



NEWS

VOLUME 6 NUMBER 1 FALL 2006

The Arlington Land Trust is a community-based nonprofit organization established in 2000 to protect undeveloped land in Arlington. As a membership organization, ALT accepts donations and welcomes volunteers to support its work.

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For Sale: Elizabeth Island

The Arlington Land Trust faces an opportunity and a challenge in working toward the permanent protection of one of Arlington's most prominent sites: Elizabeth Island, the two-acre visual and ecological center of Spy Pond.

The island has long been thought of by many residents as public open space, perhaps because the current owner has allowed access to the island by boaters and birders, and by the Town for annual fireworks displays.

More than 120 species of birds have been identified on Spy Pond over the past decade, and the island serves an important habitat function, particularly during spring and fall migrations. Owners of the island over the years have recognized this role in the deed by calling for "continuation of the use of said Island for a Bird Sanctuary." Remarkably free of invasive plants (other than the phragmites that have taken over one side of its shoreline), the island hosts a pleasant mix of birch, oak, willow, and maple trees.

Yet, Elizabeth Island remains privately owned and unprotected as open space; in fact, it is zoned residential. The current owner, Mrs. Elaine Sacco, has announced her intention to sell the island after being its steward for more than 42 years. Renewing a contact made several years ago with ALT, she came to us to discuss a potential conservation purchase. We are grateful for that opportunity, and we are working actively with her and her attorney to explore creative options.

Our challenge is to work toward a conservation purchase that satisfies her needs while meeting the realities of the parcel's valuation. One step in that process is for the owner to "test the waters" with a listing of the property,



which she has done with an asking price of just under \$1 million. We view this as part of the negotiation process.

We are consulting with the Town and community groups, including the Vision 2020 Spy Pond Committee, the Open Space Committee, and the Conservation Commission, to explore potential partnerships that may strengthen our ability to accomplish this goal, including state funding sources. We're a long way from agreement and there is much hard work ahead, but we are determined to achieve the permanent protection of this unique resource.

The name "Elizabeth Island" is itself something of a mystery. The name first appears in a deed to the Fitchburg Railroad in 1868, prior to which it was known as "the Island in Menotomy Pond." Acquisition by the railroad was apparently based on the notion of constructing a center support for a bridge spanning the pond. Fortunately that never happened, and the island has remained essentially uninhabited and undisturbed.

Thanks to coverage by the *Boston Globe* and the *Arlington Advocate*, we've heard from many residents (and even some former residents) asking how they might help to ensure the island's protection. We will be starting a specific informational email list for the Elizabeth Island Project. If you'd like to be included, please contact us at info@arlingtonlandtrust.org.

Town Undertakes Smart Growth and Open Space Planning

Arlington is starting to take a fresh look at future development, and at its open space. Where in Town should we direct growth, and what areas should we protect? What is our vision for how we want to look in the future?

The Department of Planning and Community Development recently received a Smart Growth Technical Assistance grant of \$28,000 from the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, to support a public process that will result in a Vision for Arlington's Future and an Action Plan evolving from that vision. The goal of this statewide program is to help communities "implement smart growth zoning changes and undertake other activities that will improve local and regional sustainable development practices."

Town Meeting in 2006 approved CDBG (community development block grant) funds for two complementary projects that will be carried out in conjunction with this state grant: \$15,000 for a study of the Town's zoning bylaw, as a match for the state grant; and \$15,000 to update the Town's five-year Open Space and Recreation Plan for 2007-2012.

Planning for Smart Growth

While people frequently say there is no place left to develop here, the Arlington Redevelopment Board (ARB) continues to receive applications for development or redevelopment of "larger" parcels. In recent years we have seen a number of commercial parcels converted to residential uses, and several prominent residential parcels have been subdivided for new construction by right, according to current zoning regulations.

The state grant will enable the Town to hire consultants to assist with developing a visioning process, including public meetings and a follow-up action plan. Some of the sustainable development tools that might be considered in the plan are:

- open space residential design, or cluster development;
- accessory apartments;
- targeting density along transit corridors;

- targeting areas for reduced density;
- changes to the parking requirements;
- stormwater "best management practices," and other water conservation practices;
- encouragement of "green" construction methods for energy conservation, and other means of encouraging low-impact development; and
- encouragement of universal design in new construction projects.

