

Newton Conservators' 56th Annual Meeting

The Newton Conservators' 56th Annual Meeting, held on May 3, 2017, provided the opportunity to celebrate six individuals with four awards recognizing their efforts to protect, preserve and reclaim Newton's natural areas for the enjoyment and benefit of the people of Newton, and for their efforts to educate and disseminate information about these and other environmental matters.

The Environmentalist of the Year Award



PHOTO: HENRY FINCH

George Kirby, Jerry Reilly and Jim Lerner

The Environmentalist of the Year award was initiated by the Newton Conservators in 1981 and has been presented nearly every year to a local citizen or group who has contributed to improvements in the city's environment. This year the Conservators recognized the team of George Kirby, Jerry Reilly, and Jim Lerner as Environmentalist of the Year for their work in "transforming an unused rail bed from an eyesore into a green path to be enjoyed by the community," recounted Director Michael Clarke. "What began in 1853 as the Charles River Branch Railroad, then in the 1980s became the Bay Colony Railroad, and was then owned by the MBTA is now the Upper Falls Greenway — with hopes of soon connecting to the Charles River Pathway and eventually to the Bay Colony Rail Trail across the Charles River to Needham and beyond."

And persistence is the key word. When the ribbon was finally cut celebrating the opening of the Upper Falls Greenway in September, 2016, Village 14 blog took note by proclaiming "Better Late Than Never." Greenway construction started two years earlier and was only supposed to take two months. Instead, the contractor ran into trouble and ultimately walked away from the job, leaving proponents with no clear path to completion.

Little did Village 14 know how really late it was. In 2012 George Kirby, chair of the Newton Bicycle/Pedestrian Task Force, shared the Charles Johnson Maynard Award with fellow Newton Bicycle Pedestrian Task Force member Sean Roche and State Representative Kay Kahn for their

efforts to turn an unused and dangerous old railroad bridge in Lower Falls into a lovely, pedestrian friendly green space. That was the same year the City agreed to take over development of the Upper Falls Greenway project. When Kirby presented on the proposed Greenway project in April 2011, he and some of his fellow Upper Falls residents had been working on the project for several years.

Jerry Reilly, a freelance system software engineer and editor of the Upper Falls News, was a familiar figure to Upper Falls residents as he repeatedly canvassed the streets that border on or are adjacent to the rail bed seeking community support. A self-characterized "serial instigator" of various community-based projects (Feast of the Falls, Tour de Newton, Upper Falls Greenway, Eggcellent Breakfast, Newton Nomadic Theater, Nomadic Story Slam) and "goofy projects with no apparent redeeming social value" (Museum of Bad Art, King Pong, Disposable Theatre, Human Foosball), Reilly and his family have lived in Upper Falls since 2009.

Jim Lerner is no stranger to awards — he and his wife Anita Springer were recipients of a 2011 Newton Beautification Award. Lerner had no time to rest on his laurels, however, as he was repeatedly called upon to defend the Upper Falls Greenway project against charges that it would derail attempts to expand light rail service into the area.

"While I, along with the other Newton Bicycle/Pedestrian Task Force members, would welcome improved public transit along Needham Street — including a light rail, this seems extremely unlikely to happen in the next 10 to 20 years and the park is something we can build today, at little or no cost to the taxpayers," he was explaining to the TAB back in February, 2012. "[It] would convert an eyesore into an asset without precluding any alternative future uses." The MBTA does not currently have any plans to build in the corridor, he repeatedly explained over the next several years. The Greenway Project did not preempt later transportation use, but would simply remove the same obsolete and deteriorated tracks the MBTA would have to remove if it ever decided to build.

The Directors' Awards

This year the Conservators also presented Directors' Awards to Jennifer Steel and Dan Brody...

"I know from first-hand experience that Jennifer is smart, thoughtful, thorough, and committed to the environment," explained Director David Backer in presenting the Directors' Award to Jennifer Steel, Newton's Senior Environmental Planner. "The Conservators are pleased to recognize Jennifer for her work in enhancing public access to Newton's conservation areas through the installation of new trailhead

signs and maps and the creation of the Conservation Area Stewards program.”

Steel, a graduate of Wesleyan and Duke Universities, has over 20 years of experience in environmental planning and



Jennifer Steel and Dan Brody

management. She has worked in regional coastal research and management with the EPA and NOAA, the Advocacy Department of Mass Audubon, and the conservation departments of several local communities. With her work with the City’s Conservation Commission, she facilitates the efforts of the City Council-appointed volunteers to manage 20 conservation areas, totaling over 280 acres of woods, fields, wetlands and hills in the city. She also reaches out to the general public in a variety of ways, including as a contributor to the Conservators’ newsletter.

The Newton Conservators have always relied on public education as a means of promoting its programs. While our core mission has remained unchanged for more than a half century, the ways of communicating it have not. Ten years after the Conservators recognized Dan Brody as Environmentalist of the Year for “for his vision, skill, and dedication in building and maintaining the Conservators’ Website,” thereby dramatically expanding the Conservators’ paper newsletter subscriber list reach with an environmentally friendly, “invaluable educational and informational tool for our community,” the Conservators again recognize him with a 2017 Directors’ Award for his use of new technology to allow the public an enhanced interface not only with our website but with the environment.

Brody has had a varied career in government, politics, nonprofit financial management, and urban planning. He is currently a consultant to Field First Strategies, which provides public engagement services to political campaigns and nonprofit organizations. He has previously served as chief financial officer of a non-profit start-up (The Boston Museum), as chief financial officer for the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and as Deputy State Budget Director for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. He has a bachelor’s degree from Harvard

and a master’s degree in city planning from the University of California at Berkeley and has twice been elected by the delegates of the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly to serve on the UUA Board of Trustees in the position of Financial Advisor

“Dan is a steady and long-time contributor to the Board, who has maintained the Conservators’ extensive website, and advised us on many technology issues,” Director David Backer explained. “The Conservators are pleased to recognize Dan for his work in enhancing public use of Newton’s Conservation Areas by developing and installing QR codes in Newton’s parks and open spaces and for his creation of the associated pages on the Newton Conservators’ website.”

Charles Johnson Maynard Award

And the final award goes to Carol Schein. The Charles Johnson Maynard Award is given each year to recognize efforts to “improve biodiversity, habitat reclamation, and natural resource protection.”



Carol Schein

“Charles Johnson Maynard was a well-known naturalist, ornithologist, taxidermist, author and publisher who was born and lived in Newton from 1845 until his death in 1929,” Director Chris Hepburn reminded the audience. “His 172nd birthday would have been next Saturday. “A focus of Maynard’s work was the “modifications of breeding habitats of birds caused by persecutions of man,”

Hepburn continued, and so it was only fitting that the Conservators make the award to Carol Schein, Newton’s Open Space Coordinator since 2004.

“In that role,” Hepburn explained, “she has helped the city and its residents understand the need to preserve or revitalize many places in our city, including Newton Centre Playground, Nahanton Park, the Crystal Lake Bath House area, the old home of the Parks and Recreation Dept. on Vernon Street, Waban Reservoir, and many more. She also is the manager of the city’s adopt-a-space program and the memorial donations program. In many of these projects, she has collaborated with the Newton Conservators or other environmental groups such as the Friends of Nahanton Park and Crystal Lake Conservancy.” ■

✿ Margaret Doris