

Green Possibilities Forum - Mayoral

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SPEAKERS

Jeannette McCarthy, Jonathan Paz, Dan Berlin

Dan Berlin 00:04

Hi, everyone, and thank you for joining us tonight for the Waltham Land Trust Green Possibilities Forum for mayoral candidates. As you may know, the Waltham Land Trust is a nonprofit organization that serves to protect and maintain Waltham's green spaces, and to advocate for conservation concerns in the city. We have over 350 members, and 250 stewards who help with trail maintenance and invasive plant removal. We're excited to host this forum to provide candidates with an opportunity to share their views about environmental topics with the voting public. My name is Dan Berlin, and I'll be tonight's moderator, the Board Chair of the Land Trust, proprietor of Watch City Research, and a PhD student at Bentley University. Finally, it's important for us to mention that the Waltham Land Trust is a nonpartisan organization, which has organized these forums to provide Waltham voters with an opportunity to hear from candidates about green issues. The Waltham land trust does not and will not endorse candidates for political office. Membership in the land trust or participation in this forum or any other events hosted by the Land Trust is not endorsement of any candidate. And tonight we have our both candidates for mayor, Jeannette McCarthy and Jonathan Paz. We are going to start with introductions, and I used a random number generator to determine who goes first, and it will be Mr. Paz. And I'll turn it over to the Mr. Paz.

Jonathan Paz 01:33

Thank you for hosting this great forum tonight. My name is Jonathan Paz and I proudly serve as city councilor. Waltham is not just my place of work, it's my hometown, the very community where I was born and raised. I'm deeply passionate about environmental issues, and consider myself a staunch advocate for taking practical measures to address climate change at the local level. Throughout my career I've actively championed number one, the implementation of a tree protection ordinance to safeguard our urban tree canopy. Number two, I've co sponsored the adoption of a more robust stretch code to promote the construction of sustainable housing. Number three, I've successfully secured over \$600,000 in efficiency improvements for our public housing with no cost to taxpayers. Unfortunately, our current administration does not give due consideration to sustainability programs, decarbonisation efforts or climate change protocols. As your future mayor, you can count on me to not only acknowledge the reality of

climate change, but to make it a central pillar of growth. We must protect our open spaces and aggressively solarize our municipal buildings. We must protect with... There's a clear synergy between making our infrastructure more sustainable and achieving cost savings for taxpayers. Affordability and sustainability can indeed coexist as complementary objectives. Lastly, we should establish a robust planning department to secure federal funding to bolster our city's climate resilience efforts. The path to a sustainable, sustainable future starts with us. It starts at the local level. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 03:08

Thank you. Next, Ms. McCarthy.

Jeannette McCarthy 03:15

Good evening, my name is Jeannette McCarthy. I'm a lifelong resident of the city of Waltham. I also would like to thank Dan Berlin and the Waltham Land Trust for sponsoring this and you watching at home on the computer. Except for caring for my family during their lifetimes, I have devoted my life and to serving the city of Waltham. I'm the only elected official to serve in all three branches of city government, school committee, six years City Council two years, and mayor as 20 years. I have always been committed to Waltham and the office of Mayor and I have never run for any other office or looking to run for another office. My experience also includes seven years with the city of Waltham law department. I have been blessed to serve my hometown for over 35 years, and I'm the first woman elected mayor in the city of Waltham. I have experience on all levels of government, local, state and federal. I have worked with multiple governors, lieutenant governors, state and federal agencies on projects for our city. I'm a graduate of Waltham High School Class of 1971. I also attended Hardy elementary school, North Junior High School, and Waltham High School. I have a bachelor's in biology magna cum laude from Boston College. I have a Suffolk law degree juris doctorate cum laude from Suffolk University, and I have a Master's in criminal justice from Northeastern University. And I like to answer the questions as much as I can. And I do very much appreciate all that the Land Trust has done over the years to help with not not only the stewardship program, but also advocate for the sustainability of and buying parcels of land. Thank you very much.

