

Newton CPA Application

Development of the Cheesecake Brook Greenway

Applicant: **Friends of Albemarle**

Co-Applicants: **Newton Department of Public Works,
The Playground Project at Albemarle**

Contact: **Margaret Albright 166 Edinboro St. Phone: 617-969-0497**
Curtis Betts 305 Albemarle Rd Phone: 617 965 1799

Name of Proposal: **Development of the Cheesecake Brook Greenway**
Address: **Albemarle Road, from Watertown St to the Charles River**

CPA Category: **Open Space**

Funding Requested:

Conceptual Design: \$ 24,000

Total Cost: **\$ 24,000**

Project Description:

Cheesecake Brook is a small stream that runs through Newton, flowing underground in a northerly direction from its headwaters south of the Massachusetts Turnpike, and draining a heavily urbanized portion of the watershed. The brook surfaces at the Route 16 culvert in West Newton, where it runs aboveground through an area of heavy residential and recreational use until flowing into the Charles River near Watertown. It was the first brook in the city to undergo major improvements, i.e, channelization, in the 1860s in order to make the roads passable, keep basements dry, and provide dry, buildable land for future development.

In the past century, the land bordering the central section of the brook, (from Watertown to Crafts Street), has evolved into one of Newton's most important open spaces – Albemarle Park and Avery Wood to the east, and the grounds of the private Fessenden School to the west. Along other portions, single-family homes front on Albemarle Road.

In recent years, the State Department of Conservation and Recreation (formerly MDC) has developed the Upper Charles River Corridor into an important park and passive recreation area. The Blue Heron Bridge, at the mouth of Cheesecake Brook, is the centerpiece of a pedestrian trail from Boston's Esplanade to Weston.

Working to support and improve Albemarle Park, Cheesecake Brook, and other open spaces in north Newtonville, for the enjoyment of everyone in the community

Currently the upper portion of the brook, from Eddy Street to Watertown Street, is the subject of a major improvement project, using Federal Community Development Block Grant funding.

From Watertown Street, north to the Charles River, Cheesecake Brook is approximately 15' wide, between stone retaining walls about 2' high. The brook runs through a grassy swale, about 60' wide, in the median of Albemarle Road. There is no formal drainage system in place, no catch basins, and erosion channels have developed in a number of locations. Stormwater from the adjoining parking area runs directly into the brook.

Albemarle Road is a wide, flat divided boulevard; its generally good sightlines lead drivers to consider it appropriate for high-speed travel. However the brook, parks, schools, public and private open space all make it an attractive destination and route for pedestrians and cyclists. Significant portions of the roadway have no sidewalk, and people show a clear preference for walking along the edge of the brook. Taken together these factors make the area both a real and a perceived hazard.

At this time, we propose development of a preliminary/conceptual design for a new "Cheesecake Brook Greenway":

- Connect the neighborhoods of Newtonville and West Newton to the Upper Charles River Reservation, and its uninterrupted 14 mile pathway - from the Esplanade in Boston through Cambridge, Watertown, Newton, Waltham and Weston.
- Provide walking, bicycle, and jogging trails along the brook
- Improve the linkage among the open spaces of north Newtonville, and from open spaces to schools, neighborhoods, and recreational facilities.
- Identify potential environmental remediation and improvements
- Replace the footbridge over Cheesecake Brook; identify other potential crossings
- Improve school crossings, parking, and bus loading areas
- New plantings, lighting, and furnishings to complement passive recreation opportunities in the area and improve safety and accessibility.

With the Department of Public Works, we are requesting \$24,000 to develop preliminary / conceptual plans for transformation of this roadway and drainage brook into one of Newton's premier open spaces.

The requested funding is expected to cover preliminary design only. Detailed surveys, final design, roadway, drainage, and bridge engineering, and contract documents will be developed at a later date by the DPW. Funding for construction and landscaping improvements to the greenway will likely be available from other sources, with little or no additional CPA funds.

Goals:

The Cheesecake Brook corridor is a forgotten gem – a potential linear greenway linking the Charles River Pathway with the Newtonville neighborhood. Historically, the roadway, brook, and greenspace have been managed as a roadway and drainage feature. The area is under the control of the Department of Public Works, but plantings and lawns are maintained by Parks & Recreation.

This corridor has been repeatedly been identified as having the potential to be an important open space and recreational resource – in Newton’s Open Space Plan, in designer Judy Kokesh’s 2005 study of Albemarle Park, and by environmental and community organizations.

This proposal is intended to address a number of open-space needs:

Conservation values

Cheesecake Brook provides a linear greenway connection between the Charles River and the park complex. A new footbridge will meet or exceed current environmental standards, and attention will be given to improvements to the brook to improve wildlife habitat (including linkages between the Charles River and residential areas) and mitigate flooding.

We anticipate extensive consultation with the Charles River Watershed, the State Department of Conservation and Recreation, Newton’s Conservation Commission, and other interested parties, to assure that this project will provide the maximum practicable improvements to water quality and other conservation values.

Aesthetics

The grassy swale is not entirely unattractive, but is somewhat sterile in appearance. The area would benefit from additional trees, shrubbery, and perhaps some “natural” or “native” plantings.

The existing footbridges, near Gath Pool and Nevada Street, might be charitably described as eyesores. While no design for a new bridge has yet been proposed, the spans are short enough to allow for a variety of design solutions. (One proposal calls for the preservation and re-use of an historic bridge from another location!)

A new bridge will serve as a focal point for the park and neighborhood – as a meeting place, and an appropriate gateway to the park and school. Landscape improvements to the brook corridor will enhance this open-space connector.

