

Opinion

Alewife flooding a dire possibility

Slosh. Slosh. "Hard to believe the city let this happen after being warned about flooding..."

Fortunately, this scene couldn't happen in Cambridge. Or

QUEST COMMENTARY

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could it?

"Waste from toilets floating in the city's water supply..."

Not with so many of the world's brightest minds, the environmentally concerned and the civic activists ... right? The subject of flooding centered on In-

donesia, then America (New Orleans), then New England (New Hampshire), then Massachusetts (Taunton), but it just couldn't reach Cambridge.

"How could they allow so much development in a flood-prone area and not maintain the infrastructure?"

But we have a Triple-A bond rating, and lots of "free cash" — more than enough to absorb the pre-election \$10 million property tax cut. Nope, nothing to worry about here.

Certainly, since we spent more than a million dollars to buy land in Lincoln to protect our water supply, there must be a good reason not to spend money within

Cambridge to eliminate, rather than just reduce, (un)sanitary sewer overflows into Alewife Brook, particularly since its FEMA-designated floodplain extends to Fresh Pond, our reservoir.

Last week, Ellen Mass highlighted the importance of wetlands in flood control, and the whole area between Alewife Brook Reservation and Fresh Pond used to be "The Great Swamp." But now the area has been filled and paved, and the city wants increased development in that floodplain — which it still is despite the concrete — to the tune of a John Hancock tower or two.

The current zoning proposal, developed by the city, shifts allowable development from the least flood-prone areas toward the most vulnerable. It also encourages converting existing

light industrial uses to high-activity residential and mixed uses. Whereas a flood now, aside from threatening our reservoir with contaminated water, might damage some equipment and supplies, under the new plan there could be hundreds of residential evacuations. And if you don't believe the water is contaminated, come join me at the Mass. Ave. bridge over Alewife Brook during a heavy storm, inhale deeply, then hold onto your stomach as the stench overwhelms you.

Of course, the city officials claim they focused on flooding, by requiring businesses to peel back some pavement when redeveloping. However, big floods produce more water than can be absorbed by the ground (that's why it's under water) and surface porosity doesn't much matter. The city focused on water falling in the area from the skies; the concern should be with water entering over land, particularly since their partial sewer separation project will direct even more stormwater into the floodplain. Incidentally, the Charles River Watershed Association had this to say about lawns: "When it

rains, our lawns behave more like green asphalt than open space ... The compacted soils and grasses on our lawns cause water to run quickly off to stormdrains..."

We need to preserve and excavate some land for floodwater storage to protect Fresh Pond, such as with a sizeable pond that would be an area amenity. In fact, the city's infrastructure priority plan shows a possible site. Unfortunately, they are relying on business owners to make one on their own. Additionally, the next page of the plan shows additional desired infrastructure with a road they would like built — through the middle of the pond.

The study committee, from which the zoning supposedly was based, focused only within the conveniently defined study area boundaries and excluded from discussion flooding and traffic impacts from and on surrounding areas. Also excluded from the discussion were North and West Cambridge neighbors, just over the border from the biggest impacts, who have long been following these Alewife issues.

When City Council recently refiled the zoning proposal to allow more time for evaluation, it seemed the councilors understood their responsibility for ensuring that infrastructure must be in place before encouraging additional development. Sanitary sewer overflows, floodplain zoning adjacent to our water supply and the reality of flooding had all converged. However, no city councilors participated in the Health and Environment Committee's discussion of these concerns this past week, except for Vice Mayor Marjorie Decker, who is co-chairwoman of the committee.

With an issue as basic and obvious as protecting our water supply, we need city councilors who can understand the issues and take responsibility for protecting the public, who have an equal responsibility in impressing the importance to councilors and candidates. Or we can let them off the hook and pretend that since a flooding disaster hasn't happened yet, we don't need to worry about it.

Mike Nakagawa is a board member of Alewife Neighbors Inc., which has been monitoring and analyzing environmental, flooding and traffic data and providing reliable information to North Cambridge neighbors.

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