Dan Berlin 05:00

Thank you. And we'll start with question one. For question one. We will start with Ms. McCarthy. And I'll read it just once for each candidate... I'll read each question once. In the coming years the MWRA will be digging a new tunnel through Waltham, and building infrastructure at Lawrence Meadow, the property owned by the University of Massachusetts on Beaver street. What are the opportunities to use the \$2 million set aside for the cleanup of Lawrence Meadow, and to ensure this wetlands area is protected, cleaned up, and made useful to the public in the future? And we'll start with Ms. McCarthy.

Jeannette McCarthy 05:45

Thank you. The MWRA tunnel is not going to be built at the Lawrence Meadow. I confirmed that last week with MWRA Lawrence Meadow and the rest of the UMass land to the north of Beaver

last week with MWRA. Lawrence Meadow and the rest of the UMass land to the north of Beaver Street is not owned by the City of Waltham. The city hired a licensed site professional to conduct an analysis of the UMass land and buildings on to the north and south of Beaver Street. For liability reasons, the City of Waltham did not buy the North parcel, because the testing showed that the contamination is moving. It was never supposed to move. Those records were provided to the city council by me. UMass also released all the records in response to a public records request. I provided the Waltham City Council with an update on the UMass Farm agreement. As part of that agreement, UMass on its own was going to put \$2 million of the sales proceeds and make an escrow out of that. Their own escrow to be used towards the cleanup of the environmental issues on the north side. The city of Waltham does not have that money. I'm happy to contact UMass to see what the status is of the \$2 million. I know that UMass has taken down some buildings down on the north side. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 07:03

Thank you. Mr. Paz.

Jonathan Paz 07:12

We, as a city, need to ensure those \$2 million are used expediently for the cleanup of Lawrence Meadow. As mayor, I would put pressure on UMass to ensure the protection restoration and future usability of this significant wetlands area. There's no doubt about it, the MWRA project is crucial to our water infrastructure. We need to ensure that the remediation and the restoration to take place before the MWRA project to not only prevent possible contamination, but also to ensure it does not pollute the Waltham Community Field Station Farm. The historical context is important. Lawrence Meadow was once a pond a century ago, it served as a drainage base to prevent flooding, and can now play a crucial role in mitigating flood risks in that area, particularly at the intersection of Linden Street and Waverly Oaks Road. Historically speaking, this whole area was contaminated by the agricultural experiments conducted by UMass. That contamination needs... that contamination includes fly ash, physical trash and glass, and potential hydrocarbons from power plants spills. The critical lesson learned here is that we cannot allow UMass to ignore the issue of fly ash contamination any longer. We can learn from successful examples like our neighbors in Weston, who remediated the Case Estates in the ballpark of 61 acres. In that case, the land was successfully rehabilitated and open to the public. It's crucial to emphasize that Waltham has limited wetlands, so remediating this contamination is of utmost importance. By fortifying the ecosystem, we can make Lawrence Meadow a safe and beautiful and accessible space for community and wildlife, while also strengthening its vital role in flood prevention. In short, let's make sure that money is spent and wisely. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 09:08

Thank you. Onto question two. Very few of the open spaces in Waltham are protected from future development. What is your plan for ensuring that land designated as public open space such as land purchased with CPA funds is permanently protected from future development, such as with a conservation restriction. And we'll start with Mr. Paz.

Jonathan Paz 09:37

Permanent protections are a vital aspect of preserving Waltham's limited open spaces and maintaining their ecological value. State law mandates that all lands purchased with CPA funds should have conservation restrictions in place. However, this requirement has not consistently been adhered to in the past. I propose a comprehensive plan that focuses on efficiency and transparency. It is worth noting that we're finalizing the placing of conservation restrictions on numerous parcels of land. An initiative that's somehow happening in an election year. Well, while the timing may raise questions, it underscores the need to get this right. We need to rectify past oversights and ensure that these valuable resources are safeguarded for future generations. To be clear, our responsibility goes beyond the protection of properties purchased through CPA funds. We need to identify and focus on environmentally important lands within our city. This requires a thorough audit of all acquired land. Such a review would determine which parcels have conservation restrictions in place and which ones don't. In addition to ensuring compliance we can modernize the process by digitizing and visualizing our progress to the public. We can walk the walk on a transparent and coherent process. This approach will help us preserve and maximize open space as well as promote sustainable agriculture, reflecting our commitment to a greener, more sustainable future for Waltham. In summary, my plan for permanent protection of open spaces involves ensuring insurance compliance... ensuring compliance with state law, streamlining the acquisition and development of conservation restrictions, and extending our efforts beyond CPA funded properties to include environmentally significant lands. By implementing these measures we both preserve Waltham's open spaces and agriculture, while enhancing the quality of life for current and future generations. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 11:38

