

Public Comments: Mead Point, LLC development, 168 Indian Field Road

Town of Greenwich Sustainability Committee

March 24, 2022

The forest has a broadly diverse mix of hardwood species that are expected in healthy forests of Connecticut. However, the fact that they are expected does not mean that they are occurring or anything like “common.” Coastal forest and grasslands like these have been mostly extirpated due to private development, much like what is proposed with this property.

The unspoken implication is that because the original forest was cut for agriculture likely a couple centuries earlier when the colonists arrived, the existing trees aren’t as valuable being only 100 years old with the majority at breast height of ten inches or less. On the timescale of the forest, these trees are in the first trimester into a healthy, fully-developed forest. The provided listing of broken limbs and basal decay is part of that regeneration. Dead trees have 40 percent more living cells than live trees, which have 5 percent living cells. The dead and decaying trees build the soil and its nutrients so that the forest can continue to repair itself and reestablish the community of organisms that makes for a full-fledged living ecosystem.

The report states that “trees provide ecological benefits such as soil stabilization, modification of water movement, quality and volume, carbon sequestration and shading and cooling. The health, condition and age of the tree can impact an individual tree’s ability to provide those benefits.” The accompanying table lists the condition of each of the 617 trees, which will nevertheless provide more of these ecosystem services than if they are removed. Each tree counts in ways that serve the forest as a whole and as we learn more about these complex systems it is becoming clear that the forest is much more than a collection of trees, but an interconnected web of developing resilience to the pressures that have been and are being brought upon them by human activity.

The cutting down of 148 trees is qualified as “improvements” in the report, but the report offers no guarantee that those left will not succumb due to the disturbance at the site or from the removal of those trees.

The ecosystem function of the current landscape if impaired, will reverberate far beyond the development of this extraordinary parcel and into the benefits shared by the community. The construction of such a massive edifice and surrounds will necessarily impact the surrounding community, as well as all aspects of terrestrial wildlife for months if not years. How the ledge will be removed to accommodate the underground garage and basement, as well as the pools is not specified, but in any case there will be tremendous disturbance to the environment and surrounding neighborhood. The rock will have to be hauled away over the landscape, causeway and surrounding neighborhood including Bruce park, impacting a wide swath of the community.

Further, as sea levels rise due to climate change these forests will necessarily be forced inland. Unfortunately, there is nowhere for these forests to move to since the upland areas are all developed. Impervious surfaces are the foundation of any construction and the envelope of this property constitutes approximately 25,000 square feet of installed impervious surface. The causeway and the necessary installation of utilities along the driveway add to that total. Structures to best manage that runoff are proposed, but even if fully effective those surfaces will create heat islands that will negatively affect the landscape and the surrounding microclimate. Soil compaction from the heavy machinery necessary will undoubtedly increase erosion and runoff.

It is also worthwhile to question what the estimated carbon footprint is for this gigantic property. The proposed house and garage are over 18,000 square feet and the terrace alone is an additional 3,169 square feet. There are two proposed pools, the larger of which is 2,650 square feet. The geothermal energy system will have to be drilled into the bedrock and that construction will necessarily extend the construction envelope. No effort is made to calculate that carbon footprint, but for a property of this size a requirement should be made.

Probably the greatest asset of Mead Point is the biodiversity present and its development will necessarily fragment the natural landscape. Fragmented landscapes result in biodiversity loss and alter the full potential of the ecosystem function of that landscape. Any and all mitigation measures put in place to reduce impacts need to take into consideration the ecosystem functions at risk. These impacts can snowball beyond the initial footprint of the property as the buffer zones surrounding all the ecozones will be reduced and/or altered. The removal of mature trees will reduce the canopy cover that intercepts and mitigates the impacts of heavy rainfall resulting in increased erosion and runoff into the sensitive nearshore intertidal zone impacting water quality, submerged aquatic vegetation, fish nurseries and shellfish reefs.

Keep in mind the heavy rainfall our area is experiencing with increased regularity. These types of events will inevitably happen during the prolonged construction a development of this scale will require. No amount of mitigation will prevent sediment and debris from entering the waters of the Sound.

