

Charles River Dam Advisory Committee | Meeting #6

November 9, 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 for the sixth time virtually on Tuesday, November 9, 2021, to review and discuss cultural and historical considerations for the decision facing the Town about the future of the Charles River Dam. Forty-nine people attended this meeting: 16 AC members, 1 invited presenter, 2 CBI project staff, and 30 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 AC meeting will be focused on adjacent landowner perspectives and legal considerations. [This meeting was rescheduled from November 30 to October 14 following Meeting #6 of the AC.]
- AC members will continue to review the draft work plan and share suggested experts and speakers for future meetings topics.
- The Planning Team will email the agenda and travel details about field trip to dam maintenance sites on November 15.
- The Planning Team will follow up with Mr. Wildman to address a question raised about dam removal processes with similar developmental characteristics as Natick's dam.
- The Planning Team will hold meetings with abutters upstream and downstream of the dam on November 15 and 16.
- The Planning Team will design a public outreach process to gather input about community use and recreation.
- The Planning Team will post the AC Meeting #6 recording and slides on the project webpage.

WELCOME & COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Ona Ferguson, CBI Facilitation Team, welcomed participants. AC members approved the meeting summaries from their fifth meeting on October 14. James Errickson, Town Administrator, welcomed the Advisory Committee, and William McDowell, Town Engineer and AC Member, shared updates from the Town regarding tasking GZA with a regulatory review of proposed options and submitting a proposal to the state for further exploration of the design of a spillway removal option. Jillian Wilson Martin, Town Sustainability Coordinator and AC Member, shared that the agenda had been posted for the November 15 site visit to dam repair and maintenance sites in Paxton and Worcester, MA.

REVIEW OF GUIDING CRITERIA & PRINCIPLES FOR ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Maggie Osthues, CBI Facilitation Team, presented a brief overview of the criteria and principles the Advisory Committee proposed in the September 2 Meeting to guide its work. AC members reflected on whether the criteria still resonated, or if there was anything missing. One AC member noted that some of the criteria are subjective (e.g., different perspectives on what "beauty" is) and will be vaguer guidance for AC deliberating and decision-making.

CULTURAL & HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ona Ferguson, CBI Facilitation Team, opened this topic noting that many in the Natick community have shared the significance of this area to them personally and to the Town of Natick, and many also indicated that they would like to better understand Indigenous perspectives and histories associated with the area. (The complete synthesis report of public input is available on the project's webpage, [here](#)).

Suzanne Cherau, RPA, Senior Archaeologist/Principal Investigator at The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc., presented on cultural resource considerations associated with dam removal and river restoration programs. Ms. Cherau reviewed cultural resource management at a high level, detailing the general process approach and how it ties into permitting and regulatory compliance, sharing an example from the Marland Place Dam Removal Project, which the AC visited on October 2, 2021. Responding to AC member questions, Ms. Cherau described the protocol for engaging Tribes and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPO), noting that both federally-recognized and state-recognized Tribes would be consulted as a part of the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 process. She also highlighted that the work of professional archeologists and architectural historians would be to complete an assessment to guide the work of project partners, like federal and state agencies, to avoid or minimize negative impacts to identified cultural resources, not to halt the project. *The presentation slides and meeting recording are available to view on the project page [here](#).*

Kristen Wyman, Natick Nipmuc Indian Council and AC Member, and David Yancey, Natick Nipmuc and AC Member, shared Indigenous perspectives and histories around this area. Ms. Wyman presented on the "Historic and Cultural Considerations of the Quinobequin," sharing an introduction to the Nipmuc people, describing the perspectives she brings to this process as a Nipmuc person, and emphasizing the importance of Indigenous perspectives when it comes to making decisions about the Charles River Dam(s). Ms. Wyman shared how the river is currently used by the Nipmuc people for recreation and ceremony to remember the lived experience and dispossession of the Nipmuc people. She highlighted that the river's current status is not fixed in time and can be repaired in steps and highlighted issues of environmental justice, climate resilience, biodiversity, and food sovereignty, speaking to management of the land holistically using Indigenous knowledge and thinking ahead to make decisions for future generations. Both Ms. Wyman and Mr. Yancey shared views that the spillway should be removed, and the flow of the river opened up to repair and restore the river one step at a time. *The presentation slides and meeting recording are available to view on the project page [here](#).*

Below are key discussion threads from AC members following the presentation on Indigenous perspectives and histories. *Please note that both options (dam repair and spillway removal and river restoration) were discussed without an assumption of which outcome would be selected.*

- Members shared appreciation for learning a much longer history of the river and hearing a vision for the future that included engaging the youth in the community now in stewardship.
- Members commented that it will be important to respect the Native Nipmuc peoples' perspectives and history in the decision-making process and in the design of the future site. Town staff noted that Chief Caring Hands from the Praying Indians is also a member of the AC, and the facilitation team commented that one of the major interests shared by Chief Caring Hands is around signage and acknowledgment of history at the site.
- Members noted that there are different concepts of beauty (e.g., natural, industrial).
- Members highlighted the importance of keeping climate resilience top of mind when making a decision for the future of the Town.

