

Groton Conservation Advocates

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

February 2023 Newsletter



Evidence of sea level rise: (Left) On March 10, 2022, despite no major weather event, wrack lines show flooding in Mystic. (Right) On January 8, 2023, once again, the bottom of Riverview Avenue flooded due to the confluence of a high tide, eastern winds, and the ongoing thermal expansion of the Atlantic Ocean. The University of Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation or CIRCA [study of sea level rise](#) is projecting a rise of up to 20" by 2050.

Individual and Community Action to Advance Climate Goals

By Jessie Stratton

GCA's co-chairs met with Megan Granato, the Town's recently hired – and first – Resilience and Sustainability Manager. Creation of this position was the top recommendation of the Town's Resilience and Sustainability Task Force. Megan has jumped in feet first and is working to secure funding for several climate-related projects. She is also serving as the lead on a Mystic River Flood Study that recently undertook a door-to-door vulnerability assessment of some sixty buildings in Mystic. Click [HERE](#) to learn more about the study and future public meetings.

While our ability to individually address sea level rise is limited, we can individually, and as a community, act to significantly reduce our more local greenhouse gas emissions. With the passage of the federal Inflation Reduction Act, the nation has put vastly more money and resources into efforts combatting climate change that offer Groton and its residents money-saving and energy-efficiency opportunities that also reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

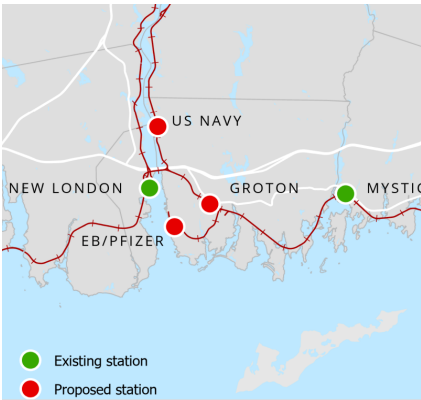
Incentives included in the federal legislation are in addition to those already available through CT's utilities. For more information visit [Energize.CT](#) to learn about how you can reduce the upfront cost of solar installations, insulation, and replacing fossil fueled gas or oil heat with far more efficient electric heat pumps that also provide air conditioning. Click [HERE](#) for a Washington Post summary of how important individual actions are.

The legislature is currently considering numerous climate and energy measures, including increasing the state's Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) that requires utilities to buy increasing amounts of renewable power. Proposed legislation also would require more accountability from the state regarding its actions in meeting our strong climate goals. The outcome of these and other measures may not be known until the legislature adjourns on June 7th. ■



The Eastern Connecticut Rail and Transit Feasibility Study Moves Slowly Ahead to Expand Shore Line East to R.I. and to Establish Rail Service to Norwich By Zell Steever

In 2021, the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) directed and funded the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) to conduct a feasibility study to bring passenger rail service to Eastern Connecticut by expanding the Shore Line East (SLE) rail system from New London to Westerly,



and exploring the potential for a new rail service connecting Electric Boat and Pfizer with SLE and the US Navy Sub Base on the existing tracks. The feasibility study continued throughout 2022 and the final report is expected to be submitted to the

CGA by January 2024. The study is looking to establish new train stations in Groton, Stonington and Norwich (9 possible locations). CTDOT is considering how public ground transportation might connect to train service to complete the first and last mile of public transportation for the travelling public.

This train/bus proposal will reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector, will provide the public with an alternative to traveling in cars, reduce congestion on highways, improve air quality, stimulate economic development and transit-oriented development (TOD), support our major industrial partners, and provide a link to Rhode Island and New York, and in the future to Providence, Worcester, Springfield and Boston. It will provide a better place to live, work and play.

The CT DOT held three public meetings in late December in Norwich, Groton and on Zoom to report on the study progress and to hear from the public.



