

Elliott Laffer testimony at Boston City Council Groundwater Oversight Hearing, May 18, 2006

The period since the last City Council review hearing has been a busy one for the Trust and for groundwater related issues in general. We have made progress in a number of areas and have set in place a foundation for more, but the issue continues to require the combined efforts of all of us.

I would like to thank Mayor Menino for fully funding the Trust's operations in his budget for the upcoming fiscal year. I trust that the Council will concur with that recommendation.

Since last fall, we have continued to expand our well network. We have installed our first observation wells in East Boston and the North End. Through an arrangement with Berkeley Investments, we have been able to incorporate into our network a series of wells located on their property in the Fort Point Channel section of South Boston to allow us to better understand groundwater levels in that neighborhood where all of the former Boston Wharf Company buildings are supported on wood pilings. We are continuing to install wells in East Boston, the North End, and the Downtown Waterfront and to add density to our network in the Fenway, Back Bay, and South End. By this summer we will have completed the installation of the monitoring well network financed by funds from the Commonwealth's Environmental Bond Bill and the US EPA.

We worked with Jim Hunt, the BRA, and civic groups including Citywide GET and the Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay to refine the language used in the new Groundwater Conservation Overlay District zoning. Since its adoption, we have helped to spread the word about this important change to civic groups, property owners, developers, and engineers and helped them to understand what they needed to do to meet its requirements. We look forward to helping the Inspectional Services Department and the Zoning Board of Appeals as the first proposals subject to this zoning make their way through the process.

The Trust has been an active member of the City-State Groundwater Working Group that was established in the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Mayor, the Secretary of the Office of Commonwealth Development, and heads of all of its member organizations in September. We have set the table at the Working Group meetings by explaining the latest results from our monitoring network and offering analysis. I'm pleased to be able to report that all of the agencies have taken their agreement very seriously. The Working Group meetings, due in no small measure to their co-chairs Jim Hunt and Andrew Gottlieb, have been among the most useful I have participated in.

Among the participants in the Working Group, perhaps the most responsive of all to groundwater concerns has been the Boston Water and Sewer Commission. They have taken many proactive steps to repair leaky infrastructure that becomes apparent from our groundwater monitoring. We appreciate, as well, the BWSC's willingness to share their

groundwater contour maps with us, as well as the series of grants they have given to help fund our operations.

Another very responsive member of the Working Group has been the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority. They have moved quickly to investigate infrastructure where we have indicated there might be a problem. They have announced plans to repair several leaks in drains that were not apparent before we began our monitoring and reporting.

We have been working as well with the Department of Conservation and Recreation to make sure that the reconstruction of the Storrow Drive underpass eliminates the possibility that Storrow Drive contributes to the reduction in groundwater levels in nearby neighborhoods. I'm pleased that DCR and its consultants have pledged a design that will not allow the road to contribute to drawdown, and that it will in fact contain a significant recharge system to distribute all water in its drains on the City side of the old seawall.

I am pleased with the way that the BRA has welcomed the participation of the Trust in the scoping sessions for Article 80 projects and has asked project proponents to work with us on groundwater related issues. Where it has made sense, the BRA has asked developers to include new monitoring wells to enhance our network. They have also helped us to persuade designers to modify foundation designs that had the potential to lower groundwater levels. I would also like to note the active participation of the Boston Environment Department in asking proponents to take a proactive role in overcoming groundwater problems.

I would also like to thank DPW and the Public Improvement Commission for adopting and enforcing a policy that anyone installing a groundwater monitoring well on public property must inform the Trust of its plans and offer it to the Trust after it is no longer needed for its original purpose. This assures that wells that could be useful in our network are not routinely filled in after their original need has been met.

It's important to thank, as well, those who have been volunteering their time to help solve this problem. In addition to our Trustees, I want to particularly acknowledge the members of our Technical Advisory Committee, who have donated hours of their time every month to help me understand what our readings are telling us and where we should place our emphasis next.

To make those readings more accessible to the public, the Trust last fall upgraded our website to make it more interactive and easier to use. We have, in addition, now posted the findings from the data logging equipment that we have installed in those wells where we believe additional study of variations in levels over time might help us to identify a problem. Both the data loggers and the software upgrade were paid for with funds from the Commonwealth secured through the efforts of Jim Hunt.

We have been working with Jim Hunt, Reps. DiMasi, Rushing, and Walz, and the T to develop a solution to low groundwater levels in the St. Charles Street section of the South

End that might have application to other similar areas of the City. The T has committed funding in its Capital Improvement Plan and the Commonwealth is likely to include additional funding in the next budget to address the issue.

So, with all that, where do we stand in terms of actual groundwater levels?

We have found that generally low groundwater levels are concentrated in identifiable areas. These include: the Back Street/Beacon Street area near the Storrow Drive Underpass; the Stuart Street/Columbus Avenue area near the Southwest Corridor; Herald Street along the Turnpike; Tremont Street and its environs in the South End; the area near the intersection of Exeter Street and Huntington Avenue; and the East Fenway in the Hemenway Street/Burbank Street/Edgerly Road area. In all of these areas, we are working to point to potential causes that can be addressed and hopefully raise groundwater levels.

In addition, our initial monitoring in East Boston has discovered extremely low levels in areas near Porter Street. We are working with other members of the Working Group and our Technical Advisory Committee to try to understand the cause and potential remedies in this area. With our expanded well network, we are also working to understand groundwater levels in the North End, Downtown Waterfront, and Fort Point Channel areas. In all cases, the information we are gathering will factor into the decision on whether to extend the GCOD to additional neighborhoods.

I am thrilled with the way all of these individuals and organizations have come together to battle this problem. With continued serious efforts, I am hopeful that we can get to a point where the threat becomes a management and maintenance issue. Continued vigilance would then serve to preserve these critical sections of our City.