



TOWN OF SWAMPSCOTT

OPEN SPACE & RECREATION PLAN COMMITTEE

ELIHU THOMSON ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
22 MONUMENT AVENUE, SWAMPSCOTT, MA 01907

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Board of Selectmen
22 Monument Avenue
Swampscott, MA 01907

December 15, 2016

Members of the Board of Selectmen,

I am writing to you on a matter that we, the Swampscott Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee, feel is of vital importance to the future scenic and historic character of this Town. We have become aware that there is a pending sale of White Court from the Sisters of Mercy to the Saint Paul's Foundation. We understand further that, should this sale go through, the new owners have expressed an unwillingness to have either any public access to the historic building and grounds, or a public easement to the water such as exists on the adjoining Blythswood property. We further understand that the new owners are considering surrounding the property with a wall – the result being to both physically and symbolically separate this valued land from the Town and its residents.

We find the new owner's proposals for this scenic and historic landmark objectionable for many reasons. Therefore, if the opportunity presents itself, we strongly urge that the Board of Selectmen take whatever steps are necessary to have the Town purchase the land, thereby forever preserving it for the use by our community. Such an investment will repay itself over and over again in years to come and future generations will thank us for it. This has been done in a number of other Massachusetts communities such as Dedham (the Endicott Estate), Holyoke (Wisteriahurst), Waltham (Stonehurst), and North Andover (the Stevens Estate).

There is no question that one of the most valued assets in Swampscott is its location as a scenic coastal community. It's no surprise that Swampscott is part of the 85-mile Essex Coastal Scenic Byway. The Town has numerous beaches as well as rocky headlands with stunning ocean views, such as those found at White Court. Most of these ocean front properties are unfortunately privately owned and not accessible to Swampscott residents.

As noted in the Town's recently adopted Master Plan "preserving Swampscott's visual appeal – its beaches, rocky coastline, varied topography, and development patterns – is essential to keeping the town's character, future quality of life, environmental sustainability." With this we couldn't agree more. The Master Plan, along with the Town's Open Space & Recreation Plan and its goal of preserving the scenic character of the Town¹, are designed to both enhance and protect what we have left in Swampscott before it's all gone. Much has been lost already. We therefore urge the Town representatives to do all within their power to prevent the loss of this very special scenic and historic asset.

¹ For instance, the *Open Space & Recreation Plan* includes, for all properties, the general objectives of "incorporating open space and recreation goals into land use planning and zoning" and "developing policies for the acquisition of private land," as well as a specific objective for White Hall (then Marian Court College) of "working with the school or owners to develop a preservation plan."

Blythswood and White Court are two of the three remaining summer estates from the late 19th century. Built by Arthur Little of Little & Brown for Frederick E. Smith, White Court was the summer home of President Calvin Coolidge in 1925. There is history here which the Town, if it owned the building, could use for educational purposes or to promote tourism. Swampscott could use White Court, as other communities have used their historic buildings, to rent for various functions and weddings in order to generate income for the Town, to incorporate a museum, as well as to utilize for community meetings and activities.

As for the six acres of ocean front property, this is much needed open space for an open-space-starved town. And more park space – for summer events or just a stroll along the cliffs --- has more than just aesthetic appeal. As has been said by Ed McMahon of the Urban Land Institute in his TEDx Talk, there is a compelling argument for, not just the psychological and social, but also the economic value of a community's uniqueness – a uniqueness that is often created by a town's natural assets. People, he points out, make decisions on where to visit and where to live based on what a community looks like. "Scenic landscapes are an economic asset ... people are willing to pay to see the view and experience the unique character of the place." All the more reason to protect and make accessible scenic properties such as White Court.

At this point we request that Board consider engaging the Sisters of Mercy in a potential purchase of the property if the current purchase and sale does not become final.

The members of the Open Space & Recreation Plan Committee remain committed to offering whatever assistance may be necessary in such an endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Mary Webster". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Mary" and last name "Webster" clearly distinguishable.

Mary Webster, Chair
Open Space & Recreation Plan Committee

CC: Gino Cresta, Interim Town Administrator
Pete Kane, Director of Community Development
Finance Committee