Balancing Commercial, Industrial, and Residential Development

Massachusetts Avenue is Arlington's main commercial corridor, with three clusters in East Arlington at Lake Street, in Arlington Center at Pleasant Street, and in Arlington Heights at Park Avenue. Along most of Mass. Ave., both commercial and residential uses are allowed. Is there an opportunity for Arlington to encourage more mixed-use development within its centers, to increase housing options and also support our retail establishments? Should some commercial use be required within residential structures in the commercial centers? Is there anything we can do to diversify the uses in our commercial and industrial districts? The Town will also examine parking requirements to encourage alternative transportation modes without hurting the existing businesses, as well as the small industrial corridors that the Town would like to preserve or expand.

Two sets of questions come up regularly with regard to housing: What can Arlington do to promote better, more sustainable development? And what more can the Town do to increase its amount of affordable housing?

Arlington is a densely developed inner suburb, with 19,400 units of housing within 5.5 square miles. Only 40 percent of Arlington's housing stock is single family, which is some-

what atypical of a suburban community. The minimum lot size for development in single-family zones is 6,000 square feet, although almost 50 percent of the developed residential lots are undersized and nonconforming.

In recent years many large developments have met with strong opposition, because of Arlington's existing density and relative lack of open space. Are there places in Town where denser development would be most acceptable? Are there changes to our existing zoning that would promote more environmentally sustainable development, promote the preservation of open space, and provide more diverse housing?

Arlington has aggressively attempted to increase its affordable housing, but a limiting factor has been availability of land. The Town has encouraged the preservation of its rental housing by supporting its community development corporation, the Housing Corporation of Arlington, in purchasing existing rental housing and, with subsidy funds, operating it as affordable housing. But despite a concerted effort to build new affordable housing, it has not yet been successful at doing so. Can we, through this planning process, locate property that the Town would find acceptable or desirable for development of affordable housing, at an acceptable density and in an environmentally sustainable manner?

Open Space and Recreation Plan

The Town's Open Space Committee is charged with preparing the Town's five-year Open Space and Recreation Plan in accordance with guidelines from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Division of Conservation Services. The state established this program to help communities identify and plan for open space priorities and to guide decision making to both protect natural resources and provide recreational activities for local residents.

Communities with an approved Open Space Plan are eligible to apply for Self-Help, Urban Self-Help, Land and Water Conservation, and other state grant programs.

The current plan, covering the period from 2002 to 2007, builds on Arlington's original 1996 plan, reinforces the Town's original goals, reports on accomplishments to date and goals that have not yet been implemented, and outlines new goals and actions to be addressed during the next five-year period. An important overriding purpose of this plan and the entire open space planning process

is to foster public awareness of open space issues and to encourage the participation of Town officials and concerned citizens in the plan's implementation.

Arlington's Open Space Plan reflects the Town's intention to preserve, protect, and enhance its valued open spaces. It aims to:

- establish Arlington's short-term and long-term open space goals, objectives, and priorities;
- present a broad statement about Arlington's long-term open space philosophy;
- document Arlington's current open space inventory and management status; and
- provide updated information as required by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts guidelines for state-approved open space plans.

This fall the OSC began to update the current plan, and it will be seeking input from the community to develop new priorities, goals, and objectives to address current concerns and needs with regard to our open spaces, water bodies, and recreational facilities. The CDBG funds allowed the committee to hire consultants to plan and facilitate the public participation process, including conducting public meetings, collating and analyzing the results, and designing the final report for approval by the Board of Selectmen, Town Meeting, and the state. This open space planning process is an integral part of the ARB's broader smart growth project.

After reviewing proposal applications, the committee with the Town Planning Department selected Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. (VHB) of Watertown and project manager Ralph Willmer, an Arlington resident, experienced planner, and coauthor of the state guidelines for open space plans.

The first public meeting for open space planning will be held on Monday, February 12, 2007. Watch the *Arlington Advocate*, the Arlington e-mail list, and other venues for additional information about how to participate in this updating process, or contact the Open Space Committee via the Town Web site. The current Open Space and Recreation Plan for 2002-2007 is posted on the Web site at: www.town.arlington.ma.us/Public_Documents/ArlingtonMA_BComm/openspace.

