

## Reducing environmental harm at Uplands

Thursday, September 21, 2006

**R**arely have good words been spoken about the environmental impacts of O'Neill Properties' proposed housing development at the Belmont Uplands. Open space advocates bemoan the loss of critical urban land, but no one has stepped forward to make a viable offer to purchase and preserve the Uplands property. As a result, the land will unquestionably be developed. Despite any environmental misgivings, O'Neill, as the property owner, has a right to do just that.

Three town committees, of which we are chairmen, have overlapping, yet not identical interests in the use of natural resources in Belmont. The town's "Working Vision for Belmont's Future" talks of being an environmentally responsible community and conserving our natural habitats. The Vision 21 Implementation Committee and Sustainable Belmont (its environmental subcommittee) are charged with helping Belmont achieve these goals. The Belmont Housing Trust has placed a high priority on environmentally responsible "green" development at both its B Street and McLean Zone 6 developments.

That is why it was heartening for us to hear O'Neill's consultant, Bob Engler, announce at a recent Zoning Board of Appeals hearing that O'Neill has hired the Green Roundtable to help ensure that the Belmont development has as little impact as possible on the surrounding environment.

It is one thing to deny that any harm will arise - it is quite another to acknowledge the harm and then seek to make amends.

The Green Roundtable is New England's leading expert on green building development. Its forte is working with businesses such as O'Neill to identify cost-effective ways to make development more environmentally friendly. The Green Roundtable has developed the skills and knowledge to show developers how green building techniques are good business practices, in addition to being good environmental policy. By fostering these discussions early in the planning process, it is more likely that environmentally sound practices will be incorporated into the final building design.

One such practice on which the Green Roundtable can provide expertise is the retention and re-use of storm water run-off on site. The potential for flooding from the Uplands development has been a concern of many town residents and committees, but can be mitigated by implementing a run-off management strategy. By integrating elements into the building and landscape design (such as pervious pavement, habitat filters, enhanced constructed wetlands, and constructed aquifers), rainwater could be captured and used for irrigation,

flushing or mechanical systems within the development. As a result, run-off into Little Pond, the river, and surrounding wetlands can be minimized.

Other green building techniques can also minimize the development's impact on town services and infrastructure. Water-conserving fixtures installed in each housing unit would not only reduce water consumption, but would also reduce waste-water generation, alleviating the burden on Belmont's oft-broken sewer system. Energy-efficient appliances and lighting can reduce electricity demand, which helps prevent the risk of electricity shortages as well as the risk of higher electricity prices.

Environmental responsibility involves not only what is built, but what is used in the building as well. One such example involves installing bamboo floors rather than hardwood floors. The use of fast-growing bamboo helps prevent the destruction of hardwood forests, which would take decades (or more) to replace. In addition to the environmental benefit of preserving forests, from a developer's own financial perspective, bamboo offers a sturdier and longer-lasting flooring, which reduces both short- and long-term maintenance costs.

One need not let go of one's disappointment with the further loss of Belmont's open space in order to appreciate the efforts of O'Neill Properties to build an environmentally friendly housing development. That O'Neill Properties proactively brought the Green Roundtable on board the Uplands development team is good news for Belmont residents and for the environment. While the action may not save the silver maple forest, anyone who is interested in promoting energy efficiency, preserving scarce forest resources, mitigating potential flooding, and minimizing potential waste-water problems should welcome this decision.

Roger Colton is chairman of the Belmont Housing Trust; Jennifer Page is chairman of the Vision 21 Implementation Committee; and Jan Kruse and Heather Tuttle are co-chairmen of Sustainable Belmont.