The North 40 – a precious resource for Wellesley

(as published, October 2, 2014 in the Wellesley Townsman)

As Wellesley College began to prepare for the 2025 sesquicentennial of its first classes, the College leadership asked five distinct working groups—representing all academic disciplines as well as residential life, student wellness and athletics—to reimagine the ways in which the College’s campus and facilities could best support its mission in the decades ahead.

Our College community dreamed big, and in addition to considering the 62% of our buildings that have not been renovated in more than 50 years, it outlined a bold plan of programmatic goals and aspirations. The plan addresses issues of health, safety, accessibility and updates to basic building systems and infrastructure; it re-envisioned our residence halls to better use the space available, and it responds to our near doubling in the number of science majors since the construction of the science building in the mid-1970’s. The cost of the original vision was estimated at $1.38 billion—far beyond our capacity, even given the generosity of our donors. We narrowed and refined our plans to create the Campus Renewal Plan, which the Trustees of Wellesley College approved in April 2013. With a budget in excess of $365 million, this plan still is highly ambitious.

Wellesley College has a history of investing in women and the Trustees committed to significant borrowing, philanthropy, operating cost reductions, and new revenues to pay for this major initiative. While proceeds from the sale or long-term lease of a small portion of our real estate assets are an essential part of funding this plan, the College’s decision to explore this source of funds was not made lightly. In 2009, the Real Estate Task Force of the Trustees began a deliberate process of identifying the College's real estate assets that are core to its mission—such as the main campus between routes 16 and 135, and that which borders Lake Waban—and those which might be considered peripheral to the College’s mission. They recognized that the College, since the time of Mr. Durant’s land grants, has acquired an additional 180 acres of well-situated land—mostly around Lake Waban and directly across from the College on Route 16. The College concluded that it has more space than most peer institutions, does not intend to increase the size of the student body, and if required, its core campus could easily support additional density.

As part of its process, the Task Force evaluated the sale or lease of the North 40, which the College has discussed for many years. A large portion of the North 40, along with the majority of the main campus and part of the Nehoiden golf course, were granted to the College in 1873 by Henry Durant subject to an indenture that prohibited the sale or long-term lease of the land. Due to barriers created by Route 135, the railroad, and the aqueduct that separate the property from our core campus, finding an academic use has been very difficult. Over the decades, the core campus has always proven more feasible than the North 40. On May 2, 2014, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court authorized the sale/lease of the North 40, stating “that adherence to the
terms of the Durant Indenture with respect to the North Forty would defeat or substantially impair the accomplishment of the purpose of the trust…”

We recognize that the North 40 is a precious resource for not only the College’s future, but also for our neighbors, the citizens of the Town of Wellesley. We are convinced that we can find a higher and better use for the property that satisfies both the needs of the College and the Town, particularly in regard to open space. The ultimate use of the parcel is of great importance to the College and we will remain one of its most intimate—and vigilant—neighbors.

While the trustees have an obligation to best use and employ all College assets to support the College’s academic mission, we have actively pursued proposals from conservancy agencies and have made it a priority to identify responsible bidders who are sensitive to community needs and concerns. For six months, we have also worked closely with Town officials to support their exploration of acquiring the property for the Town.

The College has valued its close relationship with the Town of Wellesley for more than a century. We are engaged in an open and transparent process about the use of the North 40, and have provided our neighbors with updates, held community meetings, and have had regular conversations since last March with Town officials. More information is available on our website: www.wellesley.edu/administration/realestate. We look forward to continuing this open communication and invite and encourage all residents of Wellesley to take part.

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