

Greening the New Elementary School

Opportunity seldom knocks twice. As the Town embarks upon the siting of a new elementary school, I can hear it knocking.

Here, at the planning stage, the Town has the opportunity to ensure that the new school is environmentally sustainable, protects neighboring natural areas, and provides ample open space for play and learning. It will be much harder and more expensive to incorporate energy saving and sustainable solutions after the project is completed, rather than now at the design phase.

Why is this important? It's because open space - not just classroom space - is vital to our children's education. Research consistently shows that access to open space, especially natural green open space, promotes cognitive, physical, social and emotional wellbeing. In designing the new school, we need to expand open space where ever possible, and protect the existing natural and conservation areas we already have. Further, incorporating environmentally sustainability and energy efficient measures now, will likely save the town money in the long run.

The Conservancy has shared its recommendations on the Stanley School site with the School Building Committee and the Town's consultants. These recommendations include the following:

- In creating the play areas, use only eco-friendly equipment to eliminate the degradation of plastics and paint in the soil, watershed and conservation areas.
- In addition to providing for ample open space for play, plan for the protection and restoration of Ewing Woods as this existing seven acres of conservation property will be used as an outdoor natural "classroom." This would involve removal of invasive plant species that are taking over and killing native plants and trees and destroying natural habitats, as well as the restoration of appropriate woodland native plants. For more information on invasive plant species, check out the Conservancy's series of short videos entitled *Nature Notes on Invasive Plants* at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCC6texTfviyMlq6U40e6d2A>
- Take steps and actions to ensure that any increased car or pedestrian traffic will not result in overuse or degradation of neighboring conservation or natural areas, as well as ensure that these areas are protected during construction.

- Along the school property borders, establish appropriately sized native species vegetative buffer zones, in particular along the property line with the Unitarian Universalist Church property, which has an undeveloped natural pond and wetland area that needs to be protected.
- Plantings in buffer zones as well as in the proposed rain garden should be native species. More information on rain gardens can be found at: <https://www.epa.gov/soakuptherain/soak-rain-rain-gardens>. To learn more about low impact design and environmentally friendly land use planning check out Greenscapes Northshore Stormwater Coalition's website: <https://greenscapes.org/lid-toolkit/>
- Use alternative ground covers and native grass mixes in place of traditional high resource commercial grass fescue mixes or sod in lawn areas.
- Utilize permeable pavement to the fullest extent possible throughout the site, including the driving, walking, and parking areas.
- In addition to solar panels, include a "green roof" - a roof partially or completely covered with vegetation that helps promote the energy efficiency of the building.
- Install environmentally and wildlife friendly lighting on the site.
- Ban the use of any fertilizers, herbicides or insecticides which are not only bad for the environment, but can also have harmful effects on our children.

The opportunities go beyond what happens outside the new building. There are opportunities to enhance what happens *inside* the school as well. In particular, we believe there needs to be a commitment by the Town to fund environmental education programs and to explicitly incorporate them into the school's curriculum. To that end, the Conservancy has offered its assistance in developing a site-specific curriculum that includes MA-STE aligned standards that meet the needs of the educator, family, and student communities.

At the recent SBC public forum, the Conservancy was happy to hear that the Town's consultants are committed to preserving and creating high quality open space, preserving and restoring trees, using native plantings, and creating a rain garden. We hope that the Town wholeheartedly support the recommendations of the Conservancy and take full

advantage of this opportunity to improve nature in our neighborhood and our children's lives.

Let's seize this fleeting moment and achieve long-lasting benefits for our town.