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# \$2 Million OK'd for Oswegatchie Hills

## Open space funds still need finance board, voter approval

By Julie Wernau

Times Staff Writer

East Lyme — At a Board of Selectmen meeting last week, the

board voted unanimously to bond up to \$2 million for open space preservation.

The funding is the town's share of a "Partnership for Preservation" among federal, state and local governments and private preservation groups that aim to turn about 700 acres in Oswegatchie Hills into a nature preserve. Each party has

agreed to raise at least \$2 million toward that goal.

Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, a non-profit group based in East Lyme, have already raised \$300,000 in private contributions toward its goal of \$2 million, said Marvin Schutt, the group's president. "I'm speechless," Schutt said of a

decision he and Vice President Mike Dunn have waited five years to hear.

The \$2 million must next pass the Board of Finance and Town Meeting for approval.

The group has an option to buy 65 acres owned by Alan Gardiner, moderator of Waterford's Representative Town Meeting. It plans to close on the property later this month at

around \$290,000, and has asked the town to foot half the bill.

Friends has been in touch with the Trust for Public Land, an agency working pro bono to obtain the federal government's share in the partnership in the form of grant monies, many of which must go directly to local or state government for eligibility.

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A view of the Oswegatchie Hills overlooking the Niantic River in East Lyme. Day file photo

# Oswegatchie Hills Preservation Gets a Boost

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Schutt said for each piece of land handed over to the town, Friends will request a permanent conservation easement in Friends' name at closing in order to prevent the town from changing their mind about preservation as power changes hands this fall.

"There could be a parcel on the fringe somewhere that the Board of Selectmen wants to look at for something else," said First Selectman Wayne Fraser, arguing that his overall goal is preservation.

At the state level, a bill to bond \$2 million for Oswegatchie Hills is out of committee and pending approval.

"We're not really concerned who gets it," Fraser said, "as long as we get it and it's preserved."

At a public hearing last week,

some residents expressed their concerns that public funds were being used for what they see as a private interest.

After Friends' members brought forward 1,700 names signed to a parade-sized banner at the meeting and another 600 names signed to another petition for preservation, resident John Drabik criticized the group's claim for public need.

"If these people feel that solidly about it, they can do it the old-fashioned way. They can cough up \$1,000 a piece," he said.

Drabik argued that Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve and Save the River, Save the Hills, a Waterford-based group with similar aims, are made up of residents interested in preserving land in their back yards, mocking

the latter as "Save the River, Save the Crows."

"Everybody's talking about how beautiful it is. The whole town's beautiful," he said. "The rest of the town's being raped and pillaged."

Robert Young, who lives at 47 Quarry Dock Road, defended the claim of public need for Oswegatchie Hills, saying that not only was Oswegatchie Hills in his backyard, but that the effect of development on the Niantic River had potential to impact Long Island Sound and the ocean.

"This is not just about saving the Hills," he said.

Friends of the Hills say they envision hiking trails, cross-country skiing, biking and bird watching in the Hills.

"These people who signed the petition would not be the only ones

who would be able to use the property," Schutt said.

Landmark, LLC Principal Glenn Russo's application to bring affordable housing to the Hills is under appeal after the town's Planning and Zoning Commission turned down his proposal this January. He owns 85 acres and has an option to buy another 150 acres.

Schutt said Friends has tried to get Russo's land for a price, but that time and again the price is "too high." So far, only 130 acres owned by East Lyme Land Conservation Trust are destined for preservation.

Fraser has stated that each parcel would be bonded separately, up to \$2 million, and that the town could use the money to purchase other open space in town, not just in Oswegatchie Hills.