While there is no permit yet issued for Plot B, a 3.1-acre plot of beach and rocky shoreline and native grasslands, there is also no guarantee that it will not be developed at some future point, which would necessarily affect critical coastal habitat. Already a variance is requested over the allowable cubic value for the zone. A variance in our opinion should not be granted.

The septic system for a dwelling housing ten bedrooms will by code be extensive, furthering the disruption to the ecosystem.

Flooding is already a problem with frequent heavy rains and high tides overwhelming roadways and basements along coastal areas. The causeway is vulnerable to a 10-year storm and its repair would incur further disturbance to the landscape. Sea level rise is expected at 20 inches within the next 25-30 years effectively neutering the mitigations proposed for this

property. If left alone the native, natural coastline would serve as a barrier and a buffer to those storms helping the coastline to adapt to rising seas.

No plan is put forward for the control of invasive species, which if left unchecked will overwhelm any vegetation whether native or introduced.

The existence of archaeological deposits presents opportunities for potential knowledge about the historic past embedded in the archaeological record. It is a resource of public importance that should be explored and preserved.

In conclusion, it is the stated opinion of the Greenwich Sustainability Committee that this proposed development is antithetical to the very idea of sustainability. The diversity of coastal habitats that include the coastal hardwood forest, the tidals flats, grassland and shellfish beds all comprise a rich, near pristine habitat that is an exceedingly rare remnant of what Greenwich once had. And which we must restore if we hope to survive the coming cataclysm of our rapidly changing climate.

The ideal repair to this proposal would be the gifting of it to the Greenwich Land Trust or to the Town of Greenwich as a preserve to be held in perpetuity as a natural park asset.

NOTES:

The proposed development of Mead Point is occurring between two competing timescales: the timescale of forest regeneration that takes one to three centuries and that of the rapidly evolving pressures of climate change. Unfortunately, our planning and zoning requirements have adapted to neither of these timescales, but instead are locked in a pattern of having to approve massive private properties like this one, in spite of the glaring inappropriateness to either the priority of the nature ecology of the landscape or the critical needs of adaptation to climate change.

The report specifies that the woodland primarily provides breeding and development habitat “only” for edge and generalist species (wildlife adapted to living in close proximity to disturbances and human developments/activities). It should be said that “only” generalist species occur because the habitat continues to be disturbed obviating the possibility of more sensitive species to become established. It is a kind of tautology that because the habitat is disturbed sensitive species cannot gain a foothold so further disturbance will not impinge on sensitive species. This perspective would also seem to minimize the value of generalist species or what has been able to survive and adapt to such overwhelming human incursion. As bird populations plummet and more species are threatened, habitat like this at Mead Point becomes ever more critical.

It is important to note that 90 percent of Connecticut coastline is privately held, much of it in developments just like this one. As the Town continues to be pressured to maintain and allow increased access to its public shorelines, it is the height of inequity to allow development like this. It has set a standard of development that prioritizes the pleasures of the wealthy over the needs of the broad population and Greenwich is and will continue to pay the price of those misaligned priorities.

State DEEP did not comment on this development, effectively granting its approval. It is unfortunate because the development is at a high enough elevation that it falls outside of DEEP jurisdiction. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to assume that this extensive construction will not affect the lower reaches of habitat that are within that DEEP jurisdiction. It is also unreasonable to assume that once construction is completed and the house occupied that any of this habitat could or would not be disturbed in a way that threatens its resilience.

It should be noted that these dwellings are often used as investments to house wealth and are not necessarily occupied year round. In fact, it is common that many properties like these stand empty the majority of the year. The septic system, for instance, will be constructed for 10 bedrooms, but it is likely the accompanying bathrooms will receive minimum use.

This property is not sustainable by any definition of the term, in spite of all the mitigations that have been put in place to minimize environmental harm, its installation of native plantings or its geothermal energy system. As proposed this development constitutes the destruction of an evolving coastal forest and grassland habitat that cannot be replaced. It is habitat that will be forever lost.

Prepared by: Myra Klockenbrink

Co-Chair Land/Water Sector

Town of Greenwich Sustainability Committee