



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