



# SIERRA CLUB

## OHIO CHAPTER

Northeast Group

As people across the country protest in defense of Black lives, the Sierra Club recognizes the need to dismantle systemic racism in the United States and within our own organization. We must reckon with how white supremacy -- both past and present -- has shaped our institutions and do the critical anti-racism work necessary to repair the harm done. The environmental movement does not exist in a vacuum, and it is our responsibility to use our power to help abolish systemic racism, which is destroying lives, communities, and the planet.

### **Statement of Northeast Ohio Sierra Club regarding the proposed development of the Beech Brook property in Pepper Pike - by Linda Sekura, Conservation Committee Co-Chair - August 24, 2020**

The Northeast Ohio Sierra Club was invited by the SayNoToRezone PAC to comment on the proposed mixed-use development at Beech Brook, at 3737 Lander Road in Pepper Pike. This letter is a statement of my opinions as a representative of that Group, as their Conservation Co-Chair, but co-signed by the entire Northeast Ohio Group leadership. I am also the Conservation Chair for the state, but I am acting in a regional capacity here.

As for my credentials, I am a decades-long field researcher (mainly in Ohio), and had also focused intensively on forests and headwater stream studies for seven years, with the objective of understanding the dynamics that either preserve or degrade these interdependent systems. I hold a master's degree in Environmental Science, with a concentration in botany and ecology, and have been a professional Sustainability Specialist since 2002, as an advisor and collaborative project leader, planning and implementing many successful initiatives.

Prior to 2001, I spent over 20 years in the business field, with twelve in management, and as a CPA. On the side, I continue to help companies streamline their operations, and provide financial and strategic advice to them and to friends. So, I am familiar with the business world as well as the natural world. But, more to the point, I am also aware that businesses that survive best, and have already benefited in the past, are those that fully grasp the now-global goals of sustainability - and act in a sustainable manner.

As for Beech Brook, the mixed-use project, as proposed by the developer, would be more beneficial if revitalizing a degraded urban area, and to provide efficient use of already-developed land and housing for those that need it. For mixed-use development to be considered a sustainability tool, it would provide multiple environmental and social benefits. Those social benefits would include equitable economic benefit to those that have been disadvantaged historically and currently. In Pepper Pike, it would at least benefit the vast community, and with their informed support, understanding and valuing their needs and wishes - reflecting their voice. The Sierra Club follows this and other [Jemez Principles](#) when engaging in a community, and with each other, as a way of moving forward in a positive manner, for the benefit of all.

Most importantly, a truly green mixed-use effort reduces urban sprawl and preserves ecosystems/habitat that are disappearing at a rapid rate. (Green building "points" support these concepts.) This proposed project does the opposite. It instead develops the natural lands that a green construction would preserve.

The presentation for this mixed-use project mainly focused on economic development, and as stated for community social benefits - but over the protest of residents who prize ecological preservation above economic gain - and additionally to the detriment of both the local environment and beyond the city's borders. Again, to be fair to the developer, they may have intended to benefit the community, but the voices of the community are saying they do not want these "benefits" as stated, and prefer the "benefits"

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they are about to lose forever. And I hope the developer will listen and hear these voices, and not lose their message.

To be clear, the proposed project degrades a desirable mature forest ecosystem, valued by the community, and a deep, wide one at that, that are even more rare, and that cannot be replaced without great cost and labor, stewarded over the courses of decades. Pepper Pike now has, as nearly a gift, a mature forest that other cities would love to possess - and that attracts homebuyers. Natural areas and canopy cover are desirable to buyers, and increasingly so, for aesthetics, health, sustainability and personal enjoyment.

Pepper Pike's website touts their current bucolic character. This project is antagonistic to that character, degrades what should be appreciated as a jewel that provides clean air and water, protects against heat and cold, and provides good mental health for Pepper Pike's residents - and reduces government costs in management for flooding. Development increases road maintenance, car emissions, and more.

Most importantly, I fear that this project will likely fail if built, since you cannot negotiate with the laws of nature and physics. The selected site is in a basin (a "bowl"), with land grading on both sides down to a wide stream. That alone is reason to not build. Add to that situation impermeable buildings and pavement (even if paved with permeable pavers), that replaces the deep soils currently holding back runoff from rain and snow. With 6,000 or more Pepper Pike residents being invited to live or visit, as was indicated during the presentation, that means compaction of remaining soils, that will act as impermeable surfaces.

The developer states that construction will only be on 16 acres of land (although their design shows 16 acres north of Willey Creek and another 30 acres to be developed south of Willey Creek), but even the 16 acres is within the 68 acres of deep forest - fragmenting that forest and creating edges. Once an edge is created, it invites invasive and opportunistic plants, and results in about 100' or more of degraded forest with poison ivy and the like - from degradation of people visiting and disturbing and compacting the soils. In a degraded system, mosquitoes and other insects will proliferate. Will spraying of herbicides or pesticides be done? Will residents and businesses be told they cannot use lawn chemicals in this sensitive area?

