

however. On the contrary, the subsequent proceedings were dominated by a small group of citizens implacably opposed to the Middlesex plan.

The town's Planning Board is generally responsible for evaluating the engineering and safety aspects of proposed developments. In practice the board also advises on some of the environmental questions projects are likely to encounter at later stages. Over the course of fifteen months the board worked with Middlesex to scale down the plan and change the design of the wetland crossing to mitigate its impact. In October 1994, sixteen months after the school's application, the board approved a revised six-acre plan.

The application then went to the Natural Resources Commission (NRC), a five-member board created in the 1960s charged with administering the Massachusetts wetlands laws. Like other town boards, the NRC consisted of volunteers and those co-opted by town officials and sitting members of this and other boards. At the time, the NRC was composed of a retired environmental lawyer, a wildlife biologist, the conservation administrator of another town, a self-described environmental activist, and the director of the MCZ land, who recused himself from the proceedings because MCZ land abutted the property in question.

A year of intense controversy followed the Middlesex submission to the NRC. At eight public meetings activists and commission members repeatedly raised objections to the school's plan. By every indication the activists were sincere in their opposition, contributing impressive quantities of their own time and money. To some extent they saw the Estabrook Woods as an organic entity; the question was not the marginal one of "how much additional impact," but the much starker one of "preservation versus destruction." Moreover, the heavier-than-necessary infrastructure proposed in the initial plan gave rise to suspicions that Middlesex harbored additional future expansion plans. Although I am confident that the existing plan was not controversial outside the narrow circles of the activists, a more ambitious proposal to increase the size of the school and expand the campus deep into the woods would likely have been another story. To the outside observer the natural compromise appeared to be approval of Middlesex's current plan on condition that land located deeper in the woods be permanently protected, but this suggestion was rejected by Middlesex in 1993 and did not surface again until very late in the process after the contending parties had gridlocked.

Over the course of the year Middlesex representatives argued with the NRC and the activists about nesting goshawks, dragonflies and beetles,