

Comments on the Draft Scope for the proposed Rapp Road Residential Development

1 message

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Town of Guilderland Planning Board
Guilderland Town Hall
P.O. Box 339
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Contact: Kenneth Kovalchik
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Re: Draft Scope for the proposed Rapp Road Residential Development and Additional Lands in the Town of Guilderland, Albany County, New York

Sent via email and hand delivered

Dear Town of Guilderland Planning Board

I am a graduate of the Environmental Studies program of the University at Albany and have been a student of and advocate for environmental sustainability for the last five decades. I am a board member of Save the Pine Bush, and a long-time supporter of the Pine Bush ecosystem and the Albany Pine Bush Preserve. I first became aware of the Pine Bush on my initial day in Albany in August of 1971, and began studying it my first semester at the University Albany that fall.

The most striking aspect of this Rapp Road proposal by Crossgates is the perpetuation of environmentally toxic, unsustainable growth in the midst of the climate crisis/ catastrophe that we are now in. This proposal would be an extension of car culture at a time when we now realize this road is leading us over a precipice to disaster. Forty or fifty years ago this type of proposal would have been considered foolish by urban planners and environmentalists, but now after what we have witnessed over the intervening decades it is considered extreme folly.

In cities it is quite difficult to find parking spots and because of the proximity of numerous transit options residents often choose not to own a car or to use one only on rare occasions. The scope should study where these units can be located so that no parking spots are needed or perhaps only a minimal number, which would be comparable to urban levels.

In these comments I will raise what I can see as the most obvious potentially significant environmental impacts that would occur if this proposal is approved and built, but initially I want to write about some of the most damaging and destructive aspects of the climate crisis that we are now witnessing and perpetuating by projects like this. The most devastating global problems have local components and connections. We are causing these problems here and promoting them worldwide by our actions and decisions.

Global annual mean CO2 concentration has increased by more than 45% since the start of the Industrial Revolution from 280 ppm during the 10,000 years up to the mid-18th century to 415 ppm as of May 2019. The present concentration is the highest for 14 million years. These high levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are creating environmental havoc. The scope should calculate what will be the carbon footprint of the project during construction and especially when completed and occupied. The scope should address how this proposed project can be made carbon neutral during the construction phase and when (if) it is fully occupied.

This July was the hottest month ever recorded to have occurred on this planet. According to new reports, **the last five years**—from 2014 to 2018—**are the warmest years ever recorded** in the 139 **years** that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has tracked global heat. The scope should examine how this proposed development could be heated and cooled and supplied with electricity without having to use fossil fuels or nuclear energy.

The some of the highest winds and most violent hurricanes have occurred in the last two years: Dorian, Michael, Maria, and Irma. One hundred year floods are happening every ten years.

NASA has estimated that the **polar ice caps** are **melting** 9% every ten years, which is an extremely alarming rate. If the temperature on earth continues to rise at its current rate the **Arctic** will have no **ice** by 2040. The **Arctic ice cap** has decreased since the 1960s by as much as 40%.

2017 was an intense, and in many cases record-breaking, wildfire season – especially on the west coast of North America. Despite predictions that that season would be relatively mild due to ample rain and snow from the previous winter, excessive heat combined with dry vegetation and strong winds created conditions for fires to start and spread more easily. British Columbia lost over 2.86 million (yes million!) acres to deforestation from wildfires that year, while totals are at over 1 million acres for California in the U.S., with another 1-2 million combined in Oregon, Washington, Montana, and surrounding states. This type of disaster has not occurred in New York State in over 100 years, but it is becoming more likely as temperatures and wind speeds rise. The scope should identify where 222 units can be located that are not in or near a fire adapted ecosystem.

Environmentally exacerbated diseases and plagues are occurring. Because of quick travel to almost any part of the world, we can easily be exposed to diseases that we would not normally encounter locally. It is myopic to think that we can separate ourselves from these problems. Diseases that we thought we eliminated or haven't seen in over a century are making comebacks. Diseases that were once rare or not found locally have become common: lyme disease, anaplasmosis, and other tick borne diseases.

I love being out in nature and participating in outdoor sports and activities, but I've had to drastically change my behaviors because of the recent prevalence of ticks and tick borne diseases. When I was a boy and even a young man, deer ticks and tick borne diseases were totally unheard of in the Northeast. I used to lay on the ground, walk barefoot all summer, sleep outdoors and garden without ever encountering one tick... EVER! That was normal until about 30 or 35 years ago. Since then, even with being cautious and seriously limiting my exposure, I've been bitten by deer ticks numerous times, nearly every year.

It is likely that if this development is constructed and inhabited, many of the residents will be bitten by ticks and infected with one or more tick borne diseases just by casually enjoying their neighborhood. The scope should identify the prevalence of infected ticks in the Rapp Road area, which tick borne diseases exist

here, and how ticks and the diseases they carry can be avoided or minimized using pesticides or herbicides.

