

“From Little Good Harbor to Great Good Harbor”

Speech Given at the Rotary Club of Gloucester

September 11, 2012

Before Thatcher Road was built in East Gloucester, many of you know there was a street railway crossing today’s parking lot for Good Harbor Beach allowing travelers access to Brier Neck and Long Beach. On a map in 1899, the waters were labeled Little Good Harbor. Now, we say Good Harbor. But we could also say Great Good Harbor.

Today, I want to speak about something that could make Good Harbor great: the acquisition of the salt marsh property at the intersection of Thatcher Road and Witham Street (often called Brier Neck Crossing and more recently the Good Harbor Gateway). This acquisition is **the single most important opportunity for Gloucester to realize a long standing effort to protect and restore a prime piece of open space** – the potential scenic center of a transformed Good Harbor area, a Great Good Harbor.

Forty-Year Campaign

By “long standing effort,” I mean the 40-year adversarial history of this property.* Prior to the 1950s, the land was open space, mostly salt marsh with a small portion of upland that flooded from time to time. In the 1960’s, it held a miniature golf facility followed by a restaurant that later burned. In 1975, the owner wanted a larger restaurant and parking lot but the Gloucester Conservation Commission denied the permit to fill wetland. However, the State’s Department of Environmental Protection approved it, although the Conservation Commission appealed the decision to the Superior Court and a citizen’s group also appealed the decision. Alas, the City of Gloucester was overruled. Yet, the restaurant was never built.

In the year 2000, another development was proposed. But Gloucester’s Zoning Board of Appeals rejected the plan to construct condominiums. And when the developer obtained a ruling from the State’s Housing Appeals Committee under Chapter 40B, the ZBA appealed that decision three times in different courts. However, a final judgment by the Supreme Judicial Court in 2011 cleared the way to build 12 condominium units under a comprehensive permit that stands today. The developers can build the condos anytime they want; there are no further legal impediments.

Richard Gaines, in the *Gloucester Daily Times*, called this the City’s “longest-running legal struggle.” A list of the events during the period runs three pages long. Reading it, one is struck with a singular message: **for nearly half a century the City of Gloucester has fought a protracted and united battle to protect this property as a salt marsh natural habitat.**

* The parcel is actually two vacant lots of nearly six acres located at the northwestern corner of the intersection of Thatcher Road and Witham Street, Lots 184.5 & 184.9 on the City of Gloucester Zoning Map. The front upland part of the parcel, a salt meadow until it was filled, is nearly 1.5 acre and the development site. It is zoned EB (Extensive Business) which by special permit allows business, retail, and service uses. The rear portion consists of 4.5 acres of salt marsh and is zoned R-10, formerly R-3 (Medium/High Density Residential). The rear portion is located in the flood plain while the front upland portion was in the flood plain and a coastal barrier resource area until 1992 when the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA), upon petition from the developer, re-designated the parcel as outside the special flood hazard area.

One-Time Opportunity

In the summer of 2011, the Friends of Good Harbor (FOGH) made an offer to Briernack Realty, the owners, to acquire the parcel for restoration and preservation. An appraisal was obtained and the owners accepted a purchase price of \$720,000 with \$125,000 to be contributed by the owners or taken as a tax credit, leaving an actual price of \$595,000.

Subsequently, the Friends developed a funding plan for the total cost of the project, \$750,000. In the handouts, you'll see the plan showing the five funding sources and the status of each. You'll also see that we're achieving the funding goals in four of the five categories. The one area of uncertainty is the State LAND Grant which was submitted by the Gloucester Conservation Commission in July and represents half the project cost. We will not learn the results of that grant until October. However, we're most appreciative of the advocacy of Senator Bruce Tarr, Representative Ann-Margaret Ferrante, and Lt. Governor Timothy Murray. We know the competition is keen, and if the funding should go to another municipality we'd have to raise additional funds either through grants or contributions. But, the Good Harbor Gateway initiative is clearly within reach.

Forward Movement

Now, I'd like to share with you how we're moving forward to make this initiative happen. But first, in case you saw in the *Gloucester Daily Times* the article entitled "Councilors Nix Loan for Briernack Site," let me offer a comment. It should be noted that the 5-4 decision of the City Council was against a loan order, not technically against the project. The City Council had already approved the LAND Grant application for the project on June 20th by 8-1 vote. The issue on August 14th was whether or not to authorize a short-term bridge loan to be reimbursed by the State. Unfortunately, too many Councilors feared the City might be obligated financially, even though we offered evidence that it wouldn't. There were other concerns that came up, but that was the salient one.

So, what we've done since August 14th is to arrange for private financing of the bridge loan, by which means we'll take off the table the need for a loan and only seek a decision from the City to accept the property. In addition, we're investigating other sources of funds in case the state grant should fall through. For example, the Town of Rowley has a \$1M federal grant for their 250 acre marsh, Rough Meadows. And we're continuing our fund raising in the community (we've raised the first \$25,000; now comes the second \$25,000). Finally, we're expanding FOGH's membership so it extends beyond the Good Harbor neighborhoods and embraces the whole community – individuals, households, and businesses.

