

# **Groton Conservation Advocates**

...a nonprofit 501(c)(4) organization dedicated to the protection of Groton's natural resources

### 2020 Year-in-Review e-Newsletter

## February 2021











King-Kolnaski trail project. Left to right: Sue Sutherland at Birch Plain Creek quarry in October; Conrad Heede tagging trail in December; serpent wall; committee members hiking the draft trail in December; Ben Moon tagging the east side trail in January.

# Open Space Equity Action: King-Kolnaski Trails Committee

#### By Eugenia Villagra

Last July, in the thick of Black Lives Matter demonstrations and DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) demands for meaningful change, GCA resolved to act on the festering issue of equity of access to open space in Groton.

We contacted John Burt, Groton Town Manager, and asked, what's being done to make the King-Kolnaski easement property accessible to the people bordering it in the City and in Groton? John said the town hadn't done anything yet, but asked if we would be willing to help. We had a special interest in the property because GCA and two local land trust organizations had been involved in adding the Birch Plain Creek portion of the King property to the Boulder Heights property as part of the Merritt/new middle school property swap. We immediately said yes and recruited three key people (Sue Sutherland, Conrad Heede, and Ben Moon). Conrad helped us recruit more people from the City. This group of 10 formed the King-Kolnaski Trails Committee and our first Zoom meeting was held in late October 2020. (continued on page2)

# Expanding Passenger Rail Service to Reduce Emissions and Traffic Congestion

By Zell Steever and Liz Raisbeck



A recent commitment by the US Congress is going to significantly increase the number of submarines built at Electric Boat (EB) over the next 20 years. This means a huge expansion in the EB work force of 17,000 adding possibly as many as 12,000. Last year EB hired 2,000 new employees and plans to hire an additional 2,000 workers this year. Groton is working hard to provide additional housing

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### Open Space Equity Action: King-Kolnaski Trails Committee

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Days later, we took all interested King-Kolnaski committee members, family and friends out to bushwhack our way from the EB parking lot to the quarry area on the creek. Everyone was stunned by the beauty of the property and the sensation of being in the wild in the midst of Groton. Committee members excitedly chatted about making trails to connect the King property not only to neighborhoods to the east and west, but to open space areas like Crystal Lake to the south and Washington Park to the northwest.



Parks & Rec. crew Jeff Church and Chris Hugo (above) used brush cutters, chain saws and leaf blowers to clear the new trail.

By early December, a small group led by Sue Sutherland commenced tagging a draft loop trail and completed it at

the end of January. Mark Berry, director of Groton Parks & Rec.. and foreman Jeff Church and his crew have done a phenomenal job of clearing invasive plants and trees from around the entrance of the trail, and are still clearing the trail. Numerous snow storms have slowed progress, but by early spring we expect the entire trail will be cleared and blazed;



Steve Roberts brush-cutting.

preserve and trail names will be picked, and parking signs posted; in other words, ready for the public to enjoy!

# Expanding Passenger Rail Service to Reduce Emissions and Traffic Congestion

(continued from p. 1)

to attract these workers to live in Groton, but at present 80% of them live in other towns. As this workforce grows, the commuter traffic on I-95, I-395 and other highways will grow with it, clogging our interstate and pumping more CO2 into the atmosphere.

Zell Steever of GCA and Chairman of the Groton Town Council's Resilience and Sustainability Task Force has developed a forward-thinking alternative proposal for the region to get people out of their cars and onto passenger rail service. He has gained the support of the towns of Groton and Stonington, the Cities of Groton and New London, as well as Pfizer, the CT Commuter Rail Council, and our state assembly delegation: Reps Christine Conley and Joe de la Cruz.

Reps Conley, de la Cruz and Nolan have introduced a draft bill to require a feasibility study and operational plan for the passenger rail expansion idea in the region; they have a growing list of cosponsors, nine as of this writing. A public hearing is expected this winter.

