

3/24/2022

Natick Religious Leaders Association

Honoring the Quinobequin: A Statement in Support of Removal of the Dam in South Natick

Dear Ms. Osthues and the Dam Advisory Committee,

As part of our shared responsibility to inspire the Town of Natick to live according to our highest moral, ethical, and spiritual aspirations, we are writing to share these thoughts with the Town of Natick's Dam Advisory Committee.

We understand that there are a broad range of perspectives that the Advisory Committee is considering in a careful and inclusive process, and that there are voices speaking for many possible solutions to the problem of the degraded spillway and earthen dam in South Natick.

As most of us typically think of that body of water where the dam is located, in colonial terms, it is called the Charles River, but in the indigneous traditions of this region, of the Nipmuc and Wamponoag peoples, it is called the Quinobequin. Many of us first heard this name for the river, Quinobequin, in an eloquent presentation made by Kristen Wyman, a member of the Natick Nipmuc Council and also a member of the Dam Advisory Committee.

As a matter of justice and equity, given that the Nipmuc were forcibly removed from Natick in an act of genocide, and their lands subsequently taken away from them, we believe that Nipmuc perspectives must carry extra weight in the Dam Advisory Committee's deliberations and ultimate recommendations. Many members of our Natick Religious Leaders Association are turning our concerted attention and efforts towards steps that we can take towards honoring indigenous peoples, including through education, public art and monuments, and possibly more tangible means such as intentional affordable housing.

The cultural, spiritual, and historical significance of the Quinobequin in the Nipmuc perspective is profound and points to the ecological and ethical reasons that the spillway should be removed and the river restored to its natural state. For example, damming the river disrupts the ecosystem, especially the ability of fish to migrate upstream. Without a restored river, there is little hope of restoring native fish species and biodiversity to the river. For this reason, environmental scientists and conservationists have spoken to the Advisory Committee in favor of restoring the river to its natural flow. Furthermore, as Ms. Wyman mentioned, ancient cultural practices like building burnt out canoes using downed pine trees and navigating the waters in them could be restored along with the restoration of the river. Modern day forms of recreation on the river such as kayaking could also be introduced, allowing all citizens to foster a deeper connection to this waterway and the many forms of life it sustains along its meandering path.

Ms. Wyman's presentation reminds us all of the sacredness of water as an essential element of life. The health of our waters is directly related to our own health, as we have also been reminded as a Town by the recent troubling discovery of PFAS in our wells. A sustainable society is one that values the sacredness and purity of water. Therefore, we should also be aware that the river itself, the Quinobequin, is more important than the dam, which is a humanly-constructed object inserted into it for a period of time, which is now falling apart.

The indigenous people of this land have consistently opposed the practice of damming rivers because of the many reasons detailed above. It is time for the Town of Natick to recognize and adopt this perspective. As a Town we are a colonial institution that inherits a troubling history of genocide that took place right in our own front yard. Part of how we reconcile with this history and change course for the better is by learning to respect and honor indigenous perspectives and rights, including the right to use the Quinobequin river as a source of food and as a place for traditional practices like canoeing—rights which the dam impedes.

Therefore, we hope that the Dam Advisory Committee will consider all of this and recommend a pathway forward with all due respect for the Natick Nipmuc values that Ms. Wyman so eloquently and passionately represented and that we, as religious and spiritual leaders of this community, wholeheartedly support. Please recommend that the river be restored and that this restoration process must be one that is respectful to the history, values, and rights of indigenous people.

In a spirit of honoring the Quinobequin,

Rev. Dr. Ian Mevorach, Common Street Spiritual Center, Natick  
Rev. Rebecca E. Binns Gettel, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Natick  
Rabbi Cantor Ken Richmond, Temple Israel of Natick  
Rabbi Robin S. Sparr, HaMakom is The Place, Natick  
Rev. Dr. Adam Tierney-Eliot, The Eliot Church, Natick  
Rev. Alecia Reeves-Freeman, Fisk Memorial United Methodist Church, Natick  
Cantor Hollis Schachner, Temple Shir Tikva, Wayland, (Natick resident)  
Rabbi David Klatzker, Temple Israel of Natick  
Sarallyn Keller, First Congregational Church, UCC, Natick  
Rabbi Danny Burkeman, Temple Shir Tikva Wayland, (Natick resident)