You see, the Good Harbor Gateway initiative is a movement that's been a long time building. And while we can't predict the outcome, a growing and determined community can achieve results. It's not a solo effort by FOGH. It's the work of many parties who've endorsed it and helped it to move forward: the Gloucester Conservation Commission, the Open Space and Recreation Committee, the Planning Board, the Zoning Board of Appeals, the owners (Briernack Realty), the Mayor of Gloucester, and four Councilors in particular: Paul McGeary, Joseph Ciolino, Melissa Cox, and Sefatia Romeo Theken. And there were 100 persons who came out for the August 14th hearing to show support. This is a good time to thank four Rotarians for their support: Joe Ciolino, Meredith Fine, Barry Pett, and Ruth Pino. The reason why this initiative can succeed is the amazing number of people who care.

Why It Matters

Now let's turn to the question of why Good Harbor Gateway matters. Of course, the first reason is that for forty years the City has consistently sought to preserve the property by opposing the threats of development.

Secondly, we have only to look at the Good Harbor property and **we know that it's fragile salt marsh and not a solid site for development.** The property is part of the whole eco-system which besides other tangible benefits provides a spawning and nursery habitat for the fish and shellfish industries that have made Gloucester what it is. Paul McGeary, in his remarks to the City Council on August 14, quoted a report which said "an estimated seventy-one percent of the dockside value of fish landed in the United States is derived from fish species that depend directly or indirectly on coastal wetlands."

Do we need further reason for preserving the salt marsh on Thatcher Road? Then consider this. The Good Harbor salt marsh was the subject of several troubling studies between 2002 and 2007. Salem Sound Coastwatch undertook a multi-year study during which the marsh experienced a steady decline from "not impaired" to "impaired." Three other studies revealed problems in need of investigation and remediation. The prime causes were development and encroachment on the marsh. For these reasons, FOGH launched at its own expense a follow-up study this summer. And we expect to be reporting in October on the degree of degradation taking place in the marsh. Clearly, there are compelling reasons to care for this fragile environment. And the key is to rescue a prime parcel from development, restore it, and preserve it in perpetuity.

And now, the third reason for why Good Harbor matters: **We have a broader vision for Good Harbor, a transformative vision of a Great Good Harbor.** We already know that Good Harbor Beach is an extraordinary attraction; this summer it was ranked the number one beach in Massachusetts by a poll in the *Boston Globe*. But Good Harbor is also something more. It's a major natural habitat, a recreational and environmental space. It's a place not just for summer beachgoers but for multi-season users. Imagine what could be done for the Good Harbor salt marsh and beach area with the Gateway property as key:

1. A welcoming corner property with environmental messages and opportunities to see nature up close, an outdoor classroom for children, bird watchers, and artists – a focal point for the expanse of salt marsh on both sides of Thatcher Road
2. A protected and restored salt marsh, a consolidated conservancy of over one-hundred acres[†]
3. A nature-based walkway for recreation and connection to Gloucester's trail system, a rest stop for walkers, runners, and bicyclists
4. A healthier and enhanced beach with improved signage, attention to appearance, and care of the sand dunes
5. A destination for visitors on the Essex Coastal Scenic Byway and in the Essex County Greenbelt Guide as well as in Massachusetts vacationland publications and web sites
6. A contributor to the eco-tourism economy of Gloucester and Cape Ann, as well as to the quality of life for the community

[†] The Gateway property is the key to re-opening tidal flow across the property and through the culvert under Witham Street to the salt pond on the east, a vital tributary for the whole marsh.

These visions are not just dreams – FOGH volunteers are already currently working on them. For example, I think you'll see some attractive new signage at the beach next season. And Old Nugent Farm is deliberating on a conservation restriction for some of its sixty-eight acres.

I'm wondering if some of you might also want to get involved. If so, there is something you can do. You can speak with individual City councilors whom you know and express your support. You can also support the Good Harbor Gateway with a membership for yourself or your business, and you can make a donation. All of this can be done on the web site: goodharbor.org.

In Closing

I want to close with a story told by Russell H. Conwell in "Acres of Diamonds," a lecture he gave around the country in the 19th century that's said to have earned the fees that endowed Temple University in Philadelphia. A farmer in western Pennsylvania took it on himself to study



all about oil in order to work in that business. "So," Conwell said "he sold his farm for \$833, even money, no cents." The next day, the purchaser went out to water his cattle and found a plank placed across the brook in order to throw aside a dreadful looking scum through which the cattle would not put their noses. The owner who went to Canada intending to earn money in oil had been damming back for twenty-three years a flood of coal-oil valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. But as Conwell said, "He studied oil until he knew all about it, yet he sold the whole of it for \$833, and again I say 'no sense'."

Good Harbor salt marsh is neither an oil field nor are there acres of diamonds buried in the white sands of the stream. The gems of Great Good Harbor have far more value. What this iconic jewel does for life in the ocean and what it does for our quality of life is beyond measure. It should not be sold for \$833 and no sense. We must value it. We must invest in it. We must take care of it. We invite you to join us as friends of the earth, air, and sea.

Denton Crews
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