections still to be made.

A bridge would unite the two sides of the river without a perilous walk along an unpleasant section of Pleasant Street and invite the development of the land on the south side of the river as a place that would represent a part of the culture of the Native Americans who lived, and still live, in and around Natick. The town, its institutions, and its residents need to not merely recognize the past but make an ongoing commitment to learn from what existed, what happened, and how a more profound understanding might shape our future.

Natick has an opportunity to create both a practical and symbolic connection that will serve as an ongoing reminder of the need to consider the past and imagine the future: to make a statement that understanding and compromise can merge memory and hope.

- Ian Mevorach: Good evening everyone, and I want to say thank you for all of your careful work on this topic. I'm here to read into the record a summary of a letter that was written by nine of my clergy colleagues and myself. I'm the director of the Common Streets Spiritual Center in Natick, also a resident and Town Meeting member. Our statement was titled: "Honoring the Quinobequin: A Statement in Support of Removal of the Dam in South Natick." In summary, I'll say that we were all very moved by a presentation made to this Committee by Kristen Wyman, member of the Natick Nipmuc Council. And we believe that, as a matter of justice and equity, we need to listen more carefully to Nipmuc voices and perspectives and that they should carry extra weight in this Committee's deliberations and ultimate recommendations. Our opinion about the River was very much informed by Kristen Wyman's perspective, but it was also informed by other environmental and ethical reasons, all pointing towards the restoration of the river. We believe that that is the most ethical choice; according to everything we've heard, it's also the most cost effective and the best for the environment. And we believe that removing the spillway will be best for trees, for fish, for the health of the river as a whole. We want to acknowledge the sacredness of water and the sacredness of the river, and we hope that this committee will take that into account. We also hope the committee will consider that Indigenous people have consistently opposed the practice of damming rivers for the many reasons that had been discussed, especially related to the environment and the sanctity of the river. And we think that it's time for the Town of Natick to recognize and adopt this perspective. A perspective from Indigenous people who have been more connected to the land and the waters here and have more of a sense of how we can honor the river properly. So with humility, I think we should be listening and we should be following a new way of thinking. We do hope the committee will make a recommendation to restore the river and that the restoration process must be one that is respectful to the history, values, and rights of Indigenous people. I deeply respect the work of this committee, and I do want to echo something said earlier tonight about the broad strokes, the big issues: the environment, cost, the relationship with Indigenous people. Some of the key moral and ethical issues that I think we need to take into account and see this as an opportunity to depart from a colonialist perspective and way of being that might be out of touch with the environmental realities. I appreciate this committee so much, thank you for all your work, and I would ask, on behalf of nine other clergy in town, who represent a lot of citizens, please recommend for the restoration of the river, thank you.

- Sean L.: I would just echo everyone's sentiments about just how valuable and respectful this committee has been; it really makes me proud to live in Natick. We also live on the very south end of Natick, enjoy the spillway every week. I was just thinking about some of the comments that have been made by the public here. I share some of the concerns earlier about whether town funding would be appropriated for a park. As someone who's very engaged with the Natick community organic farm, which had their barn burned down last year. There has been a groundswell of support in that instance for raising funds independently of the town to restore that barn and it just brought to my mind that maybe a similar process could occur here, given the investment so many have in the area. There could be a parallel funding drive and not even having to wait for the town to provide funds for restoration or creation of a nice park space if, in fact, the river is restored, which it seems as though many, many things are pointing toward that being the decision to be made. Just bringing it up as another idea to sort of think about ways we can harness the local community and its resources, independent of the whole town of Natick to say that this is something that we think deserves a really important and well thought out and used space, regardless of the decision that's made about the spillway.

CONCLUSION

Following public comments, Ona Ferguson, CBI Facilitation Team, reviewed a list of next steps and invited Advisory Committee members to share closing thoughts and reflections. Members shared gratitude for the conceptual design work and how it reflects the goals of the community, appreciation for the thorough deliberation of the committee and engagement of the public, and eagerness for the next meeting's presentation on preliminary spillway removal design work.

APPENDIX A: ATTENDANCE

Advisory Committee Members

Mike Balcom, Community Member
David Blease, Community Member
Dirk Coburn, Finance Committee Representative
Terri Evans, Planning Board Representative
Jeannine Furrer, Historic District Commission Representative
Martin Kessel, Community Member
Seth Levine, Recreation and Parks Commission Representative
David Lodding, Open Space Advisory Committee Representative
Jeremy Marsette, Director, Public Works
Jon Marshall, Deputy Town Administrator
William McDowell, Town Engineer
Claire Rundelli, Conservation Agent
Aaron Spelker, Commission on Disability Representative
Rebekah Stendahl, Community Member
Chris Stillman, Conservation Commission Representative
Jillian Wilson Martin, Sustainability Coordinator
Kristen Wyman, Indigenous Representative: Natick Nipmuc Indian Council
David Yancey, Indigenous Representative: Natick Nipmuc

Project Staff

Ona Ferguson, CBI Facilitator
Maggie Osthues, CBI Facilitator

Invited Presenters

Iris Yung-Ching Lin, Halvorson's Tighe & Bond Studio

33 interested members of the public also attended the meeting.

APPENDIX B: WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENTS

Town of Natick: Charles River Dam Advisory Committee
June 14, 2022, 4:00 - 6:30 PM ET Meeting
Written Public Comments

Randy Johnson
June 8, 2022

Has the dam's inclusion in the historic districts (Local and National) been reviewed relative to the removal / restoration decision?

Thanks
Randy

Historic Dam Detail: NAT.921

Charles River Dam

MHC ID	NAT.921 MACRIS Maps for NAT.921 Inventory:
Historic Name	Charles River Dam
Common Name	-
Street Address	Charles River
	-
City/Town	Natick
Village/Neighborhood	South Natick;
Local Number	-
Year Constructed	1934
Architects	Fay, Spofford and Thorndike;
Architectural Styles	-
Uses	Other Engineering;
Significance	Community Planning; Engineering;
Areas	NAT.C: Elliot, John Historic District Inventory: NR: NAT.G: Elliot, John Historic District
Designations	Local Historic District (09/27/1976); Nat'l Register District (06/23/1983);
Demolished	No



Connie Dinning
June 9, 2022

My husband and I have been attending all the zoom meetings and following the information you have provided. We live a couple of blocks from the spillway and visit it several times each week. I understand the need to remove trees in order to repair the dam, with the other option being to remove the spillway. So, it seems as though it comes down to "do you want the trees or the spillway more?". We would much rather keep the spillway which is a beautiful and unique part of our town and community, and has visitors most of the day every day. I know people were upset about losing most of the trees, but I believe there is a way to make this space attractive and useful to visitors, and would leave the side closest to the library as is. I would like to hear what the committee thinks about this.

Thank you for all of the work and thoughtful consideration all of you have put into this.

Sorry to have left out an important part of the plan in my previous email. There are many people who may prefer to restore the river (remove the spillway) for the sake of river restoration. There are aspects of this that I like, but would hate to lose the beauty of the spot as is.

Regards,
Connie Dinning

Richard Moon
June 10, 2022

Attached is a letter concerning the discussion on the future of the Charles River Dam and spillway which we would like to have provided to the committee for review and consideration. Thank you for your participation in this decision process and we look forward to the committee recommendations to the Select Board in the future.

Best Wishes
Richard Moon
617-308-7404

June 10, 2022

Attn: Maggie Osthues-Consensus Building Institute
Charles River Dam Advisory Committee
Town of Natick

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David Parish

Richard Moon

