

THE RUMINATOR: DAVID KALISH

A FEW WORDS, WRYLY SPOKEN...

Residents battle to save a green oasis in Clifton Park's commercial heart

By [David Kalish](#) on September 28, 2016 at 10:18 AM



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Just a short distance from Staples, Citizen's Bank, and Moe's Southwest Grill in Clifton Park, I wander the paths of 34 wooded acres. Pine-scented air cools my face. Stately oaks tower over me, as muted sunlight plays across fallen trees. Bird song drowns out the rumble of car traffic.

It's tough to believe I'm just minutes from the bustling commercial heart of eastern Clifton Park. That this green space exists at all—woods and wetlands crammed between Shenendehowa's Shatekon Elementary School, stores and office buildings—feels nearly too good to be true.

Maybe it is.

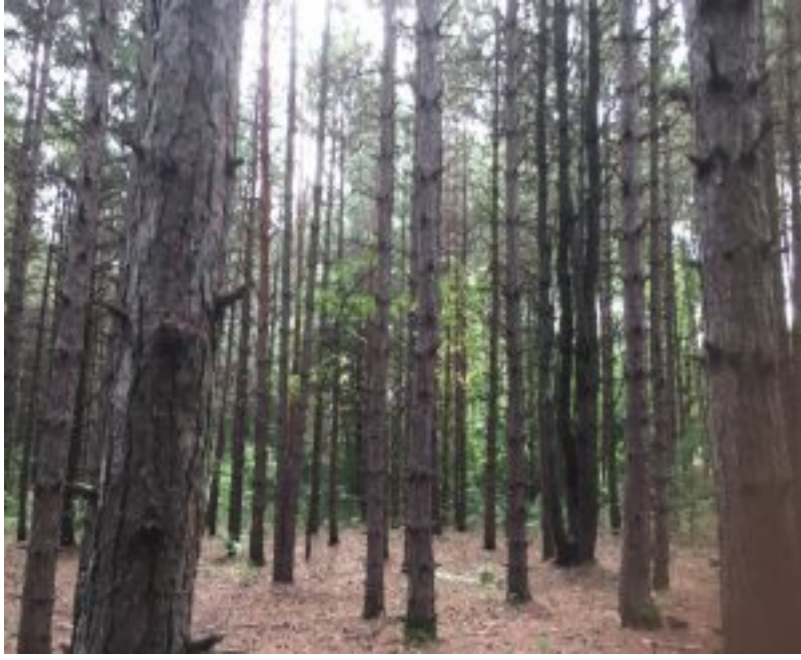
The Shenendehowa School District, which owns this rare wild space, has put the property up for bid, raising the prospect that it could be sold for development and swept aside for yet more parking lots, chain restaurants and office spaces.

Residents and town officials are pushing back. With a petition, letters, and speeches at school board meetings, the residents seek to pressure the school district to make a deal with the town of Clifton Park, which wants to buy the land and make permanent this



Civilization encroaches on this 34-acre wild space in the heart of Clifton Park's commercial district

natural oasis amid commerce.



"It's a beautiful property," says Joe Nial, 79, who lives in the Bentley senior residential apartments, which borders the forest. "I appreciate that I can step off this commercial district I live in and just step right into the forest and enjoy the trees. I've seen fox, wood frog, deer actually – seen them right in my backyard."

The survival of this forest parcel, affectionately dubbed Central Park by advocates, is coming down to the wire. The

deadline for bids is Oct. 30, and the town is worried about its ability to beat other offers. "When you're competing with bidders that are purchasing the property to make money, and we're not, it's a very difficult competitive situation," says Clifton Park supervisor Phil Barrett. "We can't compete with them."

The school district is seeking at least \$1.5 million for the property. "The decision will be based on the same standard for all bidders, looking at the economic value of the package," school board President Robert Pressly told me in an email.

The dispute underscores a thorny challenge facing fast-growing upstate communities as they seek new revenue: shouldn't a public institution, such as a school district, weigh the public value of a taxpayer owned property—not simply how much money it's worth?

