

TOWN OF GROTON
Park Commission
Public Forum – Cow Pond Fields Project

PARK COMMISSION
Mary Jennings, Chair
Anna Eliot, Vice-Chair
Mark Presti, Clerk
Jeffrey Ohringer, Member
Jack Petropoulos, Member

Date: Wednesday April 15, 2026
Time: 5:00 PM
Location: Town Hall.

Members Present: Mary Jennings, Anna Eliot, Mark Presti, Jeff Ohringer & Jack Petropoulos
Members Absent: None
Others Present: Megan Budzinski (Activitas), Matt Waterman (LandTech), Brian Callahan, Judy Anderson, Mike Johnson, Darcy Donald, user group representatives & members of the public

Call to Order: 5:00 p.m.

Mary Jennings, Chair, opened the public forum.

Chair Report –

Chair Jennings described the Park Commission as an elected five-member body responsible for the Town's playgrounds, common areas and playing fields, and as liaison to the user groups. She noted that more than 1,700 young people use the Cow Pond fields each year through nonprofit sports leagues, and that the Commission operates on an annual budget of \$25,000. Chair Jennings reported that the Commission has sponsored three CPA applications in the last three years, including the West Groton field and the town field behind the library, which is complete but out of service this summer while the turf cures, and last year's application for the design of the Cow Pond fields. The current application is the next stage of that work.

Site History –

Commissioner Ohringer reported that the first Cow Pond field was created in approximately 1990 and was originally irrigated by pulling fire hoses from the pump house. He noted that the Town has grown from roughly 5,000 residents in 1980 to nearly 11,000, while the Cow Pond complex has remained essentially unchanged. He identified the dirt parking lot as the site's longest-standing and most serious safety concern, and credited the Highway Department and DPW with maintaining field conditions over that period.

Project Presentation – Activitas –

Activitas engineer Megan Buczynski presented existing conditions, the proposed design, environmental mitigation, permitting and schedule. She reported that police and fire have identified parking along Cow Pond Road and at the DPW lot as a safety concern; that the access road to the youth baseball fields is out of compliance with the permit issued when Field 4 was built in 2009–2010, which limited that road to coaches and emergency use; and that the site has no accessible routes and no stormwater management. The site is a former gravel pit sitting in a bowl, and water ponds after storms.

Ms. Buczynski explained that three parcels are involved, two of them under Article 97, and that Cow Pond Brook, wetlands and vernal pools run through the site. The entire area lies within a Natural Heritage overlay for the Blanding's turtle, which triggers state permitting.

The proposed work includes removal and naturalization of the baseball access road; a new internal connection between the parking areas; formalized parking of approximately 295 spaces as recommended

by the traffic study; a new access drive and a designated drop-off area added at the Planning Board's request; new sidewalks and fencing; a new playground with separate structures for ages 2–5 and 5–12 inside a four-foot fence; relocation of the utility sheds and replacement of the storage unit; perimeter accessible pathways and a full walking loop; a site wall where the drive cuts into the hillside; relocation of youth baseball Field 3 to the north with an outfield fence, which yields a full-size multi-purpose field in place of the narrow former football field; athletic lighting at youth baseball Field 3; and relocation of the site's overhead electrical service underground.

Natural Heritage requires mitigation at a two-to-one ratio for disturbed habitat. Mitigation consists of naturalizing the access road, creating approximately two acres of new sand nesting habitat in two management areas, selective cutting to allow light into those areas, clearing a migration route, and deeding the unrestricted parcel to conservation.

Ms. Buczynski reported that Planning Board site plan review and the stormwater management permit have been received, and that the Conservation Commission Notice of Intent, Natural Heritage review and MEPA review remain open with completion expected in June. Construction documents are complete and the project is out to bid, with bids due April 21 following a four-week bid period. Bids will be reviewed with the Town Manager. Construction is targeted to begin July 1 with approximately one month of flexibility, is structured around spring and fall sports in 2026 and 2027, and must be complete by December 31, 2027 under the terms of the federal grant. Work in the turtle migration areas is planned for the winter months.

Public Questions & Comments –

A Hoyts Wharf Road resident asked about access from that road. Ms. Budzinski confirmed there will be no access other than construction vehicles during the project.

Darcy Donald, speaking for local turtle conservation and Nashoba Valley wildlife interests, raised concerns regarding seasonal construction restrictions in rare species habitat; a request for Cape Cod rounded curbing rather than square curbing, which has trapped turtles and hatchlings elsewhere in Town; fencing that prevents turtles from passing through; documented vernal pools and salamander movement; the effect of lighting on wildlife and tree growth; and herbicide, fertilizer and mowing practices during hatchling season. Ms. Buczynski responded that work east of the turtle corridor is being scheduled outside the restricted season and that the plan will be adjusted if Natural Heritage requires it.

Regarding lighting, Ms. Buczynski reported that the fields in question are already lit, that new fixtures will be DarkSky-compliant for athletic use with a reduced color temperature, and that the Planning Board has imposed a 9:00 p.m. shutoff. Mike Johnson of youth baseball reported that the league plays three seasons and that programmable lighting would ensure lights are not left on overnight. Commissioner Ohringer reported that the Commission coordinates with MIT Haystack Observatory regarding ambient light, and that fixture type and aiming have been studied.

