

Subject:

Thurston Nature Center and New Thurston Build

From: Margaret Weiss**Sent:** Friday, June 6, 2025 1:17 PM**To:** Mallek, Jon <JMallek@a2gov.org>; Watson, Chris <CWatson@a2gov.org>; Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>; NAP Natural Area Preservation <NAP@a2gov.org>; Delacourt, Derek <DDelacourt@a2gov.org>; Bennett, Michelle <MBennett@a2gov.org>; Manor, Courtney <CManor@a2gov.org>; Lenart, Brett <BLenart@a2gov.org>**Subject:** Thurston Nature Center and New Thurston Build

Dear City Representatives,

My name is Margaret Weiss. I am a resident of the Orchard Hills-Maplewood subdivision in the City of Ann Arbor. My family has lived here for 20 years and we raised our kids here. They attended Thurston Elementary School, Clague Middle School, and Ann Arbor Huron High School. Every member of my family has also volunteered in various caretaking capacities at the Thurston Nature Center (TNC) numerous times during the past 20 years along with other residents, students, and members of various Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops.

The TNC is a unique treasure, a community and student-created outdoor environmental lab that was envisioned by, and brought to fruition by, the global "founder of environmental education", [Dr. William Stapp](#). In the 1960s on Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS) property. Dr. William Stapp took his experience from the Thurston Nature Center and created a K-12 environmental education curriculum which he spread across the world through the United Nations which later nominated him for the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize. The National Youth Conference on Beauty and Conservation, sponsored by Mrs. Lyndon Johnson, asked that a film be created on what young people in various parts of the country were doing in relationship toward beautification efforts. Thurston Nature Center was one of seven locations to be chosen for that honor. ["We're On Our Way"](#) is a documentary that premiered in 1967 in Washington, D.C. and features the TNC. The TNC was groundbreaking in its time and was the inspiration for sites across the world. In 1968, the Nature Center was designated a [Conservation Education Reserve](#) by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. In 2010, the TNC was recognized as a National Wildlife Federation Certified Wildlife Habitat and in 2017 a National Certified Monarch Waystation. It is the oldest operating environmental education nature center in the country built by students for students and continues to thrive to this day.

Why am I bothering with a history lesson about the Thurston Nature Center? As you are probably aware, the plans for a rebuild of Thurston Elementary were shared with our local community for the first time in October of 2024. Everyone here recognizes the importance of replacing the aging elementary building. Our kids were in that structure! We volunteered in that structure! We voted for the capital projects bond monies! What we didn't vote for was a sloppy approach to the rebuild that never took into account the surrounding community and what would be best for all - local residents, educators, students, AND the city at large. All attempts to request that the TNC not be reduced and destroyed in areas and all suggestions of a rebuild on top of the existing building were immediately rebuffed. The 'engagement' from AAPS and Gilbane Construction has been non-existent. The community has felt fairly helpless since the lands are owned by AAPS and, in small part, by the Orchard Hills Athletic Club, BUT....

it turns out the lands are NOT owned exclusively by AAPS and herein lies the root of my missive. It has recently come to light that some of the land that will be modified, namely the Prairie that is part of the TNC, does not belong to AAPS but to the City of Ann Arbor. I am pleading with you to step in as a legal authority and to tell AAPS and Gilbane Construction to please rethink their plans. They have received viable alternate plans, ones that destroy little of the marvelous habitat so carefully tended for nearly 60 years. If the new school is constructed on top of the existing structure, they will avoid future issues they will otherwise face by insisting on building on an existing wetland. (There is a reason nothing was ever built where Thurston Pond sits and right next to it!). Water quality will be less challenged (the pond is a holding station for water running through Miller's Creek and eventually to the Huron River).

Our community has the support of various politicians including U.S. Representative Debbie Dingell, Senator Sue Shink, Representative Jennifer Conlin, and Washtenaw County Commissioner Andy LaBarre. We are begging the City of Ann Arbor to weigh in now that it is clear some of the City property is involved in this project.

Sincerely,

Margaret Weiss
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