Opinion

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Students, stop UConn's proposed golf facility

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We count ourselves lucky to spend our college lives at UConn. Life treats us well — we are given the remarkable chance to pursue both ample opportunities in recreation and academia, all within the confines of the picturesque woods of Storrs, Connecticut. It is these woods, and the Fenton River tract which feeds it, that we can credit our positive experience. From this river forms a critical watershed: one which provides a pristine habitat for the deer, groundhogs and salmon that our land is known for. Moreso, it is one that grows our crops and fills our wells. In fact, UConn sources its water directly from the watershed, bringing water from the Fenton River's banks to our drinking cups.



The Fenton River Tract in Mansfield, Conn. Despite controversy, UConn has continued to push foward a new golf facility.
PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSHUA'S TRUST ON FACEBOOK

Despite the bountiful providence that our river provides us, the university's administration would see it threatened. They have proposed clearing nearly seven football fields worth of these woods in favor of building a new million-dollar golf facility exclusively for our men's team. The construction of the facility, however, threatens our community's safety. It is our responsibility, and our self-interest, to prevent it from being built.

The site of the proposed golf facility lays uphill from the Fenton River. Already, the land suffers from erosion issues. Clearing cutting the area would result in a total failure of the topsoil's structural stability. Rain runoff would sweep loose sediment into Mansfield resident's wells, not only sullying the drinking water of countless local residents but causing potentially irreparable damage to well systems. Any sediment not caught within innocent wells would travel further downhill into the Fenton River, where it would end up in our cups and pipes.

The plight of Mansfield residents' safety is further exacerbated by the nature of the land UConn seeks to clear. The area is home to numerous natural springs, which feed the Fenton River. If the administration is allowed to bulldoze the area, the flow paths of these springs would be interrupted. This would dramatically increase flood risks to the region, putting countless people at risk of injury or property destruction. These floods, coupled with increased erosion, could cause housing foundations downhill from the site to collapse. Damages could quickly reach millions. Is UConn prepared to pay the cost of these damages? Will men's golf ticket sales be able to make back these costs? It seems unlikely.

The threat of erosion is not just limited to loose dirt and rainwater. Golf courses are known for their intensive lawn care management. At their most basic levels, they require large amounts of nitrogen-rich fertilizer. When faced with the threat of rain runoff, excess fertilizer is swept into waterways, leading to toxic algae growth that poisons the water in a process known as eutrophication. Worse, runoff from golf courses is often accompanied by other pollutants, aside from fertilizer. Too often, golf ranges employ heavy use of both weedkillers and pesticides to maintain their unnaturally picturesque green carpeting. If let loose into the Fenton River, the consequences would be catastrophic. Not only would our ecosystem be torn asunder, with flora and fauna alike dying en masse, but both Mansfield's and UConn's drinking water could be severely contaminated. What would result would be a public health crisis unseen in decades.

Huskies, we cannot expect our administration to act on our behalf without cause.

Already, they have gone behind the backs of Mansfield residents to push ahead their project. In one instance, the university set the deadline for public comment less than a week after the meeting for the initial proposal. Members of the community were given little to no notice of the planned facility and were thus unable to properly defend their lands and drinking waters from the administration's expansion.

The university has shown callous disregard for the environmental consequences of its decisions. The administration failed to meet its February deadline to procure its legally mandated environmental impact statement on the potential damages of its proposal on the surrounding landscape. No official rescheduling has been made by the university's environmental consulting firm, though a spokesperson for the university stated that a post-scoping notice would be made available in April. Halfway through the month, no such notice has been provided. It would not be out of line to believe the university's tardiness to be an attempt at concealing damaging information.

Still, our university's refusal to consider the impact of its proposal on us does not mean we are without hope. This is not the first time UConn's lands have come under threat from the administration's disregard. In 1999, the university attempted to pave over Horsebarn Hill in favor of a Pfizer pharmaceutical plant. In 2001, our historic Jacobson Barn was almost torn down when the university sought to "renovate" the far region of campus. Both times, UConn students joined together to preserve the land they loved.

A similar course of action lies before us now. Huskies, it's up to us to make it known that we oppose the university's ill-informed proposal for a new golf facility. Do not let our university's administration speak for us. Contact our administration and let them know of your opposition to this catastrophic plan. An informational meeting will be held at the Mansfield Public Library April 20, at 6 P.M. Attend it. We cannot allow the wants of a team of nine golfers to overtake the needs, rights and protections of our lands and people. Huskies: the need for student activism and outcry has never been higher. Act now.

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