The proposal would use existing railroad tracks owned by Amtrak and the Providence and Worcester Railroad. No new railroads would have to be built. The proposal has two parts: it expands commuter passenger rail on CT Department of Transportation's (DOT) Shore Line East (SLE) from New London to Westerly, RI, and in the future to Providence and Boston. The expanded SLE service would connect with a new proposed north-south rail service, to be known as the Norwich Branch Line, on existing tracks that run up the east side of the Thames River, between Pfizer/EB at the southern end to the south gate of the SUBASE on the north end with a possible future extension to Norwich. The intersection of these two rail lines would be at a new railroad station or platform in downtown Groton where the two lines run parallel. So, one could hop on the train at Madison or Old Saybrook and switch trains at Groton to get off at the front door of both EB and Pfizer, or at the south gate of the Navy Base (SUBASE).

Zell has talked with U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, chair of the subcommittee on Seapower of the Appropriations Committee, about this project as well as staff at the SUBASE and the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments. If combined with a mixed-use redevelopment of Groton's downtown, this project could provide an exciting redevelopment opportunity for all of Groton, New London and the region. Zell welcomes your testimony and letters of support when this goes to public hearing in Hartford.



## At Last! A Strong Open Space Plan for Groton

#### By Jim Furlong

GCA welcomed the Conservation Commission's Open Space Plan when it debuted in November. It was the town's first conservation update in many decades.

While the town has made strong progress over the years in securing open space, too often this has been done over opposition from some past planners and the Town Council. More recently, we've seen a pronounced change for the better.

The "Open Space Conservation Plan for the Town of Groton, Connecticut" at once demonstrates this change and suggests improvements in how we can protect our bountiful natural resources and our associated economic well-being.

As Bruce Lofgren of the town planning department told *The Day*, "The Conservation Commission has worked for two years on the 97-page plan, which incorporates new technology, mapping and an inventory of open space to serve as a guiding document for the commission and the town in evaluating land parcels."

GCA gave numerous suggestions to the Conservation Commission during the writing of the report. The CC was receptive to GCA recommendations that greater prominence be given to climate change and tree cover. GCA also provided advice on the difficult and often contentious issue of defining open space. On tree canopy loss, we urged that where preservation is not possible, the CC should develop more rigorous and specific guidelines on tree replacement ratios (based on trunk diameter), tree specifications, and replacement locations.

In the future, we intend to continue close relations with the Conservation Commission, both to stay abreast with a cando Commission and to avoid falling into a "leave it to the commission" attitude. As Chairman Larry Dunn commented, the commission "wanted to update the plan to reflect all the work done in the last 30 years by Groton's active conservation community and provide more information on the value of open space, not only in the historical sense that conservation is 'the right thing to do' but also the economic benefits of open space." That community intends to remain highly active.

# Synthetic Turf or Natural Grass Fields for Groton?

#### By Eugenia Villagra

Everyone agrees that Groton's 60-year old sports infrastructure needs an overhaul. Groton's Athletics Fields Task Force (AFTF) is recommending that Groton add about five synthetic turf fields as part of the plan. What will be the cost to the town budget? to the health and safety of our children? to our environment? There is a better and less costly solution: natural grass fields.

Synthetic turf (ST) is a carpet-like surface composed of plastic fibers that sit on top of layers of infill, plastic blade backing, padding, base and drainage. Acres of plastic fields are replacing grass fields across the country. The upside of synthetic turf is that the fields can be used year-round, stand up to heavy use, require no irrigation or trimming, and would enable Groton to host tournament play. The downside includes limited field life, serious environmental and cost problems with disposal and recycling, petroleum use, toxic substances used to manage the ST fields, and heightened human health, safety and environmental concerns. Did you know that professional football and soccer players overwhelmingly prefer playing on natural grass?

We contacted Environment and Human Health, Inc. (EHHI), based in New Haven, and they quickly responded with a letter addressed to the Task Force summarizing updated scientific studies on why ST is dangerous and grass is the healthier and safer option. Contrary to the evidence, the AFTF insists that ST "can be recycled," and that according to the outdated ST page on the CT Dept. of Health website, there are "no health concerns."

