



# Natural Lands

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May 14, 2018

Melissa R. Gilbert, Ph. D.  
President, Board of School Directors  
Lower Merion School District  
301 East Montgomery Avenue  
Ardmore, PA 19003

Mr. Robert L. Copeland  
Superintendent of School  
Lower Merion School District  
301 East Montgomery Avenue  
Ardmore, PA 19003

Re: Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden

Dear President Gilbert and Superintendent Copeland:

We are in receipt of a May 11, 2018 e-mail sent this past Friday by Lower Merion School District (the “District”) to District families captioned “Update on property acquisition” (the “5/11/18 e-mail”). We at Natural Lands were dismayed that the e-mail contains several false and misleading statements. We are further dismayed because this is not the first time we have brought these facts to your attention, yet the District continues to construct a narrative for the public—that is misleading, at best. We would like once again to provide the District with the correct information so that the District can correct the public record.

Stoneleigh was the subject of an exhaustive analysis by the Lower Merion Township Board of Commissioners (“Township”) in 2015. The Township considered the proposal by the Estate of John C. Haas and Natural Lands to seek approval for an Estate Preservation Lot consisting of “one lot of approximately 41.7 acres...” Thus, there is no separate “6.9 acre parcel,” as the 5/11/18 e-mail claims. There is only one parcel—Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden—and it consists of the main house (designated a Class II Historic Resource under the Lower Merion Township Historic Resource Inventory, and which is subject to a facade easement) and one single garden throughout 41.7 acres of land.

While the Township approved *potential* future uses for a portion of the 41.7-acre parcel, those purposes are solely to “fund uses, activities and preservation” of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden. In short, what the 5/11/18 e-mail claims is some separate parcel of land subject to no restrictions other than the zoning code is, in reality, an integral portion of this national treasure. In fact, it is part and parcel of the historic garden landscape which includes the Great Lawn, Meadow Vista, and other features designed by Olmsted Brothers, which have remained remarkably intact for more than a century.

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Natural  
Lands

Melissa R. Gilbert, Ph. D.  
Mr. Robert Copeland  
May 14, 2018  
Page 2

The District has claimed publicly that there is a separate area (what you call the 6.9-acre parcel) that is somehow separate from the rest of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden and is developable. Both sentiments are inaccurate. First, *all* of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden is subject to conservation and preservation easements going back to 1996. *All* of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden has been entrusted to Natural Lands to act as its public steward. If Natural Lands accepts land for preservation, that land is preserved.

Second, the portion of the property that you mention (the 6.9 acres) is integral to the beauty and long-term success of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden. There are numerous heritage trees of considerable size and age, including the state champion ironwood. These trees are irreplaceable. The area provides a natural and essential backdrop to the viewscape across the historic (and Olmsted-designed) Meadow Vista. The meadow, which Natural Lands plans to expand, is also an important natural feature, providing habitat for pollinators and a variety of bird species. A District plan to develop this area for athletic fields, fences, stands, restroom facilities, parking, and lights would not only destroy the targeted portion but would also obliterate the vista that has been a focal point of the entire property for more than 100 years and cause harm to the habitat.

And, if you haven't visited the property, you may not appreciate that the portion of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden that you write about in your e-mail also provides a natural buffer for the interior, more-formal portions of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden. This gives the person experiencing Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden a feeling of being in the middle of a nature, even though he or she is in the middle of a very developed portion of suburban Philadelphia. More prosaically, this section of the property also serves as a collection and recharge point for drainage. A small part also provides space for operational functions that are typical and required for any park or land open to the public.

Taking consideration of all these facts, it becomes clear that an effort to take a *portion* of the parcel would work an irreparable injury to the long-term plan, use and support of the *whole* parcel. This land is a vital necessity to preserve the whole—a fact reflected in Natural Lands' planning and recognized and endorsed by the Township when it approved the entire lot.

Last, the District's statement about plans to acquire the "6.9 developable acres of Stoneleigh" for playing fields is not accurate. As we have previously informed the District, the development plans shared by District officials at its April 16, 2018 Board meeting depict a softball field, portions of a soccer field, and parking that encompass a part of the Olmsted-designed Meadow Vista and would



Natural  
Lands

Melissa R. Gilbert, Ph. D.  
Mr. Robert Copeland  
May 14, 2018  
Page 3

directly obstruct the middle of the view corridor, which has been in existence for more than 100 years.

The District's communication is false for another reason as well. The District is plainly not limiting its claim to the 6.9-acre portion of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden described in your e-mail. To the contrary, as you know, the District has taken preliminary steps to inspect the *entire* 41.7-acre property and all of its historic structures for condemnation. Thus, you are publicly stating one thing, but seeking to do something entirely different.

As you know, in 2016 the Estate of John C. Haas conveyed the parcel to Natural Lands. You may not know, however, that in addition to this gift from the Estate, Natural Lands has expended many millions of charitable dollars, and countless efforts by its staff and volunteers, to complete various improvements and upgrades to the land, infrastructure, and buildings of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden. The land and funds entrusted directly and indirectly to Natural Lands are forever committed to Natural Lands' stewardship of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden for this and future generations. Interference with those charitable gifts implicates not just a condemnation, but will cause the District to face additional potential claims as it frustrates these charitable gifts.

Further, separate and apart from any interference with other trusts, the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, interpreting Article I, Section 27 of the Pennsylvania Constitution places upon each and every District Board member a fiduciary duty to act as a trustee to "conserve and maintain" for the citizens of the Commonwealth, including, "generations yet to come," "a right to clean air, pure water, and to the preservation of the natural, scenic, historic and esthetic values of the environment." Taking Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden—or taking a part of it that is intrinsically tied to the continued health and viability of the whole—turns a blind eye toward the very obligation of environmental stewardship that the Pennsylvania Constitution has imposed upon you for the benefit of all Pennsylvanians and future generations.

To assist you and the Board with understanding exactly what is at stake—and what you are endangering for Lower Merion residents and all Pennsylvanians present and future—we would like to invite each of the District's Board members to a guided tour of Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden so that you can understand first hand its natural and national importance. If you are interested, please reach out to me directly to arrange this.



Natural  
Lands

Melissa R. Gilbert, Ph. D.  
Mr. Robert Copeland  
May 14, 2018  
Page 4

In conclusion, we note that the full name of the property is "Stoneleigh: A Natural Garden." Natural Lands intentionally chose "A Natural Garden" to emphasize its core mission to educate about and encourage broader use of native plants, which are essential to the health of the environment.

Sincerely,

Molly K. Morrison

cc:

The Lower Merion Conservancy, Incorporated  
The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia  
The Lower Merion Township Board of Commissioners  
Matthew N. McClure, Esquire  
Joanne Phillips, Esquire  
Matthew A. White, Esquire  
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Natural  
Lands

Melissa R. Gilbert, Ph. D.  
Mr. Robert Copeland  
May 14, 2018  
Page 5