



NATURAL RESOURCES COMMISSION

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Wellesley Natural Resources Commission: An Independent Voice for the Environment

In 1977, Wellesley Town Meeting voted to create the elected Natural Resources Commission as the steward of our town's parks, conservation land, and recreation and open space system. For the past 40 years, this independent elected board and small staff have successfully collaborated with other town boards and departments to protect our town's natural resources. As the current elected members of the NRC, we believe the continued independence of our board and department are essential to the execution of our mission – and essential to environmental protection in Wellesley.

At the Special Town Meeting convening on November 2, the Town Government Study Committee is proposing sweeping changes to Wellesley's current form of government. The new structure proposed by the TGSC would place the NRC in a Planning and Land Management Division, several layers down in the Town organizational chart, under the Board of Selectmen, a new town manager, and a deputy town manager. We are deeply concerned that the proposed changes will compromise the ability of the NRC to accomplish its mission to protect the environment, conserve open space, and promote recreation in Wellesley. If the NRC is placed in the proposed Planning and Management Division, a division concerned largely with commercial and residential development and permitting, the voice of the NRC is likely to be significantly weakened and diluted. Therefore, our board has decided that we have no alternative but to offer amendments to the TGSC proposal. We will ask Town Meeting Members to allow the NRC to remain as an independent elected board and department, similar in status to the School Committee and the Municipal Light Plant.

We wholeheartedly support the concept of a town manager and would like to follow the example of other towns, such as Brookline, Winchester, and Weston, that have very effective town managers who work in collaboration with independent elected boards. In looking at comparable towns, it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all structure for town government – each town has worked out its own particular solution, and we would like to find a balanced solution for Wellesley that reflects the high priority that our town has placed on protecting the environment.

The very existence of the independent Natural Resources Commission is a reflection of that priority. Conservation commissions in other towns are appointed, and they are primarily permitting boards that administer wetlands regulations. Wellesley's independent elected NRC is uniquely charged with a much broader mission of stewardship over conservation land, parks, and natural resources, and includes public education and advocacy. The NRC is also vested with the statutory authority of a conservation commission and delegates that authority to the Wetlands Protection Committee, which the NRC appoints. This unique structure has given our town's critically important natural resources the protection and conservation they deserve and require, for the preservation of the character, natural beauty, and quality of life that we all treasure.

In its decades of existence, the NRC has worked to protect and expand open space, to limit pesticide use on public lands (including playing fields), to maintain the tree canopy and green character of our town, and to advocate for and safeguard the town's natural resources. Most of the NRC's achievements are accomplished through successful collaboration with other town boards, departments, and residents. And on occasion, open spaces and environmental concerns have needed strong representation and advocacy in the face of increasing pressures. In the coming years, that pressure is very likely to continue to grow, as it has already during the many years of the NRC's existence. The Town is losing trees, lawns, and backyards to larger homes and commercial development, making it even more important to protect the open spaces that remain. The Town's open spaces function in some very practical ways – they offer recreational opportunities and bird habitat; they play a critical role in recharging the underground aquifers that supply our drinking water; and they add greatly to our property values.

We believe that there is too much at stake to diminish the independent voice for the environment in Wellesley. We ask for the support of residents and Town Meeting Members in maintaining a strong and independent Natural Resources Commission in Wellesley.

We welcome your comments at NRC@wellesley.gov.