

## Nature in the Neighborhood – April 2022

### What would Olmsted do?

I'm not a native of the Commonwealth. I grew up in a suburb of New York City at a time when the surrounding farms, instead of continuing to grow corn, started to grow "Levittowns." Bit by bit, acre by acre, the farmland and other open space was lost to residential and commercial development. There is very little open space left. The town is now crowded and congested — there's no space to breathe. Frederick Law Olmsted is quoted as saying that parks are the "lungs of the city" and "the heart of the community." Today, I feel that the town I grew up in has neither — no lungs, no heart.

Olmsted is considered to be the father of American landscape architecture. He designed many urban parks -- most famously, New York City's Central Park and Boston's "Emerald Necklace." This Spring, across the country, cities and towns with connections to Olmsted will be observing the 200th anniversary of his birth. Swampscott is one of the communities with such a connection because in 1888 Olmsted designed the town's Monument Area and adjacent residential neighborhood, which is listed both on the National Register of Historic Places and as a Local Historic District.\*

In landscape design, Olmsted advocated that you need to "consult the genius of the place in all." In other words, any improvements of the landscape have to pay close attention to the inherent character of the land. In our seacoast town, that would mean enhancing our connection to the shoreline – not creating barriers to it.

Olmsted also believed that "the perfect antidote to the stress and artificialness of urban life was a nice stroll through a pastoral park." For that reason, he would wholeheartedly approve of the proposed Rails-to-Trails that would run through our town, creating a green space where we can take a relaxing stroll and our children can safely ride their bikes -- a space for use by all of the town's residents, one that connects us and gives us space to breathe. Such a green space — and not a substantial shopping center— could become the "heart" of our community.

Swampscott, like all communities, needs to pay attention to its open and recreational space. As the town moves forward with ever more new developments that crowd out our open space or block our access to the seacoast — perhaps we should start asking “What would Olmsted do?”

\* [swampscottma.gov/historical-commission/pages/olmsted-historic-district-swampscott-massachusetts](http://swampscottma.gov/historical-commission/pages/olmsted-historic-district-swampscott-massachusetts)