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USACE hosts open house October 8th in Millis, Mass., for Charles River Natural Valley Storage Area Master Plan revision

CONCORD, Mass. (Sept 9, 2024) – The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, New England District will host an open house October 8, 2024, in Millis, Mass., to kick off the process to revise the 1984 Charles River Natural Valley Storage Area (CRNVSA) Master Plan for the CRNVSA located in Millis, Medfield, Norfolk, Franklin, Holliston, Needham, Sherborn, Bellingham, Dedham, Dover, Medway, Newton, Wrentham, Walpole, Natick, and Boston.

The open house will be held from 5 to 7:00 p.m. at the Millis Public Library Roche Bros. Community Room at 961 Main Street in Millis. There will be no formal presentation during the session, but USACE members will be on hand to share information about the revision process, provide the general schedule and gather initial feedback from the public.

The master plan serves as the strategic land use management document that guides the comprehensive management and development of all recreational, natural and cultural resources throughout the life of the water resource development project. It defines how USACE will manage the resources for public use and conservation.

The current Charles River Natural Valley Storage Area Master Plan was last approved in 1984 and needs revision to address changes in regional land use, population, outdoor recreation trends, and the USACE management policy. Key topics to be discussed in the revised master plan include updated land use classifications, new natural and recreational resource management objectives, recreation facility needs, and special issues such as invasive species management and threatened and endangered species habitat. The revision does not address the technical and operational aspects of the Charles River Natural Valley Storage Area project related to flood risk management or the water conservation missions of the project.

An initial 30-day public comment period will begin October 8 and end November 9. During this time, members of the public can submit comments, suggestions, and concerns about the master plan. Comments must be submitted in writing at the open house or digitally via the comment link on the Charles River Natural Valley Storage Area Master Plan revision website at <https://www.nae.usace.army.mil/Missions/Civil-Works/Flood-Risk-Management/Massachusetts/Charles-River-NVS/>.

The website also contains a presentation which will be available during the open house that provides details about an additional comment period that will open after the draft report is released (currently scheduled for December 2025).

The Charles River Natural Valley Storage Area lies throughout 16 Eastern Massachusetts communities in the middle and upper areas of the Charles River. The Charles River extends inland from Boston Harbor and meanders for approximately 80 miles to Hopkinton, a straight distance of about 30 miles. Thousands of acres of undeveloped wetlands, which normally appear dry, lie along the river and form a natural reservoir that store floodwaters in times of excess precipitation. These wetlands make up huge volumes of natural storage that soak up water like sponges. Potential development on these wetland areas threatened to eliminate the storage area of the natural reservoir. If development had been left unchecked, floodwaters that would normally settle in the natural water storage area would rush downstream, causing flood damage to existing development in the lower reaches of the river. The natural valley storage areas reduce flood levels by retaining this excess water.

A 1972 study of the Charles River watershed showed a need to protect the natural valley storage areas from further development. The study recommended that the federal government purchase and preserve these lands as a viable means of flood control. The Corps purchased the first acres in May 1977 and made its most recent acquisition in September 1983. Resolutions to acquire remaining lands are continuing. To date, the Corps has purchased land in 17 different areas at a cost of \$8.3 million.

The Charles River Natural Valley Storage areas total approximately 8,095 acres. These lands are located in Millis, Medfield, Norfolk, Franklin, Holliston, Needham, Sherborn, Bellingham, Dedham, Dover, Medway, Newton, Wrentham, Walpole, Natick, and Boston. Note: Although there are no storage lands in Cambridge, Waltham, Watertown, Wellesley, and Weston, the Charles River Natural Valley Storage areas protect land and property in these communities also. The watershed of the Charles River covers 307 square miles.

In addition to its primary role of flood damage reduction, project lands are used for recreation and fish and wildlife management. Hiking, canoeing, fishing, hunting, and cross-country skiing are some of the more popular activities. Of the 8,095 acres, the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife manages 2,640 acres affecting nine parcels.

For more information about the Charles River Natural Valley Storage Area, visit the project website at <https://www.nae.usace.army.mil/Missions/Civil-Works/Flood-Risk-Management/Massachusetts/Charles-River-NVS/>.