

April 12, 2005

The Day, New London, Connecticut

EL Voters Approve \$2 Million In Open-space Funds For The 'Hills'

By KARIN CROMPTON

Day Staff Writer, Lyme/Old Lyme

East Lyme —With many supporters vowing the town would not repeat its past mistakes, voters at a special town meeting on Monday night overwhelmingly approved spending up to \$2 million to buy and preserve open space in town.

Although the money can be used to buy land anywhere in town, the focus will be on purchasing land in the Oswegatchie Hills, a 700-acre expanse of woodlands that borders the Niantic River.

About 300 people attended the meeting, held in the high-school auditorium. Only two or three people voted no in the voice vote.

Immediately after the motion passed, the room erupted into cheers, hollers, and whistles. Half the room stood and applauded, while others hugged and pumped their fists.

“You could feel it here tonight — this was a community, it was everybody,” said Marvin Schutt, president of the nonprofit group Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve. “Previous times, there wasn't the unification of communication and of desire.”

Many people who want to preserve the Hills have lamented the town's failure to buy a key chunk of land there 18 years ago. In 1987, the town received a \$1 million state grant to help it buy land in the Hills, but East Lyme failed to use the grant and the state repealed it in 1989.

Now, that same property belongs to developer Glenn Russo, who owns Landmark Development LLC of Middletown. Russo either owns or has the option to buy 230 acres in the northern end of the Hills and has twice applied to the town to build market-rate condominiums and affordable housing units there.

The town has twice denied Russo's applications and Russo responded each time by appealing the decision in Superior Court. The court upheld the town's decision in the first appeal, and the second is pending.

Russo also has a federal discrimination lawsuit pending against the town, the zoning and the water and sewer commissions, and four town officials. In it, he claims that the denial to allow the development of affordable housing was racially motivated.

“If we had done this back in (1987), in hindsight now, Oswegatchie Hills would have been preserved,” First Selectman Wayne Fraser said Monday after the vote.

Monday's approval is considered key to a partnership effort to buy as much land as possible in the Hills and preserve it as open space.

The town is one entity in the “Partnership for Preservation,” a public-private group formed in October to work together to buy and preserve hundreds of acres of land in the Hills.

The partnership's members include nonprofit groups and town and state officials. The goal is for each of four segments — the town, state and federal governments, and private entities — to commit \$2 million toward open space purchases for a total of \$8 million.

In January, the state legislature's environment committee unanimously approved a bill authorizing \$2 million in funds for open space purchases in East Lyme. The bill is currently in the finance committee as a bond bill.

Partnership representatives have repeatedly said that the state and federal government will not ante up money if the town doesn't first show its commitment.

“It helps an awful lot because it shows the commitment on the part of a community to match the state's contribution,” state Sen. Andrea Stillman, D-Waterford, said by phone Monday afternoon. Stillman authored the bill along with state Rep. Ed Jutila, D-East Lyme, and state Rep. Betsy Ritter, D-Waterford. “That's something that the state's always looking for, is a commitment from the community. Certainly the action they take (Monday) will be important towards expressing that commitment,” Stillman said.

The money approved Monday would be bonded, with the town borrowing as needed. Each time the town or another entity wants to use the money, the purchase would need to be approved by voters at a town meeting.

Fraser said the first proposal will be to spend \$145,000 to pay for half the cost of a 65-acre parcel in the Hills that the Friends group bought on March 31.