

## NEWS

# New obstacle for Chappaqua schools at Buttonhook development: Native American artifacts



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First, a New York City environmental agency raised a red flag about storm water drainage.

Then the contract for the sale of the land expired.

And now the history of the Hudson Valley's indigenous people has emerged as the latest issue in the long-delayed luxury housing project under development by the Chappaqua school district on a hilltop at Buttonhook Lane.

Several experts working with the citizen group Preserve Buttonhook have identified 23 ceremonial stone landscapes, both on the 20-acre parcel owned by the school district and on neighboring properties.

The group has called on the New Castle Planning Board to rescind its environmental approval of the project, which found that there would be no impact on historical resources if the development of six homes, each with a swimming pool and cabana, proceeded.

The group has also documented that the area is home to bobcats, a designated species of special concern in Westchester. The environmental report did not document large mammals on the site.

Preserve Buttonhook has requested that the environmental study be reopened, with a public hearing held on their findings so planners could assess the proposed development's impact on these historical artifacts as well as the habitat of the bobcats.

“There is evidence of Native American life here, and the stone landscapes need to be studied,” said Tracey Bilski, whose property abuts the Buttonhook parcel on its eastern boundary. “If we don’t stand up for them now, they will be lost forever.”

**Taxes:** Should school district preserve Buttonhook or put back on tax rolls?

**Gamble:** Chappaqua schools engage in real estate speculation

**On hold:** Chappaqua pauses Buttonhook project in 2020

The town of New Castle, however, is in no hurry to review the site for the Native American artifacts.

The town’s planning director, Sabrina Charney Hull, told Tax Watch that the Planning Board would not address these issues until the school district sought final approval for the project, once all other issues were resolved.

“The Planning Board won’t reopen anything until we have the final application before us,” said Hull.

Among the Native Americans who have visited the site is Michaeline Picaro, the clan mother of the Turtle Clan of the Ramapough Lenape Nation.

She was particularly struck by the stone structures on the hillside, above the underground aquifers that run down the hill to a tributary of the Gedney Brook, and into the New Croton Reservoir. She said the stones are considered prayers to the three worlds of the Native American cosmology – the underground world, the middle world where we live, and the sky world.

Members of the Ramapough Lenape Nation lived on both sides of the Hudson for millennia, with villages of indigenous people still intact through the 18th century.

Two of the stone cairns identified in the area evoke the shape of turtles.

“These sacred prayers were created centuries ago,” said Picaro. “This is part of our living culture.”

Calls for further inquiries into the Native American artifacts rank among three major issues this spring facing the school district’s speculative real estate development project.

The contract for sale of the property to a Manhattan developer has expired while the New York City Department of Environmental Protection has raised a new round of questions regarding the proposed subdivision's storm water prevention system.

Most governments with surplus land simply put the vacant parcels up for sale, with the real estate developer then working with town agencies to obtain building approvals.

In Chappaqua, the district decided to maximize the value of its land by seeking hard-to-get approvals to build in the watershed of New York City's reservoir system. That's proved a difficult task, with an estimated \$600,000 of taxpayer dollars spent so far to win approval.

The land, which was put on the market with great hopes for \$3.5 million in 2019, went into contract at a substantial discount in 2021, for \$2 million. That contract with CG Homes LLC of Manhattan expired on March 31 and has yet to be renewed.

## **More development costs**

Development costs, funded with taxpayer dollars, continue to escalate.

In March, the school district authorized an additional \$20,900 to an engineering firm to address new issues raised by the New York City DEP. The standards are high for the complex storm water prevention system: it's designed to allow no excess run-off from the site to adjacent properties in the case of a torrential rainstorm of up to 9 inches in 24 hours.

Three years after its storm water plan was submitted, Chappaqua is on its 10th extension from the DEP. Among the outstanding issues is what entity would manage the storm water system, once the six single-family homes are constructed.

Officials at the Chappaqua schools have remained mum on what's next.

Chappaqua Superintendent of Schools Christine Ackerman did not respond to messages while Board of Education President Hilary Grasso declined to respond to questions. She said an update on the project would be forthcoming at the school board meeting on May 4.

## The discovery in 2021

The 20-acre parcel was purchased for \$125,000 in 1973 as the location for a new school that was never built. The district began discussions on the project in 2010, and since 2020 has been engaged with the town, seeking approval for a subdivision for six homes, selling for \$2 million, each with about 4,000 square feet of living space, a swimming pool and cabana.

The district was alerted to the discovery of the Native American artifacts in October 2021 following a visit to the Bilski property, which abuts the site on Old Roaring Brook Road. Native American research Noham Cachat Schilling at that time had identified Native American stone structures similar to those in the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions.

Later came several other experts at different times, including David Johnson, who has a research permit through the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to locate Native American sacred and ceremonial stone landscapes in six state parks in the Palisades Interstate Park.

Johnson, a specialist in hydrology, was able to detect the underground water courses, with some stones demarcating the width of the underground flow.

In January, he submitted a report to the Office of State Parks, seeking to place the stone objects observed at the Buttonhook Road subdivision site and adjacent properties on the state Historic Registry.

“Native American sacred and ceremonial stone landscape concentrations are consistently connected to one another by stone features,” he wrote. “Therefore, there is a high probability that there are additional stone features on neighboring parcels of land.”

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