

# Protests target trustees

## Middlesex board urged to curb construction

By Ben Aaronson

Staff writer

Protesters made their voices heard this weekend at two separate demonstrations against the Middlesex School's construction project in Estabrook Woods. Opponent groups Friends of Estabrook Woods and Middlesex Graduates For Estabrook each staged demonstrations directed at the school's Board of Trustees who were meeting in Concord last week.

About 20 members of the Friends of Estabrook Woods patrolled Monument Square late Friday afternoon. Armed with flyers and home-made signs bearing slogans like: "Concord cares about Estabrook Woods" and "Choose to protect what's left" the protesters elicited intermittent honks of support from passing traffic in the busy town center.

"Our message to the trustees is that we want them to stop the development in Estabrook Woods," said Carol Dwyer, who helped organize the demon-

stration. "It's not just a piece of land. It's like a little museum. People are very upset that [the school] would destroy it."

Dwyer argued that much of the land that is now being developed was donated to the school with the expressed condition that it be maintained as protected woods.

"The Middlesex trustees are now going back on that agreement. That's why people are all stirred up about it," she said.

Friday's more conventional protest was followed up on Saturday morning with a more theatrical demonstration by a group of current and former Middlesex students calling themselves Middlesex Graduates For Estabrook. Gathering in front of the dining hall on the Middlesex campus, the protesters staged a mock funeral, complete with a larger than life puppet of Henry David Thoreau who strolled through a cemetery representing all that would be lost if the woods were cut down. Some of the protesters

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Staff photos by Karen Sparacio

Above: Middlesex School students Jon Soalfeld, a junior, and Ed Dujardin, a senior, protest at the school Saturday morning, displaying their disagreement with the school's decision to build new athletic fields using part of Estabrook Woods. At left: Christina Pienta and Molly Tsongas maneuver a giant puppet version of Thoreau through a mock graveyard.



# Protesters send message to school trustees

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dressed all in black, while others donned tree stump outfits and pretended to play tennis, signifying the destruction of the forest to make way for outdoor tennis courts.

"Our goal is to prevent further construction beyond the tennis courts," said MGFE member Molly Tsongas, who graduated in 2000. "We want to give everybody hope and put a fire in their bellies," explained Tsongas, the daughter of late Massachusetts Sen. Paul Tsongas.

This weekend's protests marked the latest round of a battle that has been raging on and off for more than 13 years. The controversy began in the early 1990s when the school proposed a major construction project to build new athletic facilities including eight tennis courts on school-owned land in Estabrook Woods. After many years and many legal challenges, construction finally began in July and is scheduled to continue for the next several years.

Middlesex School Headmaster Kathy Giles said that while she disagrees with the opposition, she respects the passion of their convictions.

"We want to try to respect what they're doing because their hearts are in the right place. We want to teach our kids that even if you don't agree with someone, you still respect them," she said.

Giles, in her third year as headmaster, defended the project, noting that the school has made a number of concessions in response to local concerns.

"We believe the school has come up with a plan that meets

our needs with the lowest possible impact," she said.

According to Giles, through mediation the school agreed to place 119 out of a possible 200 acres of the land under conservation restriction. In addition, Giles said that the school amended the original construction plan to reduce the environmental impact on the surrounding woods, including reducing the size of the access bridge and switching to artificial turf for the athletic fields.

"Although artificial turf doubles the cost of the field project, it virtually eliminates the risk of problems with water run-off containing pesticides and fertilizers," Giles wrote in a recent letter to alumni.

The school began construction on the tennis courts this summer after the amended plan was approved by the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act, a decision that has since been appealed by opposition groups. Giles said that six of the eight tennis courts have been completed, but the school will hold construction of the final two courts pending the outcome of the appeal.

While the project appears to be moving ahead, neither of the opposition groups are ready to give up on their cause just yet.

"Everybody is still just as engaged as they were 13 years ago. It's a real up for us that there's still that much concern," said Dwyer.

As for the MGFE, Tsongas said the ongoing construction will only strengthen their resolve.

"As the trees come down, we're only going to get louder," she said. "This problem won't just go away."