

To: Stoneham Board of Appeals
2024
Stoneham Town Hall
35 Central Street
Stoneham, MA 02180

March 20,

Re: Residences at Spot Pond
Housing Development

Dear Stoneham Board of Appeals,

I am writing this letter to present to you the most recent biodiversity and usage data about the Middlesex Fells Reservation that shows the adjacent site of the former Boston Regional Medical Center is entirely unsuitable for building the Residences at Spot Pond. While the addition of affordable housing to the Stoneham housing market is commendable, the chosen site for the development threatens the already fragile and degraded ecosystem of the Fells.

The data and findings I will draw upon are available to the public on Earthwise Aware's (EwA) website, in their 2023 Park Usage Report, and in their 2023 Vernal Pool and Threatened Species Report (Sources: [The Middlesex Fells Reservation Park Usage 2023 Stats Highlights](#) and [2023 Earthwise Aware Vernal Pool and Threatened Species Report](#)).

The Fells is an urban forest that already faces habitat fragmentation, erosion, and invasive species and is very vulnerable to further development and increased usage. These activities will exacerbate existing problems and directly impact biodiversity in the area. Existing challenges that the Fells is facing include:

- **Habitat loss and fragmentation:** Further development will bring throngs of additional visitors to the Fells forest and will lead to the loss of remaining natural areas, making it difficult for native species to find suitable areas for shelter, food, and breeding.
- **Invasive species:** Construction and human activity disturb soil and vegetation and make it easier for invasive species to take hold.
- **Bio-pollution:** Dog leash rules are largely ignored, resulting in dogs swimming in and contaminating ponds and pools (e.g., from parasites that are harmless to our domesticated companions but harmful to our forest inhabitants). Trails are regularly littered with dog excrement—some bagged, some not. In 2020, Fells experienced an outpouring of public visits that accelerated the degradation of the land, and visibly impacted wildlife. Since then, the Fells has seen a usage increase that has not returned to pre-covid usage.
- **Rogue trails:** The Fells is overrun by rogue trails facilitating the spread of harmful invasive species, erosion, and trampling. In 2023, established trails widened, most doubled, and many tripled in width. The system of rogue trails and intrusion areas in the Fells have also spread radically and now reach very deep into the forest. There is an estimated total of 90.52 - 104.44 miles of rogue trails at the Fells, more than doubling the DCR-established trail system and five times larger than the reported 2012 DCR rogue trail survey.
- **Vernal pool degradation:** The reservation is home to about 130 vernal pools known to NHESP (60 certified and some 70 candidates), making this reservation critical to the local preservation of wetland habitat and the species dependent upon it. Most of the

pools that EwA focuses on are located in BioMap Core Habitat areas, which are defined as specific areas necessary to promote the long-term persistence of Species of Conservation Concern, exemplary natural communities, and intact ecosystems. Species of Conservation Concern refers to those listed under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act and additional species identified in the State Wildlife Action Plan. Many vernal pools that were previously more or less sheltered by vegetation are not anymore.

The Fells serves as a haven for biodiversity in an urban setting. There are over 1643 species of fauna recorded just in the vicinity off the development site:

- 1643 species = {88 avian, 7 amphibian, 5 reptilian, 10 mammalian, 712 insecta, 42 arachnea, 288 plants, 197 fungi species}, including 193 introduced species, and **12 threatened species**. (Source: [EwA Fells Research Grade Records](#))

Finally, the development area borders a Rare Species Core zone (See definition at <https://hub.arcgis.com/pages/36c86cffe5a64b3aa75808e4fb87bb37>). You can use the following [ArcGIS map](#) developed by EwA to view the designation of the zone as a Rare Species Core Zone at the development site (in the Layer List, under Areas of Ecological Value, select Rare Species Core).

These are some of the major problems that the Fells is facing, and continuing on with such a massive development will only exacerbate them. I hope constituents in Stoneham and in other communities surrounding the Middlesex Fells take the time to advocate for enforcement of park regulations, restoration of degraded habitats, and strategic planning to mitigate the impacts of human activities on natural areas.

I urge the Board of Appeals to reconsider granting the permit to the Gutierrez Group for building the Residences at Spot Pond. The current state of the Fells is simply unsustainable, and I hope that the Board takes the time to consider the perspective of the supporters of the Fells and to ensure that this special forest survives for future generations.

Sincerely,
Marina Jokic

602-561-2325

Sources:

2023 EwA Conservation Digest Collection: <https://www.earthwiseaware.org/2023-ewa-conservation-digest-collection/>

2023 EwA Conservation Highlights:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gOkGBWS0HGpe8arlev6GDOG5hC3uNlot/view?usp=sharing>

The 2023 EwA Vernal Pool and Threatened Species Report:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mu6WBaA5VSE-2lmgAW8MfbZ8ylxwAXcu/view?usp=drive_link