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Thoreau's Legacy: Middlesex Graduates to Protest Estabrook Woods Development with Tree-Sit

Concord, Massachusetts, July 17, 2006—On July 17, two graduates of Middlesex School returned to their alma mater to stage a protest that Henry David Thoreau would surely support: a tree-sit to oppose Middlesex's development of the historic Estabrook Woods. Molly Tsongas '00 and Rachel Banay '03 ascended two trees near the school's entrance and will remain there for several days to convey their opposition to the school's actions. The protestors demand a facilitated discussion between stakeholders and the Board of Trustees and that Middlesex halt all further development until some agreement is reached. In solidarity with the alumni, Concord residents and Middlesex students are protesting on Monument Square in Concord center.

"We are alumni and members of the Middlesex community who care about the future of the school. Middlesex is about to make a critical decision – to protect or to destroy a unique piece of Middlesex and American heritage and we are here to urge the trustees to make the right choice and save the Estabrook Woods," said Tsongas.

Students, alumni, faculty, and Concord residents have fought to protect these Woods from development over the last 14 years. They are unwilling to lose the land which is treasured by students and residents for its serene beauty, educational resources, ecological importance as a home for rare and endangered species, and historical treasures, including Colonial artifacts, Minuteman paths, and Henry David Thoreau's legacy. As Meredith Davis, Class of 2006, says, "a school that prides itself on forming 'responsible and moral citizens of the world' must not commit this act of generational irresponsibility."

Despite this sustained opposition, Middlesex's trustees went forward with the proposed three-year development project last summer, razing about four acres of woods to construct six tennis courts, adding two more in June 2006. This summer, Middlesex plans to cut down roughly four more acres to install two artificial-turf playing fields in the woods, as well as a bridge and access road, 32 feet wide and 300 feet long, which will threaten the wetlands and enable further development.

"Middlesex trustees are about to lay down artificial turf over American history for yet another sports field and to destroy a critical wetland for yet another road," said Banay. "Why destroy what makes our school unique, when we already have an abundance of athletic facilities? How many prep schools can claim that their students run on the same paths the Minutemen traveled on April 19, 1775? Does Middlesex want to be known as the school that sacrificed these lands for development?"

Key Massachusetts political figures have voiced their support for the preservation of the Estabrook Woods, including US Senator Edward Kennedy, US Senator John Kerry, Congressman Martin Meehan, State Senator Susan Fargo, State Senator Pam Resor, and State Representative Cory Atkins. The following groups have written statements of support for the preservation of the Estabrook Woods: The Massachusetts Audubon Society, The Massachusetts Chapter of the Sierra Club, The Massachusetts Environmental League, The Walden Woods Project, The Wilderness Society, The Appalachian Mountain Club, Clean Water Action, and The Sudbury Valley Trustees.

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Additional Information

The Unique Values of Estabrook Woods

- The Estabrook Woods have been designated a Forest Legacy Area by Congress, rich in rare and endangered species and archaeological and historical resources, and by the Massachusetts Office of Environmental Affairs as a Core Habitat, necessary for the preservation of biodiversity.
- The Estabrook Woods contain early American artifacts, including visible Colonial corn hills, and the path down which local minutemen marched on their way to instigate the American Revolution. Henry David Thoreau wrote over 160 journal entries comprised of more than 50,000 words about the Estabrook Woods.
- Harvard maintains the field station for its Museum of Comparative Zoology and Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology in Estabrook, but Middlesex recently refused a Middlesex alumni parent's offer of \$4.5 million to endow a joint chair in Environmental Science with Harvard.
- Monk Terry, the school's second headmaster, presided over Middlesex's acquisition of its Estabrook Woods land in the 1960's. At the time, Middlesex and Harvard University, which owns an adjoining piece of the woods, conceived of an ecological study area that would be protected from development. Concord residents, eager to preserve their Estabrook parcels, ceded their land to the project for little or no compensation. The arrangement was formalized through a "gentleman's agreement." Later, in a May 1963 Alumni Bulletin, Headmaster Terry wrote "the School land abuts the largest piece of uninhabited property within seventy-five miles of Cambridge... Surely the grandsons of boys now in School will rejoice to live beside this quiet, protected area."

The Protestors

Molly Tsongas, Middlesex Class of 2000, is the daughter of the late Paul Tsongas, former U.S. Senator of Massachusetts (1978-1984). During her years at Middlesex, Molly led the student movement against development as president of the student body and head of the school's environmental club, Common Sense, and has since used her political experience to bring the controversy to the attention of state politicians.

Rachel Banay, Middlesex Class of 2003, grew up on the Middlesex campus as the daughter of two faculty members. The woods were her backyard playground during childhood, and she later ran their trails as a member of Middlesex's cross-country team.

The tree-sitters will receive support from many other Middlesex graduates and Concord residents, including Page Stites '94. Stites has served the development's opposition as an organizing member of Middlesex Graduates for Estabrook Woods.

Megan Terry, granddaughter of Headmaster Monk Terry, was unable to participate in the action, but sent her encouragement from Florida.

Other materials in this package include:

- Press Release, July 16, 2006: 'Kennedy, Kerry, Meehan Weigh In: Middlesex School Should Preserve Estabrook Woods'

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- Letter to the Middlesex Board of Trustees from the Middlesex Graduates for Estabrook Woods regarding the request for a facilitated dialogue.
- Contact List of individuals available for interviews.

For additional information or copies for any of these materials, contact Page Stites of Middlesex Graduates for Estabrook Woods: (508) 207-5620 and pstites@estabrookwoods.org, or visit www.estabrookwoods.org