For more information about the Smart Growth Technical Assistance Grant and that planning process, contact Laura Wiener in the Town's Planning Department at: lw Wiener@town.arlington.ma.us.

Conservation Update

A Small Success for Small Lot Protection

The Arlington Land Trust's first easement to protect a small neighborhood garden has succeeded in its first test. The long-time owner of the property sold her house and adjacent lot, which was large enough for an additional house, with the easement on the land. The new owners enthusiastically embraced the property and the easement. So, in the middle of Arlington, a beautiful garden is still enjoyed by its owners and numerous neighbors.

If you are interested in protecting your unbuilt land, contact info@arlingtonlandtrust.org.

A Good Time for Conservation

If you have ever thought about preserving your land, now is a good time. Congress and the President approved a remarkable piece of tax legislation in August, enabling private landowners of important natural resources to reap enhanced incentives for donating permanent conservation restrictions on their properties. But it is on a trial basis: landowners must complete the CR before the end of 2007 in order to qualify.

For more information on this federal tax legislation, contact the Land Trust Alliance (www.lta.org), a national organization that advocates for land trusts and conservation policies, or ALT at info@arlingtonlandtrust.org.

Symmes Redevelopment and Forest Management Plan to Begin

The redevelopment of the Symmes parcel is again moving forward, and the Arlington Land Trust's role in stewardship of the open space will soon begin. Abutters who had appealed the issuance of the special permit for the project were successful in negotiating a reduction in the overall size of the development, from 245 to 200 units of housing. A medical office facility will also be constructed on the site.

Developer E.A. Fish is expected to submit 100-percent plans for the project in late December, and the Redevelopment Board is expected to approve them. That step will clear the way for Fish to assume all of the carrying costs of the property in January, to close on the purchase a few months later, and to begin demolition of the existing buildings in late winter or spring. The first residential occupancies can be expected by the summer of 2008.

As part of the agreement that governs the conservation restriction to be imposed on the open spaces of the parcel, ALT together with the Town's Conservation Commission now has the responsibility to create a Request for Proposal for a Forest Inventory and Forest Management Plan. This RFP will be submitted to qualified urban foresters of our choosing, and the developer will then select one of the proposals and pay for the consultant's work.

The resulting Forest Management Plan will form the basis of future stewardship of the wooded open spaces of the site. In the words of the agreement, the plan will lay out "recommendations for maintaining and improving the health of the Summer Street Woods and Buffer Areas and for ensuring their perpetual effectiveness as habitat, buffer, and public green space."

We look forward to helping form a "Friends" group to assist in long-term stewardship, and would welcome the participation of any interested neighbors in the creation of the plan. For more information, please contact info@arlingtonlandtrust.org.

Local Farmland at Risk

Two farms on Arlington's borders (Busa Farm in Lexington and Hamilton Farm in Winchester) are currently facing the challenges of being located in popular residential suburbs where development pressures are intense. However, both farms are also enrolled in Chapter 61A, state legislation that plays a significant role in the decisions of both landowners and municipalities about the future of farmland.

Property in Massachusetts is assessed (and taxed) at so-called "highest and best use" value, which to an assessor means the value the land would produce if maximally developed. In the early 1970s, as rising property values forced many farmers and forestland owners to sell their land because the tax burden made it impossible to earn a living from those "natural" land uses, farmers and conservationists formed a successful coalition to amend the Massachusetts Constitution to allow preferential assessment of property.

Known as Chapter 61A, the Farmland Assessment Act (together with its siblings, Chapter 61 covering forestland and Chapter 61B covering other open space uses) required cities and towns to reduce assessments of farm, forest, and open space lands, provided the owners made a commitment to keep their lands in those uses.

In exchange for the roughly 90 percent reduction in property tax that Chapter 61A offers, the landowner agrees to continue using the

land for agriculture, or pay a tax penalty for either changing the use or selling the land for a changed use. If the land is sold or converted, the town has a one-time right of first refusal to match a bona fide third-party offer (in the event of a sale) or independently appraised value (in the event of a conversion). The owner must notify the town of its intent to sell or convert, and the town has 120 days to match the offer or meet the appraised value.

It is very difficult for a town to act quickly enough to meet this 120-day deadline, so the option is often assigned to an existing non-profit land trust. But even with a land trust's help it is still a huge challenge to match a development price tag on a short timeline.

