

## **Citizens for Easton Advocates Upholding Easton's Zoning Regulations for Running Brook Farm on South Park Avenue**

Citizens for Easton has seen several proposals that attempt to break Easton's zoning regulations in its thirty-one year history, but this one sounds very much like the one that originally spurred citizens to band together in April 1973 to form Citizens for Easton. "Citizens for Easton is a town-wide civic association currently being organized by concerned residents who are alarmed at the possibility of exploitation of Easton's land. The original impetus for the organization came when neighbors discovered that a group of owner-developers were planning a large apartment complex on South Park Avenue, Easton." (Position statement, Citizens for Easton, April, 1973).

The current proposal is for fifty separate units with three bedrooms and a two car attached garage on thirty acres, each with a square footage of approximately 2,700-3,100 square feet. It is conceived as an age-restricted development, meaning the principal owner must be a minimum of fifty-five years of age. It plans to provide access to public water and a community septic system.

"Proponents of this form of zoning change claim that, by somehow limiting the residents of these buildings to people over eighteen years, no school expenses will be incurred and the town will receive substantial revenue. This has not been proven. New and increased services have been demanded by the increased population in other towns. In Southbury, Heritage Village residents voted in a \$500,000 road that Southbury citizens had turned down..." (Position statement, Citizens for Easton, April 1973).

The area now being referred to as Running Brook Farm lies in a three acre zone area of town. The three acre zones in town were carefully thought out by our Easton Planning and Zoning Commission in the 1940's in order to protect the quality of our water supply. With traditional development, Running Brook could apply for somewhere between seven to ten lots depending on wetlands and conservation setbacks. Are we prepared to abandon long established zoning safeguards and risk opening other properties in the three acre zone to similar proposals?

The threat of "affordable housing" instead of "age-restricted" for this parcel is a real one and it has our board of selectmen worried. Please let your Planning and Zoning Commissioners know how you feel about this zoning issue as well as your selectmen and take time to think about why you moved to Easton and how important it is to you to keep our zoning enforced.

## **The Town Plan of Conservation and Development Will Be Discussed At Public Meetings Before Adoption**

Like a proud farmer about to harvest the fruit of his labor, John Hayes sees the Town Plan of Conservation and Development in its final stages of ripening. With a few policy issues as yet to be discussed with the Planning and Zoning Commission, the Plan is a few months away from beginning the process of town wide discussion toward ratification and adoption. This couldn't be more timely for Easton, as the potential changes facing the town from a number of quarters present many challenges, and the Plan will provide much needed guidance and structure for meeting them.

Easton established its first Town Plan in the 1970's and, though times have changed, that document has largely remained the same. The new Town Plan has integrated input from public officials and community groups reflecting their attitudes and feelings. The end product of this thorough process will be a vital advisory document providing Easton's boards and regulatory commissions with important goals and guidelines that represent the collective wishes of the town.

The Plan addresses a wide spectrum of topics, including the pros and cons of commercial development, issues related to density, design review regulations and traffic dispersion. John asserts that the core of the Plan is consistent with the mission of Citizens for Easton – the preservation of the town's rural character via a strong commitment to maintain our residential zoning regulations. People are attracted to Easton for its "teachers and trees" and the protection of current zoning philosophy and policies stands as a crucial element in conserving our natural beauty and country flavor. At the same time, it is important to prepare for the changes that will inevitably face the town by developing a proactive plan for handling development. One concept John outlined is the Village District, a plan that leaves open

the possibility of allowing some variation in use in order to preserve historic buildings or to maintain the unique character of an area. For example, he cited such “human activity” areas as the town green, the Helen Keller/ECC section, the town hall/library/Staples School and the old town center near Greiser’s as sites perhaps worthy of special planning and zoning consideration. This plan encourages the institution of a design review function to P&Z, and pointedly does NOT endorse the idea of a commercial district per se. John was emphatic in his opinion that the best way to protect the tax base is to preserve the residential nature (and thereby residence value) and rural texture of the town, and to closely monitor additional development with that end in mind.

Other elements of the Plan include recommendations for identifying special areas to preserve as open space (with emphasis on streams, natural land features and linkages to other parcels), for developing a system of trails and bikeways to connect the focal areas of town such as the post office, library, schools and the ECC, and for opening areas in the former Kelda property for hiking utilizing the old road rights of way.

As the town enters a crossroads in the upcoming months and years, the value of the Town Plan is multiplied. Without the guideposts that this Plan will provide, there is a danger that those elements that have made Easton the unique and attractive community it is today may be lost. It must be noted that guideposts can only point the way, and may be open to a variety of interpretations. It is crucial that those who value Easton’s natural and historic beauty are active and vocal in reinforcing the goals of preservation and conservation outlined in the Plan. CFE encourages all citizens to participate in the town wide discussions of the Town Plan of Conservation and Development.

## **Public Access To Kelda Lands Soon To Become A Reality**

For most Easton residents, they seem to lie just beyond reach - the alluring spread of woods, fields and streams that comprise thousands of acres of former Bridgeport Hydraulic lands now owned by the state. But that could all change as early as June, when the Department of Environmental Protection begins completion of rules that would govern not only access, but hunting, fishing, and various other types of activities on some 4,000 acres that have been closed to the public for over one hundred years.

Legally, there is “still no access but my sense is that things will change closer to summer, and that some areas will open up,” says Matt Fritz, the DEP's spokesman, who explained that “we’re looking at different forms of use, both passive and active recreation, and obviously looking at whether hunting will be permitted. Fishing is something we're exploring right now. Hiking has long gone on these properties [but] the emphasis is to create more access for folks, including trails.”

The process of determining access is more complicated than it might appear: Foremost, the DEP is just finalizing a detailed “forest inventory” based on global positioning survey technology, which will map existing trails, roads and - of course - the thousands of hills, streams, ravines, ridges, fens, and valleys that make up this complex and spectacular landscape. Says Fritz, “By next year, all of this will be complete, but information will be coming out before that. All the management plans have been broken up into different watersheds, and some of them are further along than others.”

The DEP has also applied for a so-called “Federal Recreation Grant” which would help pay for the new hiking trails. The Department of Public Health is also working to determine appropriate - and safe - use of the many water courses and reservoirs. Fishing, says Fritz, is expected to be opened up in many areas.

Safety is a major issue. While the Aquarion lands seem familiar from the road, go in a few hundred feet and you will quickly realize that you have entered a very different world. Much of it is trackless. Hikers could be wandering and suddenly come upon 100 foot drops. Abandoned (or confiscated) dwellings have long ago melted into the wilderness, but deep well holes remain; they too are a hazard. It is important to remember that these lands are vast by local standards, and will stretch municipal and state police and rescue operations.

Hikers who have dreamed of breaching those yellow sign barriers will soon discover something they could hardly have imagined - an extraordinary stretch of wildlands that are among the most pristine in all of Connecticut, and a place so profoundly serene that it is almost possible to imagine a world without the bustling intrusions of modern life. It is a true gift to Easton. Fritz says that for more information, he can be reached at 860-424-4100, at [www.dep.state.ct.us](http://www.dep.state.ct.us).