The Day published our Jan. 9<sup>th</sup> letter to the town council in an excellent article summarizing the January 12 meeting, but it was buried at the end of the AFTF's 35-page Power-Point presentation. So we asked the town if we could respond and the Town agreed to a 20-minute presentation at the February 2 town council meeting. Click on the box below to view our presentation. ■









Left: **2019 concept, 750 units**; Right **2021 concept, 931 units** with: A. intersection improvements; B. park lands; C. trail to shoreline; D. riverfront park improvements; E. new public roads; F. residential neighborhoods. (Crosskey Architects and Fuss & O'Neill)

# Mystic Education Center Concept Revised By Jim Furlong

As was the case last year, the biggest item on the table of the town's Planning & Zoning Commission is redevelopment of the abandoned Mystic Education Center overlooking the Mystic River.

The large, planned project—some have used the word "seismic"—covers 48 acres of "surplus" state land and at least 16 acres of nearby land acquired privately by Respler Homes, a builder of residential housing. Groton named Respler as preferred developer at a public meeting Nov. 7, 2019. The developer's original forecast for the size of his project was about 750 units, but he ended 2020 with a target of 931.

This sharp expansion caused one P&Z member at a meeting last month to quip that the panel might assemble one day and find the number had risen to 1,100.

The Respler project has aroused questions about its size and density—"behemoth" and "Co-op City"—are two terms heard at the meeting. Now named "Mystic River Bluffs," it poses several challenges to the P&Z, which merged the then-separate Planning and Zoning commissions in 2019. The merger took place over objections of conservationists, who worried that zoning could get short shrift from overburdened commissioners. At present, there are five full commission members, of whom only one was a holdover from Zoning. (One alternate also belonged to Zoning.).

Besides landing on a recently reorganized commission, the project is also complex and based on concepts unknown or at least unusual for Groton. It involves a "floating zone," giving developers more leeway than conventional zoning allows. Commission members are wondering what limits Respler Homes' ultimate size and whether adequate alternatives have been considered for redevelopment. Financing for the project will be provided partly by Tax Increment Financing (TIF), which involves public funds.

Suggestions for alternative uses of the scenic land include a public park. A number of residents have called for refurbishing an existing theater in the land's central Pratt building for musical and theatrical purposes.

The prospect of an influx of 2,000 more residents occupying new dwellings has raised alarm about traffic, noise, light pollution, blasting damage and sudden urbanization of a semi-rural area that once was home to a state school for the deaf. No firm answers exist about further expansion.

### Collaborative Event to Distribute Reusable Bags to New Haven Families

#### By Kris Kuhn

Through participation in the work of the plastics-reduction network BYOCT (Bring Your Own CT), GCA partnered with CT Citizens Campaign for the Environment and the CT Food Bank to put on a safe, socially distant reusable bag give-away in



New Haven. The purpose of this event was to distribute new reusable bags to area families, while educating the community on the need to reduce pollution from singleuse plastic.

Approached by GCA, Stop and Shop in Groton responded with a generous contribution of 200 new bags. In addition, GCA offered financial support for the production of new BYOCT bags. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, groups distributed 1,350 reusable bags to nine food pantries and one middle school serving New Haven area residents.





Noank School Public Garden Campaign By Eugenia Villagra

In early spring of 2019, GCA took up the thorny issue of protecting existing open space in Groton by strongly urging Groton's town council to preserve the Noank School Community Garden. Nevertheless, the council terminated the guiding document with the Noank School Public Gardens Task Force on the former Noank Elementary School site without deciding what to do with the property.

A year later, in June 2020, the council took up the issue again, at which time they decided not to sell the property and to preserve it as open space. But the devil is always in the details, so a council debate ensued on how exactly to use the open space.

Several ideas were proposed, but Brian Kent, principal at Kent + Frost Landscape Architecture in Mystic, presented a modified or compromise version of the ambitious plan that the task force had presented in 2019. The compromise plan included an informal youth playing field, paths, a playground, garden areas and many more trees, and excluded the pavilion, outdoor classroom and restroom, the costliest elements of the plan.

GCA's organizing and advocacy played a significant role in bringing out the overwhelming majority of people who sent in letters to the Council in 2019 and 2020 that supported keeping the land as open space. In the end, the majority of the councilors (6-3) supported the "Compromise Plan" which combined elements of two plans for an arboretum, community garden and playing areas.