With today's high land values, does the tax penalty actually deter farmers from "cashing out" their land? The tax penalty certainly is a factor in an owner's decision making, but not an overriding one. The roll-back penalty is about five years worth of taxes at full market value, less the taxes actually paid. In most towns that will amount to about 10 to 15 percent of the price the farmer would be getting from a developer. That's a significant slice of the potential profit, but probably not enough to stop many owners from selling for development.

A bill currently before the legislature would reform some aspects of the Chapter 61 laws. For more information, see the summary by Mass Audubon on its Advocacy pages at www.massaudubon.org.

Busa Farm Fights to Fend Off Developers

Just over ten acres of agricultural land are actively farmed in Lexington, next to the Arlington Reservoir and Munroe Brook. Almost eight of these acres are owned by brothers Fran and Dennis Busa and their sister Trudy McGarvie; their family has been farming this land for 86 years. These siblings own and operate a year-round farm stand on Lowell Street. The remaining land is owned by Dan Busa, a cousin who rents use of his land to a local landscaper.

Busa Farm is one of the last remaining working farms in Lexington, and it's a struggle to stay in business. Fran Busa fields calls regularly from developers who see the open, level land as a business opportunity, instead of a piece of Lexington history. The farm has accumulated debts due to expensive land purchases a decade ago to reclaim farmland from various Busa heirs, and the

bad weather last spring and summer caused further setbacks to the farm's viability.

A more positive development has been the establishment of an innovative Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project. Last year more than 200 households paid a membership fee in exchange for locally grown produce throughout the harvesting season. That financial boost, not to mention enthusiastic community spirit, helped the Busas over the hump of a difficult year.

Whether the Town of Lexington is prepared to match a market-rate offer for almost eight acres of land is an open question. Fortunately, the town passed the Community Preservation Act last March, and will have up to \$2 million to spend on open space for the next few years, if Town Meeting members wish to do so. According to Joyce Miller, chairman of the Lexington Conservation Commission, the town is in "prelim-

inary talks" with Fran Busa that could result in a proposal for Town Meeting in the spring.

If you want to help ensure that the Busa family can continue to farm their land and provide fresh, native vegetables to our community, please visit the farm stand and become a regular customer. For more information, visit www.busafarm.com.

Future of Hamilton Farm is Uncertain

The Town of Winchester is also struggling with the possible loss of a farm, its last one. Hamilton Farm consists of 20 acres of farmland and woodlands, including an 1828 farmhouse and numerous outbuildings dating from the early nineteenth century. It is located on Ridge Street near the northwest corner of Arlington.

The Town has until March 15th to decide whether it wants to buy the farm for \$14 million. If not, a national developer, Avalon Bay, has already made an offer to buy

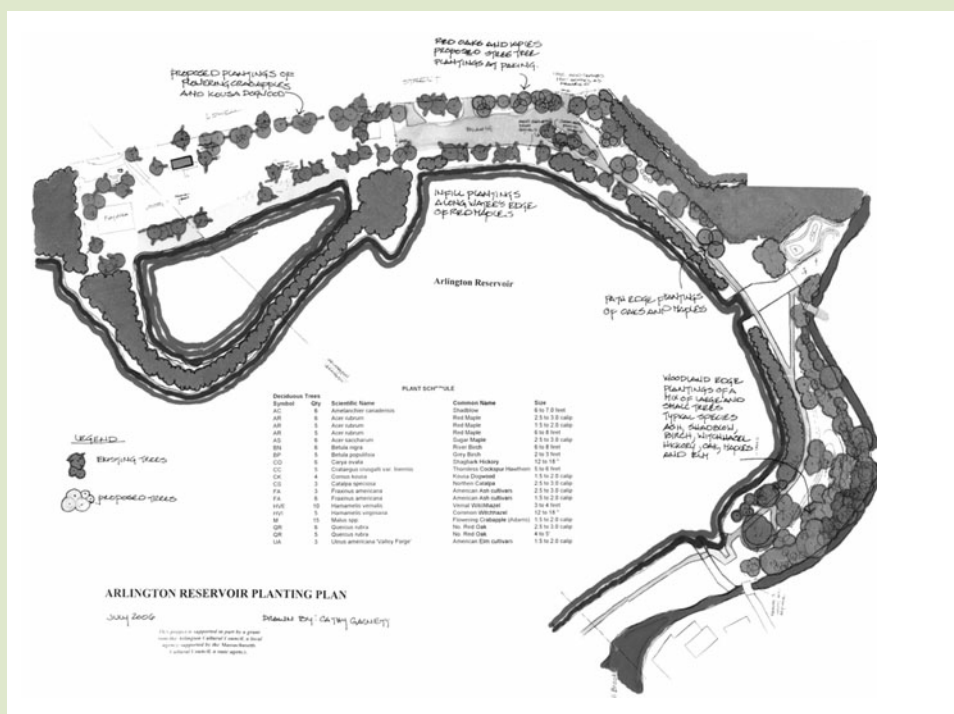
the land plans to build 257 town-house rental units.

