

South Orange Environmental Commission  
76 S Orange Avenue  
South Orange, NJ 07079

August 25, 2025

Mayor Susan McCartney  
West Orange Town Council  
West Orange Planning Board  
66 Main Street  
West Orange, NJ 07052

Dear Mayor McCartney, members of West Orange Town Council and Planning Board:

The South Orange Environmental Commission has reviewed and discussed the development proposed by Garden Homes on the 120-acre property at Block 179, Lot 32, known as the “West Essex Highlands”. Together, we have reached the conclusion that the proposed development would be harmful to the surrounding communities. As such, we formally urge the Township of West Orange to deny this application and preserve the 120-acre forest at the Second Watchung Mountain and Ridge. Our reasoning includes the following facts:

- The 120-acre property at Block 179, Lot 32, known as the “West Essex Highlands” is a core forest; a critical environmental facet of Essex County, New Jersey providing essential habitat and water resources; and
- Waters from this forested land feed the Canoe Brook tributary and replenish critical aquifers that contribute to the NJ American Water, providing drinking water for 2.9 million New Jersey residents, in more than 190 communities; and
- Replacing old-growth trees that filter groundwater with impervious surfaces causes extensive surface run-off, containing sediment, chemicals, and microplastics, into this drinking water source; and
- Such run-off can lead to turbidity spikes, harmful algal blooms, and higher pathogen levels in this drinking water source; and
- The roughly 19,000 residents of South Orange receive their drinking water from the Canoe Brook; and
- Residential neighborhoods surrounding and adjacent to this core forest are flood prone, experience repeated flood events, and exist in the 0.2% annual chance (500-year) FEMA floodplain; and
- Open space properties and parklands downstream from this property contain floodways, and or exist in the 1% annual chance (100-year) FEMA floodplain, and experience repeated flood events; and
- Urban flooding can occur in places that are well outside of mapped floodplains and can be caused by rain falling on increased amounts of impervious surfaces overwhelming the capacity of drainage systems; and
- This forest contains tens of thousands of trees, providing green infrastructure for stormwater

management as well as providing for the absorption of carbon dioxide, the production of oxygen and relief from heat island effect and essential ecological habitat; and

- The proposed removal of untold numbers of trees will exacerbate flooding, degrade the core forest and displace hundreds of native species; and
- The applicant is not adhering to the most current stormwater rules and as such are not planning onsite stormwater management that would act to better protect all surrounding properties.

Given all this, the South Orange Environmental Commission echoes its formal call to the Township of West Orange to reject the proposed 496-unit development on said lands and to preserve the 120 acres of forested land in perpetuity. We will send a copy of this letter to the Township of West Orange Mayor McCartney, the West Orange Council, and the West Orange Planning Board.

Sincerely,  
The South Orange Environmental Commissioners:

Kathleen Grant, *Chair*  
Andy Stone, *Secretary*  
David Kraiker, *Planning Board Representative*  
Julianna Garreffa  
Lorraine Graves  
Larry Hirsch  
Cindy Thompson  
Olivia Lewis-Chang, *Village Council Liaison*



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Kathleen Grant, Chair South Orange Environmental Commission



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Olivia Lewis-Chang, South Orange Village Councilperson