### Colonel Ledyard School Forest

#### By Craig Guild

The woods located behind the old Colonel Ledyard Elementary School, as well as the animals and plants that rely on them, were delivered an early defeat February 2, 2021, when the Groton Town



Council voted 6-3 in favor of the sale of the property to Bellsite Development, LLC, despite environmental and quality of life concerns raised by the property's neighbors. The company is looking to develop the property by converting the school building into apartments, followed later by paving and constructing new buildings on the backside of the property. (Click here to read more in The Day.) The proposed development of the site endangers the last remaining wild habitat in the City, but perhaps more alarmingly the property also sits on a steep slope above the headwaters of the Birch Plain Creek. The loss of root systems and permeable surfaces combined with increased human activity and run-off threatens to impact the entire creek's watershed. Efforts continue, however, to limit the scope of the property's development and preserve this important habitat and green space in the City of Groton.



Bellsite's preliminary site concept. School in brown.



### Reducing Plastic Waste in Groton

#### By Liz Raisbeck



Chunks of styrofoam and a plastic bottle are scattered among Long Island Sound marsh grass in Old Saybrook. Photo by Judy Preston, CT Sea Grant

Americans use one billion plastic bags a year, of which only about 10% get properly recycled, since single-use plastic has to be recycled with special equipment. At least 100,000 plastic bags go into Long Island Sound each year where they are partially degraded and eaten by fish, birds, and turtles, making them ill or killing them. The plastics problem in our waters, however, goes far beyond plastic bags, with tons of plastic trash finding its way into streams and the Sound each year. Styrofoam is not recyclable, and we now know that plastic never goes away, it just breaks down into smaller and smaller bits, or microplastics, which are now working their way into the food chain and are probably present in every human being on the planet.

GCA played a major role in the passage of Groton's ordinance to ban single-use plastics in January, 2020. After a three-month delay due to COVID-19, the ban went into effect on October 7. It banned single-use plastic bags at checkout counters, plastic straws, stirrers and Styrofoam carryout containers—cups, plates, bowls and clamshells.

This ordinance puts Groton in the vanguard of singleuse plastics reduction in the state of CT. There is still lots of work to do educating the public and Groton businesses on the ordinance. Spot-checking around town reveals that there is good compliance but also the need to educate some restaurants and carry-out establishments.

To encourage and celebrate compliance, GCA partnered with the Groton Conservation Commission, The Greater

Mystic Chamber of Commerce and the Town of Groton to develop a window "cling" that stores can display in their front windows to let the public know they support and comply with our plastics reduction ordinance. This beautiful cling was designed by local artist Lisa Hill. Unfortunately, just as we were rolling out the cling campaign, COVID 19 hit town, and we have had to pull back until the COVID plague has passed. A few businesses are already displaying the cling and supporting our mission. Lets do the same for them!

See page 9 to see and buy the cling!

### Community Supports NIPS Elimination

#### By Kristin Distante

Glinting in gutters and lurking in landscapes, NIPS bottles are a familiar eyesore for those of us who walk and wander on Groton's



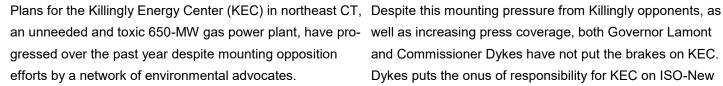
paths and sidewalks. The tiny liquor bottles are one of the biggest litter problems that remain in the Town of Groton. The Town has taken a leadership role in plastic reduction with the implementation of the single-use plastics ban, which includes check-out bags, straws, stirrers, Styrofoam, cups, plates and clamshells, but NIPS bottles remain a problem. Recently, the Conservation Commission conducted a survey of local residents and business owners and found that of 384 respondents, 81% feel NIPS are a litter problem and 55% perceive them as a major problem. Similarly, about 70% of respondents feel that they should be eliminated. Currently at the state level four bills have been submitted to the Committee on Environment to try and mitigate the problem: Bill 465 expands bottle bill to apply to NIPs bottles and sports drinks; Bill 280 (sponsored by Senator Heather Somers) provides 25-cent redemption fee on NIPS; Bill 6641 eliminates the sale of NIPS bottles in Connecticut; Bill 5811 expands the bottle bill to include NIPS and provide for the creation of redemption centers.

