

STAFF SUMMARY

TO: Board of Directors
FROM: Frederick A. Laskey, Executive Director
DATE: October 22, 2025
SUBJECT: Public Engagement and Involvement for Development of the
Draft Updated CSO Control Plan



COMMITTEE: Wastewater Policy and Oversight

X INFORMATION
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This staff summary focuses on the efforts of MWRA and the cities of Cambridge and Somerville to conduct outreach and facilitate public involvement while developing a Draft Updated CSO Control Plan. Specific recommendations for CSO reduction alternatives for the Charles and Upper Mystic Rivers and Alewife Brook will be presented to the Board at a special Board Meeting on October 29, 2025.

RECOMMENDATION:

For information only.

DISCUSSION:

Over the last 35 years, substantial progress has been made toward reducing Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) discharges within the Metropolitan Boston area. As discussed in previous Board meetings, most recently this past September, MWRA and the cities of Cambridge and Somerville (collectively referred to as the Partners) are developing an Updated CSO Control Plan to further reduce CSO discharges in Alewife Brook/Upper Mystic River Basin and the Lower Charles River/Charles Basin.¹

The extensive scope and complexity of the alternatives being developed to reduce CSO discharges as part of the Updated CSO Control Plan will impact both the communities abutting these water bodies as well as MWRA ratepayers. Consequently, from the beginning of this process, the Partners have been committed to engaging impacted residents and clearly sharing critical information. This staff summary provides an overview of the Partners' substantial efforts to not only inform stakeholders of the project as it develops but facilitate public input and comments on CSO abatement alternatives in line with and beyond regulatory requirements. For more than three years, the Partners have focused on organizing public meetings open to all, providing up-to-date

¹ The updated plan is required as part of the Water Quality Standards Variances most recently issued in August 2024 by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP).

project information and materials, hosting additional technical meetings with watershed organizations, facilitating community feedback, and conducting outreach to environmental justice (EJ) groups. To assist with the Partners' public involvement efforts, the three entities partnered with Somerville's consultant, the Consensus Building Institute (CBI), which has played an integral role in public presentations and the wider engagement approach.

Need for Public Input

A key goal of engagement efforts has been informing and inviting active participation from as many stakeholders as possible. The communities around these CSOs feel the impact of CSO discharges today and will feel the impact of the projects (both positive and disruptive) for decades to come. It is important to keep them abreast of the planning process and let them share their perspective. The Partners have been, and continue to be, receptive and responsive to public inquiries and feedback related to developing the Draft Updated CSO Control Plan. In 2026, staff expect to hear significant input from the public that will be taken into consideration when finalizing the Updated CSO Control Plan.

Public Engagement Considerations

Early in the public engagement process, MWRA, Cambridge, and Somerville were committed to a few main goals: conducting expansive outreach so that as many interested residents as possible could participate, providing up-to-date information so that participation could be knowledgeable, and ensuring the participation of members of EJ populations. Sixty percent of the residents of MWRA's service area live in EJ communities and nearly all of Cambridge and Somerville neighborhoods include EJ populations according to the State's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs' criteria. Boston, Medford, and Arlington, which border the water bodies associated with the Updated Plan, also have significant EJ populations. It is critical that the Partners specifically reach out to these stakeholders. The Partners incorporated translation and interpretation into the methods of engagement.

Additionally, stakeholders have a broad range of familiarity with CSOs and the efforts to reduce discharges from them. Some have been involved for a while and have benefited from past meetings or published information while others are new to the process. This presents a challenge in designing the information to meet everyone's needs.

Methods of Engagement

To engage with as many stakeholders as possible, the Partners utilized a number of methods.

Project Website

One of the first steps of the Partners' outreach was the creation of a [joint project website](#) as a public resource for everything associated with the Updated CSO Plan. The website has a running timeline of all meetings and events, the presentation slides and recordings of all previous public meetings as well as any associated materials, an FAQ on CSOs and the development of the plan, and translated flyers for any upcoming meetings. Members of the public can also subscribe to receive emails on the project and see the contact information of project leaders for each entity. This website provides a critical platform for both past project materials and future engagement.

