

Urban Wild protections discussed for ALH

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Staff Reporter

The Boston City Council Subcommittee on Environment and Parks held a meeting on Monday to discuss possibilities for protecting the greenspaces along the American Legion Highway corridor running through Roslindale, Hyde Park and Mattapan.

"We took a two-hour tour of the American Legion Parkway Corridor, you know it's something I drive through all the time but I never really paid attention to the detail until I took that tour," said Councilor Steve Murphy.

"What I found was that it has a wilderness feel to it, but it needs a lot of human attention right now."

The hearing explored the idea of putting as much acreage as possible into an Urban Wilds designation, much like the Allandale Woods in West Roxbury and Jamaica Plain.

"There are more than 500 acres of Urban Wilds spaces," said Environment and Parks Subcommittee Chair Matthew O'Malley. "Not only are these wilds used as living classrooms

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City Councilors met on Monday to discuss methods of preserving greenspace along the American Legion Highway in Roslindale, Hyde Park and Mattapan.

FILE PHOTO

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September 24, 2015

to learn about Boston's history, but also actively contribute to the character and quality and life of our neighborhoods. The value of these spaces makes any inquiry into adding more, finding more and designating more all the more exciting."

Murphy said the Urban Wilds designation does offer some protections, but that the entire system could use a tuneup to protect the small amount of natural ecosystem in the city.

"The first protection, if you will, would be to get a designation as an Urban Wild, but it isn't a solution," he said. "But it is a very important first step in bring-

ing the promise out in that open space. I think it's important that we kind of round out the Emerald Necklace...It seems to stop at Franklin Park on that eastern side and it could come right down the American Legion Corridor into Hyde Park. That would fully, in my view, extend Frederick Law Olmsted's Urban Necklace."

Boston Parks and Recreation Department Commissioner Christopher Cook said his department wants to work on the issue.

"The Walsh administration has made a strong commitment under Chief (of Environment, Energy and Open Space Austin) Blackmoon's leadership to acquire new open space to prepare for the density that our city is going to need," he said. "We want to keep the same ratio of per capita open space as possible because one of the great reasons people want to live in this city is because we have such great parks and open space."

The problem, according to Cook, is that Urban Wilds protections can only extend to publicly-owned land, and much of the American Legion is in private hands. He said acquiring that land would be difficult and expensive.

"Some of these entities, I believe, are probably holding on to the property for fair market value, in which the situation becomes complicated because the city doesn't have a pot of money to acquire land right now—the Boston Parks Department doesn't have a land acquisition fund," he said.

The councilors toyed with the idea of a Greenbelt Protection Overlay District, which would make urban expansion on the area more difficult in terms of zoning, but would allow current landowners flexibility.

"It would probably affect future developments," Cook said.

Resident and Mt. Hope Canterbury Neighborhood Association Member Rick Yoder said currently, the corridor has a lot of urban greenspace, which includes the Mount Hope Cemetery, the Massachusetts Audubon Boston Nature Center, the Clark Cooper Community Gardens, unprotected state-owned property on Morton Street, Canterbury Brook, the St. Michaels and Mount Calvary Cemeteries and much more.

"The American Legion Parkway Corridor includes an amazing collection of hundreds of acres of urban greenery," he said. "This creates an enormous wildlife sanctuary, an island of tranquility and a feeling of ruralness. It's visually relaxing."

Resident and former member of the Board of the Boston Natural Areas Network Jessica Mink said the biggest issue the Network faced in her 15 years was that it just never got enough funding, and was actually disbanded last year for that reason. It was set up in 1977 by the Boston Redevelopment Authority and was then known as the Boston Natural Areas Fund, and was set up to preserve Urban Wilds through purchase of land. She said the biggest issue now facing urban conservation of greenspace would have to be organization.

"It's a little tricky now," she said. "There are groups that support specific Urban Wilds, but there is not a citywide group in action right now."

Jamaica Plain resident Peggie Prebble said she hopes the city can move fast enough to properly preserve the American Legion Highway's forestry.

"The greenspace doesn't grow back when it goes away," she said.

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