

## Nature in the Neighborhood – Sept. 2025

### What to do with the Hawthorne?

*In light of the recent public forum on the future use of the Hawthorne By the Sea Restaurant property purchased by the Town of Swampscott in 2022, this month's Nature in the Neighborhood is reprinting below a letter the Swampscott Conservancy sent to town officials commenting on its vision for the property and the importance of public open space in general. This letter, with pictures, is also on the Conservancy's website: [swampscottconservancy.org](http://swampscottconservancy.org). The Town has scheduled a second public forum for September 18, 2025, at 7:00 pm, at the Swampscott High School. A survey for public comment is also available here: [swampscottma.gov/hawthorne-reuse-advisory-committee](http://swampscottma.gov/hawthorne-reuse-advisory-committee)*

To: Chair of the Hawthorne Reuse Committee, Acting Swampscott Town Administrator, and Chair of the Swampscott Select Board

The Directors of the Swampscott Conservancy have reviewed and discussed the presentation made by the Hawthorne Reuse Advisory Committee on August 20, 2025, and, consistent with the Conservancy's prior position regarding the use of the property, offer the following comments.

As the Conservancy's stated mission is the protection and enhancement of Swampscott's natural resources and to act as an advocate and spokesperson for open space preservation, we believe that the property should be primarily open park land without any sizable structures. We understand that a large segment, if not the majority of the town's residents, have also stated their preference for the property to be mainly developed as a public park and plaza.

It was an artist's rendering of this park-like vision of the property that led many to vote in favor of buying the land at Town Meeting. And there was strong support for open space in the public forums that followed: the surveys conducted showed that the "most important" use for the property was "Public Park/Open Space" while "less important" was "create revenue." We believe that there was a strong preference for more rather than less open space expressed at the August 20, 2025, public forum as well.

Swampscott's *Open Space & Recreation Plan* recognizes that "Swampscott's coast is one of its greatest resources." And it's fair to say that the Town's coast is the primary attraction and identifier for many, if not all, of the Town's residents. People enjoy living close to the ocean and having access to the waterfront. You only need to watch people of all ages stroll, run, or bike year-round along the Lynnway or around the pathway at Fort Sewell in Marblehead to appreciate that fact.

Unfortunately, over the years, access to the coast in Swampscott – and open space in general – has decreased significantly, giving way to private development. The public's connection to the ocean has diminished, which is regrettable because Swampscott's waterfront is something that makes the Town different from many other communities. If the focal point of Swampscott was only Vinnin Square, it would not be any different from so many other towns. What makes Swampscott unique is its seacoast -- it gives its residents a "sense of place." What better way to secure and enhance that connection than by creating an ocean front park at the gateway to the Town? One that allows for unobstructed views of the water and that could include, among other things, terraces, native plantings and gardens, play structures, a stage area for performances, and, of course, seating areas to enjoy the spectacular views of Nahant Bay.

It was commented that Town park land already exists nearby at the Town Hall lawn and Linscott Park, but these are not waterfront properties and do not contain the state-of-the-art amenities that a new park at the Hawthorne property could contain

It is also not true, as has been suggested, that a park would be limited to only warm weather use and an indoor structure is necessary for year-round use. Aside from the fact that people frequent parks during all seasons, there can be a wide range of cold weather activities at the park, such as neighboring Salem's successful Frozen Fire Festival that has entertainment, crafts, and igloos, or Market Street's outdoor skating, to name just two examples.

While not opposed to some structures on the property, the Conservancy believes the majority of the property should be open space providing clear views unimpeded by buildings or other structures. For this reason, and to ensure that the public has access to the coastline as required by the warrant article passed at Town Meeting, the Conservancy believes the Hawthorne restaurant should be removed. As indicated at the August 20, 2025, public forum, demolishing the restaurant is also a proposal that is favored by the Reuse Committee. However, several of the Reuse Committee's proposals include buildings – potentially two to three stories high – on the property, especially along Humphrey Street, that we believe would significantly obstruct views of the ocean. The Conservancy is opposed to situating structures on the property that block or impede the views of, or otherwise obstruct the public's connection to, the ocean.

If limited buildings are permitted to be constructed, the question arises as to what type of retail, restaurant, or other businesses the market would support at this location. Would it be more stores as currently found on Humphrey (salons, cleaners, professional services) or can quality restaurants and quaint shops be attracted as is the goal? We believe further investigation and information on this question is needed. Going on the belief that if you "build it, they will come" is not sufficient and does not always prove to be true if Pickering Wharf in Salem is taken as an example.

As was mentioned at the public forum, many Humphrey Street businesses are not flourishing or have relocated. While it is unlikely that parking is the sole reason for

their lack of success, downtown parking is an overall concern of many in town. It would be regrettable, however, if scarce public ocean front property is used for parking. For this reason, the Conservancy supports the Town acquiring the church parking lot adjacent to the Hawthorne property. This would not just provide additional space if the Town concludes that some parking must be included in any plan for the Hawthorne property, we understand it would also potentially open up an option for the Town to use the planned 80 or so parking spaces that will be created when the church demolishes the school building on Blaney Street.

Town ownership of any proposed restaurant or retail space, with its accompanying construction and maintenance costs, is not something that the Reuse Committee appears to favor; rather, as stated at the August 20, 2025, public forum, a preferred option the Committee is discussing is for the town to enter into a long term lease with a developer to build and maintain the space, with the lease containing provisions that restrict the type of operations that can be conducted in the leased space. The Conservancy reserves judgment on potential long-term leasing until more information on its details as well as feasibility is made public.

The Conservancy is aware that the possibility of actually selling a portion of the property to a private developer for retail or residential development has been discussed at Hawthorne Reuse Committee meetings. We go on the record as strongly opposing selling any portion of the property – and especially for the purpose of turning it into private residential units. As we understand it, one of the rationales for the Town to buy the property in the first place was to avoid the further condoizing of Humphrey Street and to ensure public, not private use of the property.

It should not be overlooked that there are many benefits to having the property designed primarily as open space. According to the National Recreation and Parks Association, parks are emerging as important public health solutions. “Nearly 40 years of research evidence confirms that nearby nature, including parks, gardens, the urban forest and green spaces, support human health and wellness.”

As for economic concerns, a Trust for Public Land (TPL) report, as well as many other studies, finds that “new parks have invigorated downtown businesses and neighborhood economies.” If the goal is to bring people to Swampscott’s downtown, we believe a park and public plaza are needed, not more buildings. Considering that Swampscott’s location on the coastline is what attracted many a summer visitor and supported many a hotel at the turn of the last century, a park would, in our opinion, also help make the proposed boutique hotel a success.

Like the money communities spend ensuring that school buildings are up to date, including for Swampscott’s new Elementary School, investment in open public space has long-term returns that will benefit all of the Town’s residents for generations to come.

Parks are the “lungs of the city,” Frederick Law Olmsted is quoted as saying, and “the heart of the community.” In landscape design, he advocated for “consult[ing] 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.

For that reason, the Conservancy believes he would have wholeheartedly supported designing and developing the Hawthorne property as open green space. In a town with very little undeveloped land left, it could be 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, connected as it is to the nearby Olmsted’s Historic District, could become the “heart of our community.”

For the reasons presented, the Conservancy strongly supports this “once in a generation opportunity” of designing the Hawthorne property primarily as open space.

We thank you for this opportunity to comment and should you have any questions or wish to discuss this matter further, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

The Directors of the Swampscott Conservancy