Public Meetings

To encourage active participation from stakeholders, the Partners have hosted five virtual public meetings. These meetings were designed to bring the public along over the course of the project by (a) sharing information about the process and draft concepts and content as they were developed, and (b) getting timely input and feedback from the public about the topics on which the project team was working. General topics included a) what CSO discharges are, why they occur, and what has been done already to reduce their frequency and volume; b) an overview of the planning process; c) an overview of potential tools to help reduce or eliminate CSO discharges; d) potential control alternatives under consideration and the range of potential costs; and e) results of alternative analysis. In addition to the public meetings, the Partners hosted a listening session in April 2025 to provide a forum for anyone interested in CSOs and the Updated Plan to share their priorities, concerns, and questions on the planning process. To offer the public multiple perspectives, the listening session included brief presentations by three watershed groups - Charles River Watershed Association, Mystic River Watershed Association, and Save the Alewife Brook - as well as the MWRA Advisory Board. See the table below for the topics, dates, and the number of remote participants for each public meeting.

| Public Meeting | Topic | Date | Participants |
|-------------------|---|--------------------|--------------|
| 1 | CSO Overview & Intro to CSO Plan | June 29, 2022 | 226 |
| 2 | Plan Priorities & New Typical Year Development | December 15, 2022 | 177 |
| 3 | CSO Tools & Alternative Development | November 15, 2023 | 243 |
| 4 | Alternatives Screening & Affordability Analysis | January 22, 2025 | 355 |
| Listening Session | | April 3, 2025 | 173 |
| 5 | Results of Alternative Analysis | September 25, 2025 | 170+ |
| 6 | Present Draft Plans | Spring 2026 | Planned |
| 7 | Present Final Plans | Winter 2027 | Planned |

Given the technical complexity of the project, the effort to design the content of these meetings so the plan could be understood by members of the public with vastly different levels of knowledge about CSOs was significant. Meetings were two to three hours long and involved both presentations and time for questions to be answered in writing and verbally. During these meetings, staff answered over 450 questions to inform and enable continued public participation in real time. Additionally, surveys associated with public meetings 2 and 3 were made available and open for several weeks to gather input from people who were not able to attend the meeting live. All public meetings were recorded and posted online, and all meeting materials were posted online so the public could access them at any time.

Outreach for Public Meetings

The Partners conduct broad outreach in anticipation of the public meetings. Prior to each meeting, notifications are posted on the joint website as well as each entity's website. Notification flyers with QR codes for registration are developed and translated into eight languages prevalent in the surrounding communities - Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, Haitian Creole, Nepali, Amharic, Arabic, and Bengali - in adherence with Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act Office's (MEPA) Public Involvement Protocol for Environmental Justice Populations. These flyers are posted to the joint website and distributed in EJ communities at community events, through the watershed associations, and through MWRA's water fountain program across the metro area.

Notifications of public meetings and the listening session were widely distributed. The Partners email flyers to nearly 200 contacts, including the MEPA EJ distribution list and specific EJ organizations identified by Cambridge and Somerville.

In addition to outreach, the Partners prioritized accessibility at the public meetings. All meetings have been conducted over Zoom to maximize participation, which proved to be successful, with at least 170 people attending all the meetings to date. Interpretation has also been a focus of the Partners. The presentation for the first meeting was prerecorded in English and live interpreted into four languages – Portuguese, Spanish, Amharic, and Bengali – followed by a question and answer period. The second meeting was entirely live interpreted in eight languages – Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, Haitian Creole, Nepali, Amharic, Arabic, and Bengali. Participants were given the option to join distinct language channels where an interpreter would repeat the original speaker in the given language. The third meeting was live interpreted in Spanish and Portuguese as potential participants did not request additional languages during outreach. Given that attendance on the translation channels cannot be seen in Zoom, the Partners moved to providing interpretation if requested for the fourth and fifth public meetings. As mentioned above, the flyers are still translated into eight languages with instructions on how to request interpretation for upcoming meetings.

Surveys

As noted, a strategy the Partners are using for encouraging and obtaining feedback is to provide opportunities for people to submit input via asynchronous written online surveys. These were conducted both during public meetings through live polling and, several times, through surveys shared with the broader public that were open for several weeks. See below for a list of each survey conducted to date.

| Survey | Date | Format | Respondents |
|--------------------|------------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Public Meeting # 2 | December 2022 - January 2023 | Broad Survey | 86 |
| Public Meeting # 3 | November 15, 2023 | Live Poll | 81 |
| Public Meeting # 3 | December 2023 - January 2024 | Broad Survey | 1,312 |
| Public Meeting # 4 | January 22, 2025 | Live Poll | 167 |

The aim of these surveys was to learn who was participating at the public meetings (participants were asked where they lived and worked) and, in some cases, to hear their primary reason for attending. The surveys provided an opportunity for people who might not want to speak in a forum of nearly 200 people to share their concerns about the current CSO situation, make suggestions for the plan development process, and share thoughts on what they believe is important for the Plan to include.

