



Saw Mill River Audubon

A VOICE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT SINCE 1953

November 16, 2022

VIA EMAIL

BoEducation@chappaquaschools.org

Ms. Jane Kimmel Shepardson, President
Chappaqua Central School District Board of Education
66 Roaring Brook Road
Chappaqua, New York 10514

Re: Saw Mill River Audubon Statement of Support for
Preservation of the 20.3-acre Buttonhook Road Property

Dear President and Members of the Board of Education:

I am writing as a member of the Board of Saw Mill River Audubon (SMRA) to express our support for the preservation of the Button Hook Road property and for the acceptance of the offer to purchase made by Friends of Buttonhook.

Saw Mill River Audubon has been involved in the preservation, management and conservation of open space in Northern Westchester County since the 1950s. Our headquarters are located at Pruyn Sanctuary, 275 Millwood Road, Chappaqua, New York. We have five sanctuaries, including Pruyn, in the Town of New Castle. Over the years, our Board and membership has included members of your Board, and members of the Town and Planning Boards of New Castle, and of the other volunteer Boards of the Town.

In 1991, I became a member of the Conservation Board of the Town of New Castle, then chaired by Anne Swaim, and Anne is our Executive Director. Under Anne's guidance on the Conservation Board, we began developing Open Space mapping and plans for protection of open space in the Town. I joined the Town Board in 1995, and during my tenure the Town began an Open Space Advisory Board and successfully protected hundreds of acres of open space. In 2001, I helped found the Community Land Trust of New Castle, and we successfully promoted the passage of the Open Space Referendum.

I have been a member of the SMRA Board for approaching 20 years. I was asked to join the Board by Stan Wecker, who with his wife, Rita, and other Board members, organized an Earth Day celebration at Greeley High School on the first Earth Day in 1970.

Reviewing the current Town of New Castle website, I discovered an excellent document which is a must-read for all Town residents, the 2022 Natural Resource Inventory Draft Report (NRI). This document is comprehensive and thoughtful. I am proud to see this work from the Town Board and other Boards including the Conservation Board and Planning Board, and for me this represents a compilation of the efforts of so many people over the last 30 plus years to balance competing interests and concerns and while overseeing and protecting the beauty and resources of our local environment.

I recognize the responsibility of the Board of Education to act in a manner consistent with the community you serve, which includes people outside of Town. SMRA also serves a membership beyond the imaginary, but real, lines created for purposes of civil administration. However, considerations and concerns including stream and wetland protection, habitat protection, biodiversity, corridors for animals and insects, and climate change cross these lines so that as public officials you have a responsibility to consider likely or possible impacts of their decisions on the broader community.

The NRI states, at page 37:

Lands within the Town of New Castle offer diverse habitats for local wildlife. When considering habitats and wildlife, it is important to understand the local and regional context as habitats extend beyond municipal boundaries. Habitats within the town have been identified as significant at multiple scales including portions of the town that provide critical habitat for rare species. By recognizing how and where natural resources extend beyond municipal boundaries, the Town can better plan management and conservation activities and consider the implications of decisions on a broader scale. It also aids in promoting intermunicipal cooperation to protect natural resources that are important for maintaining large, contiguous habitats to protect biodiversity and support climate change adaptaticns for native species.

The Friends of Buttonhook have stepped up to state and set forth the important environmental considerations associated with the possible development of one of the last remaining undeveloped 20 plus acre parcels in the Town. They have highlighted issues including the clearcutting of 767 trees, extensive additional infrastructure that will be needed to address stormwater runoff and degradation of water, loss of habitat, loss of wildlife and loss of important corridors for wildlife. They have also raised concerns about issues relating to our indigenous predecessors on this land.

At SMRA, we are identified with birds, and we are extremely concerned by the loss of birds from our planet at an alarming rate caused by loss of habitat, glass strikes, outside lighting at night that interferes with migration, and the introduction of animals (cats) to local environments are serious threats to birds. National Audubon published a study in September, 2019, in the journal Science, documenting that over the last 50 years, over one in four birds have been lost. Some species of birds have suffered losses over 50%. The development of the Buttonhook property is just one piece in a very large puzzle that impacts the survivability of birds over time, and I am sure we can fill many 1,000 piece puzzles with similar developments over the course of time. SMRA is concerned about more than birds, but birds are frequently an indicator of broader impacts from development.

The clearcutting of trees is something I would also like to draw greater attention to; 767 trees will be cut, with a spend of over \$251,000 proposed to replant 400 of them. I just wonder how we value those 767 trees. What would Thoreau say? In this time when we talk about carbon capture, flooding, habitat destruction, and climate change, do we really understand and appreciate what those 767 trees accomplish for us? This property straddles one watershed and is on the downward slope leading into a second watershed, with water making its way to a reservoir (two reservoirs?) which provides drinking water to people throughout the NYC metropolitan area.

I submit that the damage that would result to the local and larger environment because of the removal of these 767 trees, will cost all of us far more than the \$251,000 to replace 400 of those trees. Instead of building substantial infrastructure to mitigate the impacts of flooding on the quality of drinking water, avoid the issues altogether by preserving the land and not removing the trees.

Back to the NRI and the purpose of this letter. In the NRI, numerous references are made to actions available to the Town to mitigate climate change and the impacts of human activity on the local environment. Preservation is an option which will be far more effective for Climate Change purposes than developing the land and then taking steps to mitigate the damage.

Two other sections of the Town’s NRI – Climate Change and Conclusions – make important points:

The Town of New Castle has already shown a dedication to addressing climate change within the community through the recreation of the Climate Smart Communities Task Force and recognition as a sliver certified New York State Climate Smart Community. Continued strategic planning can aid in identifying opportunities and implementing projects to further support a climate resilient community. In addition to projects already implemented and previously described, installation of green infrastructure such as rain gardens, strategic restoration of wetlands, restoration of riparian buffers, and increasing canopy cover can all aid in mitigating expected impacts of increased precipitation and temperatures.

The Town of New Castle and its residents have made the protection of natural resources a priority for the town through careful and intentional planning and inclusion of policies in the TCP (Town Comprehensive Plan). The TCP recognizes that “Harmony with Nature” is critical for not only maintaining the natural feel and bucolic nature of the town, but also protecting habitats that support a diverse community of flora and fauna, protect and improve water quality for the Town of New Castle and surrounding communities, and aid in ensuring the sustainability and resiliency of the town and its natural resources in a changing climate.

I suggest that instead of looking back and saying we should have protected that parcel called Buttonhook, the Board of Education should take this step to preserve a small piece of what has been left to all of us as a result of a decision to purchase made by your Board in the 1970s.

The visionaries who started the National Parks movement, protected the Adirondacks and Central Park, and established Audubon preserves had the foresight to protect those areas. We should have the foresight today to protect Buttonhook.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kenneth J. Novenster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "K" and a long, sweeping underline.

Kenneth J. Novenster and the
Board of Saw Mill River Audubon