The public meetings were well attended and receive overwhelming support from the public and our local state legislators. The CTDOT will complete a Preliminary Feasibility Assessment in March of 2023. It will use this assessment to define the next steps to refine the corridor and possible station sites; conduct more detailed market and TOD analysis; identify rail and bus service options; and estimate ridership potential and costs. A second round of public meetings are expected this summer.

For more information on the study see the [CTDOT Study Website](#). The CTDOT Project Manager is: Elise Greenberg at Elise.Greenberg@ct.gov. Last year the federal government passed major infrastructure legislation to fund expanded public rail and bus transportation and reduce the impact of greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. This new funding supports expanded public rail and transit in Connecticut.

To show support for local train and bus services, send letters of support to: your city or town council: (Groton council@groton-ct.gov); the Planning and Zoning Commission: djones@groton-ct.gov, and the Economic Development Commission, pbronk@groton-ct.gov. Letters to the editors of local newspapers are always helpful, too. ■

Groton Resiliency and Sustainability Task Force

by Zell Steever

The Groton Resiliency and Sustainability Task Force, appointed by the Town Council in 2019, continued to make progress over the past year.

The TF wrote a strong letter to the Groton Town Council regarding the proposed NE Edge data center on Flanders Road last spring. The TF strongly opposed this large facility because of its need for major diesel generation capacity onsite and the related air quality degradation it would cause during peak power periods or major power failures.

The Groton Long Point bridge replacement project continued slowly with more engineering and environmental studies. This project has recently been taken over by the state, including funding for the project.

While the Groton Town Council passed a formal resolution to consider climate change as a central, overarching concern in all future actions taken by the Council going forward, it has not used this resolution during the past year.

The TF continues to focus on: sea level rise and community flooding; energy conservation in town buildings and schools; the expansion of public passenger trains to reduce our carbon footprint in transportation; health impacts to the community from climate events such as major heat waves and major storm events; and public education on climate/resiliency and sustainability issues that will impact Groton in the future. ■

GCA Led Community Effort to Stave Off Data Center Development

By Kristen Earls



Diesel-powered back-up generators at the 168,000 square foot Norwalk data center.

In 2022, GCA led a successful, community-wide effort to protect Groton from a large-scale data center development on 173 acres located on land south of Interstate 95 and between residential neighborhoods along Flanders and Hazelnut Hill Roads. The Town offered the developer a 20+ year tax-free commitment for a project that threatened local public health and the environment, had questionable economic benefits, and was rushed forward with little to no due diligence on the developer and no submitted site design or business plan.

GCA leafletted those neighborhoods to inform the residents about the data center plan and its potential impacts. As a result, dozens of concerned citizens wrote letters, showed up or spoke at a public hearing, and attended multiple Town Council meetings in February and March 2022 – some lasting 2 to 3.5 hours. GCA also provided expert testimony and conducted hours of desktop and media research to equip Town officials with critical information, case studies, and data center trends.

In late March, the Town Council voted 5-1 vote (with three councilors abstaining) to direct town staff to end negotiations with developer NE Edge LLC.

Why it matters:

Residents' health at risk Air, noise, and light pollution would have impacted all of Groton but, most acutely, neighbors with homes across the street from the property. Several neighbors had children suffering from asthma and sensory issues, and testified that they would likely need to vacate their homes should the data center be built.

Environmental, climate, and cultural site protection

The proposed property is ecologically and culturally rich with mature trees (wildlife-supporting white oaks, for example); bedrock ridgelines unique in Connecticut that would need to be blasted to build, endangering critical vernal pools, wetlands, and streams. Light, noise, and 24/7 activity would disturb nocturnal wildlife and light up night skies, impacting wildlife migration and breeding habits. Data centers use staggering amounts of electricity and generate heat which contributes to local and global warming, as does the practice of 'peak shaving' - highly polluting diesel generators that switch on as needed during "peak power" days when air quality is already significantly worse. And the requisite parking lot/s and rooftops of data center buildings would produce hundreds of thousands of gallons of polluted stormwater runoff, flooding our waterways and fresh and saltwater resources with contaminants. Mashantucket Pequot tribal artifacts, likely ceremonial stone and other cultural features, would have been disturbed or lost.

