

Sacred Hearts Retreat Center The Great Neck Conservation Partnership



The Sacred Hearts Retreat Center sits at the tip of Great Neck, on the shores of Buzzard's Bay at the west end of the Cape Cod Canal in Wareham, Massachusetts. Formerly the Herrick Estate, this 128 acre woodland and waterfront property was acquired by the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in 1943.

The retreat center serves over 200 visitors a month, and turns away many more because of limited space. The natural beauty of the retreat center's grounds is in itself a deep reflection of God's goodness. "Among the many characteristics distinguishing the ministry in Wareham is its pristine setting. The whole area is a cathedral proclaiming the presence of its Creator."

At the time the Religious Lands Conservancy (RLC) began conversations with the Sacred Hearts Congregation, the retreat center's future was uncertain. There was a proposal to expand operations in the hope of turning the center's operating deficit into a profit. This would require an investment of funds for new building construction. But the order, headquartered in Rome, has substantial funding needs for its missions to the poor and suffering of the world. The possibility of closing the retreat center and selling it had been considered for a number of years.

The Sacred Hearts Congregation expressed an interest in conserving some part of the property when they registered for RLC's *Conserving Religious Lands* conference in the fall of 2005. RLC then initiated discussions to learn more about the community's circumstances. It became clear that the land, an undisturbed area and the largest remaining undeveloped parcel of land on Wareham's coastline, had great ecological importance.

RLC invited Mass Audubon, owners of adjacent conserved land, to join the conversation. Bob Wilber of Mass Audubon took charge of this project, quickly identifying the important features deserving protection: coastal beach, freshwater wetlands, vernal pools, forest and habitat for numerous threatened and endangered species. The property is located within an area identified by the Commonwealth's Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELCP) as "having significant ecological values..." Because of these characteristics and the negative impacts on the community of the possible development of this land, a partnership of concerned organizations formed. Led by Mass Audubon, the Wareham Land Trust and the Coalition for Buzzards Bay joined in discussions with the Congregation to find a solution to satisfy all interests. The goal was to preserve as much of the environmentally significant features as possible while reserving the congregation's right to do construction to expand the retreat center facilities.

The Wareham community was very much in support of the project, and expressed this support in the spring of 2007 by voting to allocate \$500,000 of Community Preservation Act Funds for this purpose. Many of the retreat center's neighbors on Great Neck were also

eager to see the property preserved. They responded favorable to a proposal from Mass Audubon to include their properties in the conservation plan. To conclude the plan, Mass Audubon engaged a land use planner to assist the Sacred Hearts in identifying the areas they wished to reserve for construction.

In the summer of 2008, the Sacred Hearts community confirmed its decision to forego a sale of part of the property for a far greater sum, and signed an agreement to conserve 100 acres in exchange for funds to expand the retreat center. This agreement served as the critical keystone to protecting an additional 200 acres of neighboring property. Together, these properties provide approximately 300 acres of contiguous habitat for many threatened and endangered species, the potential for public access to a variety of natural settings, and further public benefits such as the protection of sensitive water resources and shellfish beds. Perhaps of equal importance, the conservation of this last large open space in Wareham will preserve the character of this beautiful, wild coastline forever.

2010 Update

In November of 2010, the property was opened as the Great Neck Wildlife Sanctuary. It will be managed by Mass Audubon. Father Stan Kolasa of the Sacred Hearts Spirituality Center stated: “It was important to us to keep this as a place to enjoy, reverence, and celebrate together what the Creator has given for us all. The Great Neck Wildlife Sanctuary is not only a wonder-filled place, but an experience of sanctuary.”

