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[Print Page](#)

Letter: Preserving open space should be more than a smokescreen

I am upset that an ecologically important piece of property that was designated as open space in negotiations between developers of the Ponds of Plymouth and our town Planning Board is now proposed (and seriously being considered by our Planning Board) as a 10-home development in Cedarville.

The land involved is a narrow isthmus lying between Triangle and Little Herring ponds, in the headwaters of the Herring River watershed. This property is a key remaining undisturbed part of a state-designated Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Some of the reasons for this designation include the function of the Herring River as an important migration and spawning ground for River Herring, but also as an area that is home to several state-designated species of special concern. Equally important, the property is a beautiful example of the globally-rare and fast-disappearing Atlantic Coastal Pine Barrens ecoregion habitat. Plymouth County, and most of Plymouth in particular, contain the second-largest remaining expanse of this world-threatened type of ecosystem, more than two thirds of which has already been lost, due largely to development, but also fire suppression, invasive plants, herbicides, and pesticides.

Part of the frustration I feel is that this parcel in Cedarville was clearly designated and approved by the Plymouth Planning Board as open space during negotiations between itself and developers of the Ponds of Plymouth.

Somehow this narrow connecting strip of land between two ponds was re-designated as developable in a closed executive session of the Plymouth Planning board in June 2005. Now comes a company, whose principal is Ponds of Plymouth-connected, proposing 10 more homes clustered for greater than zoned density, with a small fraction of the newly carved parcel being offered as open space, to sweeten the permitting process (once again!). New homebuyers in adjacent areas, who clearly did their due diligence in the late '90s when plans showed this clearly marked as open space, are now rightly in shock. Even the Wildlands Trust, with the abutting Pickerel Pond Preserve, was blindsided.

At issue, in my opinion, is not only the beautiful piece of ecologically (and hydrologically) valuable land, but also the process that takes place between land developers and the Plymouth Planning Board. What do their negotiated conditions for development mean? Why is there a process of negotiation for open space if it later turns out to be an essentially meaningless exercise?

As a citizen, I believe that development negotiations concluded by our town should have more meaning than what appears to be a smokescreen that later clears and benefits the developer. Negotiated conditions for preserving open space in Plymouth should mean something more lasting to our community and to our future generations.

– Brian Harrington, Plymouth

<http://plymouth.wickedlocal.com/article/20140924/NEWS/140928719>

[Print Page](#)