



Teen Center of Wilton

April 5, 2020

To: Wilton Board of Finance
Wilton Board of Selectmen

Re: Appeal of Trackside Teen Center of Wilton's Proposed Town Funding Cut for FY21

Dear Board Members:

We are reaching out to you today to appeal the funding cut to Trackside Teen Center of Wilton as presented in the Board of Selectmen's proposed FY21 Town Budget. When social distancing needs abate and school resumes, we believe Trackside is going to be even more important to the health and safety of the Wilton Teen community.

Over 17 years ago, a group of Wilton Citizens and the Board of Selectmen came together to work out what was then Wilton's first Public/Private Partnership. These efforts, which lasted multiple years, resulted in what today we all know as Trackside, Teen Center of Wilton. For the past 15 years, Trackside has taken great pride in serving Wilton's Middle School and High School aged students, ensuring that they always have a safe place to socialize, gather, explore new interests and make new friends. While participation in Trackside has varied through the years, we are now positioned for meaningful growth due to the passion and efforts of new staff members and new Board leadership with a renewed sense of purpose and passion.

While we're aware of the discussions regarding a push for Trackside to become self-sustaining, we did not expect to face a drastic cut in our funding from the Town of Wilton.

Over the past 4 years, we've devoted a notable amount of energy and effort in researching and enacting programs to increase our fundraising capacity while also ensuring that we first and foremost are using our resources to service Wilton's teens. As we've shared on multiple occasions, we currently do not see a path, certainly not in the near future, where Trackside can be self-sustaining AND serve our primary mission of being there for Wilton's teens.

This is not through lack of effort on Trackside's part, or because of lack of need for the Teen Center by the community. Organizationally, over 70% of our Director's time is spent on facility maintenance and fundraising, including managing the extensive and growing rental side of the organization. **Trackside's facility rentals benefit over 3000 residents from Wilton and surrounding communities each year.** We support more than a dozen of Wilton's fellow nonprofits, High School and Youth sporting groups along with many of the town's departments with low and no cost rentals each year, simply ensuring that we cover the costs to keep the facility open for their events.

We also provide an affordable and memorable place for many community members, both teens and adults, to celebrate life's significant milestones. At the time of our closure due to CoVid-19, Trackside, with Board Leadership, had held 4 of our 6 fundraising activities this year, one every other month. This included the Wilton Food Truck Festival, which brought together over 3000 community members and our sold out 80s Night in February.

From a community standpoint, over this past year, we have been there for over 600 Wilton public, private and homeschooled students, as an after-school program, as a safe place to socialize on Friday nights and as the base of operations for Wilton Safe Rides. A significant portion of Trackside's constituents are teens who may not be part of as many structured programs and activities as their peers and have the unbridled energy of teens that need a constructive outlet. Our conversations and observations indicate that many of these teens may find more satisfaction in less structured environments, where they can engage in and flow between different activities and peer groups.

Trackside's approach to blending free play and programming in a dedicated facility, enables us to uniquely support these teens with an atmosphere where they can feel safe, comfortable and able to release energy while engaging with friends. Doing so at a low cost to the families also ensures that ALL of Wilton's teens are able to participate without worry about financial needs or constraints.

Through the years, Trackside's Boards and Staff have discussed and investigated different paths and options to decrease our dependence on funding from the Town. As part of our efforts, we also reached out to some of the original Trackside

founders to better understand how funding the organization was envisioned. What we now understand from conversations with co-founder Keith Overland and founding member, Colleen Fauwcett is that Trackside was, in fact, celebrated as Wilton's first Public/Private partnership and was, at the time, never envisioned to be self-sustaining. The public/private partnership, solidified by ensuring the Board of Selectmen always has a seat(s) on Trackside's Board along with the Operating Agreement between Trackside and the Town. This agreement ensures the town has the ability to continue to support Trackside and provides guidance as to how this support should be calculated each year. In the Operating Agreement, the Town is permitted to fund Trackside up to our direct personnel costs each fiscal year. It is our understanding from these founding members, that from the onset, the plan and agreement was structured to ensure that the lean staffing model remained focused on servicing the teens and maintaining the facility rather than expending the significant time and energy that would be required to raise the funds needed to sustain the organization independently. We additionally have a 30 year ground lease for our facility and land, which further supports that this was envisioned to be a long duration partnership in support of Wilton's teens. Then, today and for years to come.

As we make this appeal, we also must raise our added concerns with the financial impact of CoVid-19 on Trackside. Due to our close connection with the Wilton Public Schools, we were included in the urgent and immediate closure of all school facilities on March 11. In addition to cancelling our programs, we also had to cancel rental events and multiple large fundraisers. This revenue was intended to support Trackside through early FY21. We have estimated our lost revenue to be approximately \$37,500 from mid-March through mid to late summer.

This loss in revenue, coupled with the proposed \$33,000 town funding cut will have a significant and potentially catastrophic impact on Trackside.

We have taken many steps to reduce our costs during our closure and have applied for all of the SBA and DECD loans and programs currently available. We have also applied for multiple emergency grants, including reaching out to existing grantors to share our need to revise our grant proposals if they are able to permit it.

We also have not stopped servicing the Teens and the families of Teens during this closure. We have identified and are offering multiple webinars in lieu of in-person events we would have held this spring and are working with our program instructors to develop virtual versions of some of our more popular programs. We remain passionate about supporting Wilton's teens in the unique way that we can, as supporters, as confidants and as mentors to the kids who have come to depend on us.

For the past 2 years, Trackside received \$98,000 in Town Funding each year, the lowest funding in our 15+ year history. In FY21, our projected direct personnel costs are projected to be \$153,000, covering 1 Full-time Director, 1 Part-time Programming Director, 1 Part-time Custodian and 1 Part-time Program Supervisor. The very minimum it takes to run the day to day operations of Trackside.

We humbly ask the Board of Finance and Board of Selectmen to reconsider the funding cut and reinstate Trackside's funding to at least \$98,000.

This funding will offer Trackside a realistic and fighting chance to withstand the impact of the CoVid-19 closure and be there for Wilton's teens and the broader community as we all strive to recover, together.

Thank you and we wish each of you and your families health in these unusual and trying times.

Forrest Close
President

John Wyman
Vice President

Lori Fields
Secretary

Cindy Moser
Director, Development & Operations

John Priest
Director, Programming

*Stay abreast of our teen and community programs and events on our website
(www.trackside.org) and follow us on social media!*