

Restoration of a Meadow environment in our Conservation Meadow Park

To: Mayor Compton and Town Councilors Rob Gilmore, Kriss Grisham, Peter Nagrod, Eva Patrone, Barbara Raimondo, and Mary Warfield

CC: Town Clerk, Kathy Lehman and Town Web Manager, Christine Dibble

Dear Mayor Compton and Town Councilors,

The Meadows Committee respectfully submits these further comments concerning the tree reduction proposal on the Sept. 9 Town Council agenda. In the interest of striving for greater consensus, we would support deferring a decision on the proposal until the October Town Council meeting, but we feel strongly that going forward with phase 1 of the proposal is the correct action, based on expert analysis.

We wish to reiterate that meadows are a diminishing yet valuable ecological resource. The Town is blessed with its 100 acres of woods and residential tree canopy, but our 10-acre Conservation Park meadow is all we have that can meet the needs of a distinctly different ecosystem. The country is witnessing a collapse of beneficial insect populations, which as Doug Tallamy teaches are the main food supply for birds, amphibians and other small wildlife. Our woods cannot replace the meadow in this regard. A healthy meadow will support more wildlife than it does now. We have an opportunity to encourage good stewardship of this natural resource, and Montgomery Parks, through their easement on this land, has ultimate responsibility to deliver.

In addition to the ecological concerns, there are legal and historic preservation concerns, as noted by William J. Roberts, Town's attorney, in a lengthy opinion to then mayor Georgette Cole dated April 3, 2012:

“The protection of the Meadow was not for the purpose of serving the subdivision. It was not for the purpose of active recreational use, ball fields, or anything of that ilk. It was a protection of the Meadow in order to preserve the historic setting of the Town of Washington Grove. That was plainly stated.”

Roberts goes on to respond to a question about tree removal.

“The bottom line is this: The Meadow should be used and maintained as the Meadow for the express purpose of protecting the historic setting of the Town. Whether removing certain trees or certain species or planting other species is good or bad or right or wrong, I frankly am not in a position to say without much further information. And that probably is not a legal question, but rather one of **good conservation and land stewardship**. [emphasis added]

“I would suggest that the Town let this be their guide: Whatever MNCPPC [i.e., Montgomery Parks] staff proposes should always be examined in the context of the purpose of the easement in the first instance...”

Therefore, we have worked with Montgomery Parks to explore best practices to maintain the ecological health of the Conservation Park as a meadow. Parks has four active meadow restoration sites, three of which are smaller than ours. **It’s a rare opportunity for Parks to restore a meadow of this size.**

We have met multiple times with Ryan Colliton, Vegetation Ecologist and Principle Natural Resources Specialist; Colliton, in consultation with others on the Montgomery Parks’ Meadow Management & Restoration Program, developed the tree reduction proposal. Additionally, the Parks team facilitates the removal of invasive species and will design & supply the subsequent replanting program. **We believe in relying on the advice of these experts whose focus is meadow restoration.**

At the time that the Operation & Use Plan was negotiated, the red cedars in question were shorter than the 5’ browse limit and should have been mowed down. They are still growing; if unchecked, they can grow to 40-50’ tall and 20’ in diameter, further crowding out meadow species and thereby decreasing the amount of meadow wildlife that the land can support.

There are two approved ways to address the proliferation of woody species in a meadow: mowing or burning. Annual mowing has successfully held back other woody species, both native and non-native, and can continue to do so. The present state is not a natural early succession forest, because virtually everything other than the red cedars – native or not -- has been held in check.

Our current recommendation to Town Council is to approve only phase 1, the removal of 37 cedars plus one identified Bradford pear, out of the 200+ trees in the meadow. To be clear, there will remain clusters of cedars and other existing trees, including the trees deliberately planted by Parks to thicken the stands of trees between the upper and lower meadows and along Ridge. For your convenience, the map showing Phase 1 and Phase 2 is attached.

The Meadows Committee