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Greening Town Hall to Address the #1 Pollutant to Massachusetts Rivers

BELLINGHAM, MA [June 26, 2020] — As it was made clear yesterday by EEA Secretary Theoharides' announcement of a Level 2 Significant Drought for most of Massachusetts, it is critically important that cities and towns invest in stormwater management practices that build resilience to both flooding and drought, as precipitation becomes more consolidated to certain parts of the year and leaves New England with long, hot, dry summers.

Over the last year, the Town of Bellingham, in partnership with Tighe & Bond and Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA), made improvements to the Town's Municipal Center to reduce pollution going to local waterbodies. This work included creating the new park and installing a stormwater infiltration basin near the back entrance to the building.

"Both the park and the new basin capture and infiltrate stormwater on the municipal building site, so they let rainfall absorb into the ground," explained Don DiMartino, Bellingham DPW director. "This reduces the amount of nutrient pollution that ends up in the Charles River."

Over the last four decades, the Clean Water Act has helped to eliminate many pollution sources such as wastewater treatment plants, sewer overflows, and industrial discharges. Now, stormwater runoff is the number one cause of water pollution in most waterways in the U.S., including the Charles River.

"Rain and snow start clean, but pick up trash and pollution from roads, driveways, parking lots, rooftops, and other paved surfaces that do not allow water to soak into the ground as well as landscaped and natural areas," said Emily Norton, CRWA Executive Director. "The pollutants end up in local streams and ultimately the Charles and other major rivers. Each community has a part to play to reduce stormwater pollution to restore our rivers and lakes and we applaud this work that the Town of Bellingham has undertaken."

The Municipal Center site was identified as a priority for stormwater infiltration in the 2011 report "Subwatershed Management Plan for Bellingham, MA," produced by CRWA and Nitsch Engineering. Green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) uses natural features, like soil and plants, to filter out pollution from stormwater runoff. GSI systems are particularly effective at reducing phosphorus pollution, a primary concern in the Charles River which currently receives roughly twice as much phosphorus

pollution as a healthy river should. Green stormwater infrastructure also helps reduce flooding and build resilience to drought, two things that are critically important to adapt to climate change. The Massachusetts State Hazard Mitigation and Climate Adaptation Plan (September 2018), the National Climate Assessment (November 2018), and resilient MA: the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Climate Change Clearinghouse, all offer dire predictions for the Northeast in coming years including increases in intense rain storms and longer, hotter, dryer summers.

“This cooperative project has been funded in part by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The Federal Funds from EPA to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection provided design, construction, and education under a s. 319 competitive grant, which allowed Bellingham to make stormwater cleaner at this Municipal Center,” said Janet Moonan, Project Manager at Tighe & Bond.

Phosphorus pollution, which comes from fertilizer, pet waste, detergents, eroding soils, and even decaying leaves and grass clippings from improperly disposed of yard waste, enters the river when it is transported by stormwater through underground drainage systems. Phosphorus causes excessive algae and plant growth that create a toxic habitat for aquatic life and hinders recreation, including fishing, boating, and swimming, which are critical to the Commonwealth’s vitality.

This new green stormwater infrastructure feature is just one of the many actions the Town has taken to protect waterways, recharge groundwater, and address climate change impacts. Bellingham has a robust stormwater management program that includes education and involvement of the public, finding and removing sources of pollution to the drainage system, management stormwater runoff in new and redevelopment projects both during and following construction, and taking actions to manage pollution from municipal operations.

Residents can do their part too! Never put anything (even bagged up pet waste) into a storm drain or catch basin. Think carefully about the timing of fertilizer application, use it sparingly, and clean up extra from driveways and walkways. Consider taking your car to the car wash, instead of washing in the driveway, or even wash on your lawn instead. Pick up yard waste and take it to the recycling center. Always take household hazardous waste to the recycling center and dispose of properly, free of charge.

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Charles River Watershed Association uses science, advocacy, urban design and education to promote resilient communities and a healthy river ecosystem. CRWA was formed in 1965 in response to public concern about the declining condition of the Charles River. Since its earliest days of advocacy, CRWA has figured prominently in major clean-up and watershed protection efforts that have dramatically improved the health of the Charles.