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Cities and the Environment (CATE)

Volume 13

Issue 1 *The Science and Practice of Managing
Forests in Cities*

Article 41

3-2024

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Recommended Citation

Sutton, Paul; Long, Nicholas P.; Andrews, Taylor; and Holm, Erica A. (2024) "Land Protection and Habitat Restoration as Catalysts for Sustained Community Engagement at the Roslindale Wetlands Urban Wild," *Cities and the Environment (CATE)*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 41.

DOI: 10.15365/cate.2020.130141

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cate/vol13/iss1/41>

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Land Protection and Habitat Restoration as Catalysts for Sustained Community Engagement at the Roslindale Wetlands Urban Wild

The Roslindale Wetlands “Urban Wild,” a 10-acre forested wetland in the heart of Boston, Massachusetts, is the backdrop for a compelling story of land preservation and habitat restoration as primary drivers for sustained community engagement. Originally identified for residential development, this patchwork of City and private land was long neglected and degraded by incompatible adjacent development and illegal dumping. In 2005, the community group Roslindale Wetlands Task Force (RWTF) was formed to start the long, gradual process of cleaning up and advocating for full preservation of the site. However, between 2019 and 2023, an alignment of several strategic joint planning ventures between the RWTF, the City of Boston, and Mass Audubon accelerated efforts and culminated in a giant leap forward. By 2023, the majority of the site was permanently protected and was ecologically restored through a \$1 million City capital renovation investment. These milestone achievements, in turn, have recharged long-term community organizing and site stewardship efforts and contributed to a wider embrace of this nature park by Bostonians.

Keywords

urban forested natural areas, practitioner notes, urban forests, land preservation and policy, community engagement, urban wetlands

CONTEXT

The context for this Boston case study is one shared by many US cities: dwindling open space, housing shortages, and exceedingly high land values. Prior to and since the RWTF's formation in 2005, several housing development proposals had been proposed for 108 Walter Street, the largest remaining private tract of land at Roslindale Wetlands. Each proposal was incompatible with the City's stated wetland protection and climate resiliency goals, and each revealed limitations in the protection of this type of resource area under the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act (WPA). Defined as an "isolated wetland subject to flooding" under the WPA, the Roslindale Wetlands received no state regulatory protection of its 100' wetland buffer.

Despite limited wetland regulations, inadequate land use controls, and a hot real estate market, several factors contributed to the preservation of the Roslindale Wetlands. Most importantly, the RWTF and its umbrella neighborhood organization (Longfellow Area Neighborhood Association) were committed to ensuring sustainable development and the preservation of conservation land. Secondly, the UWP had long worked with other City departments to expedite the foreclosure of private parcels to consolidate City ownership and management by the UWP. Working together, the RWTF and the UWP formed a working relationship and collaborated closely on development review (under the Parks Commission's 100' Rule) and land protection campaigns. Ultimately, in the face of escalating real estate market pressures and the affordable housing shortages in Boston, both partners realized that more aggressive, proactive measures were needed to achieve success. Together with Mass Audubon, they worked on several strategic fronts to advance land preservation goals at Roslindale Wetlands.



Figure 1.

GOALS AND APPROACH

The goals of the concerted efforts of the UWP, RWTF, and Mass Audubon were to end the perennial attempts to overdevelop the 108 Walter St. parcel and to permanently protect the site’s natural resources. In time, it became clear that that success hinged on linking conservation with affordable housing, and, on closer examination, that Roslindale Wetlands provided opportunities for both. However, several interim key actions were taken that would fortify the position of conservationists and lead to a sustainable and publicly supported outcome.

Step One: Land Management Plan

2019 marked the beginning of the joint partnership between the UWP, Mass Audubon, and RWTF. The UWP, in partnership with the RWTF, took an important step by hiring Mass Audubon’s Ecological Extension Service to develop a land management plan for Roslindale Wetlands. For the UWP, the plan was intended to inventory the site’s natural resources, guide land management decisions, and inform future capital investments. For the RWTF, one of the principal goals of the plan was to establish and guide land conservation priorities for the remaining private parcels. The plan targeted the Walter Street parcel as being the “highest priority” for conservation, highlighting a variety of factors: its wetland resources, its state-recognized “prime forest land” soil, its popular use by local birding clubs, and its value as the key missing link in the site’s perimeter walking trail. Taken together, these criteria provided an important rationale for subsequent conservation grant and site restoration work.