This fall Winchester Town Meeting members, led by preservationist John Clemson, worked to put the Community Preservation Act on the warrant for a Town Meeting in November, and it won approval by a close vote to be put on the ballot for the spring election. The Winchester Board of Selectmen and other groups are actively discussing various options that may decide the fate of Hamilton Farm.

The Community Preservation Act is a state initiative that allows towns and cities to raise additional local taxes that are then matched by a state fund to support local projects that protect open space, preserve historic resources, and promote affordable housing. In Winchester's case, passage of the CPA would be a critical element in the Town's ability to consider purchasing the farm.

For more information, visit the Winchester Hamilton Farm Interest Group Web site at www.whfig.org.

New Plantings to Enhance Reservoir Path



Arlington's award-winning Reservoir Dam project has passed the test of a busy summer and fall season with glorious colors. And next year even more plant varieties will entice visitors to walk along the woodland path encircling the 65-acre water body on the Arlington-Lexington line.

Cathy Garnett, a landscape architect and member of the Arlington Conservation Commission and the Vision 2020 Reservoir Committee, has prepared a landscape plan to accommodate more than 100 trees to replace those removed during the dam construction project, in accordance with the Town's wetlands bylaw guidelines approved by the Commission. In addition, the Arlington Land Trust has received an anonymous gift of \$3,000 to be used for additional plantings of native shrubs and bushes, especially varieties that will attract birds, butterflies, and other wildlife.

The dam rehabilitation project began in 2002 under a state order to prevent a catastrophic breach that could threaten people and property downstream of the dam and Mill Brook. The project was postponed for several years because of financial constraints and opposition of residents who wanted to ensure that the natural landscape of the

Reservoir area would be preserved.

The solution devised by Weston & Sampson engineer Mark Mitsch used innovative technology known as an I-wall (a vertical interlocking steel sheet pile wall capped with a reinforced concrete beam) that both saved the majority of trees and protected against dam breaching and uncontrolled seepage through the embankments. As part of the construction remediation, the walking path on top of the dam was resurfaced, and the border areas were regraded to accommodate the new trees and other plantings.

In recognition of this win-win project that addressed public safety and environmental and recreation concerns, the dam was named a Public Works Project of the Year by the American Public Works Association, in its environment category for projects under \$2 million. In September the Town of Arlington, along with primary contractor MIG Corporation and primary consultant Weston & Sampson

Engineers, Inc., received the award during APWA's International Public Works Congress and Exposition in Kansas City, Missouri.

The project also received an award last March from the American Council of Engineering Companies of Massachusetts in a competition that "recognizes engineering achieve-

In recognition of this win-win project that addressed public safety and environmental concerns, the dam was named a Public Works Project of the Year by the American Public Works Association.

ments that demonstrate the highest degree of merit and ingenuity," according to the organization.

With the planting plan now completed and approved by the Conservation Commission and the Park and Recreation Commission, the Department of Public Works will supervise the plantings in the spring of 2007. As another enhancement for Reservoir visitors, Arlington resident Andrew Fischer donated a bulletin board that he had constructed, and he worked with students from The Workplace at Arlington High School to install it at the entrance to the dam path near the parking lot. Like similar boards in other parks, it will feature public notices of scheduled bird walks, bird sightings, and other news about activities at the Reservoir year round. The Park and Recreation Commission will continue to monitor information about the beach and swimming area in that section of the Reservoir.