Large scale local development process reset

The data center proposal process was one that GCA and others pointed out was part of a pattern of recent large-scale development debacles, and the process itself needed reconsideration. In the case of the NE Edge proposal, no site design; business plan; economic, environmental or public health and well-being analysis, nor developer background, credentials, or track record had been submitted or reviewed by the town or stakeholders.

Following the data center proposal rejection, GCA organized support for Groton's Planning & Zoning Commission's (PZC) consideration - and ultimate passing - of a one-year moratorium on large scale data centers, to give the PZC more time to decide on how best to regulate any future proposals.

What's Next:

As the Groton PZC finalizes its data center regulations, GCA continues to monitor and advocate for strong public health and environmental standards.

Meanwhile, the developer has active data center proposals in Bozrah, Waterford, and other towns, and we are tracking these and any new Groton specific proposals that may arise.

Finally, Groton's Town Council would require a vote of 6 (of 9) to bring back the NE Edge proposal through March 2023, but another data center agreement could be on the horizon until the PZC finalizes its regulations. ■



Mystic Education Center Temporarily Inactive

By Jim Furlong

Since Oct. 3, 2022, when Governor Lamont severed the contract between the State and the Long Island-based developer Jeff Respler concerning the Mystic Oral School, quiet has replaced an uproar.

Not only are the former school's buildings and grounds quiet but related news has nearly vanished from websites. One underwhelming recent event: trucks arriving at the campus to replace broken windows in the chimneyed brick buildings that make up the former school's core.

However, neighbors of the 931-apartment "live-work-play" complex that Respler wanted to build on the bluffs above the Mystic River remain alert to any sign that the project could be reborn. That's because it recovered many times following round upon round of near-death negotiations before finally collapsing. Respler's plans had drawn outrage from neighbors and other town lovers of the Mystic River, who saw the plans as outlandishly big and out of character. The town's Planning & Zoning Commission, which had a veto over the project, made known it was opposed.

"We will be monitoring the situation in every way possible," says one neighbor who's been keeping an eye peeled on the land since before the project was announced in November 2019.

The land that the town planned to sell to Respler is now under care of the Department of Administrative Services. A spokesman says the department is holding 48 acres of land that is intended ultimately to be sold for development. The rest of the land, about 37 acres, will remain state-owned open space, as originally intended, the spokesman said. The Town of Groton had a development agreement with Respler that the town ended November 18, 2022.

John Burt, the town's manager, also remains alert to the danger. He recently heard a rumor indicating the possibility of a Respler return. He quickly filed a Freedom of Information query to the governor, noting that to bring back a sale without first restarting the legal process would "be met with extreme opposition locally and paint the State in a very negative light." He also filed an FOI query with the Attorney General's office and consulted with the Lieutenant General and the commissioner of the Department of Economic and Community Development. None of these outreaches turned up problems.

Burt commented that "It's generally easier to get the State/elected officials to change their mind prior to their making a decision public. I wanted to be assertive in responding to the rumors to make the community's wishes known."

Burt said the State-Respler contract was ended, according to a letter from then Commissioner David Lehman, because of failure to satisfy Connecticut Public Act 15-193 which requires sites with contamination to be cleaned before sale.

That's the legal explanation. The other explanation was fierce popular opposition. The legal explanation of the termination may mean the story is not finished. ■

October 4, 2022

Letter from state Commissioner David Lehman, Department of Economic and Community Development, to Jeff Respler terminating the state's agreement to sell the Mystic Oral School property to Respler.

Click [HERE](#) to read the letter.



