



## **Chestnut Hill Reservoir Coalition, Inc.**

15 Orkney Road, Brighton, MA 02135-7703

Phone/fax: 617-232-0995 E-mail: Reservoir-Coalition@comcast.net

---

February 5, 2008

Mr. Gerald Autler  
Mr. John M. FitzGerald  
Boston Redevelopment Authority  
One City Hall Square, 9th Floor  
Boston, MA 02201

### **Re. Opposition to Boston College Institutional Master Plan proposal to build dormitories on Shea Field**

Dear Messrs. Autler and FitzGerald:

For the past 8+ years, the grassroots Chestnut Hill Reservoir Coalition (CHRC) has been the chief, strongly committed community force advocating for the public use, preservation, restoration, and improvement of the Chestnut Hill Reservation.

We are pleased to submit our comments with respect to the part of the Boston College Master Plan that affects the Chestnut Hill Reservation. These comments are based on direct feedback collected from our members in numerous neighbor-to-neighbor conversations, and in a public meeting that took place on January 14, in which a vote was taken opposing the proposed Shea Field dorms.

Note: For a detailed explanation of the negative impacts that Shea Field dorms would have on the Chestnut Hill Reservoir, please see page 4 of this letter.

#### Background Information

Shea Field is directly adjacent to the state-owned Chestnut Hill Reservation, and occupies an area that used to comprise the southeastern portion of the Reservoir's Lawrence Basin, acquired by Boston College in 1949 and filled in the early 1950s.

In 1989, the remaining Bradlee Basin along with the adjoining parkland and pumping stations were placed on the National and State Register of Historic Places, and designated a City of Boston Historic Landmark — but long after that, the parkland around the basin remained closed to the public and lacking basic maintenance.

After decades of visible neglect that made the area residents fear for the future of the surviving Bradlee Basin – so close to a dynamic, growth-oriented institution – the Reservoir experienced a reversal of fortune.

Thanks to the efforts of many concerned citizens and elected officials, the Chestnut Hill Reservation is now again a spectacular public open space destination that enriches the City of Boston. Later this year, the park will be the beneficiary of substantial landscape improvements implemented by the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

CHRC was instrumental in the process that led to the reopening of the Reservoir to public use in June 2004. Our members have organized and actively participated in a number of volunteer events, educational programs, and other initiatives designed to benefit the Reservoir — including an extensive DCR-managed Resource Management Planning process that was concluded a year ago.

It should be noted that representatives of Boston College (the very same individuals who have been presenting the current BC Master Plan to the community) also participated in the planning process for the Chestnut Hill Reservation, and they had many opportunities to bring up the issue of Shea Field dorms and discuss their impact with members of the Reservoir community in any of the numerous Reservoir planning meetings.

BC chose not to inform or consult the Chestnut Hill Reservoir park users regarding its intent to build dorms on Shea Field, though it is obvious that BC knew during the Reservoir Planning process that Shea Field dorms were on BC planners' drafting boards.

Additionally, in recent meetings conducted by the Boston College Task Force, the issue of Shea Field dorms was overshadowed by a plethora of concerns pertaining to the proposed development on the former Archdiocese land.

#### Importance of protecting the fragile environment of the Chestnut Hill Reservoir

The value of the Chestnut Hill Reservation to the neighborhood and the City of Boston is both immeasurable and self-evident.

In addition to its historic value (being the key element of the Chestnut Hill Waterworks complex, and the first deliberately designed suburban public park in the United States) — and irrespective of its current role as emergency non-drinking water supply — first and foremost the Reservoir is a natural oasis that is essential to public health and the quality of life in the area.

Each year, the picturesque parkland around the basin serves many thousands of people who seek a clean, serene environment to run and walk safely, to contemplate nature, to experience the change of seasons, and generally "recharge their batteries" so they can better cope with stress and competitive pressures in their daily lives.

Year after year, decade after decade, it amounts to millions of local citizens and visitors who seek the peacefulness and undisturbed beauty of nature at this location. It would be impossible to quantify the immense benefit of this parkland to:

- working people of all ages;
- retirees/senior citizens;
- children and their parents;
- nature lovers;
- exercisers (running, bicycling, tai chi, snow-shoeing, cross-country skiing);
- dog walkers;
- sunbathers;
- birdwatchers;
- amateur fishermen;
- patients recuperating from illness;
- artists painting or sketching views;
- et al.

The natural appeal of the Reservoir is all the more precious and amazing in light of the immediate proximity of the hectic urban environment just outside of it. Very near to busy roads, multi-story buildings, and a roaring (at times) football stadium, there is a beautiful but **extremely fragile** environment that includes a plethora of wild plants and captivating creatures.

