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Protesters plant saplings to save forest Middlesex School expansion opposed



Members of the Estabrook Woods Alliance, led by Christina Pienta and Ned Kelley, demonstrated against the Middlesex School's development of Estabrook Woods yesterday. (JON CHASE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

By Michael Levenson, Globe Staff | April 29, 2007

CONCORD -- Deep in a forest of oak and pine, where Henry David Thoreau once contemplated nature, a man in a tri-corner hat yesterday pitched a shovel into the mud. Then he lowered a pine sapling into the freshly dug earth. He was standing in the middle of a clearing, surrounded by yellow caution tape. Nearby, there were two bulldozers, two backhoes, and a dump truck. "This will grow really well," said the man, Ned Kelley. "Until they mow it down."

The planting was the latest and perhaps most desperate chapter in a 15-year battle over the future of the Estabrook Woods, a quiet forest that inspired some 160 journal entries by Thoreau. Middlesex School, which owns much of the land, has cleared aside legal challenges, local opposition, protesting alumni, and trees, to build eight tennis courts here. Now, it is on the last leg of its expansion, building two soccer fields in the clearing where Kelley planted his sapling as a protest.

The expansion has bitterly divided the school, whose alumni include former governor William F. Weld and former US senator Henry Cabot Lodge. While the board of trustees has been pushing hard for the expansion, some of the school's alumni, led by Molly Tsongas, the 25-year-old daughter of the late US senator Paul Tsongas, have been pushing back, arguing that the woods are a cultural and natural treasure. Tsongas was there yesterday, holding a sign that read, "Honor Estabrook Woods."

"This is not something the community is calling for," Tsongas said of the construction. "It's quite the opposite. So why are they going forward?"

James Saltonstall, the school's assistant headmaster for finance and operations, who came out to survey the site just before the protesters arrived, said Middlesex needs to build the best sports facilities for its students, and he described the location, a few hundred yards from campus, as ideal. About 11 acres will be used for the construction, he said.

"I think the school inevitably seems to want better and more facilities," said Saltonstall, a distant cousin of former governor Leverett A. Saltonstall. "We're in a competitive position with other schools such that we feel our current athletic space is inadequate."

Kelley, who graduated from Middlesex in 1959, said he loved to walk in the woods as a student. He had dressed in Colonial garb to symbolize the revolutionary spirit the protesters hope to embody.

"When I think of the Estabrook Woods, I think of wonderful, quiet times," he said. "Now when I think of Estabrook Woods, I feel great sorrow in my heart and soul, and when I think of Middlesex, I think, 'How ignorant can they be?'"

Kelley said he and his mother had both written Middlesex out of their wills and he urged other alumni to do the same.

"That's the one thing Middlesex will listen to," he said. "They will listen to money."

Before the planting, the opponents had tried other tactics. Last year, Tsongas camped in a tree across from the headmaster's house for 36 hours.

Activists also gathered 1,000 signatures from Concord residents opposed to the project. A Middlesex parent offered \$5 million to endow an environmental studies program, if Middlesex would save the woods. Others filed a lawsuit arguing that the project would harm native species such as the blue spotted salamander and spotted turtle. Though the case held up construction for more than a decade, it ultimately failed.

Yesterday, Julia Terry, whose father, Lawrence "Monk" Terry, was a headmaster of Middlesex, read a letter her father had written to the board in 1963, in which he proposed setting aside the woods for study and contemplation.

"Surely, the grandsons of boys now in school will rejoice to live beside this quiet, protected area," Monk's letter says.

Saltonstall said the school has agreed to preserve 120 acres of the woods and will preserve another 61 acres for at least the next 20 years. Terry and others said they would also like those acres preserved forever, in the memory of Thoreau.

"I hope that Estabrook can finally become a vital part of a shared agenda and not part of a battleground of competing agendas," said Terry's sister, Elise Brown. "At that point, the woods can become what all the founders envisioned."

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