

Mass Audubon Statement on Withdrawal from Little Harbor Country Club Negotiations

Over the years, Mass Audubon has demonstrated a strong commitment to providing quality conservation to the Town of Wareham.

We greatly value our partnership with the Wareham Land Trust in providing special places for people to experience the wonders of nature firsthand, decompress in an increasingly stressful world, and improve their physical health. We have provided welcoming hiking trails and expanded educational programming for the community's residents.

In recent years, we have dramatically expanded our existing property in town—Great Neck Wildlife Sanctuary. The most recent addition to the sanctuary was the 108-acre former Sacred Hearts property in 2019.

Since the acquisition of the former Sacred Hearts property, we have worked to increase coastal resilience by removing buildings and rewilding large portions of the site that were vulnerable to climate change and rising seas. We have partnered with local schools to provide more than 400 hours of “Beyond School Time” education that engages fourth- and fifth-graders in watershed education and action. The students have even participated in diamondback terrapin nesting habitat restoration.

We have also provided adult education, working with partners through events such as “Wild for Wareham,” as well as with on-site programs. Additionally, we have constructed new trails, are developing educational signage, and have plans to construct an outdoor classroom.

It was in this spirit of partnering with the community on land conservation and nature-based programming that, in mid-2020, after the owners of the Little Harbor Country Club had approached us to explore whether a sale for conservation might be possible, Mass Audubon entered into negotiations for the property.

We pursued a conservation vision for Little Harbor Country Club that was ambitious but very compelling – acquiring the property and fully restoring it to the natural habitat that was once there for the benefit of people and wildlife. We planned to convert the cart paths into a series of ADA-accessible trails so that people with mobility challenges would have fuller opportunities to connect with nature.

Ecological restoration of the property would also act to better buffer the area from the climate impacts of increasing coastal storm surge and rising seas.

When we began the purchase discussions, it was against a backdrop of research suggesting that golf as a sport was on the decline and had been for some time; a golf course business looking to sell its land has become an increasingly common occurrence, in Massachusetts and across the United States.

What we did not fully appreciate was just how strong the support was in the Wareham community to continue golf at this particular property -- once the current owners made the decision to sell. As a result, we were caught off guard by the strength of opposition by some to our vision for the property.

Mass Audubon prides itself in practicing conservation at the local level – implementing projects that yield a broad array of timely and well-received benefits to the host community. Due to the stronger- than-realized support for continued golf on this site – including by those in town government –

our conservation vision came into question, and even became the target of unfounded public criticism from some quarters.

Accordingly, Mass Audubon has made the difficult decision to step away from the project. This decision was made with the mutual agreement of the sellers, who are now witnessing far greater support for continuation of the sport that they provided so well for over the last four decades.

While we are no longer pursuing the purchase of this land for conservation and restoration at this time, we remain hopeful that, perhaps if it is determined that golf use is no longer practicable on the site, we can be a part of the solution.

Importantly, we wish to express our deep appreciation to the Town of Wareham Community Preservation Committee, for endorsing our request for CPA funds for this project, and to the Wareham Land Trust for its steadfast support throughout.

Mass Audubon will continue to serve the Wareham as we have been doing—providing access to, and teaching about, nature for all, and preserving habitat for future generations.