Figure 2: Local Advocacy Efforts for Land Protection at Roslindale Wetlands

Step Two: Local Wetland Ordinance

Amidst city-wide concerns about inadequate state protection of Boston’s wetland resources, particularly coastal and flood-prone areas, the City of Boston took a significant step in 2019 by signing into law its first local wetlands ordinance as a way to advance the goals of Climate Ready Boston by strengthening floodplain protections and defending against sea level rise. One of the most notable changes under the ordinance gave the Boston Conservation Commission the authority to review projects within a 100’ buffer of isolated vegetated wetlands and vernal pools. As a result

of the ordinance, the City finally had jurisdiction to review wetland impacts from any future development at the Walter Street parcel. Due in part to the advocacy by the RWTF, the ordinance was signed and adopted at the Roslindale Wetlands site with much fanfare and was received enthusiastically by Task Force members and the general public.



Figure 3: 2019 Local Wetlands Ordinance Signing at Roslindale Wetlands Urban Wild
Photo courtesy of the Office of Mayor Walsh.

Step Three: The Race for Land Acquisition

The City's success in adopting the local wetland ordinance soon faded as the undeveloped 108 Walter Street parcel and the adjacent 104 Walter St. parcel with one single family home (same owner) were offered for sale "as is" in the summer of 2020 for \$1.45 million and the stipulation of an end of the year sale deadline. While adoption of the local wetlands ordinance may have factored into the owner's decision to sell both parcels, the deadline forced the City to act very quickly in developing an acquisition strategy. After considering various alternatives, the City, in partnership with the RWTF, conceived of a co-development acquisition strategy whereby the City would seek to purchase the properties as follows: the 108 parcel for preservation and integration into the Roslindale Wetlands Urban Wild, and the 104 parcel for redevelopment of four affordable housing units. Such a strategy would accomplish multiple City goals:

- Implementing Climate Ready Boston and Boston Open Space and Recreation Plan;
- Implementing the Parks Department's Priority Parcel Plan Study (which identified Roslindale Wetlands as in the top five of Boston's "preferred" land acquisition sites);
- Encouraging affordable infill housing while ensuring flood protection;
- Preserving tree canopy on private land;
- Ensuring preservation and restoration of wetland buffer; and,
- Allowing 100% completion of a perimeter walking trail.

Various land protection strategies and funding mechanisms were explored in rapid fashion. Under one scenario, Mass Audubon offered to serve as a conservation restriction holder if the project were to be funded through the locally administered Community Preservation Act. Instead, Mass Audubon and RWTF submitted support letters to strengthen the City's other grant application efforts. Ultimately, the City was able to secure two key sources to fund the \$624,871 purchase of the 108 Walter St. parcel:

- \$337,684 from the Massachusetts Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity (LAND), a state-administered reimbursement grant that enables cities to acquire land for conservation and recreation purposes; and,
- \$287,187 from the Boston Climate Resiliency Fund, a newly established City fund established to help fund flood control related projects, including land acquisition.

To make this acquisition occur expeditiously, the Boston Planning and Development Agency fronted the purchase of both parcels. The conservation parcel was later transferred to the Boston Conservation Commission for inclusion into the UWP-managed Roslindale Wetlands. The development parcel was later sold to Habitat for Humanity, for the development of four affordable housing units.



Figure 4: Land Acquisition Celebration
Photo courtesy of the Office of Mayor Wu.

KEY RESULTS

The City's purchase of the Walter St. parcels was significant. For decades, the City had not purchased land for conservation purposes. Many of the City's most important natural areas were acquired in the 1970s and 1980s through front-end purchases by the non-profit Boston Natural

Areas Fund. However, the urgency of development pressures, combined with skillful and effective advocacy by the RWTF, forced the City to aggressively pursue conservation of the Roslindale Wetlands site. Acquisition, by itself, proved to be a strong motivator and had a number of ripple effects in the community. Key among these effects were the following:

- A GoFundMe effort by a resident to purchase and gift to the City another private parcel at Roslindale Wetlands;
- LANA's success in securing a grant to support a community-led planning and design process for the redevelopment of the 104 parcel as affordable housing; and,
- The City allocation of funds to initiate a capital project to incorporate the 108 Walter parcel into the Roslindale Wetlands.

