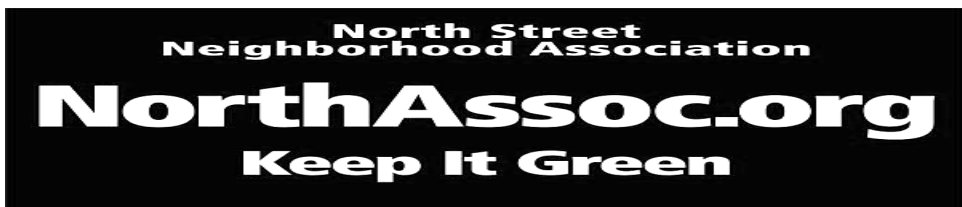


The woods behind North Street, Fall 2008

Preserving our urban trees is an important part of making the Sustainable Northampton Plan work. As Henry Arnold writes for Planning Commissioners Journal, "Our urban centers need to become more attractive to help counter the continuation of a sprawl pattern of development. If the appeal of low density, widely scattered development is derived from the need to be closer to nature, then making trees an integral part of the urban habitat will help make our town and city centers more desirable places to live and work." The Sustainable Sites Initiative adds, "Planting trees and plants strategically can combat urban heat island effects and reduce energy consumption by lowering air temperatures by 5° F [2.8° C] or more... Shared green spaces, particularly those with trees, provide settings for people to interact and strengthen social ties."

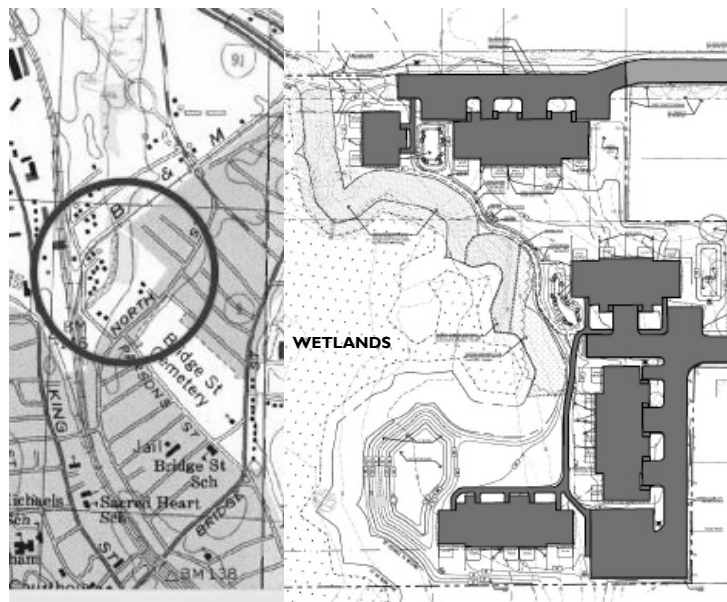


# Public Hearings

on the

# North Street Condo Proposal

**Kohl Construction**, operating as Tofino Associates and Northern Avenue Homes, proposes to build 23 condo units plus roads in the woods and grassy areas around View Avenue off North Street. Much of the site is within 100 feet of the wetlands bordering Millyard Brook. Many large trees would get the axe. The North Street Neighborhood Association opposes this development for its poor design, risk of flooding, loss of trees, threat to the wetlands, and its awkward, crowded layout. When so much paved land and several vacant buildings go begging for development in the North Street-King Street area, eating into our remaining trees and wetlands buffers is not what urban infill should be about. See inside to learn more, or visit [www.northassoc.org](http://www.northassoc.org).



*Kohl Construction proposes to place 23 condo units (1.04 acres of impervious surface) on swampy land that currently contains a single house. Past landowners wisely left most of this site unbuilt.*

**Stand Up for Our Trees,  
Wetlands, and Quality of Life**

- Attend one or both of the Kohl condo hearings on Thursday, May 14:
  - 5:30pm**—Conservation Commission, City Hall Hearing Room, 2nd floor, 210 Main Street, enter via back door
  - 7:00pm**—Planning Board, City Council Chambers, 212 Main Street
- Can't attend the hearings? Send us a letter to present to the Conservation Commission and Planning Board: North Street Neighborhood Association, P.O. Box 796, Northampton, MA 01061, [info@northassoc.org](mailto:info@northassoc.org)
- Request a free yard sign from [info@northassoc.org](mailto:info@northassoc.org)
- Join our email bulletin list with a request to [info@northassoc.org](mailto:info@northassoc.org) (1-2 bulletins per month)

**COME TO THE MAY 14  
HEARINGS**

**Conservation Commission, 5:30pm**  
City Hall Hearing Room, 2nd floor, 210 Main Street, enter via back door

**Planning Board, 7:00pm**  
City Council Chambers, 212 Main Street

North Street  
Neighborhood Association

# NorthAssoc.org

Keep It Green

**Kohl Construction proposes** to build 23 condo units in the woods and grassy areas around North Street and View Avenue—the 21 units shown here plus two at the end of Northern Avenue.

