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Commentary: **This Rugged Land is No Place for Houses**

By Dennis J. Murphy, Jr.

If ever there was a place that nature intended not to be developed, the east slope of the Oswegatchie Hills in East Lyme is that place. Nowhere I know of is the land less suitable for construction, the natural resources on and adjacent to the land more susceptible to damage, and the public benefits to be gained from greater.

To get that point across. Though, finding a way to save this valuable land from development has been a story in frustration.

This past week, *The Day* reported that a joint study of the East Lyme Planning and Zoning commissions has recommended rezoning about 500 acres of undeveloped land in Oswegatchie Hills from one acre to three acre. Residential. This proposal which also includes provisions for clustering home sites in order to create the most open space, is the third rezoning proposal to be brought forth since 1983. It follows on East Lyme's unsuccessful attempt to persuade Waterford to join with us in forming a Gateway Commission, which would have had greater than normal powers to limit and direct the use of land surrounding the upper Niantic River.

The entire eastern slope of Oswegatchie Hills, extending from Route 161 in Niantic north to the Golden Spur at the head of the Niantic River, is untouched except for a string or single family houses fronting Oswegatchie Hills and Quarry Dock Roads.

Between the end of Quarry Dock Road and Golden Spur lies almost a mile of pristine waterfront, one of the longest reaches undeveloped coastal estuary remaining in the state of Connecticut.

The Eastern slope, which drains directly into the Niantic River and Smith Cove is generally very steep and the land is dominated by exposed bedrock and by Hollis soils, where bedrock is found at a depth of about 17 inches. Road construction, the installation of septic systems, and the site development for foundations under these conditions would require extensive grading, blasting and placement of imported fill. Even with the best available erosion control measures in place, major sedimentation into the Niantic River and Smith Cove is expected. It should be obvious that the severity of this will be directly proportional to the density of development permitted.

Although the greatest effect would be seen during construction, sediment loading would continue after houses are built and occupied, and septic system effluent and lawn fertilizer run-off would add nutrients to the estuary. We have already seen the effects of development on Smith Cove. where a multi-million dollar dredging program is proposed as the temporary solution to the loss of water depth from sedimentation, proliferation of algal growth from nutrient loading and closure to shell fishing.

A recent scientific study commissioned by the Waterford-East Lyme Shellfish Commission on the disappearance of eelgrass from the Niantic River and the consequent reduction in the scallop harvest, places part of the blame on turbidity and loss of water clarity caused by sedimentation and nutrient run-off from the development that already exists.

It has been argued that Oswegatchie Hills could be developed in an environmentally sound manner if the town would relax development standards for such things as road width and drainage and would extend municipal sewers into the area. As to the former. I doubt the Planning Commission would abandon its subdivision standards to facilitate the development of an area it has recommended open space preservation in three successive Plans of Development stretching back to 1968.

As chairman of the East Lyme Water and Sewer Commission, I can say unequivocally that I would never recommend that the eastern slope of Oswegatchie Hills be sewered. The entire intent and direction of our municipal sewage system construction is to correct existing sewage disposal problems by servicing areas already developed; not to open up new areas. If sewer service is ever provided to any portion of Oswegatchie Hills, it becomes inevitable that the entire area will one day be sewered and developed at high density, The Department of Environmental Protection has made it clear to us that sewerage Oswegatchie Hills would be contrary to the policies of the Coastal Area Management Act and will not be

permitted; I agree completely with this position.

The rezoning proposal referred to at the opening of this article reflects the concept that if the eastern slope of Oswegatchie Hills is to be developed, it must be done at low density, with large areas of open spaces preserved. I believe that this approach offers owners of property within that area a reasonable use of their land, consistent with its ability to support development.

However, the best use of Oswegatchie Hills is not for houses. It should be preserved as open space, for the public, forever. Two years ago, with the help of our representatives in Hartford, a \$1 million bonding authorization was passed for acquisition of land in Oswegatchie Hills. Unfortunately, that amount is woefully inadequate, and considering the current state fiscal crisis, it is highly unlikely that it will be supplemented.

The owner of the waterfront land has optioned his property to a development company. Still, so that the owners may be fairly compensated, we are hopeful that funding can be found to secure a significant portion of Oswegatchie Hills for the public before it is too late. In the meantime, the rezoning proposal deserves the support of the townspeople.

Dennis J. Murphy Jr. is the First Selectman of East Lyme.