The Eastwick Property

The Eastwick Property, owned and maintained by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, is at first glance not particularly interesting. Mainly overgrown with non-native invasive species, this site was a planned housing development that ran into issues because of its history.

At the time Philadelphia was settled, this property was deep in Tinicum Marsh, which covered an estimated 10 and 20 square miles (6,400-12,800 acres). Shortly after settlement, the area was diked to restrict tidal flow to allow for agricultural use and this is how it remained until the early 1900s. Around this time the area began to be filled with various materials resulting from Philadelphia’s growth including dirt, trash, and building remains. However, as a historic tidal marsh, the site has issues with settling and stability. Beyond that, the entire site is within either the FEMA 100-year or 500-year floodplain.

These problems and various legal issues have prevented the redevelopment of the Eastwick Property into an urban hardscape. With this hold on redevelopment, the site has reverted to a wild, if weedy, landscape that is supporting two plant species of concern. These two species, field dodder (Cuscuta pentagona) and forked rush (Juncus dichotomus) are both residents of disturbed areas and do well in this environment. These species likely originated in the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, which the property abuts on both its south and west sides.

Today very little of Tinicum Marsh is left (approximately 200 acres) and what remains is contained within John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge. Because this site shares so much border with the Refuge it acts as a buffer against the continued development within the Eastwick Neighborhood. Development of this site would remove the last buffer between developed areas and the Refuge, further alter the already highly modified hydrology of the site, and remove any chance for the future expansion or remediation of historic Tinicum Marsh.

This habitat also acts as one of the last remaining large areas of unfragmented scrub or shrubland habitat in Philadelphia. This habitat is important to birds throughout the year with different species using it at different times of the year. During the breeding season it can host bird species common to grasslands and edge habitat; during migration it can host most migratory passerines; during the winter is can host species common to the tundra and steppe habitats. This allows the site to act as not only a buffer to an exceptionally important natural area, but to offer habitat to a diverse suite of different birds throughout the year.

Threats and Disturbances
The greatest threat to this site is its conversion to a developed landscape. Beyond that the sites is almost completely dominated by invasive non-native species. Additionally, the sites has numerous active illegal dumping sites on it along with 100+ years of fill and refuse, and some areas of gray infrastructure from the original development attempt.
Conservation and Restoration Recommendations

This site should be added to the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge as a buffer against further development. Because of the site’s lack of elevation above sea-level and proximity to rivers it is entirely within the FEMA 100- and 500-year floodplains. This suggests that development of the site may be prohibitively difficult and expensive, and be ecologically damaging. A better and less expensive option could be the transformation of the site into a large, green gateway to the refuge inviting enhanced use by the public through biking and walking trails connecting the nearby Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) station on S. 84th Street to refuge facilities. This would allow for increased access not only from Philadelphia proper, but open up access, via train connections, to the rest of the East Coast and potentially spur local economic redevelopment.

Ecologically, this area is almost a blank slate. The plant species of concern found on the site are likely “common” throughout the adjacent wildlife refuge and the predominance of non-native invasive species within the site may also be acting as a seed reservoir. This could cause the continual reinfection of the refuge thereby diminishing attempts to mitigate non-native invasives species.

This should not be seen to suggest that the site, in its current state, is lacking ecological value. The buffer from development the site offers is extremely important. Additionally, the safe-haven the site provides to birds is of incalculable value. If this site were lost to development these species might be left with no appropriate habitat within the city.

This suggests that a restoration plan for the site could be very aggressive in scope and extent. Restoration of a mix of newly created tidal wetlands intermixed with shrubland and meadow habitat would allow for an extensive network of trails with vistas of both the wetland land within the refuge and the skyline of downtown Philadelphia.