



Town Councilors
Town of Barnstable
PO Box 1494
Marstons Mills, MA 02648

March 20, 2017

To the Town Council:

On behalf of the Barnstable Land Trust, I am writing to ask you to **oppose the zoning amendment that would allow the installation of ground-mounted solar panels on the Cotuit Fire District's Water Department property** when the vote comes up at the March 23rd Council meeting.

The Barnstable Land Trust (BLT) is a 34-year-old community-based non-profit whose mission is to ensure that Barnstable's land, water, natural resources and character are sustained and valued for future generations. We are supported by over 800 dues-paying members from throughout the seven villages of Barnstable.

Our organization has a long and productive history of working with the Town of Barnstable. The same is true of the water departments, including a recent successful partnership with the Cotuit Water Department to preserve 19 acres around Lowell Park, adjacent to the property proposed for the solar installation.

BLT opposes this solar installation because it will put at risk the very mission of the Water Department – to provide clean drinking water to the residents and businesses of Cotuit. It also puts at risk critical natural habitat designated by the Commonwealth.

Water Quality at Risk

BLT protects land for many reasons; protecting water is one of the most important. There is only one reason water departments own land and that is to safeguard and deliver clean water. The Cotuit Water Department properties were acquired and protected to do just this. Since the 1980's, the Department has invested significant resources to protect the water supply in Cotuit and along the Little River. The community, including BLT, has also invested significant resources for the same purpose, because conserving forested lands is the best way to protect the water supply. Clear-cutting 30 acres, as proposed by Borrego Solar Systems, invites siltation, increased runoff, and pollution of a water supply that has been degraded over the years by gas spills and, recently, fecal coliform. It will exacerbate the existing drinking water and coastal water problems the town and department are currently working hard to address.

Forested landscapes prevent pollution by impeding fertilizer and other run-off into groundwater and fragile waterways, and forest vegetation and soils are effective at removing nitrogen. Barnstable and the Cape Cod community overall are already struggling to meet drinking water and coastal water standards.

Clear-cutting a wide swath of forested land, already set aside for the purpose of protecting clean water, will make this job harder.

Natural Habitat at Risk

Cotuit has the wonderful distinction of being home to State-designated Core Habitats. Such habitats are considered the most important to protect because they are intact, ecologically resistant and resilient ecosystems that provide habitat for rare and vulnerable native plants and wildlife. They are very important to maintaining the biodiversity of Massachusetts. The 400-acre forest including Eagle Pond (owned by BLT) and the Cotuit Water Department wellfield, is one such core habitat. The wellfield is habitat for the New England Cottontail, and thus targeted by the Massachusetts Division of Fish and Wildlife for protection in order to prevent the New England Cottontail from becoming an endangered species. The wellfields are also home to American beech and American holly, which are indicators of an emerging native climax forest—considered a “Critical Woodland Community” by the Association to Preserve Cape Cod (APCC, *Critical Habitats Atlas*, 1990).

The Massachusetts Department of Energy Resources’ 2015 solar energy guide “strongly discourages designating locations that require significant tree cutting because of the important water management, cooling and climate benefits trees provide. DOER encourages designating locations in industrial and commercial districts, or on vacant, disturbed land.”¹

Solar energy production has many benefits. It is a very appropriate decision in already cleared areas (landfills, airport, etc.). The heavily-forested Cotuit Water Department property is not an appropriate location. Current zoning does not allow this and that should not be changed.

Looking Ahead

In order to avoid such conflicts in the future, the Barnstable Land Trust encourages owners of all community lands held for water protection and other conservation goals (habitat protection, passive recreation) to protect such land by conservation restriction. We support the permanent protection of all Water Department lands. This is a simple and inexpensive way to protect our water supply and critical natural habitat in perpetuity.

We will be present at the Town Council meeting on Thursday. In the meantime, please contact me with any comments or questions. Thank you for consideration of our request.

Best regards,



Janet Milkman
Executive Director

cc: Town Council
Town Manager
Planning Board
Cotuit Water Department

¹ *Clean Energy Results: Questions and Answers, Ground-Mounted Solar Photovoltaic Systems*, Massachusetts Dept. of Environmental Protection et al, June 2015.