

CAMBRIDGE

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But who speaks for the geese?

Advocates seek voice in BU bridge project

By Jennifer Schwartz, Globe Correspondent | September 14, 2008

Cambridge's white geese have it rough these days.

The flock of barn birds that reside on a small swath of land under the Boston University Bridge has survived more than two decades on the grassy banks of the Charles River, despite brutal mutilation by at-large human attackers in 2001, being ousted from their feeding grounds on Magazine Beach in 2004, and a growing dependency on volunteer breadcrumb-throwers.

But now a \$2.3 million rehabilitation project of the 80-year-old steel-truss connector between Cambridge and Boston may wipe out their current nesting area. During a Cambridge Conservation Commission meeting last Monday night at which consultants from the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation discussed their plans for the project, advocates for the geese and other local issues who came to voice their concerns were denied public comment.

"It's interesting that, in an effort to give the DCR all this additional time, the commission refused to open up the meeting to a hearing," said Marilyn Wellons from the Friends of the White Geese group. "I was at Boston's meeting with the DCR, and they had public comment."

Kaki Martin, chairwoman of the commission, said at the meeting that there would be "no room for official public comment because there were so many issues at stake with the application itself."

"We feel totally shut out right now," said Charlie Denison, director of advocacy at the Livable Streets Alliance, who came to address the prospect of improved cyclist and pedestrian safety. "We didn't even know about the project until we saw signs announcing it. I didn't realize the planning process was so far along; I don't think there's much we can do now."

The rehabilitation of the bridge is slated to be just that - a repair of the pre-existing design, said DCR Commissioner Richard Sullivan. Over a 30- to 36-month process, the entire deck needs to be replaced during three stages while keeping the historic properties of the bridge intact.

There is one new element, though. A proposed drainage system will collect stormwater runoff and channel it into hydrodynamic separators (one on each side of the river), which will remove sediments before the water runs into the Charles.

Although the separators will diminish pollution into the river, and they have been lauded by the commission and other environmental groups, Wellons was quick to note that fish aren't the only creatures at stake.

"Looking at the plans, it was remarkable to see how much damage this project will do to the nesting area," she said. "These geese have nowhere else to go."

Commission members had plenty to say about the application, though they did not mention the geese or other wildlife.

"There is no specific planting plan," commission director Jennifer Wright told the consultants. "You're removing all the trees, but how do you plan to revegetate?" Trees are necessary to keep the steep banks stable and prevent erosion. Wright also addressed "major issues with previous lack of maintenance."

"It's discouraging that they spend the money on the projects, but then say they don't have the funds for upkeep," said Wright on the phone before the meeting.

In response to accusations that the public has been kept in the dark during the planning process, Sullivan said there is going to be a meeting "that is in the process of being set up" at which the public will be able to comment about the reconstruction.

"The DCR takes very seriously our responsibility to engage the public," he said. "We'll engage them with a Listserv (an electronic mailing list) so that they can see how the project is proceeding."

But members of the public who showed up at Monday's meeting didn't seem to be buying it.

"That we've been ignored by the DCR is too nice a word," said Wellons.

Denison said that had he been allowed to comment, he would have urged the commission to work with the DCR and open up the process to greater transparency.

"Why not involve the advocacy groups that have made the parklands better for years to come?" he said. "Our sense is that, when the DCR got a new commissioner last year, public involvement has almost completely gone away."

Wellons and her gaggle of geese supporters worry that the flock will cease to exist if they can't voice their concerns.

But Wright said the project "should not impact" the habitat. "It's never our intention to take away space from animals already in the area," she said. "But we need to put tunnel vision on and say, 'what is the scope of project?' "

The geese can't seem to catch a break. In the DCR application, they were blamed for prohibiting officials from flagging wetland areas at the site.

"It's right here in the text," said Wright, when the consultants claimed they didn't mean for the geese to be a "serious" or "official" reason for failing to mark the area.

If the geese really were squawking at the DCR officials, perhaps they know what's coming. ■

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