Capital Renovation: Completing the Picture to Spark Interest in Nature in the City

The acquisition of the 108 Walter St. parcel fulfilled the community's dream of integrating that conservation land into the Roslindale Wetlands. The next job would be to physically connect the two sites. Years of neglect had left 108 Walter Street in poor condition with abandoned sheds, a relic barn foundation, cracking pavement and dilapidated fences, and abundant weedy vegetation across the property. A crude unmarked footpath created over the years by walkers allowed pedestrians to cross the property to access the rest of the City property. That would all change in spring 2023 when the UWP initiated the second phase of a \$1 million capital renovation project. In a dramatic transformation, the 108 parcel was successfully restored over a six-month period with the inclusion of a new trailhead, new walking trails, interpretive signage, benches, and other site amenities. To advance habitat restoration goals, invasive plants were managed and removed, and, in their place, hundreds of wetland and upland trees, shrubs, and ground cover plantings were installed.



Figure 5: Pre-Renovation: Japanese Knotweed along the Coniston Road Frontage



Figure 6: Post-Renovation: New Coniston Road Trailhead

Translating Conservation Advocacy and Habitat Restoration into Re-Invigorated Field Stewardship

As significant as the land protection was, the capital renovation was even more dramatic and transformative. Together, the two were powerful motivators in sparking community interest in this formerly hidden greenspace. Neighbors who rarely ventured into the site soon became familiar faces on the walking trails. Amateur birders were also soon spotted along the wetland edges enjoying wildlife. Interpretive signage on the site's history, ecology, and hydrology proved particularly helpful in informing and generating interest among new and returning visitors.

With the increased foot traffic on the trails, one of the next key challenges was to channel this new public interest into a new generation of site stewards. RWTF members quickly realized that they needed to increase their ranks by recruiting new members who would work with the UWP in implementing the land management plan and reforestation efforts.

Working together, the UWP, RWTF, and Mass Audubon planned a series of events and programs to supercharge outreach and recruitment efforts. In the Spring, Summer, Early Fall, and Late Fall of 2023, the UWP worked closely with the RWTF and successfully completed four "Serve and Learn" events, with future events to come. Serve and Learn events feature a learning portion and a land stewardship (or "serve") portion. Both portions are led by UWP staff, who then work together with volunteers to complete the land stewardship portion of the event. An average of twelve volunteers participated in each Serve and Learn event, consisting of a core group as well as several newcomers. During these events, UWP staff and RWTF volunteers successfully completed several important ecological restoration projects, which included invasive plant removals as well as native plant restoration plantings in an effort to restore the shrub and herbaceous layers that are currently lacking on the site.

Additionally, in Spring 2023, staff at both UWP and Mass Audubon worked hand in hand to strategize, coordinate, and promote free, multi-site events associated with the City Nature Challenge (CNC), a friendly iNaturalist competition to document living things in urban areas. At the Roslindale Wetlands CNC event, 15 community members made 277 wildlife observations

consisting of 107 species across almost all kingdoms of life. Beyond bringing together new and familiar faces from the RWTF, UWP, Willow Tree Youth Leaders, and surrounding neighborhood and further activating the Urban Wild, this participatory science effort provided an avenue for RTWF volunteers to build their capacity to contribute to ecological management through collecting usable, research-grade wildlife data in iNaturalist.



Figure 7. Left to right: Amara Chittenden, City Council staff member, and Nick Long at the City Nature Challenge event at Roslindale Wetlands on April 29, 2023.

Outcomes of the efforts to engage community around this project have grown beyond what the City could have initially predicted, including (but not limited to):

- The creation of a Steering Committee formed with RTWF and UWP on reforestation efforts, which meets frequently and facilitates strong communication among volunteer advocates.
- In June of 2023, RWTF launched their very first Instagram account aimed at educating neighbors and community members about the importance of protecting the wetlands, raising funds for tree plantings, and recruiting volunteers. The page quickly grew in popularity, and is now heading towards 200 followers!
- In November of 2023, the RWTF launched a “tree fund” fundraising campaign aimed at raising \$1,250.00 to purchase additional native trees and shrubs for the property, which would help to replace any dying / aging trees in addition to establishing a shrub layer. As of November 20, 2023, the group has already raised \$1,800.00 and has increased their goal to \$6,000.00 by Arbor Day 2024 (April 26th).

CONTACT AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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<https://www.boston.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/urban-wilds-roslindale>

<https://sites.google.com/site/roslwetlands/>