The school district hopes to sell the land and use the revenue to buy another property to build a new school, probably in Halfmoon, school district spokeswoman Kelly DeFeciani says. Shenendehowa is hard-pressed to fit more students on its crowded campus in Clifton Park.

It put the property up for bid last year, but the sole bidder, real estate developer DCG Development Co., withdrew its \$1.7 million offer early this year. The town subsequently entered discussions with the school district to buy the property, offering what Barrett describes as a very attractive offer – cash plus a proposed partnership for playing fields on a nearby site– but the deal wasn't enough. Barrett declined to say how much money the town offered. In August, the school district decided to put the property up for bid again.

Advocates, meanwhile, are [circulating a petition](#) through www.change.org that says the public interest is best served by preserving one of the last wild spaces in the heart of Clifton Park. They imagine parkland, instead of another Dunkin Donuts or Panera. A place to sit on a bench in the shade, or blow off steam by taking a tranquil walk in the woods. A space located just minutes from shopping and offices. You could grab a burrito at Moe's and eat it under the trees amid the song of birds.



David Kalish:
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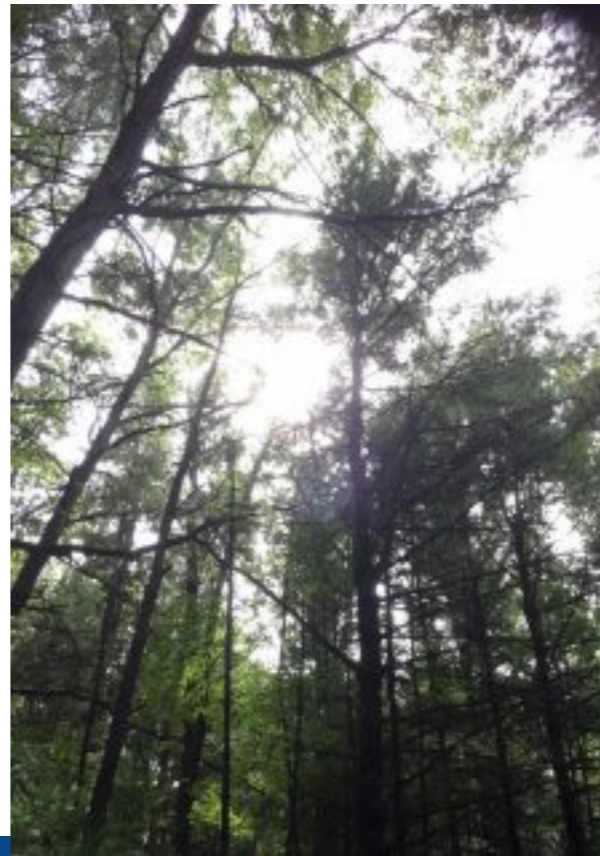
"We are trying to generate public interest in urging the school board and town board to work together to keep this parcel in the public domain," says Susan Burton, of [Friends of Clifton Park Open Space](#), a citizen's group. Dense development in this part of town "makes an open space park all that more valuable. It adds to the diversity of the district, and adds to the economic viability of the places that are there."

Adding 34 acres of green space would be another notch in the town of Clifton Park's Open Space initiative, which has permanently preserved 1,300 acres of green space as land elsewhere in the town has been gobbled up by development.

Richard Cipperly, an upstate forestry consultant, says the 34-acre forest would be an ideal laboratory for Shenendehowa students to explore the natural world, a refreshing change from the virtual high-tech learning that pervades schools nowadays.

"How does the school district know what taxpayers want? Did they have focus groups?" he wonders. "The sale would bring one-time money—a few school buses and it's all gone. It's better to get opinions from taxpayers who own it and say, what do you think we should do with it?"

