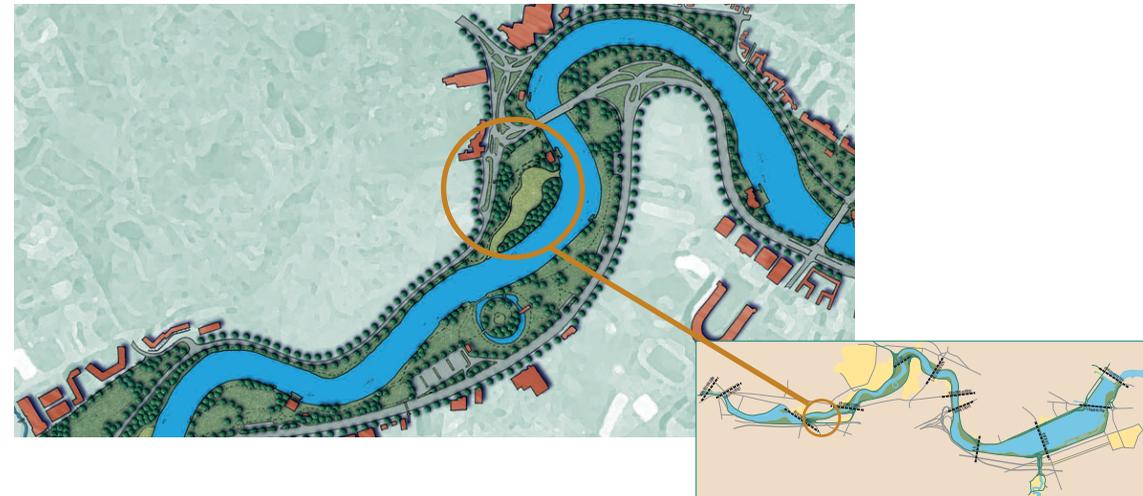


- **Establish a nature walking loop from the Arsenal Street Bridge to the Eliot Bridge to link Herter Park West and Hell's Half Acre.**
- **Maintain the wooded bank, especially the existing catalpa and birch plantings, but open selected views through to the water to create a sense of connection to the river.** There should also be formal points of contact with the river where paths lead to wooden decks or stone terraces at the water's edge.
- **Establish a wildflower field,** in cooperation with the community gardeners, to diversify the basin landscapes and strengthen wildlife habitat along this section.
- **Separate foot and wheeled uses with a dedicated bicycle-and-skate path along the parkway edge of the meadow and a dedicated soft-surface pedestrian path along the river.** The meadow should remain free of structured paths, although stabilized turf paths may be appropriate.
- **The community gardens should be part of an overall redesign of this area.** The intrusiveness of this facility in an otherwise natural area should be moderated with border plantings. Water and storage space should be provided for the gardens.
- **Redesign the current parking lot for a limited number of park users** in a manner similar to the proposed redesign of the small lots at Herter Park East.



HELL'S HALF ACRE (8N)

An 800-foot section of river bank, marshland, fields, and parkways on the Cambridge side of the river just upstream of the Eliot Bridge

KEY RESOURCES

- *Marshes*
- *Arsenal Street Bridge (1925)*
- *Bath house/American Legion Marsh Post 442 (1941)*
- *Belmont Hill Boat House (1950)*
- *Eliot Bridge (1951)*
- *Greenough Boulevard (1966)*

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Once known as the Riverlands, the marsh at Gerry's Landing was ten times its current size prior to development and the construction of Greenough Boulevard. Aside from a small wetland just upstream, it is the only substantial wetland area in the basin. It is rich with bird life, including red-

winged blackbirds, song sparrows, and different species of ducks, and is accordingly a popular bird-watching spot. In 1955 writer Bernard DeVoto called the Riverlands “Hell’s Half Acre” in an article that advocated saving this unique urban wild.



Despite opposition from some environmentalists, the MDC proceeded with construction of the road on the grounds that landscaped parkways were central to Eliot’s vision for the Charles River Basin. The low volume of traffic on Greenough Boulevard was noted as soon as the boulevard opened;

traffic has not increased substantially in ensuing years. The four-lane boulevard remains underutilized.

EXISTING CONDITIONS AND ISSUES

Hell’s Half Acre sits a foot or more above the elevation of the river and is cut off from it by a low embankment. A drainage channel and weir structure keep the water level in the marsh down. The area is slowly being degraded by invasive plant species: phragmites, an aggressive weed species that creates dense monocultures with little habitat value, has spread over 50 percent of the wetlands. Phragmites grows on higher, drier ground, and by lowering the water level the drainage channel may be promoting the spread of these plants. An expanse of cattails grows in the western end of the marsh, protected by slightly deeper water, but as siltation continues phragmites will spread.

Park users have a heavy impact on this area. Multiple paths have been worn through the wetland and the wooded area that separates it from the Charles. Walkers, joggers, or cyclists do not commonly use the area because they perceive the woodlands as dangerous. The shore path is isolated by the marsh and completely cut off from view.

The open field between Hell’s Half Acre and the Eliot Bridge is dominated by intrusive structures and paving. The former bathhouse, an undistinguished brick structure, blocks views to the Charles River and the Eliot Bridge. Though located at a critical juncture in the reservation, its current use as the American Legion Marsh Post 442 provides no public park benefit. The parking lot for the Post is awkward, dangerous to enter and exit, and fails to keep cars off the grass or tree roots. The generous parking lot across the street could provide more than enough parking for this area if it were better marked and connected to the reservation by crosswalks.

