



Dear friends,

[Monday night's Lower Merion School Board meeting](#) was an incredible experience. In reality, it was more like a rally for the Save Stoneleigh movement!

The venue was crowded and it was hard to count how many supporters turned out for the meeting—**about 300 is our best guess**. Both the School Board meeting room and the overflow room were packed, with people spilling out into the hallways and parking lot. **It was a sea of crimson Save Stoneleigh t-shirts and home-made signs!** (One of my favorites read "Don't touch a hare of Stoneleigh!")

About 50 residents of the School District came to the podium and spoke eloquently about Stoneleigh's unique benefits to the community, its irreplaceable gardens and ancient trees, and its essential services to the natural world. **For more than two hours, we listened to residents of the district express their support for Stoneleigh and urge the School Board to find another way forward.**

In my three-minute chance to address the School Board last night, **[I shared how difficult it's been to not to feel anger about these current circumstances](#)**. And about how what should be a time of celebration in the opening of Stoneleigh to the public after years of preparations is instead a time of fear about the looming threat of condemnation.

Director of Stoneleigh, **Ethan Kauffman, talked about the 6.9-acre portion of Stoneleigh that the Board continues to mischaracterize** as "developable." He described the Olmsted Brothers-designed Meadow Vista with its meandering path through grasses and flowers that support birds and pollinators, **the state champion ironwood tree that John Haas climbed as a young man**, and the extraordinary ostrich fern garden with specimens that stretch over his head.

The School Board did **not** vote to condemn Stoneleigh last night. **Nor did they withdraw their interest in it.** Rather, they reaffirmed their focus on Stoneleigh in this letter to the editor from Board President Melissa Gilbert and Superintendent Copeland that appeared yesterday in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*.

L. Merion schools need land

You recently published an article about the Lower Merion School District's efforts to meet the ongoing challenges of enrollment growth.

One option is the possible use of some or all of the Stoneleigh garden at the Villanova estate that once belonged to the chemical-industry billionaire John Haas ("L. Merion schools eye new garden for new facility," May 11).

We realize this is not an ideal solution. However, there are times when ideals and reality do not align. The reality is that Lower Merion is the state's fastest-growing school district, with a 21.5 percent increase in students over the last decade.

Families are drawn here by the schools' excellent reputation. Also, the recent construction of numerous multi-family housing units has made living here more affordable. However, Lower Merion is an inner-ring suburb with little available space. The district has already constructed additional classrooms at five schools. This has helped with immediate challenges, but a new middle school is a forward-thinking solution that will provide optimal flexibility. And one that requires land.

Efforts to use a township park for athletic fields were rebuffed. Efforts to purchase a private-school property were rejected. Two other potential sites have buildings being considered for historic designation. With options so limited, it is incumbent on the district to consider all possibilities.

The district remains hopeful that a solution can be found. We understand many consider Stoneleigh a unique treasure. Lower Merion School District considers each of its 8,600-plus students, and the 1,000 more expected in the next decade, to be unique treasures as well.

Melissa R. Gilbert, president, Board of Directors; **Robert Copeland**, superintendent, Lower Merion School District

We were encouraged to hear Monday night that the School District and Lower Merion Township are meeting this Friday with representatives of St. Charles Borromeo Seminary. We hope this will be the start of finding a more suitable location for the School District's needs.

Natural Lands remains committed to doing everything we can to save Stoneleigh; the outpouring of support from all of you has bolstered our spirits and strengthened our resolve. We can only hope it has also helped the School District understand that **taking any inch of Stoneleigh would be a devastating loss to residents—including Lower Merion school students—and the greater community.** We will continue to make that point to the School Board and hope you will continue to, in a strong and respectful way, raise your voice in support of Stoneleigh.

If you would like to support Natural Lands during this challenging moment, [please consider joining or making an additional donation.](#) Once again, thank you for your support. It means the world!

Sincerely,



Molly K. Morrison
President



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[1031 Palmers Mill Road, Media, PA 19063](#)