

We Must Protect the Miracle of Webster Woods

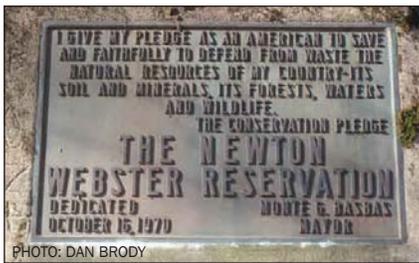
By Ken Kimmell

(Ken is a former official in Governor Patrick's Administration and now heads a national science-based advocacy group.)

Thirteen years ago, my family and I moved to Newton Centre not far from the Webster Conservation land. I can't quite describe what it was like to wake up that first morning, amid boxes and packing crates, and realize that I could walk down the block and step into woods that reminded me of rural New Hampshire—except to say that I felt both astonishment and gratitude. Two blocks in the other direction brought me to the doors of Peet's Coffee. I heard coyotes howl at night as I heard the trolley rumble back and forth on its way to Copley or Riverside. Hawks circled over my backyard as I watched a blimp float toward Fenway Park.

How could it be possible, I wondered, to live in the city and live near the woods? What sort of miracle *was* this?

As I was to discover, it was the same sort of miracle that has given Newton a swimming lake, with a bathhouse and a playground, in the middle of town. In mid-summer, swimmers wave at commuters from the middle of Crystal Lake, floating on their backs while businesspeople riding on the T gaze wistfully from the windows. It was the same sort of miracle that brings children into the villages every Halloween to paint goblins and witches on shop windows and that allows skaters to circle a cove in Auburndale as soon as the river freezes and then change back into their shoes in a warming hut. We are a city of people who value getting outside; we value the environment as part of our daily lives instead of as an abstraction; we value seeing each other. We don't simply live in our houses; we live in Newton.



That first morning, as I walked along the little creek that meanders through woods, I understood my immense good fortune to live in this surprising and lovely city. And I vowed I would do everything possible to make sure everyone else in Newton would always be able to have the experience I was having: walking in the woods in the morning, listening to the birds, watching people stroll by with their dogs on the trails, smelling the leaves and hearing them rustle in the breeze.

That was thirteen years ago; I am as intensely grateful today as I was then. But I am also aware that my vow has now come due. With its pending purchase of property owned



A Walk in Webster Woods

by the Mishkan Tefila temple on Hammond Pond Parkway, Boston College soon will own a large wedge of land that bisects the Webster Woods. Without swift action from the city to acquire the undeveloped section of that property, what is now a swath of forestland could turn into pockets of trees. Boston College has not divulged its plans for the property, which does not bode well for Newton residents. I was an environmental lawyer for almost twenty years before I spent seven years in state government, first as General Counsel for the Secretary of the Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and then as the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection. I have seen a heartbreaking number of cases where wooded land that once seemed protected, and that local residents cherished, turned into shopping malls, residential complexes, and high-rise institutional buildings.

We are an old city. We don't have many large undeveloped parcels left. Certainly we don't have many places where we can take a walk and feel far away from the noise, traffic and tensions of urban life—while still being right at home. The chance to spend time in a large and contiguous stand of the woods grows more precious every day. Amid the trees of Webster, the stick forts, the birds, the dog walkers, the cross-country skiers in the winter and the lady slippers in springtime, I see people laughing and talking to each other, children climbing on rocks, elderly couples admiring the changing fall leaves. And here is something I *rarely* see: people staring at their cell phones.

We are a city that deeply loves its marvelous, unusual, fragile natural beauty. We owe it to ourselves and our children and all future residents, to protect what has, almost miraculously, been provided for us. ■