



Waltham Land Trust, Inc.
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A non-profit organization dedicated to preserving our community's natural resources through open space advocacy, education, acquisition, and protection.

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**Protecting
Waltham's land
...forever.**

Comments on the SMAA Supplemental Report for the MEPA Review of the Waltham High School Project February, 2020

Our core responsibility at the Waltham Land Trust is to protect the City's open space. Like most parties that weigh in on the new high school project, we want the best for Waltham's students, but recognize that conflict arises as important community needs compete for scarce resources. As the sworn protectors of Waltham's open space, we must be guided by our mission -- to acquire, preserve or restore land in a way that balances conservation and access, maximizes the natural value of the land, reduces habitat fragmentation, and permanently protects and conserves Waltham's natural resources.

We are aware that even with the planned blasting and removal of a large strip of the wooded hillside of the former Stigmatine campus, a reasonable open space corridor will still exist above the high school to provide habitat and connectivity for wildlife, and hopefully educational and passive recreational opportunities for students. This loss of valuable open space is made more acceptable by the City's important acquisition of the abutting wooded parcels over the past 20 years – the 6-acre Jericho Hill Summit, and the 26-acre Sanderson Heights parcel. Unfortunately, we feel compelled to comment on the disturbing changes proposed now for this natural area.

The Waltham Land Trust (WLT) must speak out against the concept of creating emergency access to the high school campus through the Sanderson Heights parcel, essentially bisecting the remaining open space of Jericho Hill with a gravel road. The major points that inform our opposition are as follows:

- Preservation of Jericho Hill has been a priority of the WLT since our inception – this open space asset has already been diminished significantly by the plan to locate the high school on the eastern flank of the hill, and the recent sale of the abutting Arrigo Great Orchard for development.
- The major remaining open space on Jericho Hill lies within the entirely wooded Sanderson Heights parcel. Dividing this woodland with a road that will need to be continually kept passable for large emergency vehicles, including during snow season, will reduce its value as an open space corridor and fragment the connectivity that makes this area important for wildlife.
- Road construction and maintenance, however minimal, invites the introduction of invasive plant species, further deteriorating the wildlife opportunities here.

[over]

[Comments on the SMAA Supplemental Report, cont'd]

- While intended for emergency vehicles, the road would serve as an open invitation to destructive ATV and motorbike use and create an opportunity for other motorized vehicles to enter the woodland.
- Sanderson Heights was one of the first 5 parcels recommended by the Waltham City Council's Committee to Study Land Acquisition for the Preservation of Open Space.
- Based on the public perception that this is city conservation land, WLT volunteers have dedicated many hours collecting and hauling out abandoned tires, carpeting, mattresses, camping equipment, fuel containers, scrap metal, broken glass and the like. They have succeeded in restoring this community resource to the cleanest and healthiest state it has seen in many years, and are pledged to continue to protect it.
- Despite the Law Department opinion that there are no protections built into the city's deed for this property, the history shows clearly that its acquisition was an effort to stop the threat of development here and to respond to the Council's and the community's wish for it to remain as an open space asset for the public to enjoy.
- Testimony from the Chief of Police included in the report points out the problematic length of this route and suggests that a shorter alternative be examined.
- The acquisition of the fee or an easement across just one house lot bordering the high school property would create the opportunity for a shorter emergency route that would not affect Sanderson Heights.
- WLT can only recommend that the city's infrastructure needs be met on land that has already been developed and can be re-used. This applies to siting the emergency access road as much as it does to building structures and parking lots.

The Waltham Land Trust urges the city to re-examine the opportunities for siting an emergency access road and abandon the plan to degrade the remaining open space at Jericho Hill. We continue to urge the city to act now to protect its open space acquisitions with Conservation Restrictions and join us in our continued vigilance to protect Waltham's open space.

For further information contact Sonja Wadman, Executive Director
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[The Waltham Land Trust board of directors includes a City Councillor and a School Department employee. Neither director attended the discussions or votes on endorsing this position.]