

Nature in the Neighborhood – February 2022

Uncovering our Neighborhood's Past

You never know what will turn up in the dusty corners of your basement. Recently my neighbor uncovered a 1970 town document entitled *"Swampscott Environment: Now or Never."** Issued by the then sitting Conservation Commission and addressed to "our fellow Townspeople," this 52-year-old document is interesting, if not troubling, reading. It provides a snapshot of what Swampscott's natural resources were back in the 1970s. It also proposed what needed to be done to preserve those resources and the character of the community as the Town moved toward the distant future ... of 2010. The comprehensive plan it contains recommends the implementation of specific proposals to expand and protect the Town's open space – proposals that mostly went unheeded.

At the time of the report, developed areas in town constituted roughly 70% of the land, some 1,400 acres, while less than 600 acres remain open. According to a January 25, 2022 Patch article, today there are only 19 acres of land not yet developed -- with a Foster Road development proposal designed to take up 4.5 of those remaining acres.

While some preservation of undeveloped areas followed the issuance of the 1970 report (for instance, Harold King Forest was expanded from 22 to 47 acres and Ewing Woods was created preserving another 7 acres) the bulk of the 600 acres was lost to development. Over the intervening years since the report counseled *"that the time for a [town] program of land acquisition is NOW,"* open space continued to decrease and population increased. As a result, the environment and quality of life in Swampscott diminished.

It's often argued that development is needed to increase the tax base, however, even back in 1970, the studies cited in the report disputed that claim. In fact, contemporary cost of community services studies continue to show that parks and open space increase property tax revenue and yield a better return on investment than development. Why? Because property taxes from new development never really cover the cost of improved infrastructure and municipal services required by new residents (roads, police, fire protection, schools). Also, living near public green spaces increases property values, whereas living away from them (or without them) decreases values. As pointed out in the 1970 report, "greater densities are accompanied by higher service costs per household and lower value and taxable capacity per dwelling unit."

The report also emphasized the importance of Swampscott's 4 miles of ocean frontage, noting that "the Town's priceless natural resource in its coastline should be available for use by the townspeople" and "insofar as possible should be placed and preserved in public ownership." This was echoed in a subsequent 1983 open space plan

which recommended that “any opportunity for further purchase of beachfront property be vigorously pursued.”

The importance of the coastline to our Town and its identity cannot be overstated. As the new, 2021 – 2027 Open Space Plan points out:

“what separates this small, built-out suburban community from so many others in Massachusetts is the 6,190 feet of accessible, viewable, wide open oceanfront. The ocean adds another dimension to Swampscott’s definition of open space: a true sense of vastness that meets residents at the edge of town. The ocean is part of Swampscott’s identity, so much so that it is often taken for granted that the spectacular views and ease of stepping onto the sandy beaches will always be available. It is perhaps this, and the constant prospect of redevelopment, that puts it so at risk.”

Back in the early 1980s, the Swampscott Foundation, a local non-profit made up of concerned townspeople pooled their resources to purchase properties that were seen as potentially valuable conservation or recreation land, but which were imminently threatened with development. Their efforts, as acknowledged in the 1983 Open Space plan, helped the town acquire Chick Estate (now Linscott Park), the Hastings property (now Ewing Woods), and part of the New Ocean House property (now Johnson Memorial Park).

Short of large donations from private individuals, what is needed today is for “our fellow Townspeople” to call for and support the Town’s acquisition of remaining open space in the town. Now is not just the time, now is actually past time -- fifty years past time if one considers the “now or never” warnings and recommendations for expanding and protecting open space in the 1970 report.

How unfortunate it will be if in another decade or two, residents look back regretfully at the decisions that Town representatives made -- or failed to make -- regarding open space.

*The 1970 report will be downloaded onto the Swampscott Conservation Commission page of the Town’s website.