The Belmont Hill Boathouse houses the high school rowing programs of the Belmont Hill and Winsor schools. (The Buckingham, Brown, & Nichols Boathouse, on the other side of Eliot Bridge, is the other high school boathouse in the basin.) The Belmont Hill Boathouse screens the entrance to the Hell’s Half Acre shore path, making it difficult to monitor the path. A plan to expand the boathouse to accommodate more effectively the Winsor School rowing program by providing a composting toilet system has been proposed. There is no sewer service to the boathouse; students currently use the American Legion toilet. The sewer line serving the Marsh Post is in poor condition.





ALTERNATIVE C (LEFT) WOULD REVIVE THE LAST SUBSTANTIAL MARSH IN THE BASIN, CREATE AN ISLAND WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, AND NARROW GREENOUGH BOULEVARD TO RECLAIM PARKLAND. THE PHOTO BELOW SHOWS THE EXISTING CONDITION OF THE SITE.



GOALS

- **Restore Hell's Half Acre as a healthy native wetland.**
- **Establish the marsh as a laboratory for environmental education.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Master Plan explored three restoration schemes for Hell's Half Acre:

- **Alternative A**, no build
 - **Alternative B**, dredge and reconstruct existing wetland areas
 - **Alternative C**, dredge, reconstruct, and connect to river
- Under **Alternative A**, the no-build scenario, silting-in would continue. The result would be a monoculture of phragmites and eventually a scrub-shrub marginal wetland or woodland. Habitat value would be reduced, and the last marsh in the Charles River Basin would eventually disappear.
 - **Alternative B** would restore the marsh, connecting it to the river channel by a single-dike pathway.

- **Alternative C** would cut channels through the top and bottom of the embankment to permit the free flow of water between Hell's Half Acre and the Charles River. The resulting island would be enlarged with material dredged from the marsh, creating approximately one-third of an acre of protected upland island habitat and another third of an acre of restored wetland habitat. Phragmites would be removed by cutting them back for one to three months before they go to seed and then grubbing them out, roots and all. Deep dredging should prevent the reseeded of phragmites.

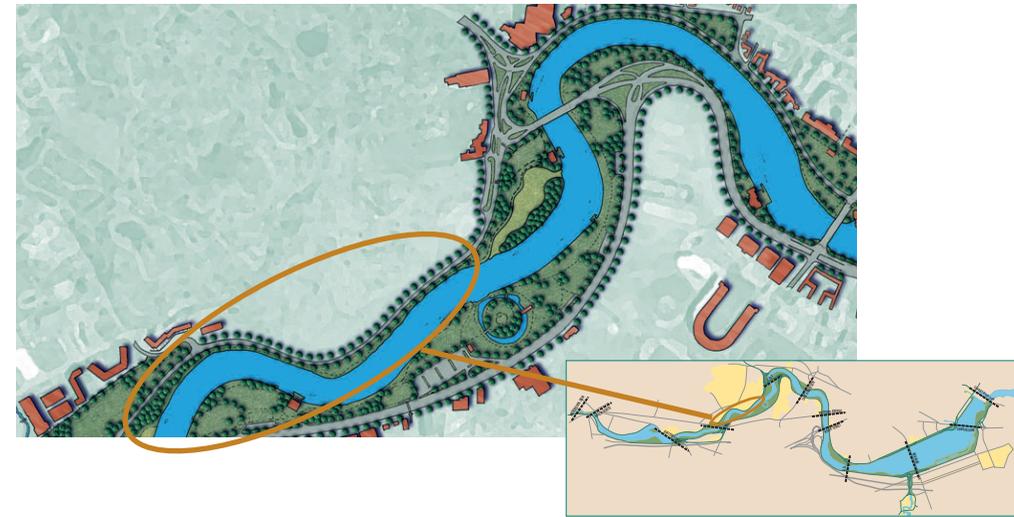
A deeper channel along the shore would provide canoe access and discourage people and dogs from crossing to the island wildlife sanctuary. To protect habitat, boat access to the island should be prevented. Marsh overlooks along the shore with benches and interpretive stations would provide the basis of an environmental education program.

The creation of an island removes some land from pedestrian access but maximizes natural habitat. The resulting increase in wildlife would enrich the visitor experience. Canoes and kayaks would have access to the channels that divide the island from the shore.

This plan recommends Alternative C.

The reconfiguration of the intersection at the Eliot Bridge and Greenough Boulevard is discussed on page 145.

- **Permit the Belmont Hill/Winsor Boathouse to expand only if a suitable public benefit can be demonstrated.** It may be more feasible to combine all three high school programs into one structure along this crowded stretch of river. This would free up parkland currently covered by the Buckingham, Brown & Nichols structure just below the Eliot Bridge. This facility crowds the bridge and the Cambridge Boat Club. A larger, better-designed boathouse next to the marsh would improve the overall appearance and function of this bend in the river.
- **Remove the former bathhouse used by the Marsh Post and its parking lot to open views of the Charles and the Eliot Bridge and to restore the river setting.** The ample parking lot across the parkway should be better signed. Install well-marked pedestrian crosswalks with traffic-calming measures.



GREENOUGH BOULEVARD (8N)

Greenough Boulevard between the Eliot Bridge and the Arsenal Street Bridge

KEY RESOURCES

- *Arsenal Street Bridge (1925)*
- *Eliot Bridge (1951)*
- *Greenough Boulevard (1966)*

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

This one-mile stretch of parkway has the potential for dramatic change. One of the least pleasant stretches of the reservation for pedestrians, Greenough Boulevard's excess road capacity can be recaptured to widen the pedestrian pathway, separate it from traffic, and create a generous strip of parkland to sustain the river bank. The parkway's curving alignment creates a wonderful variety of views. The wetlands at either end of this segment, home to a large number of bird and animal species, are unique features within the Basin. Just to the north is Mt. Auburn Cemetery, a significant stopping point for migrating birds.