Thank you.

Jeannette McCarthy 11:41

Upon becoming mayor, I'm sorry. Upon becoming mayor, I signed a conservation restriction for the former Met State land on Trapelo Road. Land which I did not purchase, that was handled by three communities. But that was... I put that on when I first became mayor. 14 parcels of land were purchased from 2004, when I first became mayor, to date. Four of those parcels, the Gable Hospital on Chapelle Road, one which is 775 rear Trapelo Road, Fernald School, and the 240 Beaver Street were purchased as a result of state enabling legislation, which provides already the highest level of protection from future development. Berry Park, addition to Prospect Hill Park, which I negotiated the outright gift of, has a deed of trust. It was originally put in a trust, and then the trust has restrictions on it, and that was passed and gifted to the city of Waltham. I voluntarily submitted a conservation restriction for zero before Chesterbrook Road to the Waltham City Council, keeping my word that I would take approximately six acres and put that into a conservation restriction. Eight additional conservation restrictions for 282 Trapelo Road, 775 rear Trapelo Road, 385 Trapelo Road, 84 aft to Arcadia, which are all in the north Waltham area. 287 aft to Grove Street, 342-44 Warren Street, zero Prospect Hill Road 1A, which is with that, and 240 Beaver Street was submitted to the City Council and will be sent to the state once the council votes them out. Some of them have already been voted out and they are complete. Since it is an interest in land involved here, te restrictions will be sent out to bid.

And I thank you very much. And we were able to have more than 300 acres of land added. A lot added to the Prospect Hill, but all over the city we were able to add land, and I very much appreciate the city council for their support in buying that land. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 14:00

Thank you. We'll move on to question three and thank you to the candidates so far for your answers. We are lucky to have many green spaces in Waltham. But there's a particular lack of it in the densely populated South Side area of Waltham. How could the city bring green space to this area? And we'll start with Mayor McCarthy for this question.

Jeannette McCarthy 14:23

The city is working on the permitting of Koutoujian playground, which is on Moody Street, and the Woerd Avenue landfill. And that has been a landfill for many years. The plan calls for a playground, a skatepark, an adult fitness area, small parking lot, tennis and pickleball, basketball and futsal, small and large dog park, two stormwater retention basin areas, the cleaning of the riverfront along the city's boundary with the Charles River, and 24,500 square feet of an open lawn area with accessible walkways around the open space area. This will create a very large green space on the south side. The whole area is 6.701 acres and already has an existing budget of \$4,000,195 which is available for the project. The pocket park at Embassy Park will be reconstructed once 200 Moody Street finishes its project. Other park land that comes available or pocket packs, we will look at them and review them. Additionally, the city has open space at the Chemistry Station off of Pine Street, Gilmore playground, MacDonald playground, McKenna playground adjacent to the Riverwalk, and Logan Park. Fitch School will have an open space and recreation components. And naturally we have the Charles River, which borders the whole South Side and the state's Riverwalk. So we're very lucky for all the open space and playgrounds and recreation areas we had in the Southside. Thank you very much.

Dan Berlin 16:08

Thank you. And I'll turn it to Councillor Paz.