DPW Director Brian Callahan reported that the fields are mowed at two to two and a half inches, raised to three inches in summer, and receive five conventional, non-organic fertilizer applications per year. Ms. Budzinski noted that stormwater infiltrates on site and does not discharge to Cow Pond.

In response to further questions, Ms. Budzinski reported that netting will be installed at several locations and will be lowerable; that the accessible pathways will be porous asphalt rather than stone dust; that the playground is approximately 40 by 20 feet with no swings; and that former infield areas will be sodded rather than seeded.

Project Funding –

Commissioner Petropoulos presented the funding. The current estimate is \$4.2 million, with a firmer figure expected when bids open April 21. A \$1 million federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grant, secured with the assistance of Select Board member Becky Pine and the Town Manager, reduces the cost to Groton to \$3.2 million, to be funded through the Community Preservation Act. The grant is reimbursable, which is why the full \$4.2 million must be appropriated.

The state currently matches CPA contributions at 25 cents on the dollar, or approximately \$640,000, bringing the net cost to Groton taxpayers to approximately \$2.56 million, or about 61% of the project. Bonding \$3.2 million over seven to ten years at 4–5% would produce an annual payment of approximately \$353,000 to \$394,000. Against annual CPA revenue of roughly \$1.1 million, the project would use between 36% and 50% of CPA funds, leaving 50% to 64% available for other projects. There is no property tax impact. Commissioner Petropoulos noted that the state match varies year to year and that the figures are based on historical experience. He further noted that there is no opportunity cost to other Town needs, as CPA funds are restricted and cannot be used for purposes such as hiring teachers.

Project Benefits –

Commissioner Presti reported that many of the needs addressed by the project are long-standing and appear in Town assessments going back more than fifteen years. He identified accessibility and ADA compliance as the single largest benefit, followed by resolution of the outstanding environmental compliance issue created by the access road, expanded programming including the new walking loop, and extended play hours achieved consistent with dark sky standards and with neighbor and observatory concerns. He emphasized that the project carries no tax increase.

Commissioner Eliot asked what vote threshold would be required at Town Meeting given that the article will be bonded. Chair Jennings confirmed that it is more than a simple majority.

Chair Jennings thanked those attending, noted that Town Meeting will be held Saturday, May 2 at 9:00 a.m., and invited residents to bring concerns to the Commission at any of its meetings before that date. The public forum was concluded at approximately 7:57 p.m.

Park Commission Session – User Group Requests –

A representative of youth baseball thanked Commissioner Presti for his response and follow-up regarding Sawyer Field. Chair Jennings clarified that the field has been remediated to its initial condition, will not be used until next spring while the seed takes, and will be reviewed next summer for any further needs.

The representative requested that the standard portable toilet at the baseball fields be swapped for an ADA-accessible unit so that families are not required to walk to the soccer side. Commissioner Ohringer noted the change can be requested from the vendor and estimated the difference at \$10 to \$15 per month, and youth baseball offered to cover the difference if it cannot be absorbed. Chair Jennings reported that the Commission holds quotes for ADA and non-ADA units from another vendor and that the question is a budget matter to be taken up at the next budget review. No decision was made.

The representative also asked whether baseball could join the trash and recycling service used at the soccer fields, noting that baseball moved to carry-in/carry-out last spring. Commissioner Ohringer reported that the soccer service is paid for by soccer at approximately \$120 per month through E.L. Harvey, and the representative agreed to follow up offline.

Chair Jennings confirmed the Commission's intent to meet with each user group as a committee of the whole to determine the actual cost of operating the fields, and invited youth baseball to open that series at the May 27 meeting. The stated goal is to inform a fair fee structure. The representative agreed to provide the league's financials.

Planning Town Meeting – Forum Debrief & Next Steps –

Commissioner Presti reported that attendance and the quality of public contributions were better than expected. He recommended that the Commission state more explicitly that the Hoyts Wharf parcel will be closed both to access and to future development, which he characterized as a net benefit to that neighborhood, and that it repeat Commissioner Petropoulos's point that CPA funds are not otherwise available for needs such as the schools. Commissioner Eliot noted the approximately twenty acres to be placed under conservation restriction.

The Commissioners discussed the handout. Chair Jennings reported that the sequence of percentages in the funding section was difficult to follow, and that framing the CPA figure as funds remaining available for other projects was more effective than the share consumed. Commissioner Presti recommended reducing the number of figures presented and keeping the message simple and digestible. The Commissioners agreed that the handout should be tightened, that it may be paired with a project overview on the reverse, and that it should be placed in the Town Meeting folder or distributed at the registration table.

The Commissioners discussed the presentation time limit, understood to be seven minutes and possibly ten for the proponent of a warrant article, and agreed to confirm with the Town Moderator. The Commissioners agreed that the presentation belongs to the Commission rather than the consultant, that the available time should be allocated deliberately among Ms. Buczynski and Commission members, and that the Commission would direct Ms. Buczynski on content. Specifically, the Commissioners agreed to drop the timeline and permitting slides and to abandon the “must do / want to do / trickle down” framing, on the concern that presenting any element as a “nice to have” invites opposition. Commissioner Presti recommended instead presenting the additional benefits as outcomes of doing the necessary work.

Adjourned at 6:58pm

Approved 10/5/26