The Reservoir attracts a wide variety of bird species, which could never be seen in this area otherwise (all of which have been spotted by CHRC members):

- numerous songbirds, including the Red-Eyed Vireo, Northern Oriole, Black-capped Chickadee, American Goldfinch, Northern Cardinal, Northern Mockingbird, Gray Catbird, White-breasted Nuthatch and many types of warblers;
- seagulls and waterfowl — not only the familiar Canada Goose, Mallard and Mute Swan, but also the Double-crested Cormorant and migratory species such as the Bufflehead, mergansers and coots;
- marsh/wading birds, such as the majestic Great Blue Heron and other herons and egrets;
- birds of prey such as the Red-Tailed Hawk and the American Kestrel;
- and other birds such as the Blue Jay, Robin, and American Crow, the latter of which often roosts in impressive numbers at the Reservoir in wintertime.

Additionally, the Reservoir basin is a home to a variety of turtles, muskrats, and numerous fish species. The natural parkland supports beneficial and interesting insects (butterflies, dragonflies, beetles, bees, ladybugs, grasshoppers, crickets, etc.), small benign snakes, salamanders, and small mammals, including rabbits and chipmunks, all of which delight children raised in an urban environment.

All those living creatures benefit from the presence of large trees and self-seeded naturally growing vegetation that is non-existent on the adjacent BC campus.

All this richness and beauty of natural life still exists, precariously, at the Reservoir — despite all the development that has sprouted around to date — because the parkland that has survived is somewhat out of the way; parts of it are still secluded, undisturbed by too much pedestrian traffic.

Considering the immediate proximity of a major institution with thousands of students and employees, it is almost miraculous that the Reservoir parkland has not yet tipped toward being overused. (As any park connoisseur knows, a park's ecosystem and soothing character suffer when it becomes overused.)

In order to preserve the Reservoir's historic landscape, and to prevent the park from losing its rural/suburban feel, and then becoming visually just an extension of the abutting institutional campus, Reservoir advocates have steadfastly resisted Boston College's idea that the Reservoir's inner path should become lined with street lights like all walkways on the BC campus.

However, the main reason the Reservoir has been a peaceful oasis is that the current dormitories on BC's Lower Campus (all located north of the MWRA-owned "beer can hill", which functions as a buffer) are just sufficiently far enough from the basin, and separated by a metal fence that impedes access to the park, to have successfully maintained a healthy separation of the park from the campus.

That palpable separation has been enough to discourage needless pedestrian traffic by BC students — except for those from the BC community who legitimately visit the Reservoir park for passive recreational uses, and as such benefit the park and are welcome by the community.

#### The impact of Shea Field dorms on the Chestnut Hill Reservoir parkland

Reservoir users and hundreds of residents whose homes overlook the Reservoir are deeply concerned about the impact of 3 dormitories (totaling nearly 500 beds) that BC proposes to build on Shea Field — just a stone's throw from the Reservoir basin.

There have been many instances of serious misbehavior by BC students not only off campus, but also on campus, in and around dorms. Just last May, students intentionally started a fire by burning stacks of books on campus, an incident that seriously injured a Newton firefighter. Outdoor parties and sports-related celebrations (after games by BC teams, Red Sox, Patriots, and the Marathon) often get out of hand.

We must not allow for those things to be happening right next to a public park.

If BC is allowed to build dormitories on Shea Field — which is directly across from the wide-open, easily accessible western gateway to the Reservoir's interior path — the park will find itself being used, and misused, in ways that will damage its peaceful character and fragile ecosystem.

The geography of the area is such that Shea Field dorms will also instantly make the Reservoir pathways the most direct route for hundreds of students traveling to and

from Cleveland Circle drinking and eating establishments — in daylight, but also after dusk when the park is not supposed to be used.

Undergraduate students housed in dorms do not typically have cars, and so they usually walk to the nearest places that can provide them with entertainment for a night of “fun”. Except for Cleveland Circle/Beacon Street, there is no other area for “bar hopping” that is within comfortable walking distance from Shea Field. When bars close, students start heading home between 2 and 3 a.m.

Walking from Cleveland Circle and heading for Shea Field, there is nothing that can stop students from entering the Reservoir grounds – in fact, it is the most efficient short-cut.

**Young inebriated people traversing through a park with a large body of water late at night is a prescription for disaster.**

BC students’ safety notwithstanding, the pedestrian traffic generated by Shea Field dorms would be detrimental to:

- All categories of Reservoir users; neighborhood people and other visitors would be running into loud-talking, boisterous groups of students filling the width of the paths and having an intimidating effect on them;
- Residents whose homes overlook the Reservoir (the Waterworks, Commonwealth Ave., and Beacon Street) – these homeowners would hear drunken shouting, screaming and hooting at night;
- Reservoir wildlife that also needs nighttime peacefulness to regulate its circadian rhythms;
- DCR as the steward of the land, and its Reservoir maintenance crew — because cut-through traffic from and to the dorms will increase trash and other problems associated with overused parkland.

DCR has no resources to pick up trash by hand on a regular basis (which is the only way a parkland can be kept clean) — therefore, it is a certainty that beer cans, bottles, fast food debris, and lost articles of clothing would start littering the Reservoir landscape.