Passive recreation

The park, wood, Charles River walk, and brook corridor provide a popular destination for walkers, cyclists, and joggers. The area is close to two senior housing facilities and

Working to support and improve Albemarle Park, Cheesecake Brook, and other open spaces in north Newtonville, for the enjoyment of everyone in the community

is a popular walking area for those residents. The proposed improvements will enhance linkage with other open spaces, and with the neighborhoods, schools, and recreation facilities. Provision of benches, tables, and berms with sitting areas will provide additional opportunities for passive recreation.

Active recreation

Albemarle Park and the Halloran Sports and recreation complex comprise the City's largest and busiest active recreation area. This proposal does not directly address these facilities. All of the proposed changes will enhance accessibility, safety, and aesthetics for active recreation users while creating an improved environment for spectators and passive users.

Safety

The roadway now supports joggers, dog-walkers, and children walking to and from school, even after dark. These pedestrians are in the median, shoulders, and even traffic lanes. Meanwhile the long, relatively straight road presents motorists with the impression that it is safe for high speed travel, even racing.

The existing footbridges are an acknowledged safety hazard. The steep ramps lead directly into heavily traveled traffic lanes, with slopes of up to 25%. However, one bridge has been designated as the primary emergency evacuation route for F.A. Day Middle School. It also serves as a primary entrance to the park, from the public footpath to Wildwood Road, and from the "drop-off" area on the west side of Albemarle Road. Replacement of this bridge and improvement of the crosswalks MUST be a community priority.

Crosswalks are now inadequate, particularly where Albemarle Road intersects Crafts and North Streets. Lighting in this area is currently best suited for motorists, and is inadequate for the heavy pedestrian traffic, particularly at dusk. New park-style lighting at frequent intervals will improve safety.

Accessibility

Existing bridges and crosswalks do not meet basic accessibility standards. One of the primary goals of this plan will be to identify specific areas for improvement, and recommend new pathways and crosswalks to assure full accessibility.

Community Need

This proposal will meet many of the needs identified in Newton's *Open Space Plan*:

- Additional facilities and improvements in the more densely populated northern sectors of Newton,
- Enhanced linkages among existing and future recreational areas,
- Attention to flooding problems,
- Addressing water pollution in brooks and streams,
- Improved maintenance of outdoor public areas,
- Maintaining visual corridors,

Working to support and improve Albemarle Park, Cheesecake Brook, and other open spaces in north Newtonville, for the enjoyment of everyone in the community

- Paths and nature trails in park and conservation areas,
- Preservation/improvement of sightlines,
- Passive recreational facilities such as picnic and sitting areas within playgrounds and ball fields,
- Walks and sitting areas for the elderly and disabled, and removal of barriers which restrict access to recreation areas,
- Improved entry signage, pedestrian and parking access, educational signage, pathway surfaces and site furnishings,
- Bike paths,
- Master Plans for the coordinated improvement of parks.

Community Support

[Public comments and letters will be provided as attachments, as they are available]

Timeline

The Design is expected to require approximately 6 months, once funding is released and a designer has been contracted.

On completion of this design phase, a multi-year plan for implementation of proposals will be developed by DPW, in consultation with the Parks and Recreation Commission and community groups.

Credentials

This project will be managed by the Department of Public Works. Co-applicants have worked with other departments on a number of similar projects.

Success Factors

Measurement of the success of this project will necessarily be subjective. Increased pedestrian use of Avery Woods, and more nature-watching from the footbridge may not be readily measured, but will be apparent to even a casual observer. Improved pedestrian traffic flows into and out of the park over the central corridor will benefit both active and passive user and will be measured by an increased use of the park for passive recreation.

Factors of safety and accessibility will be measured by the availability of multiple handicap accessible entrances into the park, including over Cheesecake Brook. Sight lines and lighting will be improved, providing a measure of increased safety at dusk and dawn for those using the park for passive recreation or in passing through the park to access the middle school.

Budget

Total Budget for Conceptual Design: \$24,000

Budget for final design and construction to be determined; the overall project will likely be undertaken in several phases.

Working to support and improve Albemarle Park, Cheesecake Brook, and other open spaces in north Newtonville, for the enjoyment of everyone in the community

Other Funding

As noted, the development of a conceptual design for the Cheesecake Brook Greenway will leverage a number of sources and projects:

- Upper Cheesecake Greenway - The City's Planning department is currently administering a CDBG project, totaling almost \$200,000, for design and improvements to the Greenway immediately to the south of the area covered in this proposal. Passive recreation, plantings, drainage, walkways, and perhaps a new bridge are under consideration at this time.
- Upper Charles River Reservation – immediately to the north of the Cheesecake Brook Greenway, the Massachusetts DCR is nearing completion of a 10 year, multi-million dollar greenway. This uninterrupted 14 mile pathway - from the Esplanade in Boston through Cambridge, Watertown, Newton, Waltham and Weston, should be connected to the heart of Newton.
- Parks Improvements – Albemarle Park and Avery Wood regularly benefit from open space and recreation improvement projects. Some (but certainly not all) of these projects have been funded through CPA.
- Abutters – neighbors, including the Fessenden School, have expressed interest in working with the city to coordinate and support improvements along the right-of-way. On completion of a preliminary design, specific actions and recommendations can be developed.
- Department of Public Works – in upcoming years, DPW will undertake both minor and major projects in the Cheesecake Brook Greenway. A preliminary design will enable the department to make even routine maintenance projects and traffic improvements to work toward the goal of an integrated Greenway. In addition, a plan may act as a catalyst for a more ambitious project, to implement many or all of the recommendations.

Maintenance

Maintenance considerations will be an important design criterion, however at this stage it is impossible to address specific concerns or costs in any meaningful way.