Walpole Conservation Commission, Walpole, New Hampshire

This letter was presented to the Walpole NH Planning Board, November 10, 2026. The issue will be discussed at the Walpole NH Zoning Board meeting, town hall, 7pm, November 18.

We are addressing River Valley Natural Burial's request to develop a natural burial cemetery west of route 12, across from Bensonwood. We present environmental concerns herein, which show how the proposed site is inappropriate for natural burials, and why it should not be granted any exemption to our town's zoning ordinance. We are NOT offering an opinion about natural burials per se.

• It lies within the well protection zone of Bensonwood's well, servicing over 100 people.

• The top layer of soil, Agawam fine sandy loam, was deposited on the underlying clay from flooding thousands of years ago. Clay has a very low permeation rate. Water moves through the loam until it hits the clay, where it can't move vertically very easily, so it moves horizontally, the path of least resistance. Natural graves need to be dug within the upper level of soil in order to allow ready decomposition. Clay, with its low level of permeability, does not allow timely enough decomposition to avoid soil and water contamination. Clay soil swells and shrinks continually, creating openings and subsidence.

• The property is higher than the surrounding land. Water will percolate along the clay, transport leachate from the bodies to downhill farms of several abutters, contaminate their crops and wells, flow into the many underground springs, and eventually into the Connecticut River.

• **There are multiple potential risk factors.**

1. Groundwater may be contaminated with biochemical products of decomposition, pathogens, and pharmaceutical products. In highly permeable soil, there is efficient decomposition mitigating many of these risks. (Our town cemetery has soil suited to natural burials.)

2. There is uncertainty regarding virus survival outside the human host.

3. Other microorganisms are longer lived, and may survive in soil profiles or groundwater systems. The risks associated with pathogen transport in the soil are substantial.
For example, an outbreak of foot and mouth, and avian, influenza resulted in the burial of cattle, swine, and poultry carcasses. A subsequent study of groundwater contamination identified fecal coliforms and E. coli.

4. The shallow burials required for thorough decomposition are at risk of disturbance from scavenging animals, such as coyotes and foxes.

5. Decomposition in low permeable soils that are easily waterlogged, and become anaerobic, can be increased to decades.

6. The reduction of burial depth in natural, burial compared to standard practice, may increase gaseous exchange and increase connectivity of the decomposing cadaver to surface biology.

All of this is to substantiate our objections to allowing natural burials on the proposed location.

Respectfully,

The Walpole Conservation Commission
PS References follow

References pertaining to the Walpole Conservation Commission's letter of November 9, 2026, objecting to River Valley Natural Burial's request for allowing a natural burial cemetery on their chosen site, west of route 12, across from Bensonwood.

1. Town of Walpole's zoning ordinance of 2025

2. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0929139323003980
…As the body is not embalmed in preservatives, nutrients (for example nitrogen and phosphorus) within the decomposing body will be returned to the natural environment at greater rates. These bioavailable nutrients may benefit flora and fauna within the local habitat through increased nutrient acquisition; however, there is also a risk that the nutrients enter the groundwater as a source of diffuse pollution. There are also risks of environmental contamination from human pathogens and pharmaceuticals, although there has been little research into these risks. With the COVID pandemic, for example, there is uncertainty regarding virus survival outside the human host…

3. NH Cemetery Legislation

4. NH Dept. of Health

5. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0045653522025188
Direct contamination of toxic organic contaminants (TOCs)…

6. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S004896971834659X
Microbial life beyond the grave: 16S rRNA gene-based metagenomic analysis of bacteria diversity and their functional profiles in cemetery environments…

7. https://www.naccho.org/uploads/blog/nacchoessentials/Environmental-Health-Implications-of-Green-Burials-K.-Koepenick-Balt-Co-DOH-11-7-18.pdf…