Jonathan Paz 16:17

As a South Sider I think a lot about this question and have worked on some potential solutions. The South Side experiences hotter summers than the north side because of the lack of green space, we are an urban heat island. So addressing the lack of green spaces is indeed crucial, not only for enhancing the quality of life for residents, but also combating extreme heat. Here are a few strategies. Number one, a tree protection ordinance sponsored by the city council is a key element in preserving and enhancing the green space in any area. This ordinance can both carve tree removals and simultaneously fund the replanting of trees wherever necessary, contributing to the development of a healthier urban environment. As mayor, I could instruct our soon to be hired planning director to help find opportunities for tree planting and conversions. Fun fact, we have been without a planning director for over a year. This leads to

the second strategy, which is collaborating with the City Council to repurpose existing properties. It is important for Waltham's next mayor to collaborate with the City Council to identify and create opportunities for green spaces, especially on the South Side. This might involve repurposing underutilized areas or allocating resources to the development of new green spaces. As an example, the city's acquisition of the old Bank of America building for a parking lot could have been an opportunity for a pocket park. Another example is 67 Crescent Street, which is a riverfront property. You can't miss it because it's smack in the middle of two residential properties and it looks like a mini jungle. You can make that into a dog park or pocket park. Investigating our available land for green space opportunities should be a top priority for the city. Lastly, we can roll out a more ambitious tree planting program. The underutilized tree planting program is a valuable asset that can be marketed more effectively encouraging residents to participate in promoting the benefits of tree planting in the South Side. In conclusion, addressing the lack of green space in the Southside requires a multifaceted approach that involves legislative measures, collaboration with the council, and the proactive utilization of existing resources. By implementing these strategies we can make the South Side and more environmentally friendly and comfortable place to live while also combating the challenges associated with extreme heat. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 18:43

We'll move on to question four. The Riverwalk along the Charles River is a popular trail for residents and tourists alike. But some areas of the Riverwalk are experiencing an increase in illicit activities. What is your vision for ensuring the safety of people who want to use Waltham to Riverwalk? We'll start with Councillor Paz.

Jonathan Paz 19:03

I'll be briefer on this one. I jog along the Charles River path two or three times a week. It's a space that I hold close to my heart and I truly cherish it. The green oasis on the South Side is a rare gem and it's a high time we make improvements. Every time I run there I see members of the unhoused community there and I see trash accumulating because the city took out trash barrels there. I have also seen how people like to walk the river Riverwalk late into the dusk. Unfortunately the Department of Conservation and Recreation, DCR, is slow to take any meaningful steps when it comes to basic improvements. I've seen firsthand when I sent a list of recommendations in my first year in the council and got close to no response. I would love to see our local police department patrol the area on bikes. We should also take practical steps to ensure there's adequate lighting, especially at this time of the year when the sun sets earlier. We should we should absolutely have emergency boxes in case of emergencies. That way people can contact dispatchers ASAP. A very small, very practical solution there. I'm also in favor of a Charles River path stewards group to ensure there's regular cleanups and a helpful presence when people go on walks. I would definitely partner with members of our state delegation to ensure this gets done across every level. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 20:30

Thank you. And Mayor McCarthy.

Jeannette McCarthy 20:36

Okay, so I have worked for years with Dan Driscoll. He was the original visionary of the Riverwalk. And now Gerald Autler is the DCR representative. So we have worked with Gerald on the plan current plans that DCR has to improve the whole Riverwalk along the Waltham section as well. So the state owns that Riverwalk, the city does not own it. And the state will not allow us to put barrels because they believe that household trash is all that ends up in there most of the time. So we've asked as part of the review process and we had a couple of the kids that came forward that were using that and one of them was accosted, a young woman. And I asked her to come when we were having the sessions about improving the Riverwalk that was all on Zoom. So what we asked was for more lighting for more lighting and emergency call boxes as part of the upgrades. In the past, we asked DCR if we the city could cut the brush back near the Riverfront. For not only safety reasons, but also for aesthetic reasons. So we could actually see the river. They declined. Now the State Police have jurisdiction over the Riverwalk and for a long time they would not allow the city of Waltham to have concurrent jurisdiction, allowing us to actually patrol to help them out. I'm happy to say that earlier this year, the State Police agreed that Waltham Police, they have a path that they can patrol that. Since July of this year, we have had 16 arrests on the Riverwalk and three additional arrests in the Shaw's parking lot near the Mary Early bridge. I'm going to ask the Conservation Commission for its recommendation regarding the river vegetation and then I'm going to go back to DCR. And I'm happy to report that that was planned, they have the money. DCR always has to fight for money, but they have the money. So that Riverwalk plan, the whole improvement all the way in Waltham is going forward and we are very happy with that. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 22:40

Thank you. And we'll move on to our final question. Which is how should the city deal with the ongoing rat problem in a way that won't harm Waltham's wildlife? And we'll start with Mayor McCarthy.