Historic Groton Property Preserved

By Liz Raisbeck

The people of Groton received a wonderful present just before Christmas, 2022. With help from Groton Open Space Association, Groton Conservation Advocates, and a state Open Space Watershed Land Acquisition grant, the Town of Groton purchased the magnificent 161-acre Watrous/Wolfebrook* property in the center of Groton located between Noank - Ledyard and Flanders Roads and between I-95 and Route 1. GCA raised approximately \$50,000 toward this effort. We are grateful to the many people of Groton who contributed toward this purchase.

The Watrous/Wolfebrook property is comprised primarily of mature forest with minimal invasive species. A large portion of Eccleston Brook, which flows through the property, will be protected from development and pollution as it flows through the Merritt Family Farm to Palmer Cove. Most importantly, the property features a large pond and numerous wetlands and vernal pools, including one of the biggest vernal pools in New England. Vernal pools provide critical habitat for declining amphibians—frogs and salamanders. The mature forest offers ideal habitat for forest birds rare in our area, such as scarlet tanagers and warblers, and rare wood turtles and box turtles have been found there. Because of its many ecological values, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the Groton Conservation Commission have had this property on their open space acquisition priority lists for permanent protection for several decades.

The Watrous/Wolfebrook property is an important site of the Pequot Wars in 1636-1637. With the purchase of this property, combined with the Sheep Farm and Pequot Woods preserves, most of the 1637 battle site is now protected. We have already contacted the Pequot tribal historian about collaborating on educational programs about Pequot history around these sites.

GCA has asked the Parks and Rec Department to form a special committee to devise a management plan for the Watrous/Wolfebrook property that would include GCA and GOSA as major funders of the purchase.

* We refer to this property as Watrous/Wolfebrook, because both names are being used in reference to it. It will eventually receive a new name from the Parks and Recreation Department. ■



30 x 30: Protecting Open Space in Groton

By Eugenia Villagra

At the January 2023 League of Conservation Voters Environmental Summit, a panel of experts stated that **ecosystems are in decline in Connecticut**. To remedy this alarming situation, scientists recommend permanently protecting at least 30-50% of Connecticut’s land and water resources by 2030.

The Summit recommendation is based on President Biden’s [30 x 30 concept](#), defined as a national goal to conserve at least 30 percent of U.S. lands and freshwater and 30 percent of U.S. ocean areas by 2030. This initiative seeks to reverse the negative impacts of biodiversity decline and climate change by both protecting more natural areas and increasing access to nature for communities that lack it.

Today, only 1% of Connecticut’s land is protected— not enough for long-term community well-being. Legacy trees and old-growth forests (less than 0.02% of Connecticut) need stronger protection. Forests are the natural ecosystem for most of the state, **and they slow the rate of climate change by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it**.

More good news is that [nationwide polling](#) shows Americans strongly back the protection of the nation’s natural heritage; **four out of five U.S. voters favor a plan to protect at least 30 percent of America’s land, ocean areas, and inland waters by the year 2030** because they understand it will be good for their well-being and the environment.

GCA has been advocating for 30 x 30 for several years. We can help Connecticut and the nation come closer to the 30x 30 goal by protecting forests right here in Groton. According to Larry Dunn, the Conservation Commission chair, Groton is very close to exceeding the 30 x 30 goal. ■

Follow GCA on FACEBOOK!

By Kristin Distant

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 climate change, plastic pollution, energy developments 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 website to learn more about GCA!



Top left: Flooding on Riverview Ave. in Noank is happening more frequently and under mostly normal conditions.

Top right: Map of existing and proposed stations for the expansion of Shore Line East rail service from New London to Westerly and Norwich.

Lower left: dock at the Naval Submarine Base New London museum with the USS Nautilus at the end of the pier. The railroad tracks are the P&W RR tracks that run along the east bank of the Thames River between EB and Pfizer, past the SUBASE up to Norwich and beyond to Worcester, MA. These tracks are used daily by freight. This would become the Norwich Branch Line in the future under the feasibility study.