- Members raised big questions about how the Town could possibly “make things right” given its colonial treatment of Indigenous peoples. Ms. Wyman noted that, although economies and industry may look differently now, there is great opportunity to restore localized food economies and create new systems based on combined viewpoints of Indigenous peoples and folks that have settled here.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

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

- Lawrence Slotnick: I live just upstream of the dam on Route 16, and I just wanted to briefly raise a point that is, as I understand the history, the first bridge where Pleasant Street is, was built by the Indigenous communities; it was a stone bridge and then later it has developed into what it is now. There is a history of Indigenous infrastructure on the river as well in that, you know, if you look back thousands of years, obviously the River was one thing, but over time, the history, including the history of Indigenous people, the uses of the River changed. The presentations today were certainly reflective of the history going back a long time, but there's also a history moving forward and I just wanted to point that out.
- Candy Hulton: I live off of Route 16. I had probably an idea that may have been discussed before, but my idea is to bring out whatever that's called on the upper side of the earthen dam back into the water with land fill that can be grassed over for beautiful area. Perhaps it gets free land fill from some of the construction that we're doing lots of. On the lower side of the spillway dam and everything, I also suggest that you bring that fill into the lower side to meet up with the Pleasant Street dam – not coming all the way up to the street level but keeping it low enough so that you can have another sitting area. What you've done is doubled the size for the community itself to use the area, you've been able to leave the trees, you've been able to leave the spillway, and you've also alleviated the need for giving every two years, an expensive analysis of the hazardous condition that we have now.
- Karen Mallozzi: I just wanted to agree with the ideas about the mishoon and other materials that may or may not come up if we either repair or remove the dam. I think it'd be good to keep in mind that some of these materials don't have to turn into trash where we're always using up and discarding. I'd like to, going forward, see some of those materials, whether they're trees, or whatever, if the Indigenous community has a use for those that that is remembered and offered to them.
- Mia Khefetz: I appreciate Kristen and David's comments. You know, when they're talking about widening the horizon, and we're looking back at history that goes back thousands and thousands of years, that when we're thinking about the river today we're also thinking forward into the future, and I think that was a point Kristen made about kind of moving forward in generations forward as well. And that we've come to the point where we're learning from the past, we see the effect that the damming had on the river, and to think about what we're going to say to our kids and our grandkids when we know that we're presented with the opportunity to make a change now that would be ecologically better, more respectful of our history, and when I say history really far back history, and it's just something that we need to think about going forward for the generations coming forward as well.

CONCLUSION

Ona Ferguson, CBI Facilitation Team, reviewed a list of next steps and invited Advisory Committee members to share closing thoughts and reflections. Members shared the importance of worldview, relationality, and reciprocity when thinking about stewardship of the river; gratitude for presenters' time and efforts, especially for the sharing of the Natick Nipmuc perspective; feeling a sense of shifting to a more community-focused and future-focused place in deliberations; and need to process the information shared.

APPENDIX A: ATTENDANCE

Advisory Committee Members

Mike Balcom, Community Member
David Blease, Community Member
James Errickson, Town Administrator
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
William McDowell, Town Engineer
Karen Partanen, Director, Recreation and Parks
Claire Rundelli, Conservation Agent
Rebekah Stendahl, Community Member
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

Suzanne Cherau, RPA, Senior Archaeologist/Principal Investigator at The Public Archaeology Laboratory, Inc.

30 interested members of the public also attended the meeting.

APPENDIX B: WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENTS

Town of Natick: Charles River Dam Advisory Committee
November 9, 2021, 4:00 - 6:30 PM ET Meeting
Written Public Comments

Matt Connell
November 4, 2021

TWIMC,

Background on me:

- I am the nearest private property owner to the dam (downstream... 8 Pleasant Street).
- I love the dam in its current form.

My Comment:

Those pine trees are more than 50 years old. In any other year before the present one, if an engineer identified them as problematic, the solution would be removing the trees. Only now would the idea of canceling the dam gain traction. Anti-dam momentum has grown artificially, because of zoom. The cultural importance of the dam is absent from the discussion when the discussion is absent of community – which it is when the meetings are virtual. Touting environmentalism is consistent with embracing “science” as we all are naturally inclined to do these days. I will spare you my rhetoric on why the dam should stay in this letter and simply beg you, do not let trending online public sentiment of the moment (biased by the pandemic) delete this cultural icon for ever.

