

Subject: Urgent: please oppose the Mugar wetlands development

December 22, 2020

Conservation Commission  
Town of Arlington

Dear Conservation Commission,

*I speak for the trees.* So speaks the Lorax. Theodor Geisel, the Springfield native better known as Dr. Seuss, wrote *The Lorax* as an urgent call to arms against the destruction of nature and the rapacious pursuit of profit at the expense of the flora and fauna who make up our living world. What would the Lorax or Geisel have thought, I wonder, of the planned Mugar development on Dorothy Street, which will raze 17 acres of animal habitat?

It is no secret that we live in a society that enfranchises the very wealthy at the expense of the many. The Mugar, an immensely wealthy family with the political clout that such wealth effortlessly buys, feel that they should be able to accumulate more and more private wealth, more and more power and influence, with as few constraints as possible. Having already come to dominate our local landscape with their commercial developments, they now want to destroy hundreds more trees, and to kill or uproot hundreds more animals, for more wealth and power.

When I attended the Conservation Commission's hearing on the planned Mugar development two weeks ago, I listened with mounting frustration and anger as Mr. Hession of the BSC Group and attorney Stephanie Kiefer of Smolak & Vaughan belittled the Commission's environmental concerns about flooding and wetlands loss, effectively weaponizing the 40 B provision in order to bulldoze through widespread community concerns about this development. David Mugar meanwhile sat quietly in the background, his camera off, allowing his family's hired guns do his bidding--the unseen face of power.

I have lived in Arlington for 12 years, first on Thorndike Street and now on Varnum. As such, I'm familiar with the area that the Mugar family wants to obliterate. Foxes live there. Deer and turkeys live or have lived there. Cotton-tail rabbits live there. Field mice and squirrels and opossums live there. Black-capped chickadees and dark-eyed juncos and many other birds either live there or make use of the forested canopy year-round. Countless insects are living in hibernation there, awaiting spring. And for what urgent purpose, for what "higher good," must these conscious beings now be uprooted from their nests and burrows, or even killed outright under the bulldozer blades? For profit; so that the Mugar family can acquire even more capital, and thereby acquire even more land to ruin elsewhere.

Who, I wish to know, is truly protecting the animals of our town? Since moving to Arlington, I have seen relentless destruction of local animal habitat here as a result of development and climate change. Spring is arriving weeks earlier than it did in the mid-19th century; winters are now so mild that Spy Pond, which once provided ice to markets as far-flung as India, no longer freezes over. Light pollution is interfering with the ability of fireflies to communicate with one another during their mating season. Meanwhile, as global warming

increases storm activity, we see old growth trees bearing torn up and toppled by unusually high winds. On top of all this and more, we have homeowners and developers clearing more land and destroying more trees.

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau built and lived in a small cabin in Concord, in order that he might "front only the essential facts of life." Today, reading *Walden*, Thoreau's famous account of his sojourn, it is easy to come away with the impression of a biotic community in full flower, teeming with animal life. However, Thoreau himself felt otherwise. *Walden* was as much a requiem for nature and its denizens as a celebration of it. By the time Thoreau settled into his cabin, New England had been depopulated of most of its animal life, destroyed by massive deforestation, the killing of millions of animals for the fur trade, and exterminationist campaigns against reviled species like wolves. In a journal entry in March 1856, Thoreau laments that he has found the book of nature "mutilated," its pages "torn out":

I spend a considerable portion of my time observing the habits of the wild animals, my brute neighbors.....But when I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here--the cougar, panther, lynx, wolverine, wolf, bear, moose, deer, the beaver, the turkey, etc...I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tamed and, as it were, emasculated country....Is it not a maimed and imperfect nature that I am conversant with? As if I were to study a tribe of Indians that had lost all its warriors. Do not the forest and the meadow now lack expression...? When I think what were the various sounds and notes--the migrations and works and changes of fur and plumage which ushered in the spring and marked the other seasons of the year--I am reminded that this life in Nature...is lamentably incomplete. I listen to a concert in which so many parts are wanting.

In the years since Thoreau penned these words, dozens of other species have vanished. Others now rest precariously on the knife-edge of survival. Nonetheless, commercial developments like the Mugar one are still being greenlighted, rubber-stamped though pro forma "environmental assessments" designed to favor developers.

Surely Commission members are aware that we are living through the greatest mass extinction event in 65 million years. In the waters of the Antarctic and the mountains of Nepal, in the deserts of the Kalahari and under the canopies of the Costa Rican rainforest, on the African savannahs and in the fjords of Scandinavia, the animals are dying. Or rather, we are killing them.

Humans have destroyed two-thirds of all extant wild animals in just the last 40 years. The devastation is hitting with equal apocalyptic force across the phylogenetic spectrum--birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, others. Species at imminent risk of extinction include familiar ones like hammerheads, giraffes, tigers, polar bears, walruses, rhinos, chimpanzees, gorillas, elephants, Blue Fin tunas, Mantas, orcas, and jaguars, and less familiar ones such as the Arabian Oryx and Giant Ibis. Even the horseshoe crab, an ancient denizen whose forebearers populated the seas hundreds of millions of years before the emergence of the dinosaurs, is hurtling towards extinction. Most ominously, insects and other arthropods, comprising 97% of all animal life on earth, are suddenly disappearing. Their obliteration threatens to destabilize the entire terrestrial food web.

Not since an asteroid slammed into the Yucatan Peninsula to bring a sudden violent end to the Cretaceous period has animal life suffered a cataclysm of remotely similar proportions. There have been only five mass extinction events in the last half billion years, all believed to have been caused either by volcanism or meteor strikes. This is the first one to be caused by a life form--ours. What we euphemistically term the "extinction crisis" is in fact better described as a crisis of extermination. A growing number of scientists have in fact compared our extermination of animal life to "biological annihilation" and "genocide."

This is the apocalyptic context in which you have been asked to evaluate the planned Mugar development. It is useless to quibble about how much of the Mugar plot is "wetlands" and how much is "uplands." *All* of it is habitat. Where are the animals to go after being evicted by their Mugar landlords?

We live a topsy-turvy world in which the powerful live in comfort while the poor and vulnerable are made to suffer privation. Due to COVID, millions of Americans are now facing either home foreclosure or eviction; meanwhile, wealthy companies plot to build even more luxury condominiums for the wealthy, further driving up rents and property values, thereby in turn sowing the conditions of inequality and alienation that have fueled the rise of fascism across our land. The animals to be displaced by this wetlands development are the sisters and brothers of the working families being thrown out onto the street.

I plead with you: use every means at your discretion to preserve the ecological diversity of our town. We owe our nonhuman neighbors so much, yet we give them so little. They have just as much a right to live here as we do.

Sincerely,

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