The drawings for the project concept seem to show just 150 total feet of forest buffer to remain, to protect Willey Creek. That is 75' on either side, on average. In some cases, 75' can be an adequate buffer size, but that may be more suitable when a forest buffer is not surrounded by pavement, and on an incline. And they are encouraging thousands of people to visit this buffer as a "park," and including with a path, inviting compaction of soils, children taking living souvenirs (e.g., frogs as "pets"), and pulling the pretty flowers to take home.

The developer uses the words "greenspace" and "park" - and this natural area currently is neither. It is a forest ecosystem. Ecosystems are mainly self-sustaining especially if deep enough. To fragment and impact this forest, it does simply become a park or greenspace - and on the edge of a stream that requires a deep buffer of forest with deep roots and canopy.

Also, building in a bowl, slippery winter roads will require salt, that will runoff into the stream and impact macroinvertebrates and fish, including downstream. Downstream impacts will likely also include flooding from increased water flow including the homes along the Chagrin River that already have problems - as well as flooding for the buildings built within this bowl. And cutting of trees means more erosion and sediment, within the development and into the streams. When further development is done upstream, that the developer has no control over, that will impact their "bowl" development.

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Also, when a property is sloped and is surrounded by large trees, as is the intention of the developer, these trees can and will succumb to age, disease, and other factors, especially erosion - and will likely fall onto the homes and/or facilities built. What are the plans for ensuring protection of these structures, short of removing surrounding trees for an 80'-plus radius?

Additionally, where will the infrastructure for sewers and power lines be built? How will these systems be put into this development without further removal of trees and disturbance of soils, including for ongoing maintenance?

The developer talks about planting trees along the stream. That would likely be more of a "tree garden" to be maintained than a forest. And 60' trees with 60' roots cannot be planted - only saplings that will need much time to grow large and with deep roots. And once they fall (even if there is time for these plantings to grow large), how do you replant large trees years later? Forests proliferate on their own, though.

Also, when building in a bowl, as the runoff increases flow in the stream, that has sinuosity (bends), there is already a bit of erosion on these bends from previous increased flows during big rain events. Once construction at the site and/or upstream additionally increases flow, these bends will most likely increasingly erode - and at that point with less soil and trees to buffer. Might this not only flood the development, but cut into the higher slope on the south side, near the current parking lot at Beech Brook? I hear that there were homes taken down in Pepper Pike (on Shaker Boulevard and another on Lander Road) due to bends in a creek becoming larger due to erosion and encroaching on homes. And I hear that the homes that were not taken down still have major flooding.

The attraction for some residents is the proximity to a yoga parlor and ice cream shop - to ride bicycles to. I understand these types of facilities are already within less than a mile or a little over. And why would anyone ride a bicycle into a bowl that they must bicycle uphill to leave? And can the bicyclists navigate well in this mixed-use area, intended to efficiently use space and invite thousands of residents to visit? Are all residents aware that similar facilities are already currently within similar bicycling distance, likely on flatter, easily-to-navigate land - and are they taking advantage of bicycling to these facilities now?

My impression is that the idea of this development is more impressive than what the reality will be. All of the presentations and comments by the developer during the public hearing this past week were beneficial when it comes to the concept of mixed-use - a great, sustainable concept, but for revitalization of degraded urban areas, and not remaining valuable forests. But Willey Creek and the forested areas within this "bowl" is not the place to site this. It is the opposite of sustainable. And ideas of technology to try to control runoff instead of deep, natural forested buffers is not in keeping with the laws of nature and physics. You cannot negotiate with nature nor barter with the laws of physics. Water does what it wants and goes where it wants - and the wise money is along the line of least resistance. Rainwater percolates into groundwater in deep, healthy soils of a forest, and into basements and foundations, eventually, if present. Floodwater pours over paved or compacted surfaces. Again, the developer is building in a "bowl."

Why not redevelop the sections on the high, flat area where the current Beech Brook facilities and parking already exist? If there is concern within nearby properties and facilities about people walking from the proposed development into these nearby areas, a wall or fence can be built. Even now, a fence should be placed around the natural areas - the forest and the stream, to protect and preserve it, and to keep deer out, to stop the browsing of plants/habitat by deer. Building in the "bowl" and forest invites more deer to come eat the flowers and trees that would be planted - and would not survive. A fence that would be useful enough to keep deer out could not be built around the proposed facilities within a forest. How would residents and visitors come and go easily?

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Having a deep forest with a headwater stream and vernal pool system in close proximity to a truly sustainable mixed-use (reuse) development would be more of a draw for businesses and residents - and would provide clean air and nature outing/education opportunities not provided as much by a park. Now that would be a Chautauqua-like facility!

Thank you for asking for our feedback, and for your time and consideration. Be safe and well.

*Linda Sekura*

Linda Sekura, Conservation Co-Chair  
Northeast Ohio Sierra Club

Also:  
Dennis Plank, Conservation Chair  
Fran Mentch, Executive Committee Chair

The [COVID-19 crisis](#) has not passed and continues to [disproportionately harm](#) Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people and other communities of color. The pandemic has revealed how the communities hardest hit are often the same communities that suffer from high levels of pollution and poor access to healthcare. The fight for environmental justice cannot be separated from the fight for racial justice.