The Conservation Commission has recommended that the Town Council support these bills, and GCA concurs. ■









Two permit applications have gone forward: first, a KEC water discharge permit, approved by DEEP in early January, 2021; and second, an Eversource permit for a gas pipeline from Pomfret to Killingly approved by DEEP in December, 2020. Environmentalists regard this pipeline as highly objectionable in its threat to local habitat and endangered species. In the aftermath of intense public objection, a final DEEP determination is pending. And as one remaining legal obstacle, Killingly area opponents have brought a lawsuit related to the plant's approval by the CT Siting Council. The State Supreme Court has yet to render a decision in this case, but a finding against KEC is not anticipated.

Meanwhile, concerted opposition to KEC is reflected in an ongoing stream of op-eds and letters to the editor; hundreds of letters and calls to Governor Lamont and DEEP Commissioner Katie Dykes; and numerous activist events including an on-line December press event sponsored by multiple organizations, including Citizens' Campaign for the Environment, Sierra Club CT, the CT League of Conservation Voters, Clean Water Action, 350.org, and the youth organization, Sunrise.



Six GCA demonstrators said NO to KEC last year in Hartford.

well as increasing press coverage, both Governor Lamont and Commissioner Dykes have not put the brakes on KEC. Dykes puts the onus of responsibility for KEC on ISO-New England, the manager of our regional electric power grid, which in 2019 awarded KEC a spot in its "power auction."

Regardless of the fact that the build-out of KEC would thwart his goal of a 100% carbon-free power by 2040, Governor Lamont thus far has not demonstrated the political will to halt the Killingly project. As recently as last week, the Governor repeated that he doesn't want to build KEC. In a February 3<sup>rd</sup> interview on CT Public Radio's Where We Live, he said that at this point there might not be a lot he can do to stop the plant.

KEC opponents continue to apply concerted pressure, and advocates are shining a light on the DEEP-approved plan to replace a 375-MW gas plant in Middletown with a gaspowered "upgrade" rather than carbon-free technology. Hope is now pinned on a bill introduced in the CT legislature by Sen. Christine Cohen that would place a moratorium on all new fossil-fuel power plants in the state.



### Groton Resilience and Sustainability Task GC3: Update on Governor's Council on Force Update

By Liz Raisbeck

For the last year the Groton Resilience\* and Sustainability\*\* Task Force has been reviewing Groton's various vulnerabilities to climate change, which like all coastal towns, are numerous. GCA's Zell Steever chairs the Task Force, and Jessie Stratton, also of GCA, is the secretary of the Task Force; both bring considerable professional experience to the seven-member group.

The Task Force is presently developing a number of specific action recommendations the Town should take to become more resilient to the effects of climate change. These will include how to fulfill the state's mandate to plan for 20 inches of sea-level rise by 2050 and how Groton can meet the state mandate to have 40% of electrical energy generated from renewable sources by 2040.

The Task Force notes that the Town has already made substantial progress during the last 15 years, including: installing energy-efficient lighting in many town schools and town buildings; increasing use of energy efficient hybrid automobiles; supporting recycling activities; including climate, resilience and sustainability concepts in various community documents, i.e. the Plan of Conservation and Development; and revising Town zoning regulations to better reflect climate, resilience and sustainability concerns.

This, of course, is just the start of what needs to be done. First, GCA and the Task Force are strongly recommending that the Town hire a full-time experienced director to manage Groton's evolution into an energy-efficient town to mitigate the impacts of climate change while making the community more resilient. Much more can be done to promote solar installation on the new schools being proposed and built. We need vehicle-fleet conversion to electric, and revised zoning in our coastal and flood-prone areas. Rising temperatures that increase tick populations and help spread infectious disease are a threat to public health and need to be addressed. Downtown Mystic needs a serious evaluation of how to cope with a 20" sea-level rise by 2050. (Click here for a 2012 NYTimes video showing the convergence of Hurricane Sandy's storm surge + a full moon tide in Mystic.) These are issues the Task Force will be assisting the Town in addressing over the next year.

