

# Open Space As Permanent 12/14 Memorial Site Sparks Concern

January 7, 2016



**Kendra Bobowick**

“Developing [open space] land when other properties are available is wrong,” Ann Astarita wrote in a recent email to the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission. The statement followed a formal letter the Newtown resident and others submitted to the Conservation Commission in December regarding the High Meadow in Fairfield Hills as a possible location for a permanent memorial honoring those killed on 12/14.

The commission approved the location on December 14. The Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission (SHPMC) has narrowed its search for a memorial location to the High Meadow at Fairfield Hills.

“No one disputes that the SHPMC has a valid and important mandate. However, once developed, open space is lost forever,” Ms Astarita writes in her letter. “No other Newtown open space properties are as loved, used, and highly rated” as High Meadow, she added. Her signature accompanies those of other conservation-minded residents including former Conservation Commission members Joe Hovious, Marjorie Cramer, Mary Gaudet-Wilson, and Garden Club of Newtown President Holly Kocet. The residents, in the letter, asked the commission to consider several points before making a “precedent-setting” decision.

Approval or denial would be premature since the project has not yet been defined, and the project could not be evaluated, the letter states.

SHPMC has not yet settled on the design or scope of the memorial project.

The formal letter had noted that “After public support, hundreds of hours of work, meetings, surveys, and discussions including Fairfield Hills Ad Hoc Committees, Planning and Zoning Commissions, the Conservation Commission and others, the High Meadow was declared ‘Dedicated Open Space.’” The letter also indicates the declaration establishing the meadow as open space with a purpose of ensuring its protection from activities, notwithstanding “normal passive recreation purposes.”

“Creation of a driveway and parking lot and yet-to-be-defined structure is inconsistent with the declaration,” the letter states.

This week Ms Astarita, via email, raised additional concerns including why legally protected open space is even being considered for development, and whether the public, residents and taxpayers think it’s a good idea. She also indicated a state statute that requires municipalities to provide comparable replacement land if open space is developed. She asked also if town land use officials or the first selectman were aware of this statute.

Ms Astarita also noted the conflicting feelings between a “deep sympathy for 12/14 victims’ families, the need for our community to memorialize this tragic event, and our desire to keep the land as it was intended, open space for all Newtown residents and the wildlife making it home.”

In a phone interview, Ms Astarita asked if people were “on board with open space.”

“If it was not this project, would we even be thinking about open space? What precedent are we setting?” she said. “Here in Newtown we are land rich and we have so many spaces that could be appropriate.”

The High Meadow has “so many protections,” and so much work has been done to protect the land, she said.

Admitting her own conflicted thoughts, Ms Astarita said she and others “are heartbroken. Who does not want to see memorial for [the 12/14 families]?”

### **Conservation Concerns**

The Conservation Commission voted last month to approve the High Meadow location with the motion, “The Town of Newtown Conservation Commission, acting in its capacity as stewards of open space resources, supports in principle, the Memorial Commission’s use of lands adjacent to and within an area referred to as the ‘High Meadow,’ providing appropriate sensitivity to the important ecological value of this area be taken into consideration during design and development of a permanent memorial.”

William A. Darrin, Jr was the commission chair during that meeting. His term ended at the conclusion of the month.

“I think, at the time we were in support of a Sandy Hook Memorial, and we knew [SHPMC] had looked at many other options and they had narrowed to the meadow in Fairfield Hills,” he said this week. Commissioners were “less enthused about that site, and some commissioners are concerned that any form of memorial would be disturbing the meadow,” he added.

“Others are less concerned about that and are supportive of a memorial, even if it goes at open space, as long as the commission has a connection to decisions producing the memorial,” said Mr Darrin, who said he also believes the commission “has its priorities straight and will do what they feel is absolutely right for Newtown.”

### **Arriving At High Meadow**

The permanent memorial “will not be a massive building,” said SHPMC Chairman Kyle Lyddy. “We are looking to build something within that landscape and work with conservation to make sure it fits the meadow and makes enhancements.

“We need help understanding how to preserve the meadow and have the memorial fit into the landscape. We think that both can be accomplished,” he added.

The permanent memorial commission does not yet know what the final memorial will look like. The commission has held “many conversations on this topic although through our discussions, we made a decision that the location needed to be set prior to asking someone to create a design,” Mr Lyddy explained. “We didn’t want to just force fit a design into a location. We stand by that decision.” He feels it’s the right choice, “as we also asked design and landscape architects to assist us with that decision.”

Arriving at High Meadow as the preferred memorial site was a process started two years ago, when the commission began, Mr Lyddy said.

Criteria for a suitable site was established through outreach points. His commission asked for input from the families, school staff, and parents of students enrolled and in Sandy Hook Elementary School on 12.14, among others.

“We wanted parents/teachers and first responders, all of them,” said Mr Lyddy. The SHPMC sent out surveys, held forums, and more as it created criteria based on those responses.

They sought a location that was a destination in the community, something with views not closely aligned with sirens, a tranquil location, and something with infrastructure.

The commission also worked with town officials to understand what land we could potentially use as a site. Land Use Deputy Director Rob Sibley provided the commission with about 30 locations “and we worked through them,” Mr Lyddy said.

After cutting down the list, the commission was left with eight possible locations.

“We encouraged our commissioners to walk those locations and there were many trips taken with Mr Sibley. We wanted to be at the locations and understand them, then we cut it to three.” The final locations were the former garage and service station at 7 Glen Road, Deep Brook, and High Meadow.

“We encouraged the 26 families to [make site visits],” he said. “We made sure 26 families had a chance to walk the top three sites and we have had no opposition from any of the 26” in the SHPMC’s bid for the High Meadow, Mr Lyddy said..

The group’s work and permanent memorial recommendation will be sent to the Board of Selectmen.

After choosing the meadow site, Mr Lyddy attended a December 21 Board of Selectmen meeting and “was looking for a nod that I was going in the right direction,” he said. From that meeting he did “receive the idea that I should continue on this path.”

He hopes to create a liaison with the Conservation Commission “to make sure they’re involved in the process, and be sure there is a voice from conservation to collaborate. We want to do this without a struggle.”

Mr Lyddy understands any conflicting views with open space proponents or past Conservation Commissioners.

“Their charge is to preserve open space and ours is to honor the families,” he said.