Disease, worry, and anxiety that we never had to consider are now part of our every day lives. They diminish the quality of lives and our ability to enjoy the outdoors because of the real fear of these now common diseases. They cause a separation from nature which is growing all the time and becoming worse with each generation. There is a loss of connectedness with nature and empathy for other beings and the life sustaining environments of the Earth. This is a deadly mindset for people to adopt. The scope should examine where 222 units can be built so that residents need not worry about ticks and tick borne diseases. I would suggest areas that are already developed, that have sidewalks, in locations where deer are not residents or common visitors.

We continue consuming resources and creating garbage as if there were no consequences to our actions, as the Rapp Road landfill, already the highest point in the City of Albany becomes larger each day with no waste solutions in sight. The landfill, which is highly visible admission of our failures as a consumer culture continues to grow and foul the Pine Bush Aquifer below it and foul the air as it vents methane and other noxious fumes.

For most items, recycling is not a viable option since China stopped importing our recyclables. This area does not have a sustainable plan to deal with garbage, recycling, or composting. The scope should identify what the likely garbage footprint of this proposal will be, and identify ways to minimize it. It should examine how residents will be able to compost their food scrapes and other organic materials.

What we have learned from decades of building in inappropriate locations is that this type of development can be successful in the short term but runs high risks of catastrophe in the long term. We know that we should no longer continue building on barrier islands, extreme slopes, flood plains, and fire adapted ecosystems. Eventually the sword of Damocles which is hanging over our heads will fall. We are going to see more extreme weather: cold, hot, wet, and dry. One year we will have a cool and wet summer season, the next could be hot and dry with a sustained drought. If this is followed by high winds and a careless spark, wildfires in the Pine Bush could result as we commonly now see in the West. Besides identifying locations for this project that are not in a fire adapted ecosystem, the scope should identify how residents will be evacuated and where they will stay if wildfires threaten this area.

Ecosystems are more sustainable when they are contiguous, and extensive, with fewer edges and intrusions. They are easier to manage and perpetuate with less active management. The Pine Bush Preserve is still very fragmented. The inclusion of these 19.68 acres, and the 15 acres from Site 2, and the 11.34 acres from Site 3 would all help to fill out the Preserve and make it more sustainable. Demands of money and staffing become less when preserves are properly configured. All of these parcels should be added to the preserve to make it more viable. The scope should examine how the desired acreage for the Preserve can be achieved if these parcels are not included.

The long term sustainability of the Crossgates Butterfly Hill and the migration of Karner blue butterflies will become more tenuous if the habitat on this 20 acre parcel is destroyed, and thousands of daily car trips are added to Rapp Road. Karner blue butterflies are low and slow fliers and it is likely that their migrations will be impeded or stopped by the increase in fatalities from car traffic. The scope should examine the likely extent of Karner blue butterfly fatalities from this, any how they can be avoided.

Although the Karner blue butterfly is the star of the Pine Bush, there are other butterflies and moths that need protection. This is also true of the eastern worm snake and the eastern hog-nosed snake and many other species. A healthy ecosystem will foster the survival of all pine barrens species especially the ones that are most at risk: the rare, threatened and endangered species. The scope should include an inventory of plants, animals, fungi, an other life forms on this site (these sites), both residents and migrants, and how those that have a protected status can be protected rather than obliterated.

If these 222 units are constructed they will compete with housing units that already exist in appropriate development areas like downtown Albany. The scope should determine the extent of this competition. Is there a need for 222 housing units on Rapp Road? The scope should examine this question. The population of the Capital District has been fairly stable. There have been shifts in population to the inner ring suburbs and outer ring suburbs and now back to the cities. If completed will this development hurt efforts to repopulate our cities? The scope should look at this.

This proposal would be a perpetuation of car culture at the expense of mass transit, walking and bikes. It is expensive to build, maintain, and operate individual cars for everyone, not just from a financial standpoint but also in terms of resource consumption and pollution. Even recycling used cars is costly financially and environmentally. Why are we constructing our society in ways that are dysfunctional and destructive to nature and the human psyche? Why are we building a world in which you have to own and operate your own car in order to be a functioning member of society? In downtowns people often walk, bike, or take buses because there are a multitude of venues that are easily available using these forms of transportation. The scope should examine where 222 units could be better located so that non-car methods of transportation would be viable, and if this site is chosen, how these non-car methods could be made viable.

There are health costs of living where driving is the most likely option for transportation. The reliance on the automobile has contributed to numerous health crises: obesity, heart disease and cancer are the most obvious, but stress from driving is a factor in these and other common diseases. The scope should examine what the likely morbidity and mortality rates from these diseases would be for residents who adopt a car dependent lifestyle compared to those who travel by more healthy methods.

Psychological problems can be induced by environmental conditions. Separation from others with everyone in their own car is a cause of isolation and depression. Rational and empathetic people often change when they get behind the wheel of a car. The experience of driving pits drivers against each other. It becomes easy to dehumanize other drivers. Road rage is only the most obvious pathology associated with driving. The scope should examine what the hidden costs of thousands of additional car trips per day will be. How many more people will be injured or killed? How many more accidents will occur? What will be the added costs to the average driver?

