

Groton Conservation Advocates

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

2021 Year-in-Review e-Newsletter

February 2022



Sea level rise: On October 9, 2021, despite no weather event, both the Barn Island Wildlife Management Area (left) and the Watch Hill Napatree beach parking lot and yacht club entrance (right) were submerged due to the confluence of a high tide, full moon, and thermal expansion of the Atlantic Ocean. More photos of flooding in Mystic and Noank on page 6.

The Groton Resiliency and Sustainability Task Force

By Zell Steever

The Groton Resiliency and Sustainability Task Force (GRSTF) continues to evaluate Groton's progress in taking action on climate change. They have reached the general conclusion that the town has undertaken a number of good planning studies during the past ten years looking at ways to make changes in Groton. But despite these studies there has been little action across the community in response to climate change.

Last year, the TF recommended to the Groton Town Council that they pass a formal resolution to consider climate change as a central, overarching concern in all future actions taken by the Council going forward. In addition, the TF proposed the Council establish and fund a new senior level position, Manager of Resilience, Sustainability and Climate Change in the town this past year*. While committing to the position, the town has not issued a job announcement yet.

The TF continues its focus on four issues: 1. Sea level rise and community flooding; 2. Energy conservation and schools, and the establishment of expanded passenger trains and for moving commuters in the community and

(continued on page 2)

Advancing Climate Goals

By Jessie Stratton

In December, Governor Lamont issued Executive Order 3 in which he directs state executive branch entities to undertake numerous actions designed to help meet the state's greenhouse gas reduction goals and increase its resilience to the impacts of a changing climate.

The directives address the following broad areas: buildings and infrastructure, clean transportation, community climate resilience, health, equity, environmental justice, jobs, the economy, and natural and working lands. The specifics in each category are available [here](#).

While the orders are directed at state agencies, there will be numerous ways the public can influence some of the specifics. For example, as DEEP develops its next Comprehensive Energy Strategy, the public can weigh in as to



(continued on page 2)

Groton Resiliency and Sustainability Task Force

(continued from p. 1)

reducing our carbon footprint in transportation; 3. Health impacts to the community from climate events such as prolonged major heat waves and major storm events; from new diseases related to the changing climate in our community; and 4. Public education on climate, resiliency and sustainability issues that are or will likely impact Groton in the future.

***Coastal resiliency:** 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. Resiliency is our ability to prevent a short-term hazard event from turning into a long-term community-wide disaster. [NOAA](#)

Sustainability: the quality of supporting long-term ecological balance by not being harmful to the environment or depleting natural resources ■

Advancing Climate Goals

(continued from p. 1)

whether we think their proposals will result in meeting the goals outlined by the Governor. Similarly, as the Department of Administrative Services updates the building code, it will be important that we advocate for more resiliency and efficiency requirements in our building codes as there will certainly be opponents. There will also be opportunities for the public to weigh in on proposed legislation that will be needed to achieve the goals of the Executive Order.

The legislature convened in early February for what is known as the "short session" during which non-budget related bills must be introduced by committees rather than by individual legislators. It is likely that measures to advance adoption of California cleaner vehicle standards, additional support for electric vehicles, expansion of community solar programs and an end to natural gas expansion incentives will be on the agendas of the Environment, the Energy & Technology, and the Transportation committees. GCA will monitor these developments. ■

Passenger Rail Service Expansion for Groton and Eastern Connecticut Takes a Step Forward

By Zell Steever

This past year, the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) took a major step toward bringing passenger rail service to eastern Connecticut by expanding the Shoreline East (SLE) system from New London to Westerly. The CGA passed legislation directing the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) to conduct a feasibility and operational study of the expansion. They are also studying the potential for a new branch commuter rail service connecting Electric Boat and Pfizer with SLE and the US Navy Submarine Base on the existing Worcester and Providence Railroad tracks running north and south on the east side the Thames River. The CGA funded the CTDOT study at \$2.3 million and directed CTDOT to report back to the CGA by January 2023. The study is looking at establishing new train stations in Groton, Stonington and Norwich. It also requires CTDOT to consider how ground transportation might connect to the proposed expanded train service in eastern Connecticut.

This study bill had 13 co-sponsors and was supported by more than 45 local organizations and individuals including EB, Pfizer, all the local municipal governments, the Connecticut Commuter Rail Council, and the CTDOT.

