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**Group Kicks Off Fund-raising Campaign To Purchase Land In Oswegatchie Hills**

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East Lyme — A local nonprofit group has taken several steps toward its goal of helping the town and cooperating organizations buy land in the Oswegatchie Hills to preserve as open space.

On Thursday The Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve announced it has kicked off its capital campaign. That announcement followed a Monday visit to Hartford to testify in favor of a bill to set aside state money for land in the Hills.

The Friends, a nonprofit group, wants to raise \$2 million in private funding to match equal amounts from state and federal sources and from the town of East Lyme. First Selectman Wayne Fraser said last fall that he would ask residents to approve spending \$2 million on preservation efforts in the Oswegatchie Hills.

The capital campaign will help the organization buy a 65-acre parcel that belongs to Benajah Farms Limited Partnership of Waterford. In December, The Friends signed an option to buy the property for \$290,000. The option agreement calls for the group to close on the property by the end of March.

The Friends group is part of the public-private Partnership for Preservation that formed to buy and preserve land in the Hills. The Friends also announced Thursday that its membership has grown from 12 to 350 people since November.

Together with the Trust for Public Land (TPL) — a national nonprofit that helps small organizations raise money and negotiate for land conservation — the Friends will approach landowners in the Hills on behalf of the partnership.

Michael Dunn, Friends vice president, said he has walked some of the land with TPL representatives.

Dunn said TPL may suggest the partnership apply for a federal Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program grant.

The Friends will give a presentation to the Board of Selectmen at 6:30 p.m. March 2 on a plan to split the purchase of the Benajah property. The presentation will also involve how to raise money and buy land and how the Friends plan to contribute to the partnership.