

Can this DPW yard help save the planet?

Malden's plan to create a waterfront park at the city's public works department is just one way local communities are taking aim at climate change



Left, people working to convert part of a DPW yard in Malden into a waterfront park gather at the site. From left: Kathy Vandiver, Marie Law Adams, Evan Spetrini, Amber Christoffersen, Marcia Manong, and Karen Buck. Below left, part of the Malden River site today and below right, architectural renderings of its planned rebirth.





Garden beds at the Natick Housing Authority's main site were reconstructed by a local Girl Scout and NHS student, Fiona Ripp, last summer. The town is now planning to create a community garden that will include 55 additional beds through a new climate resiliency grant from the Metropolitan Area Planning Council.



A future rain garden area at Luce Elementary School in Canton.

By John Laidler | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Malden is advancing plans to create a new waterfront park within its public works yard to help protect the city against flooding, extreme heat, and other future effects of climate change.

Responding to the same global challenge, Natick plans to build a community garden at a Housing Authority site, among other measures to ensure the town's vulnerable residents can access healthy food and social supports during future climate events.

Canton is launching a campaign to educate local residents about climate change and ways they can better protect their own properties from its effects.

The three municipalities are among 11 in Greater Boston recently awarded a combined \$742,600 by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council to make

their communities more resilient to climate change impacts.

The projects funded under the planning council program, which complements a similar state funding initiative begun in 2017, highlight the diverse and innovative ways municipalities, often with community partners, are taking local aim at a worldwide crisis.

“With the threat of climate change impacts facing the people, places, and communities in this region, there is a lot to be done and the local people know what is important for their city or town,” said Ella Wise, land use planner for the planning council, a regional agency serving 101 municipalities.

In many cases, projects to prepare for climate change also help in the fight against the problem itself, Wise said, noting for example that a Beverly tree-planting initiative “will reduce emissions but also protect against storm water and extreme heat impacts.”

The future Malden park will be located on Commercial Street in the portion of the DPW yard adjacent to the Malden River. The park’s elevated greenway path and lawn will reduce local flooding should water levels rise in the river, officials said. The new greenery would also lessen the “urban heat effect,” the higher temperatures that can result from a lack of natural cover.

“Climate change is real, we know it’s coming, and we need to be able to prepare for it,” said Evan Spetrini, senior planner and policy manager for the Malden Redevelopment Authority. With the COVID-19 pandemic, “We are seeing firsthand what can happen when we are not prepared for things.”

As with many of the local climate initiatives, Malden’s project is also intended to meet other community needs, providing city residents a new park and furthering an ongoing regionwide effort to expand public access to the river.

Additionally, the project is a vehicle to promote social equity in Malden, Spetrini said, noting that it is overseen by a community-led steering committee, a majority of whose members are people of color. The Friends of the Malden River and the Mystic River Watershed Association are also project participants.

“When we think about resilience broadly, it is about climate resilience but also about social and economic resilience,” said Spetrini. “They are all

intertwined.”

Steering committee chairwoman Marcia Manong said the chance to promote social and racial equity was part of her motivation to join the panel. “All too often, communities of color have been damaged by climate injustice.” She said she also likes how the project is bringing people together.

“It is connecting ethnic interest groups, various neighborhoods of Malden. The community engagement with this project is something to be proud of,” she said.

Wise said building social equity is one goal of regional planning council’s grant program.

“Certain populations are more vulnerable to climate change than others,” she said, noting for example that chronic disinvestment in infrastructure can make low-income neighborhoods especially prone to flooding, and that residents in aging housing units without air conditioning are more vulnerable to extreme heat.

Malden began planning for the park project after receiving \$100,000 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2019 under a program that supports urban climate resilience projects that emphasize social equity. Malden’s \$52,500 grant from the planning council and a separate \$150,000 state grant awarded last fall will advance design and engineering for the plan.

Spetrini said the city opted to integrate the park within the public works yard because it lacked suitable land on which to relocate the DPW. But officials were also inspired by the challenge of “physically marrying an industrial use and a waterfront park,” noting that the project includes measures to better filter contaminants from storm water flowing into the river.

Natick decided to focus its program on food insecurity after seeing a surge in the number of people seeking help from local food pantries due to rising food costs and job losses from the pandemic, according to Jillian Wilson-Martin, the town’s sustainability director.

“It got us thinking how climate change could result in similar circumstances,” she said. “There are going to be food shortages and price increases due to changing growing conditions.”

With its \$141,793 grant, the town plans to create a community garden at the Housing Authority's main complex on Cottage Street, building 55 handicap-accessible raised beds to add to two beds installed last year by local Girl Scouts.

Teens working for the Natick Community Organic Farm and students from Keefe Technical High School will build the beds, 52 of which will be set aside for seniors and low-income Housing Authority tenants to grow their own produce, with any left over provided to community members. Three beds will grow food for the Natick Service Council's food pantry.

The town is also expanding a pilot Community Supported Agriculture program begun last year at the farm that provides selected seniors and pantry users free shares of vegetables for the growing season. Grant funds will also be used for initiatives to build friendships through gardening, including having experienced gardeners mentor new ones.

"I'm thrilled about it because it meets a really important need in our town," Wilson-Martin said of the project, adding that the initiative will also help Natick connect with its vulnerable populations. "Our intention has not been to prescribe the project to the community but to include these groups in developing and maintaining it."

Canton in 2019 completed a plan assessing its vulnerability to future climate change effects. The study, funded through the state's municipal grant program, highlighted the risk of future flooding from severe rainfall events, and recommended the town begin to prepare by evaluating its storm water system and raising public awareness of the issue.

With a follow-up \$337,500 grant from the same state program. Canton since 2019 has been studying potential deficiencies in its storm water system and plans upcoming community workshops on the subject, according to Town Planner Laura Smead.

With the new \$42,817 planning council grant, the town has hired Mass Audubon to conduct a series of additional public workshops over the coming months about what Canton is doing to prepare for climate change and how residents can fortify their own properties, including such steps as weatherizing their homes and planting rain gardens.

Smead said over the last several years, Canton installed rain gardens, shales, and other types of natural water absorption systems to demonstrate

their benefits for the public.

Christine Smith, a member of the Canton Sustainability Committee, welcomes the workshops and other steps the town is taking to prepare for climate change.

“Obviously regional and broader preparation is essential, but it’s important that each municipality takes care of these issues on the local level as well,” she said. “Everyone needs to do their part.”

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