Jeannette McCarthy 22:56

As I said before, we need to eliminate the food sources and control the population by the birth control method. Prevention methods also includes notices. The health department went out early this year, with notices in multiple languages, and they brought them to all the houses where plastic bags were being used, and to other residences as well. The notices advise them of the city ordinance requiring barrels that have covers and prohibiting the use of plastic bags. Now they don't want to actually give fines. What they want to do is solve the problem. The city does not use rodenticides. I went to a Land Trust meeting and I was very much enlightened by this speaker there, so we stopped using rodenticides. Other prevention methods include actual traps, physical traps, and the CO2 method. The CO2 method is very effective because it kills the population very quickly. When there's an outbreak, the Health Department actually goes out and we ordered the bait boxes with the traps in them so that we can try to get ahead of the situation and try to reduce any outbreaks that are coming. The building department requires pre baiting before demolitions by private owners. We are preparing to provide barrels with covers for the Monday and Friday rubbish routes on a trial basis to help try to alleviate the continuing issues on those routes. And we're hopeful that that will allow the trash to stay in and their food sources will be eliminated. If those are successful, then we can expand you know this

these barrels with the close covers for other parts of the routes in the city. And no one likes rats. They're a health hazard. And even if you have, you know, compost at home, you have to be very careful. You have to make sure that they're not harboring around under leaves and everything. So people also have to inspect their properties as much as they can. Thank you very much.

Dan Berlin 25:02

Thank you. Councillor Paz.

Jonathan Paz 25:07

As a member of the South Side, I hear about this problem all the time. I always joke and tell people about this rat that runs across my backyard and says hi to me on its way to work. It's a true story. It's important to note that this is a city wide issue, not just the South Side issue. We need to address the ongoing rat problem in Waltham through a comprehensive approach, and not a piecemeal approach. We can address the rat problem without harming local wildlife. The road to progress starts with universal trash bins. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Similar to recycling, we need to provide standard trash bins to all residents. By buying in bulk we save people money, and also allow Waltham to become eligible to a myriad of grants available at the state level. Building off this point, it's important to install proper trash cans in areas like Moody Street, that river path and other streets and parks with open trash issues. Yes, we should work with DCR, but we should not wait. I'm not sure why we ever removed these trash bins in the first place. We need to work with our business community on Moody Street to ensure that there's timely and adequate removal of those trash bins. Wouldn't it be interesting if the city acquired and provided grants to its business owners so they can make improvements in their waste removal. More importantly, the city should set electric boxes throughout the city, instead of relying on absentee landlords. These traps kill the rodents in a more humane way and allow us to gather data in the process. To close, it's important we as a city ban the use of rat poison which has already killed two bald eagles in the city. I have personally seen a dead owl along the Riverwalk along the Charles River. It's terrifying. We're not making ourselves any favors after going after the natural predators of rats. Let's develop a comprehensive plan, execute, monitor progress in a clear and transparent way. Thank you.

Dan Berlin 27:09

Thank you very much. And thank you to both of our candidates for joining tonight's forum and to all of our attendees for listening in. We hope you found this forum educational and insightful. The recordings for all forums will be posted to the Waltham Land Trust website as soon as we can. Remember to vote on November 7. You can also request mail in ballots on the city website by tomorrow, October 31. Thank you for joining tonight's forum, everyone. Good night.

Jonathan Paz 27:39

Thank you, Dan.

Jeannette McCarthy 27:41

Thank you very much, Dan.

Dan Berlin 27:45

Thank you candidates.