Furthermore — and with more harmful consequences — a large park routinely used by young people for non-recreational purposes, just as a pass-through, tends to attract other young people, and with it, underage and public drinking, drug use, and an increased likelihood of random assaults.

Fortifying the police presence would not be the answer to on-going problem (and one that could have been prevented in the first place by not allowing BC to build dorms on Shea Field). Monitoring and making arrests in areas filled with dense vegetation is not easy. Aside from putting added pressure on police resources, a frequent presence of law enforcement at the Reservoir would be detrimental to having a welcoming, relaxing, country-like park.

Shea Field dorms would also substantially increase vehicular traffic along the section of More Drive that comes to just within feet of the basin. This would be happening on



days when hundreds of students move in and out and bring private cars to load and unload their belongings; when students are visited by parents or picked up by off-campus friends; and when BC sanitation and building maintenance crews service a dense residential complex.

Last but not least, students in Shea Field dorms, due to the dorms direct proximity to Alumni Stadium, would be hosting outdoor parties on football game days (and even when the Eagles play elsewhere) — which would inevitably attract scores of students from other parts of the campus.

Those hordes of partygoers will be easily spilling over into the Reservoir land – to have fun at the edge of the water, or heading for the Cleveland Circle bars – and in the process, scaring away Reservoir wildlife and driving away parkland users.

After years of problems such as those described above, public pressure on Boston College to deal with them may prompt BC to launch efforts to gain control of the Reservoir — for the sake of their students and to improve the Reservoir’s maintenance, they will say.

We all know what happens to natural open space when it falls in the hands of a growth-oriented institution. We cannot afford such an outcome — Allston-Brighton has a grossly inadequate amount of open space as it is.

#### Recommended solutions

- Boston College should be told by the City of Boston to be a considerate neighbor on all sides of its campus, including Shea Field;
- No dorms should be built on Shea Field;
- Any other type of building(s) that BC may want to build there instead needs to be effectively set back and buffered from the Reservoir/More Drive.
- BC has enough room to house all undergraduates on the Lower Chestnut Hill Campus (on, and near, the Mods site), especially if some beds are also added on the Upper Campus in Newton.
- The Edmonds Hall/Mods/RecPlex area is well buffered both from the Reservoir and people’s homes — and that’s where BC should house most of its undergraduate population.
- The entire Mods site should be used for a dense, efficient undergraduate housing complex.
- The BRA should require that BC renovate, not demolish the 790-bed Edmonds Hall.

#### Unanswered questions

- Why has BC not proposed to build anything on Shea Field until now (the College has owned the parcel since 1949)?

- What are the exact deed restrictions that were put in place for the area now known as Shea Field when the Lawrence Basin was acquired by BC from the Metropolitan District Commission in 1949?
- What are BC's intentions with respect to the small historic gatehouse on the edge of Shea Field, at More Drive?
- Why is a high water table supposedly a problem with respect to building dense housing on the Mods site, but it is not a problem on Shea Field, and was not a problem when other parts of the former Lawrence Basin were built upon (Edmonds Hall)?
- Where is the documentation supporting BC's claim regarding the water table and its impact on BC's ability to build on the Mods site?
- Why hasn't BC proposed any permanent buffer zone between new development on Shea Field and More Drive, considering that the development would be highly visible from the Chestnut Hill Reservoir?
- What are the traffic and use implications of Shea Field dorms on the narrow road that separates Shea Field from the MWRA's property? Who owns that road, BC or the MWRA?
- Why are BC's/Sasaki's drawings showing densely planted trees along the sidewalk on More Drive, in front of Shea Field — when everyone familiar with that sidewalk knows that it is too narrow to plant trees (they would obstruct pedestrian traffic)?
- Why isn't BC proposing to add undergraduate dorms on the Upper Campus in Newton? (some buildings there are only 2 stories high)

\* \* \*

In closing, we would like to reiterate that the beautiful public open space of the Chestnut Hill Reservation serves thousands of local residents and visitors, whose interests would be harmed by the presence of dormitories on Shea Field.

We hope that the City of Boston will do everything in its power to protect our neighborhood's greatest public treasure, and that this unique location will be afforded as much careful consideration as would be given to Jamaica Pond, a comparable city park.

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,



Eva M. Webster  
Acting President, Chestnut Hill Reservoir Coalition

CC: Mayor Thomas M. Menino  
Secretary William F. Galvin  
Senator Steven A. Tolman  
Representative Michael Moran  
Representative Hevin Honan  
Councilor Mark Ciommo  
Ms. Ellen Lipsey, Exec. Dir., Boston Landmarks Commission  
Ms. Brona Simon, Exec. Dir., Massachusetts Historical Commission  
Commissioner Antonia Pollak, Boston Parks and Recreation Department  
Commissioner Rick Sullivan, Department of Conservation and Recreation  
Mr. Fred Laskey, Exec. Dir., Massachusetts Water Resources Authority