



## THE GARDEN CONSERVANCY

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December 21, 2022

Dr. Khalid N. Mumin  
Superintendent of Schools  
Lower Merion School District  
301 E. Montgomery Avenue  
Ardmore, PA 19003-3399

Dear Superintendent Mumin:

The Garden Conservancy, the nation's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving, sharing, and celebrating outstanding American gardens for the education and inspiration of the public, joins a growing number of organizations and individuals who oppose the demolition of the environmentally sensitive and historic 13-acre property in Villanova known as Oakwell Estate to build student athletic and activity fields.

In 2018, the Conservancy opposed the use of eminent domain by the Lower Merion School District to acquire all or part of the historic 42-acre Stoneleigh estate. This property, whose design represents the longest, continuous involvement of the Olmsted Brothers, one of the most influential landscape architecture firms in the mid-19th century, was saved.

In 1919, a portion of the Stoneleigh estate that included auxiliary garden structures and landscape features designed by celebrated Philadelphia-based architect Frank Miles Day, was subdivided to become Oakwell Estate. Later, in 1922, architect William Wayne, Jr. designed a mansion for Oakwell Estate that is currently locally designated as a Class II Historic Structure. The Oakwell Estate is also an environmentally sensitive area with over 500 heritage trees. According to the Lower Merion Conservancy, [Oakwell Estate] "still retains landmark plantings [by the Olmsted Brothers] that define spaces on the property."

Due to its historic association with Stoneleigh, the integrity of extant garden structures and landscape features, and its association with notable American architects and landscape architects, the entirety of the Oakwell Estate warrants additional protections. As a preservationist and leader of an organization dedicated to preserving gardens, I strongly feel as the leader of a national organization that works to preserve historic American green spaces and as a trained architect and landscape architect, that the historic and cultural significance of this site must be preserved for current and future generations.

In conjunction with Stoneleigh, the Oakwell estate property presents immense potential for collaboration with local school groups, universities, and other organizations to create new heritage tourism opportunities and educational opportunities in historic preservation, environmental science, as well as conservation, sustainability, gardening, and social studies. These opportunities for learning would benefit students of all ages and the greater community.

While The Garden Conservancy recognizes that occasionally, school districts need to expand their physical footprints to meet community needs, we believe it necessary to do so in a way that does not deny residents and students of Lower Merion and the broader region the shared history of this cultural landscape and the benefits that would be gained from its preservation. The destruction of a unique, one-of-a-kind historic treasure with far-reaching educational, economic, and community growth opportunities should not be overlooked in this process.

We urge you to reconsider your position and take into greater consideration the alternatives proposed by Lower Merion Conservancy and other groups that would preserve the property's historic buildings, landscape features, and historical significance while also reinvigorating the site for use by current and future generations.

Sincerely,



James Brayton Hall  
President & CEO  
The Garden Conservancy