Last but not least, the GRSTF has concluded that Groton needs a robust public education program on climate change, resilience and sustainability. To be successful, the TF will help the town think through a broad effort to build a common understanding of the issues, the opportunities and a way to move forward. This is likely to include: signage and story boards; public meetings and listening sessions;

# Climate Change

By Jessie Stratton

As usual, the legislature convened in early January for what is known as the "long session" during which legislators have more ability to introduce new legislation. However, given COVID-19 it is likely to be an anything-but-usual session and one that is more focused on a few big issues including addressing the state's current solid waste system's serious shortcomings.

GCA will monitor the progress of several bills legislators and the Governor have proposed that would expand renewable generation, efficiency, and benefit the town of Groton and its residents. In somewhat of a surprise, the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA) has proposed a financial construct for solar projects that enables a continuation of the existing net metering system that GCA supported as well as a new tariff construct that the utilities favor. See Jan Spiegel's article in the CT Mirror.

Members of GCA have continued to follow the work of the Governor's Council on Climate Change (GC3) as its subject matter working groups have regularly met through Zoom. In January of 2021, the Council issued a Phase 1 Report: Near-Term Actions that highlights near term (2021-2) strategies to mitigate climate change impacts and, to a lesser degree, actions to make Connecticut more resilient in the face of them. Those recommendations begin on page 31 in the report titled: Taking Action on Climate Change and Building a More Resilient Connecticut for All.

Specifically the Governor has proposed three bills that address climate and energy issues:

An Act Concerning Transportation-Related Carbon Emissions; An Act Concerning Climate Change Adaptation; An Act Concerning Climate Change Mitigation and Home Energy Affordability

lectures and classes at public schools, libraries, and UConn; TV & radio programs as well as public service announcements; and finally the effective use of internet platforms and social media.

- \* Coastal resilience means building the ability of a community to "bounce back" after hazardous events such as hurricanes, coastal storms, and flooding - rather than simply reacting to impacts. Resilience is our ability to prevent a short-term hazard event from turning into a long-term community-wide disaster. NOAA
- \*\* Sustainability is the quality of supporting long-term ecological balance by not being harmful to the environment or depleting natural resources.



#### Follow GCA on FACEBOOK!

#### By Kristin Distante

Facebook is a great outreach tool for GCA.

Our page is packed with interesting articles, vivid photos and videos accessible at the click of a mouse. We can share material and ideas coming in from all over the web and disperse our news and information back out there. As we keep up to date with current issues,

the page is steadily gaining "likes," "views," and followers. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, and links you to more information and raises awareness about global warming, plastic pollution, the Killingly gas plant and other topics of interest to GCA. To find the page, go to Facebook.com and search for Groton Conservation Advocates. We encourage you to check it out, like, share, follow and join the conversation!

## You Can Help!

Get involved! Click <u>here</u> or go to grotonconservationadvocates.org/partners-1/ to add your name to our e-mailing list.

We know you're busy. Could you make a donation?

Write to us at groconadv2017@ gmail.com with your ideas or concerns.

Thank You!

Visit our website or go to grotonconservationadvocates.org/ to learn more about GCA

### Support Plastic Reduction with Window Cling by Kristin Distante



This beautiful logo, designed by local artist Lisa Hill, was jointly created by GCA, the Groton Conservation Commission, Town of Groton and the Greater Mystic Chamber of Commerce to acknowledge our local merchants who have supported the Town's plastic reduction efforts. Many businesses had to make large and sometimes costly adjustments to their practices and did so willingly. Some adopted leadership roles. The rollout of the cling hit a snag during the pandemic, but will resume as vaccinations allow; ASAP, please! The cling will be distributed to local merchants and is also available for you to display! If you would like to purchase a cling, please send a \$5 donation to Groton Conservation Advocates. Make a check out to GCA or send \$5 cash to:

GCA, 76 Riverview Ave, Noank, CT 06340

Be sure to include your name and the address where you want the cling mailed.

Support the merchants who display the cling!