



## Our Objections to the Kohl Condo Proposal for the North Street Neighborhood

*Come to the January 22 Hearings at the Conservation Commission and the Planning Board*

**Kohl Construction**, operating as Tofino Associates and Northern Avenue Homes, proposes to build 25 condo units plus roads in the woods, grassy areas, and wetlands buffer zone between North Street and the new bike trail in Northampton. Many large trees would get the axe. An existing century-old house at the end of View Avenue would be demolished. Within the wetlands lies Millyard Brook, a stream that flows nearly year-round. The North Street Neighborhood Association opposes this development for several reasons.

### Environmental Quality

Wetlands need adequate buffer zones to keep human disturbance and pollution out. Most local wetlands ordinances in Massachusetts specify no-disturb zones of at least 25-50 feet. Kohl, however, originally proposed to place grading, walls, yards, patios, and certain components of its stormwater management system as close as 12 feet to the wetland, plus a new road encroaching to within 35 feet. Despite Conservation Commission objections at a December 11 hearing, Kohl's latest proposal is not much different.

Studies find that buffers of less than 50 feet are generally ineffective in protecting wetlands. In one study in Washington state, no buffers of 25 feet or less were functioning to reduce disturbance to the adjacent wetland. For the past several decades, the Connecticut River has been getting more and more salty. Runoff from paved surfaces near wetlands and water bodies is a major culprit. Indeed, the Connecticut River Strategic Plan supports the removal of impervious surfaces within 50 feet of streams (Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, 2003).



*Kohl Construction proposes to take a big bite out of one of the last major stands of mature trees near downtown Northampton. The plan calls for 25 condo units like the ones above in a marshy area left largely (and wisely) unbuild since the establishment of the city.*

### Health and Safety

When you build housing close to a wetland, you risk exposing residents to water-related problems. An example is the possibility of mold and moisture intruding into residences via utility ducts, basement walls and cracked foundation slabs.

In Northampton, homes built near wetlands include several on Winslow, Nutting and Elm Streets. Former City Councilor Alex Ghiselin reports that water-related issues were "the knottiest, the most difficult problems that we dealt with... Once the houses are built there's really no good solution... The developers are long gone." One couple on Winslow spent over \$8,000 in 2007 to move water around their house. <sup>[1]</sup>

After Tropical Storm Floyd (1999), flood damage was reported at the end of View Avenue. This area is one of the more *elevated* portions of Kohl's property. We infer that much of the property may be at risk of flooding.

### Smart Growth vs. "Smart Growth"

Some claim that because Kohl's proposed condos are within walking distance of downtown and have a high density, they are a good example of Smart Growth. However, there's more to it than that, according to the Urban Land Institute (ULI).

True Smart Growth respects green infrastructure, such as trees and wetlands. These green spaces filter the air, reduce the urban heat island effect, enhance property values and moderate stormwater flows, and they do it inexpensively. Urban greenspace is associated with improved physical and mental health and greater social cohesion in neighborhoods.

True Smart Growth preserves a community's character, unlike development that "bears little relationship to a community's history, culture, or geography." ULI says homebuyers are increasingly attracted to vernacular and historical house styles that characterize their immediate area or region. Quoting Jim Constantine, a market specialist who does "curb appeal" surveys for developers, "Consumers are turned off by cookie-cutter subdivisions and the homogenous look of



*The woods behind North Street, October 2008. According to a recent Boston Globe article, urban greenspace is vital for mental health. "Studies have demonstrated, for instance, that hospital patients recover more quickly when they can see trees from their windows, and that women living in public housing are better able to focus when their apartment overlooks a grassy courtyard. Even these fleeting glimpses of nature improve brain performance, it seems, because they provide a mental break from the urban roil... Natural settings are full of objects that automatically capture our attention, yet without triggering a negative emotional response -- unlike, say, a backfiring car. The mental machinery that directs attention can relax deeply, replenishing itself..."*

houses." Unfortunately, that's exactly what Kohl Construction is offering the neighborhood.

Developers must not be allowed to cherry-pick aspects of Smart Growth that suit their profit goals and ignore the rest. If Northampton wants to reduce sprawl and attract residents to its already built-up areas, it must keep these areas safe and preserve the greenspace and visual appeal that grace its traditional neighborhoods. Learn more at [www.northassoc.org](http://www.northassoc.org).

Note 1: Alex Ghiselin, videorecorded testimony at Conservation Commission hearing on 12/11/08, <http://northassoc.org/2008/12/18/kohl-construction-conservation-commission-hearing-12-11-2008-video.aspx>

**Stand up for urban trees, safe housing, good design and clean water. Come to these Northampton public hearings tonight!**

#### Conservation Commission

Kohl is scheduled for **6:30pm**  
City Hall Hearing Room, 2nd floor, 210 Main Street, enter via back door

#### Planning Board

Kohl is scheduled for **8:00pm**  
City Council Chambers, 212 Main Street