The CTDOT train study will be undertaken by two consulting firms, AECOM and SVR, under contract to the department.

To show support for bringing local passenger train service to connect southeastern towns, send letters of support to: The Town Council: council@groton-ct.gov, the Planning and Zoning Commission: djones@groton-ct.gov, and the Economic Development Commission, pbronk@groton-ct.gov. ■



Shoreline East above; map of proposed commuter rail service below.



Groton Ponders Data Center Challenge

By Liz Raisbeck



*Facebook's New Albany, Ohio, Data Center
This is the image that New England Edge recommended the Town Council look at to get an idea of what data centers look like.*

The Town of Groton is considering an agreement with a newly formed company called New England Edge that would allow the company to place a large data center on 173 forested acres immediately west of Flanders Rd and below Rte. I-95. A data center is essentially a building filled with computers that collect, distribute, and store data from its customers. Groton Conservation Advocates is concerned the town may make an agreement before they have seen a business plan or are fully aware of the consequences for Groton. The Council is under heavy pressure from the company to vote to approve the center at its March 8th meeting. Issues of concern:

Economic: The center is guaranteed property tax exemptions for 20 to 30 years. Is this in the town's best interest? Water, electric and sewer hookups will be needed, at whose expense? The Council should seek answers to these questions before signing an agreement.

Environmental: Permitting the development of this property is a move in the wrong direction for Groton. The property is fully covered by mature trees and removing large swaths of trees goes against the town's purported goal of not contributing to global warming. The town should require that the data center be carbon neutral. Numerous wetlands and vernal pools occur on this property. These need to be carefully protected. Data centers require huge amounts of electricity and water to run. Will Groton's water supply be protected in times of drought from overuse by the data center? A closed loop water system should be used. During testing and power outages, diesel fuel will power generators which will pollute our air and make a lot of noise, so noise abatement will be needed. Will the two main pollutants on data center properties--diesel fuel and batteries--be properly managed and controlled?

These are just a few of the questions GCA has about this project. We will keep you informed as the project moves forward. ■

Strengthening Groton's Plastic Ordinance

By Kris Kuhn

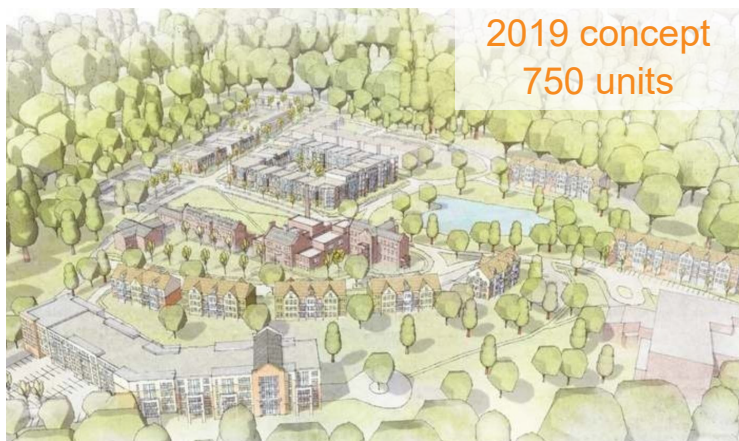
GCA played an important role in the passage of the Town of Groton ordinance (effective October 7, 2020) banning single-use plastic check-out bags, polystyrene (Styrofoam) carryout food containers and trays, and plastic straws and stirrers. However, the ordinance is now in need of remedies to address two problems:

1. The ordinance specifically bans plastic bags up to a 4 mil thickness. Now Walmart*, CVS, and other retail chains are getting around the ban by providing 4 mil plastic bags covered with the labels "Reusable" and "Recyclable." These small-sized bags are made of a heavy Category 4 plastic that has no recycling market, which means that the vast majority will be burned after one use or go into a landfill forever. Furthermore, they threaten to undermine behavior-change campaigns to promote the use of the durable plastic/cloth reusable bags available for \$1 in grocery stores. Corporate provision of these 4 mil bags avoids the intent of Groton's ordinance to decrease plastics pollution and in fact will increase it. To eliminate this deceptive 4-mil workaround, GCA is requesting that the Town Council amend the ordinance to require that plastic bags provided at checkout be at least 12 mils thick, a thickness that would be prohibitively expensive and impractical to manufacture.



