



September 10, 2015

Mayor Setti Warren
Members of the Board of Aldermen
City of Newton
1000 Commonwealth Avenue
Newton Centre, MA 02459

Officers

Beth Wilkinson, President
George Mansfield, Vice President
AnnaMaria Abernathy, Secretary
Katherine Howard, Treasurer
Beth Schroeder, Past President

Board of Directors

Margaret Albright
David Backer
Dan Brody
Larry Burdick
Mat Calabro
Bonnie Carter
Michael Clarke
Ann Dorfman
Margaret Doris
Henry Finch
Robert Fizek
Maurice Gilmore
Daniel Green
William Hagar
Chris Hepburn
Ted Kuklinski
Jane Sender
Larry Smith
Willis Wang

Advisors

Lisle Baker
Rodney Barker
John Bliss
Octo Barnett
Lee Breckenridge
Lucy Caldwell-Stair
Michael Collora
Modestino Criscitiello
Douglas Dickson
Bart Hague
Judith Hepburn
Duane Hillis
Peter Kastner
Alison Leary
William Leitch
Don Lubin
Eric Olson
Anne Pearson
Richard Primack
Eric Reenstierna
Jon Regosin
Patricia Robinson
William Shaevel
Verne Vance
Brian Yates

Dear Mayor Warren and Members of the Board of Aldermen,

The members of the Board of Directors of the Newton Conservators are concerned that the potential sale of the open space behind Temple Mishkan Tefila will endanger a beautiful 28-acre parcel that has great environmental value. The temple has been a good custodian of the land, and we want to see that care continue. We request that you act to protect that land from development and to preserve it for the citizens of Newton.

The Mishkan Tefila land has environmental features that should be saved: it contains a vernal pool that is home to tadpoles and breeding salamanders in the spring and also notable sandstone ledges and outcroppings of Roxbury puddingstone. Except for the front third of the land that contains the temple buildings and parking lots that are adjacent to the temple, it is wild, open area.

The Mishkan Tefila land is surrounded by conservation areas. Not only is it adjacent to those public spaces, but also it is functionally integral with them. As climate change begins to have greater effects on our environment, having this kind of connection between our conservation areas will become more important, allowing stressed plants and other wildlife to migrate to more hospitable areas in which they will be more likely to survive.

In 1916, Edwin Webster gave this parcel of land to the State. In 1954, the State sold it to Mishkan Tefila for \$1, with the proviso that the land be used for only educational or religious purposes for ninety-nine years. That proviso will be in effect for the next thirty-seven years, but it does not protect the land from development.

The actual vernal pond and the one hundred feet surrounding it have the standard wetlands protection offered by the Conservation Commission, but there is no protection for the rest of the property. A cluster of buildings or parking lots could be constructed around the pond and could cover the rest of the land.

We strongly encourage the City of Newton to take action to protect this unique and irreplaceable tract of land. The following scenarios are possibilities:

- **Buy the entire site outright** from the current owner, Mishkan Tefila, with money obtained through the Community Preservation Act or other public funds.

- **Buy only the open-space part of the site and the western parking lot,** leaving the already-developed area to be used for religious or educational purposes, as mandated by the state regulations.
- **Advocate for a conservation restriction and a public-access easement on all of the undeveloped land as well as on the western parking lot** (which is surrounded by undeveloped land). This would leave the currently built-up land and the adjacent parking lots for the owner to use.

For decades, our members and other Newton residents have enjoyed hiking through the woods of the Mishkan Tefila land. Long-time member Octo Barnett is an ardent admirer of the land and wrote that he sees history written in its stones. More recently, Boston University Professor Richard Primack told the attendees at our 2015 annual meeting that he learned how to be a biologist by exploring those same woods. Brandeis University sustainable biologist Dr. Eric Olson leads annual Newton Conservators' walks to find the salamanders in the vernal pond. With Dr. Olson's instruction, the land serves as an important tool to teach children and adults about nature.

It is our concern that if the City does not take action to protect this land now, its treasures might not exist for the citizens of Newton in future decades. Please help us to preserve this very important open space

Sincerely,

Beth Wilkinson, President

On behalf of the Board of Directors
of the Newton Conservators