Kohl's attorney Michael Pill claims that this project deserves deference because it's "infill"—the homes would be within walking distance of downtown. While that's technically correct, there's more to Smart Growth than that.

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. The large loss of trees would contradict goals of the Sustainable Northampton Plan, which calls for an increase in tree canopy in urbanized areas like ours.

True Smart Growth preserves a community's character. Jim Constantine, a market specialist who does "curb appeal" surveys for developers, tells the Urban Land Institute, "Consumers are turned off by cookie-cutter subdivisions and the homogenous look of houses." Unfortunately, as you can see below, that's exactly what Kohl Construction is offering the neighborhood.

The North Street woods border a wetland, at the heart of which is Millyard Brook. Scientific studies suggest that wetlands buffers of less than 50 feet are generally ineffective at

protecting wetlands, but Kohl proposes to encroach to within 35 feet. Indeed, the proposed intensity of development near the wetland helped cause the Conservation Commission to deadlock on an earlier version of Kohl's proposal at its March 12 hearing. Commissioner Downey Meyer said,

"...this is the wetland that the people living in this part of the city have. It's their wetland. It might not look as beautiful as a pristine brook out in Mineral Hills that someone may have behind their house up there. But it is the wetlands that these people have...and I don't think I can say that because it's ugly now, because it has been abused, that let's just keep on...impacting it..."

Despite these and other objections, Kohl has made only minimal changes for the current proposal. No condo units have been dropped. In one important respect, the current proposal is even worse than the earlier ones. The loop road around the condos has been broken into two cul-de-sacs.

Now, even though the Sustainable Northampton Plan disfavors cul-de-sacs, not all cul-de-sacs are bad. Northern Avenue is a good example of a healthy one. It's straight, well-connected to North Street, has clean sight lines that permit good visibility between the homes, and access to the rear of homes is restricted.

Contrast this with the cul-de-sacs in Kohl's latest condo proposal. The ac-

cess roads would be crooked and the space visually broken up, with most units isolated from



North Street. Footpaths at the back of the property would provide secluded access to the units. Studies suggest these are likely to be appealing features to criminals.

Even setting aside the security issues, the current layout reinforces the disconnection and disharmony of this project with respect to the surrounding neighborhood. It is hard to imagine that neighbors would feel comfortable walking around the dead-end access roads and paths of the development. Instead of public ways, these would feel like private spaces. This social disconnection, along with the traffic inefficiency, is why the Sustainable Northampton Plan and other Smart Growth proponents tend to oppose cul-de-sacs.

Because groundwater is high on the site (just 14"-16" below the surface in

places), Kohl proposes to use slab-on-grade foundations. The durability and longevity of these structures is a concern, not to mention their energy efficiency—all Sustainable Northampton values.

For example, Bruce Maki, editor of HammerZone.com, has issued this "Quasi-Rant" on the matter of "Crawl Space vs. Slab Foundation":

"...Quite frankly, you couldn't give me a house built on a slab foundation. With no easy access to any of the 'environmental systems' (electrical, plumbing, HVAC) maintaining these structures is a nuisance at best, and a nightmare at worst..."

"Builders will say that slab foundations are cheaper... I don't buy into that argument. It only saves money up front, and almost certainly adds costs later, costs in maintenance and repair..."

"Another issue that nobody talks about is structural longevity... Around here most houses are plenty high off the ground, but many garages and sheds are built low. And I've seen many of these buildings get structural damage, typically rot but also termite infestations, from rain dripping off the roof, onto the ground, and splashing onto the building... I have absolutely no confidence in the long-term structural integrity of slab-foundation houses."

Wikipedia notes that slab foundations are less common in cold climates:

"Slab-on-grade foundations

are...most often seen in warmer climates, where ground freezing and thawing is less of a concern and where there is no need for heat ducting underneath the floor..."

"The disadvantages are the lack of access from below for utility lines, the potential for large heat losses where ground temperatures fall significantly below the interior temperature, and a very low elevation that may expose the building to flood damage in even moderate rains."

Adding to flooding concerns, the end of View Avenue—at a relatively high point on Kohl's land—reported flood damage from Tropical Storm Floyd in 1999. It's also still an open question whether some of the condos would be built on filled wetlands, which is disfavored by Northampton's 2004 Flood and Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan:

"Historically filled wetlands are commonly related to problems with wet basements, flooding, shifting foundations and failed septic systems. Development in historically filled wetlands should be discouraged through zoning in order to protect health and safety."

At the March 12 hearing, Conservation Commissioner Paul Wetzel was so concerned about the watery ground that he recommended eliminating the 10 units at the southern end of the proposal.

Should infill mean bad design, flooding risk and wholesale tree loss for our neighborhood? That's the question before the Conservation Commission and the Planning Board on May 14. Please join us to let them know our safety and quality of life matters just as much as a developer's profits.

