

Watch Hill Fire District

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WATCH HILL FIRE DISTRICT AND THE WATCH HILL CONSERVANCY FILE FOR DECLARATORY JUDGEMENT TO PROTECT FRAGILE NAPATREE POINT CONSERVATION AREA

Highlights Commitment to Public Access;
More than 40,000 Visits to Napatree Point In 2022

Westerly, Rhode Island --May 4, 2023 – After repeated attempts to resolve the longstanding debate over “Fort Road,” the Watch Hill Fire District (WHFD), together with The Watch Hill Conservancy, today filed a complaint in Rhode Island Superior Court seeking to protect the fragile Napatree Point ecosystem by preventing the Town of Westerly from a “taking” that violates property rights and could potentially result in a 20-foot wide road or right of way through the Bay Street parking lots all the way through the Napatree Point dunes. Said a WHFD spokesperson, “The Town’s current efforts are misinformed and misguided and will threaten over 70 acres of conservation property, pedestrian safety, and will result in a loss of public parking. “

“There is a lot of disinformation about Napatree, private property rights and the Fire District’s posture on beach access,” added the spokesperson. “The Fire District has worked for decades financially and otherwise to preserve and protect Napatree and its unique natural environment. At the same time, the public has enjoyed continuous access to this beautiful conservation area. There were well over 40,000 visits to Napatree in 2022 alone. The Fire District has provided the public with access to Napatree Point for decades and will continue to do so in a manner that is consistent with ecological preservation, and subject to laws, statutes, rules and regulations promulgated by the federal government, the State of Rhode Island and the Town of Westerly. No one is denying access.”

“The WHFD has protected this unique natural resource for over fifty years, and The Watch Hill Conservancy has aided in this stewardship since its inception,” continued the spokesperson. “The WHFD, The Watch Hill Conservancy and the local community spend hundreds of thousands of dollars each year maintaining and preserving Napatree Point and supporting respectful visitation by everyone. The conservation efforts are curated with the help of the CRMC, RI DEM, URI, U.S. Fish and Wildlife and many others.”

“It is difficult to understand what the Town wants to accomplish. Westerly residents, and visitors from everywhere, have the exact same access rights to Napatree as Watch Hill residents – who pay taxes both to Westerly and the Fire District.” The spokesperson noted that, in addition to property owned by the WHFD on Napatree, the WHFD owns and operates the historic Flying Horse Merry-Go-Round (with almost 45,000 rides in 2022), provides a public beach with bathhouse facilities next to the Merry-Go-Round (12,000 plus visits in 2022) and maintains a public waterfront park open to all. The WHFD has invested millions of dollars in parking for the public through its purchase and operation of parking lots creating more than 300 spaces. “We provide public restrooms and free public parking for shoppers and diners, not to mention the emergency services our Fire Department provides to residents and visitors alike on land and sea, with over 20% of the annual call volume coming from medical assists and water rescues,” said the spokesperson.

“In 2007, the Town of Westerly’s own title attorney found no evidence to support the notion that Fort Road was or is a town road. The 2008 Town Council resolution ignored that finding and in doing so did not and could not create property rights. These actions by the current Town Council have compelled us to bring this action, which does not infringe upon the public’s access in any way. To the contrary, we seek to preserve and protect the pristine beauty of Napatree Point, meet our commitments to all our dependent constituencies, provide safe pedestrian access and not reduce parking available to the public in our Bay Street lot.”

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