Hard, dense surfaces and more parking lots and paved areas create temperature extremes more readily than vegetation and soil. There is more heating (and cooling). Runoff is contributing factor to soil and water pollution and to flooding. The scope should examine how heating, water and soil pollution, and runoff can be avoided during construction and throughout the lifespan of this proposed development.

The Rapp Road Historic District would be dramatically affected by increased traffic with the accompanying air, noise and light pollution from vehicles. These forms of pollution would affect the historic integrity and aesthetics of the Historic District and diminish the quality of life for the residents. The large increase in traffic would be a major safety hazard for drivers and pedestrians. Residents now have trouble pulling out of and into their driveways. Since there are no sidewalks, pedestrians usually walk in the street. This would increase their risk of injury and death. There isn't enough room to expand the roadway or to add sidewalks to this narrow road and doing so would detract from the historic qualities of the district. The scope should examine how any additional traffic above current levels can be avoided, and how the quality of life of those who live here and their safety can be enhanced rather than diminished.

People move out of the city to escape traffic, noise, light pollution, air pollution and other negative environmental qualities, but often they find that these problems follow them to their suburban locations. Some believe the answer is to move further out, which compounds the problems rather than solving them. The scope should examine how these negative environmental qualities can be lessened rather than increased, so that current residents will not be tempted to move further out and consume more green fields that we need to keep green.

Building on natural areas even if they are not valuable and rare ecosystems like the Pine Bush is a wasteful and destructive practice and should be stopped. Nature will survive without us, but we need nature to survive. Already developed areas, brownfields, and parking lots are more suitable locations for proposals like this. The scope should identify where alternative areas like those mentioned above exist nearby where these units could be constructed.

If the applicant is dead set on building housing, why not do a project everyone can support? Why not rehab 222 units in areas that need rehab, like Clinton Avenue in Arbor Hill or the South End of Albany and/or build compatible mixed use infill on vacant lots in these areas? These areas are in the food desert and people who live there also lack other basic commodities. People could easily walk, bike, bus, or carpool to retail in their neighborhoods. The need is there.

The market is there. And it could be done in a socially and environmentally responsible way. The scope should examine other, more appropriate sites in urban areas like those mentioned above, that are more distant from Crossgates as locations for residential units.

Pyramid/ Crossgates started out as retail and has been diversifying into entertainment and housing as their retail component has diminished. I propose that they pursue a new and growing industry: ecotourism. It is a natural fit and they can use it to rebrand themselves as a responsible neighbor and citizen of the world rather than the irresponsible villain image they now project. It would draw people to their retail by providing experiences no other malls offer.

What is Crossgates most valuable asset? I think it is the Pine Bush! It is in close proximity to a world-class environmental treasure. They are next to valuable, prime habitat: the Butterfly Hill. They are connected a growing network of trails into the Pine Bush, and just a short distance from the Discovery Center. Why not focus and expand on this to draw people in and make money?

Alan Fiero at Farnsworth Middle School reconfigured an existing space to create a modest yet impressive butterfly garden. This facility is great for the students at the school but is not generally accessible to the public. Crossgates could create the largest butterfly garden and conservatory in the world! It could focus on local species especially those that are rare, threatened, and endangered. There are a couple of other butterfly gardens and conservatories in the Northeast, but none are nearby and nothing exists of this scope or magnitude.

I ask that the scope consider using the Pine Bush in a constructive and supportive way rather than consuming and destroying it. I ask that the scope consider embracing the bounty of the Pine Bush and expand and enrich it, while enriching the lives of the thousands of visitors who would flock to such a unique attraction, and most importantly enrich Crossgates and the investors, for being savvy business minds out ahead of the trends.

When you have a unique treasure next door, you don't obliterate it, you cultivate it, and cash in on it. Unique natural beauty, especially in the form of butterflies, is universally desirable. A world class butterfly conservatory and everything that would be associated with it would make Crossgates a destination unlike any other and would be a magnet for attracting shoppers to reverse their slumping retail businesses.

To expand the desirability and viability of this project and the Pine Bush ecosystem as a whole, they could donate the various undeveloped properties that they own within and near the Pine Bush study area to the Preserve. Additionally they could help to purchase the remaining full and partial protection areas to complete the Albany Pine Bush Preserve outlined in the Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission's plan.

The intent of the Rapp Road proposal is to make money for its investors, with little redeeming social or environmental value. I believe that we could have both. Why not make money while doing something helpful for the community and the planet? We could have a win/win situation if we created the right plan. I've proposed some alternative development proposals for Crossgates in the Pine Bush and within neighborhoods in the urban core of Albany. I ask that the scope consider these types of alternatives to what is now being propose by the applicant.

Crossgates could become a good and helpful neighbor rather than a villainous enemy. The most valuable publicity is word of mouth from people you trust and respect. These types of responsible and locally and globally beneficial actions are better than any publicity money could buy.

Thank you for considering the many environmental impacts I've outlined. I hope to see them addressed in the final scoping document. I also hope that the applicant can make a profit while making the Rapp Road neighborhood, the Pine Bush, our region, and the world a better place.

Sincerely,

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