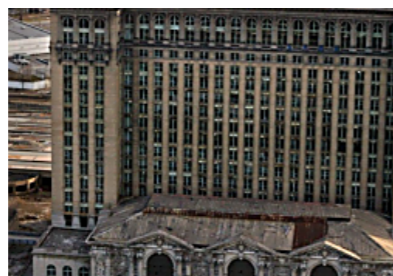
David Kalish writes essays, novels, and plays. His essay, "A Path to Fatherhood, With Morning Sickness," appeared in The New York Times. He is the author of The Opposite of Everything, a novel that's a romantic comedy and cancer story rolled into one.



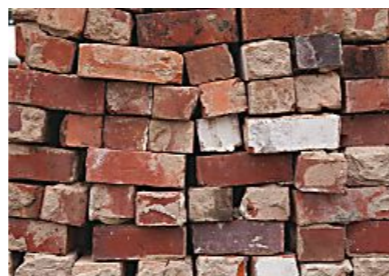
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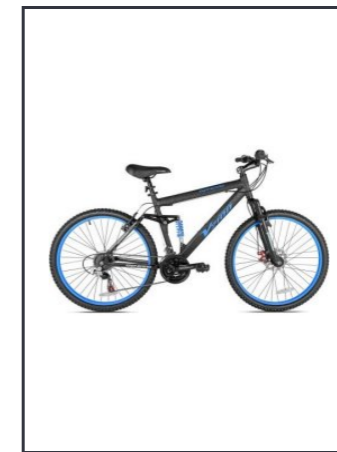


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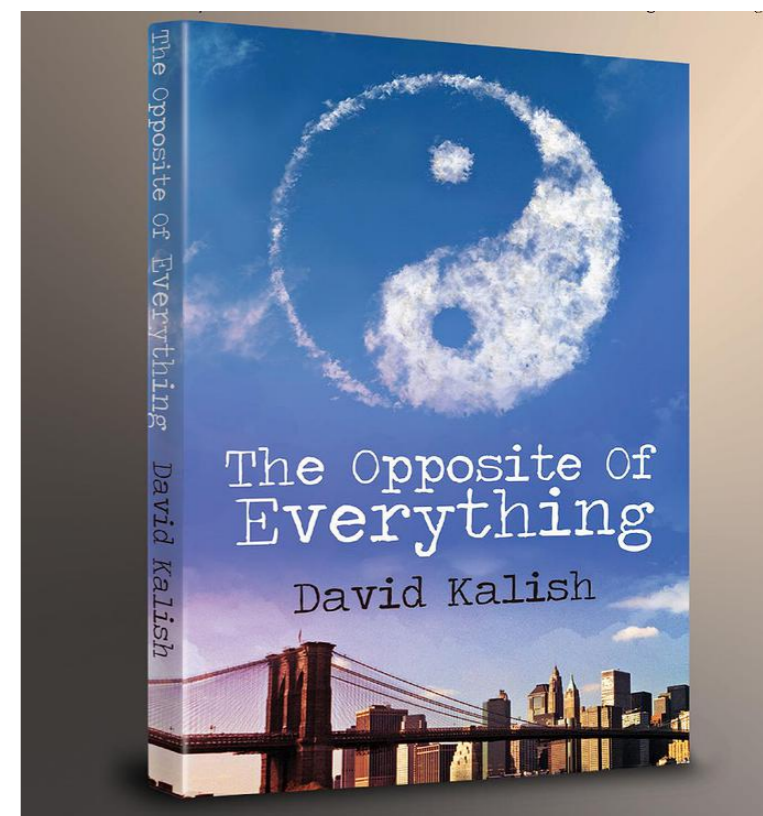
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September 28, 2016 at 11:55 am

The school district is rather shortsighted. Instead of trying to garner a relative few pennies (considering school budgets these days) the land should not only be left in its pristine state, but used for teaching purposes-to give students a real-life lesson in the wonders of nature. After all, learning about the world in a stuffy classroom, however new or spiffy the school or its resources are, cannot begin to match the wonders to be discovered in a suburban surround, in this case, of all places, right next door. When it comes to creativity, public officials too often have long demonstrated a gross lack of stewardship in how and where taxpayers' funds are used. Let's hope the district has an epiphany and does the right thing here.

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