2. GCA is also asking the Groton Town Council to establish a **10-cent paper bag fee** to be kept by the store proprietor. Paper bag production and disposal causes a host of environmental problems, different from the pervasive harm of plastics but still very concerning. It has been estimated that 14 million trees are cut down in the U.S. annually to keep us in paper bags. Their production consumes twice the energy needed for plastics, and thousands of gallons of water are required to create a ton of pulp. Numerous other communities have documented that a 10-cent paper bag fee results in a substantially decreased demand for paper bags and an increased use of reusable bags. We seek the same environmental benefits in Groton.

***Correction.** Since the initial publication of this newsletter, we were surprised and glad to learn that several weeks ago Walmart discontinued use of the 4 mil plastic bag. We are not sure why. Cost was cited by a Walmart retail employee as one reason, but another factor could be that GCA, among many other Connecticut environmental organizations, signed onto a letter pressuring Walmart corporate leaders to discontinue use of these 4 mil bags. They are now offering paper bags for a 10-cent fee. ■



2019 concept
750 units



2021 concept
931 units

Left: 2019 concept, 750 units; Right: 2021 expanded concept, 931 units (Crosskey Architects and Fuss & O'Neill)

Questions Arise on Respler's Proposed Sellout

By Jim Furlong

Long Island developer Jeffrey Respler, who has sought to build a mega residential complex on bluffs above the Mystic River, is attempting the sell his embattled company.

Respler let it be known January 25 that he has an agreement to sell a full membership interest in his company, Respler Homes LLC, to Blue Lotus LLC, of Port Washington, NY. Eric Callahan, a town attorney, told the Town Council that night that Blue Lotus specializes in senior housing and assisted living and wants a development "substantially smaller" than what Respler has contemplated.

The 2021 version of the Respler "live-work-play" plan foresaw a development of 931 living units on 60+ acres (including adjacent, privately acquired Respler land), supplemented by shops and offices. That number of living units is 2.7 times the number of the currently most expansive residential complex in Groton, the Ledges, at 339 units.

The land at issue is the abandoned Mystic Oral School—a state school for the deaf—declared "surplus" in 2011 and

put on the market. The land is subject to agreements by Respler with the Town of Groton and the state. Under current agreements, 37 acres of the land would remain protected open space owned by the state.

Reaction to Respler's apparently unilateral plan to sell to Blue Lotus has turned harsh after a collective sigh of relief that the long fight over the property would be finally coming to an end.



Questions were quick to arise both about Respler's right to sell out of his agreement—currently in mediation with Groton with the aim of dissolution of the pact—and the ability and intentions of Blue Lotus. Further mediation between Respler and the town will go ahead as scheduled on March 3 and 4, Town Manager John Burt recently told a representative of MOSA, a group representing opposition to the Respler plan. ■

Environmental Win on Killingly Energy Center (KEC) Now in Question

By Kris Kuhn

Environmental advocates thought they could celebrate a major win after six years of concerted effort to oppose the buildout of a 650-MW fossil fuel power plant in Killingly, Connecticut, when on January 3, 2022, the



Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) agreed to a request by the regional electric grid operator – ISO New England – to terminate its agreement with NTE (Killingly's owner), a decision that was perceived to doom the project.

However, action taken late Friday, February 4, 2022, by the federal district appeals court in response to a suit filed by

NTE resulted in the temporary suspension of FERC's decision and threatened to revive the project. (For more information click [here](#).)

GCA had joined other local and statewide advocates in arguing that the energy from the proposed plant was not needed, that it ran counter to the Governor's mandate for a zero-carbon electric sector by 2040, and that it presented an environmental justice issue for Killingly as an economically distressed community.

No doubt there will be further developments in the case before the federal district appeals court. We will stay abreast of the situation and strategize with fellow environmentalists regarding other avenues for advocacy. Thank you to those who have joined in GCA's efforts thus far to oppose KEC.

Also of note, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection has yet to publish a final decision on an application from Eversource for the pipeline to bring gas to the plant. Advocates submitted formal testimony opposing the pipeline. ■

Protecting Open Space in Groton

By Eugenia Villagra

Since our 2021 newsletter went out, a lot has happened on the open space front.