Over the past several years, responses to these surveys, as well as discussions with the watershed groups, have yielded several themes:

- The Partners need to act with urgency to develop and implement both short-term and long-term CSO discharge reduction alternatives.
- Green infrastructure and nature-based solutions should be a key part of mitigation.
- Input from the public and watershed groups should be taken seriously and the Partners should integrate feedback into the Updated CSO Control Plan.
- The projected impacts of climate change should be considered in evaluating alternatives.

Engagement with Watershed Organizations

In the fall of 2023, the Partners began meeting separately with the watershed groups mentioned previously – the Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA), the Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA), and Save the Alewife Brook (StAB). While communication between the Partners and these organizations has been frequent, the watershed groups expressed a desire to be more deeply involved in the development of the Updated CSO Control Plan. To date, four meetings were held with these groups as summarized below. The purpose of these meetings has been (a) to share technical information and answer questions, (b) to hear feedback, and (c) to get advice on the public meeting designs. Because the watershed groups are much more familiar than the general public with CSO discharges in the relevant water bodies and the types of potential mitigation measures, these meetings have allowed for in-depth dialogue on specific topics and more technical discussions.

| Watershed Group Meeting | Date | Format | Number of Participants |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | October 24, 2023 | In-person | 21 |
| 2 | June 24, 2024 | In-person | 32 |
| 3 | December 17, 2024 | Virtual | 35 |
| 4 | September 4, 2025 | In-person | 35 |

Engaging with the watershed groups has several goals: to receive input on what they and their constituents view as important considerations for the Updated Plan, to get their input regarding the public meetings (these meetings typically preceded the public meetings), to learn of their suggestions for potential siting of reduction projects, and to answer their questions about the process.

The watershed groups also significantly assisted with outreach to interested constituents in the area, and such was key to the Partners’ success in getting high levels of attendance at the public meetings.

In addition to these group sessions, leaders from these organizations were informally in touch with project staff and the CBI facilitators via email and phone during the process to request or share updates or provide recommendations.

Commitment to Community Feedback

The Partners have heard and taken concrete actions in response to many of these concerns. In response to the request to design for future conditions including climate projections, in 2022, in collaboration with a consultant and climate scientist from Cornell University, the Partners established a first of its kind approach, using both historic observed rainfall data and future climate models to identify a 2050 Typical Year. The 2050 Typical Year rainfall is significantly larger than

the typical year rainfall data than was used previously. Using this updated typical year in alternative evaluation for development of the Updated CSO Plan goes beyond regulatory requirements and will allow stakeholders to understand how the projects recommended in the Updated CSO Plan will operate under the more intense rainstorms projected in the future.

The Partners have also implemented and are investigating the feasibility of near-term improvements. Notification, including additional signage on bike paths, in advance of large rainstorms has been implemented and the Partners have completed two evaluation reports: 1) evaluating the effectiveness of current floatables control at outfalls to the Alewife Brook and the Upper Mystic River and recommending improvements; and 2) identifying potential best management practices for reducing odors near CSO structures in the three water bodies. Lastly, in response to comments from both the public and the watershed groups, the Partners are integrating green infrastructure into many alternatives where feasible.

Both the public and watershed organizations also provided specific project and construction related suggestions during the many surveys and meetings, which the Partners have used in developing alternatives.

Next Steps

The Partners are working with urgency to finalize the Draft Updated CSO Plan for submission to MassDEP and the EPA by December 31, 2025. As has been done throughout this process, the Partners will continue to have monthly meetings with the regulators. The Partners will also continue to answer questions from the public and the watershed organizations.

The Draft Updated CSO Control Plan submittal in December will be followed by a public meeting and hearing on the Draft Plan within a five-month DEP/EPA and public review and comment period. Public outreach throughout impacted communities and to various stakeholders will continue through this comment period to encourage additional engagement. The Partners envision robust public involvement during these few months which may include additional public meetings, listening sessions, and stakeholder meetings. Following this engagement, the Final Updated CSO Control Plan, which will address comments received on the Draft Plan, will be submitted in January 2027 for MEPA review.

The Updated CSO Control Plan will provide a conceptual level overview of potential alternatives and their impacts rather than design-level details on specific projects. The Plan itself will not be considered to independently require Environmental Impact Report review. Instead, projects that exceed MEPA thresholds will comply fully with applicable MEPA regulations, including requirements relating to public outreach to and involvement of EJ populations and an analysis of impacts on these residents.

Although the Partners are close to achieving a significant milestone by finalizing recommendations for reducing CSO discharges as part of the Draft Plan, there will continue to be many opportunities for the public to engage and provide input over the next year plus as the final plan is developed.