This Reservoir project is one of several major capital projects in Arlington's public parks in recent years (including Spy Pond Park and Robbins Farm Park) that demonstrate the benefits of successful collaboration among Town officials, volunteers on town boards and commissions, and local citizens to achieve multiple goals for safety, access, and protection of natural resources. If you have not walked around the Res recently, you are in for a treat.

For more information, visit the Reservoir
Web site: www.arlington2020.org/reservoir.

Bob Bryant Remembered

Robert R. Bryant, former chairman of the Arlington Conservation Commission, passed away on October 8, 2006. We extend our condolences to the Bryant family, and thank them for suggesting gifts to the Arlington Conservation Stewards Fund as a way of remembering Bob.

We gratefully acknowledge memorial contributions from the following friends of Bob Bryant and his family (through December 7, 2006):

Krysten Aufiero
William Barrett
Ingrid Boelhouwer
Mark & Kathleen Boelhouwer
Kim & Bob Chebator
Dorothy Comley
Mary Callahan & Philip Corbett
William & Ellen Cross
Mary DeLisle
John & Mary Deyst
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John Warren Schaller
Carolyn and Mike Schwartz
Karen Shea
South Shore Imported Cars Inc.
State Street Global Markets Canada
Gustav Swanson
Patrick and Victoria White

Friends Efforts Enhance Arlington's Great Meadows

The Friends of Arlington's Great Meadows (FoAGM) have been busy in a number of areas this year. They have sponsored several public nature walks focusing on both bird and plant communities and have also continued nature education activities with Arlington elementary school students.

A small, dedicated group of members has worked to control the Japanese Knotweed along the bike path. Their success now provides a spectacular view of AGM for the thousands of travelers who pass along that way. After clearing the invasive growth for two years, members have reseeded a section with some native grasses as an experiment in restoration.

Construction activities have been less extensive this year than last, but members and neighbors installed some short boardwalk sections over wet areas and constructed a bridge over Munroe Brook connecting AGM and a section of Lexington conservation land.

What Can We Do?

- Participate in future work projects;
- Walk the trails to monitor activity and report back to FoAGM via Mike Tabaczynski (mjt1@rcn.com) if you have any questions or concerns;
- Obtain more information from the FoAGM Web site www.foagm.org;
- Contribute to the FoAGM Stewardship Fund through the Land Trust.



Building some new boardwalk sections.

Thanks to you!

We'd like to thank all of our 2006 members and donors for their contributions, including those who through their gifts to the Arlington Land Trust support our dedicated funds for the Friends of Arlington's Great Meadows and Arlington Conservation Stewards.

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the Arlington Land Trust
and help make a difference
in your community,
please contact us at:
info@arlingtonlandtrust.org

Plaudits for Anne M. Paulsen

State Representative Anne M. Paulsen is retiring from her House seat, representing Belmont and Arlington, at the end of this term. Her tireless advocacy for the environment will be missed. Last October the Mystic River Watershed Association gave Anne its first Herb Meyer Environmental Achievement Award at the organization's 35th Annual Meeting. This award is named after Meyer, a former Arlington resident and ardent environmentalist who helped organized the watershed association in 1971.

In the spring the Town of Arlington will honor Representative Paulsen by planting two Elm trees between the Whittemore-Robbins House and the Library. We will let our membership know when the tree planting is scheduled. Anne Paulsen has served as an advisor to the Land Trust since its inception, and we expect to call on her in the future.

We also congratulate Will Brownsberger on winning election to succeed Anne, and we look forward to working with him on land use and conservation issues in East Arlington and the broader Alewife region.

Arlington Land Trust Annual Meeting

Monday, January 22, 2007

7 to 9 pm

Robbins Library Community Room

700 Massachusetts Avenue

Arlington, Massachusetts

Guest Speaker

Katherine Abbott

"Campaigning for Public Parks:

A Personal and Professional Journey"

Katherine Abbott is the director of the Conservation and Recreation Campaign, housed at the Trust for Public Land in Boston. The campaign is working to increase annual funding for the operations and maintenance of parks and public lands. The campaign's aim is to broaden the constituency for the parks, and to educate and encourage the legislature to increase public spending for them. Abbott was formerly the commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, and the president and CEO of the Island Alliance.