Sincerely,
Matt Connell
508.655.8881

Ray Watts
November 8, 2021

Comments to Dam Advisory Committee
November 8th, 2021

1. **What was not addressed at October 14th meeting:**

A. What will happen to the current eco-system, i.e. current fish population; snow white swans; Canadian Geese; ducks of every variety including Mallards, Loons, and Diving Ducks; the Blue Herons; and birds of hundreds of varieties; frogs and reptiles; flora and fauna? What is going to be lost, *never* to return? The proposal is to drain the pond/lake behind the dam. Does this have no negative consequences?!

B. What are the specifics of our situation? Making a decision on general attributes of a group, is often wrong for an individual in that group. Yet that seems to be exactly what is being proposed for our dam. Of the 3,000 dams in Massachusetts, The South Natick Dam does NOT fit the average! Why our dam is different than the average Massachusetts dam is not even being discussed. Why not?

C. Fish moving from the ocean to the rivers stop at the first dam. Although fish ladders and upstream stocking can help, their effect is minor compared to no dam. A pivotal publication on this is: <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/conl.12000> In this paper the authors discuss why “Half Way Technologies” (their term), have failed. Basically fish stop at the first dam. The first dam(s) on the Charles are in Boston, They have created a beautiful lake called the Charles River Basin. Most of us have experience this awesome urban oasis separating Boston and Cambridge. There is no possible way I can think of that Boston and Cambridge would drain this Basin and “return the river to its natural flow”. That being the case, ocean migrating fish species will never happen in the Charles to the degree that existed 500 years ago. (It should be noted that we don’t know what existed on the Charles 500 years ago.)

2. What is the central question the committee is trying to answer? I would hope the question is: *What is best for Natick?* Since the act of demolition of the water falls is so extreme, the answer to each discussion phase should be overwhelming for demolition, not just , “on average, 3,000 dams have (.....)”; and “we think (.....), but we have no specific data on South Natick”. The committee should agree on the central question to be answered. Individual members of the committee may see the question as, “to breach the spillway or not”. However, I believe the Natick community sees the question as, “To demolish the South Natick Waterfalls, a Natick historic, and cultural center piece, or not”.

Submitted by: Ray Watts, Owner 61 Eliot Street (overlooking waterfalls)

Kyle Ondricek
November 8, 2021

I'm writing to question the urgency of a repair or breach decision.

The need for a decision is clear. And... You are to be commended for the thoughtfulness and balance you have brought to the process.

However, I submit that the ultimate decision may not be urgent, could be made in years not months and thus not disrupt Natick's iconic and significant focal point.

The urgency is NOT coming from the office of dam safety (a tiny agency overseeing 1600 dams)

The "fair" category assigned to our dam by our engineering consultants is not unusual and is not a category that ODS acts upon. If the consultant's inspection in two years leads to a reduction to a "poor" rating then we hit ODS radar which triggers more inspections.

The urgency may come from a concern that a dam failure would be "a disastrous catastrophe" and severely affect our neighbors downstream.

But, has the "disaster" been subject to a quantifiable practical risk and damage assessment? Here are two questions that come to mind.

What percentage of dams in our "fair" category have failed in the last 100 years?

If the dam failed in the midst of a 100 year flood with millions of gallons already flowing per time period would the emptying of our dam's modest reservoir over a few minutes (or more likely hours) raise the flood plane downstream by an inch or a foot. By 1% or 30%?

If the probability of dam failure is high and the resultant emptying of our reservoir is likely to significantly add to the 100 year flood consequences for our neighbors, then YES ...repair or breach quickly. If not, then hold onto our gem of a dam for a while longer.

I am raising this question based on my experience of "managing" a dam for 15 years, hiring the professional engineering inspector and dealing with ODS. Based on that experience I suggest you keep up the sterling work you are doing, but don't rush.

Thank you
Kyle Ondricek
20 Pleasant street
Natick, MA

Here are some Background links.
[Rating system and actions ODS takes](#)
[Budget for ODS](#)

Kyle Ondricek

November 9, 2021

Following an email exchange with the Town Engineer

I had not considered the damage potential of the uprooted trees and the bridge. That certainly does increase the potential damage possibility.

Here's an approach... It may (probably?) be not politically feasible, but if it is it would buy time, reduce damage potential, give peace of mind and time for the town to get used to the fact that the dam cannot exist in its present form forever.

The approach: Remove some of the high damage potential trees and stumps before the next inspection as a beautification step. This is cheap, lowers potential damage and sets a path that is consistent with either repair or breach option. No further action until after the next inspection. Use the time to get the town population more used to and more comfortable with the committee's recommendation.

Candy Hulton

November 9, 2021

I would like to propose an alternative to put fill in the above the earthen dam section far enough into the water to remove the hazard that the town is now paying every year to have reviewed. Below the spillway fill in the water to the Pleasant street bridge and build out the current stone wall to meet the bridge. The hazard review would be eliminated, the trees could remain, the spillway and its beauty could remain. The fill could possibly be free from construction and the town could put grass on the 2 new areas to create a more beautiful South Natick iconic area for the public to enjoy. Thank you for considering this alternative. Candy Hulton
