

Unholy Lotus, Asphalt Woes, and De-Signed Trees: ecoRI News Roundup

Zoning Board Kicks Asphalt Operation to the Curb

Providence's Zoning Board of Review unanimously denied a variance request Oct. 13 from a pavement manufacturing company that sought to continue the use of a leased portside Allens Avenue site for the storage and processing of concrete, stone, aggregate, and asphalt.

The Narragansett Improvement Co. applied for a variance permit last August to continue the non-waterfront dependent use of the 338 Allens Ave. property, which has been ongoing for the past three years despite lying within a maritime industrial waterfront district. The variance permit was opposed by more than 50 community members.

"This application doesn't meet any of the standards, as far as I'm concerned, for a use variance," board member Marcus Mitchell said. "It doesn't comply with the ordinances or the comprehensive plan."

Board members pointed to the three years of unsanctioned use of the site, the lack of zoning approval previously sought by the Narragansett Improvement Co., and the impact of asphalt processing on the health of nearby neighborhoods.

According to Robert Azar, deputy director of Providence's Department of Planning and Development, the city's land-use plan and zoning codes prioritize the water-dependent nature of the port area to best capitalize on the deepwater channel. The Allens Avenue site, he said, was historically home to a dock extending into the Providence River, which suggests the site's continued potential for waterfront use as zoned.

Outdoor Advertising Company "Erroneously" Removes Trees in Front of Its Billboard

A bank of trees on Providence city property in Washington Park alongside Interstate 95 was "erroneously" chopped down in September, according to city officials, triggering concerns about tree equity in an area lacking trees and the benefits they provide.

The highway buffer trees were removed from 1101 Eddy St., a 0.82-acre lot owned by the city and leased to Lamar Advertising Co., a Louisiana-based outdoor advertising company that operates billboards in the United States and Canada. The city has requested that Lamar Advertising, which subcontracted the bulldozing of the buffer, replant trees on the lot, which hosts a single billboard.

"The city of Providence had previously worked with the lessee of the lot to allow tree trimming for visibility purposes, but the tree removal that occurred went well beyond what was authorized," said Faith Chadwick, deputy director of communications for the city.

Michael Murphy, general manager at Lamar Advertising's Providence office, said the company was given verbal approval by the city forester to trim and remove invasive species on the property.

According to Murphy, a mix-up with the subcontractor hired to do the trimming resulted in the removal of nearly all vegetation on the embankment, which sits above I-95 and a spur of the Providence and Worcester Railroad.

“It was erroneous on our part,” he said. “It was a miscommunication.”

But for Linda Perri of the Washington Park Neighborhood Association, the fiasco indicates bigger problems of tree equity in the city.

“You can’t just go chopping down trees in an environmentally precarious area,” she said, noting the lack of tree coverage in the community when compared to other areas of Providence, as well as the high rates of asthma and pollution in the neighborhoods bordering the Port of Providence.

Studies have shown urban trees can lead to better health outcomes and social cohesion, as well as reduce pollution, urban heat, and noise.

Cranston’s Unholy Battle with the Sacred Lotus

The serene tableau surrounding Cranston’s Meshanticut Pond belies an intense fight against the sacred lotus, which now covers much of the pond’s surface.

In the past seven years, after a Cranston resident planted it in memory of a relative, the lotus — an invasive species, endemic to Asia and relatively new to Rhode Island waterways — has overtaken the pond.

According to Keith Gazaille, project manager with SOLitude Lake Management — a water quality and waterbody restoration company that works throughout the eastern United States — it’s not the only aquatic invasive crowding out native plants in the pond.

Gazaille has continued the fight against a trifecta of invasives plaguing Meshanticut Pond: variable watermilfoil, fanwort, and sacred lotus.

“The lotus and the other invasive plants have the ability to really outcompete a lot of the native plant species,” Gazaille said. “It really reduces the diversity of the habitat.”

There is legislation in the works to stop the sale of aquatic invasive species, but the reality on Meshanticut Pond and other Rhode Island waterbodies is invasives have already taken root. And the state can’t treat them all — it’s too expensive.

Cost varies based on the size, the weed type, the chemicals used, and the staff time needed. The 12-acre Meshanticut Pond alone cost \$6,685 to treat — a price tag picked up by a federal grant program for habitat restoration.

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