Last year's newsletter reported on the King-Kolnaski Trails Committee DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) project that we initiated in 2020. The approximately two-mile Blue Loop Trail is completely cleared and 95% blazed. The trail entrance can be easily accessed from the EB parking lot north of Poquonnock Rd. and a few feet west of the entrance to the Catherine Kolnaski school. The name **Sassacus Nature Preserve** was selected in honor of the Chief Sachem (leader) of the Pequot Tribe who died in 1637 during the Pequot War.



Wolfebrook ridgeline. The 161-acre property is in the process of being purchased by Groton to be forever preserved. The stone wall is likely of Native American origin.

More good news is that the Town of Groton is acquiring an open space parcel known as **Wolfebrook**, located north of Route 1, south of Interstate 95 and between Flanders and Noank-Ledyard Roads. Wolfebrook is situated within an intact mature forest, contains a pond and an unusually large complex of wetlands, and the largest vernal pool in New England, making it one of the most ecologically valuable properties in Groton. To help the town purchase the property, GCA has raised \$25,000 in individual donations to date and is currently approaching foundations for more.

Thanks to our work on the Sassacus Blue Loop Trail, GCA has developed a good reputation for trail blazing. The Town requested that we blaze another trail on a 20.51-acre property known as **Maple Glen** on the west side of town near Navy housing. We will begin our work when the town surveyor completes marking the property boundaries.

Finally, as part of our climate mitigation efforts, GCA is encouraging Groton to consider adopting the more ambitious goal of protecting 30% of Groton's land as open space by 2030. First proposed by a 2019 article in Science titled "A Global Deal for Nature," **30 x 30** is a worldwide initiative for governments to designate 30% of Earth's land areas as protected areas. Connecticut's outdated 1998 conservation goal of 21% has informally guided Groton's land conservation objectives, so we have recommended to Groton's Conservation Commission that they consider the 30x30 goal and ensure that *only* environmentally significant properties (not golf courses, for example) be counted toward the goal. ■

Pleasant Valley School Redevelopment

By Eugenia Villagra

As part of the elementary and middle school consolidation program in Groton, the Pleasant Valley Elementary School property was offered for sale this past year to a potential developer. But only half of the property is developed; the remaining half is forested. GCA asked if those trees could be spared the axe and continue to provide tree coverage on the west side of town.

There are many tall native varieties of maple and oak growing there, and hickory and black cherry were spotted, too. Native grape, blackberry and raspberry plants are growing near the paved path that connects the school and the Navy housing development.



Several full-grown trees are located inside the fenced school perimeter including white pines, blue spruce, pin oak and other oak varieties, black cherry, red cedar, hickory and even the sumac trees there provide food for wildlife.

There are many excellent reasons to protect trees:

- They provide oxygen, store carbon, stabilize the soil and provide shelter and food to local and transient wildlife. They reduce wind speeds and cool the air as they lose moisture and reflect heat upwards from their leaves. It's estimated that trees can reduce the temperature in an urban area by up to 12.5 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Trees absorb hundreds of gallons of stormwater, which helps prevent flooding and soil erosion
- One mature oak can be home to as many as 500 different species. Hawks, osprey and many other birds have been spotted in the school forest.
- People are attracted to live and work in green surroundings and benefit from them. Average house prices are 5-18% higher when properties are close to mature trees, and people surrounded by trees and green space generally have lower blood pressure, heart rates and stress levels.

Many people think it is acceptable to cut down trees provided they are replaced with young trees elsewhere. There are good reasons not to. Newly planted trees require many decades to a century before they grow enough to [sequester carbon dioxide](#) in substantial quantities. It is important that Groton do all it can *now* to contribute to a sustainable future. ■

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 [here](#) 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!

GCA

[Visit our new and improved website to learn more about GCA](#)



Top left: Flooded Ram Island Yacht Club dock in Noank, on December 14, 2019, a windy, rainy day. Photo courtesy of Chuck Toal

Top right: Flooded S&P Oyster restaurant dock on the Mystic River, January 17, 2022, no weather event. Photo courtesy of Kris Kuhn

Lower left: Greenwich, Connecticut flooding October 9, 2021, no weather event, 48 minutes after high tide. Photo by Elizabeth Tebbe, on the CTMyCoast.org website.