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Warning of Flood Waters of the Future, CRWA-led Coalition Calls on City Leaders to Reject Proposed Amazon Development in Widett Circle

WESTON, MA [March 16, 2021] — In coordination with a coalition of 15 partners representing a diverse cross section of voices composing the state’s environmental advocates, Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA) is submitting a joint letter to Mayor Marty Walsh and the Boston City Council warning that construction of a new Amazon distribution center in the area of the city’s Widett Circle and Frontage Road “would be at best incredibly short-sighted, and at worst a danger to residents and property.” The groups instead propose restoring nature-based features that could create a buffer against climate change-driven devastation.

On the heels of the Boston Globe’s recent report on the potential redevelopment, the CRWA-led coalition is raising the alarm on the long-term hazards of solidifying Widett’s status as a low-lying impermeable surface, which the letter warns will send floodwaters into surrounding communities alongside the all but certain one-two punch of sea level rise and storm surge in the extreme weather events of the fast-approaching mid-century.

“Based on the city’s own projections for sea level rise and future coastal storms [the Widett Circle/Frontage Road area] will be regularly flooded a mere two decades into the useful life of any development,” reads the letter.

Signatories range from statewide organizations such as Massachusetts Sierra Club and Trustees of Reservations, to local groups such as Eastie Farms and the Harborkeepers.

Citing the bleak findings of the city’s own Climate Ready Boston initiative, the letter goes on to add that “any redevelopment that fails to incorporate climate resilience measures will only exacerbate flooding, extreme heat, and other climate vulnerabilities in surrounding communities.”

According to Climate Ready Boston’s Climate Vulnerability Assessment, seven percent of the total land area in the city could be exposed to stormwater flooding for the 10-year, 24-hour rain event, “with that percentage increasing to nine percent by the end of the century.” The assessment also found that West Roxbury, the South End and South Dorchester were among the locations to have the largest areas of land expected to be

affected by stormwater flooding.

Shattering the notion that the consequences of climate change are some futuristic worst case scenario, the letter highlights the flooding that's already taking place in the area of



the proposed development -- including the 2018 winter storms and king tides that flooded the city's tow lot, caused massive disruption to the Department of Transportation, and forced the relocation of the Police Department's emergency communications operations.

Rather than doubling down on the same ill-conceived engineering that made the area a flood risk at the turn of the century, the coalition instead calls for city leadership to heed the advice of its own 2019 Ordinance Protecting Local Wetlands and Promoting Adaptation in the City of Boston, that recognized the city's need to factor "development of green infrastructure, including the option to construct, restore, and revitalize local wetlands," into its plans for climate adaptation.

Calling the area a "golden opportunity" to make good on climate resilience promises, the letter states that restoring the filled lands to wetlands and removing unnatural coverings and obstructions (also known as daylighting) of the buried "Bass River," would cost-effectively reduce flooding while also protecting neighboring homes and businesses, providing much-needed cooling during extreme heat and creating green space for Boston residents.

Among neighborhoods that the coalition says will benefit most from these green resiliency projects are low-income communities in the South End, Dorchester, and Roxbury -- lending further evidence to the vital role that commonsense climate resiliency plays in achieving the broader goals of environmental justice.

"They say history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes," said CRWA Executive Director Emily Norton. "And rushing headlong into an expensive development project in a flood-prone area like Widett Circle is a pitch perfect repetition of the same short-term thinking that turned this area into a chronic flood zone. In 2021, we have an opportunity to break that cycle and embrace the natural resiliency fixes that can push back on the cocktail of climate catastrophe posed by the three-pronged threat of sea level rise, storm surge and increased flooding."

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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.