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Preserve this state treasure

Southeastern Connecticut is fortunate to be home to the largest undeveloped coastal land preserve between Boston and New York, Bluff Point Coastal Preserve in Groton. There now is a good chance that the state will add another expanse of rare, pristine land nearly as large as the 788 acre Bluff Point to its inventory of open space in the region.

For a year, East Lyme First Selectman Wayne Fraser has been campaigning for the state to establish a nature preserve in the Oswegatchie Hills, a lovely, undeveloped woodland along the Niantic River. Mr. Fraser says the state Department of Environmental Protection has shown strong interest in acquiring 600 acres there for open space. The Oswegatchie Hills area extends from Golden Spur in the north to Veterans Memorial Field in Niantic to the south.

Acquiring the Oswegatchie Hills under the state's greenway program would be a brilliant coup for the DEP. The rugged, beautiful land consists of a bluff that extends along the northern length of the river. It contains abandoned granite quarries, ponds and streams that flow to the river. The vistas of the river are stunning, and at some of the higher elevations, it is possible to see Niantic Bay.

Unfortunately, these same qualities have made the Oswegatchie Hills an enticing prize for developers despite the difficulties of building there. One developer after another has come along with plans to exploit the area, only to be beaten back by the rugged terrain and changing economic conditions. The latest is of these is Landmark Development Co. of Middletown, which, according to Mr. Fraser, is acquiring options and is interested in developing golf courses, condominiums and elderly housing along the 2-mile stretch. Mr. Fraser and a growing number of disciples are anxious to preclude any development of this fragile and significant natural resource. The Oswegatchie Hills not only adds to the beauty of the region, but in its undeveloped state protects the Niantic River from waste and erosion runoff. It also affords its neighbor, Waterford, a beautiful view across the river. In addition to trying to persuade the state to establish a nature preserve, the town has prepared a set of zoning changes that would further limit development and prevent environmental damage.

The proposals would increase the lot size on which homes could be built from 3 to 5 acres, and create a 500-foot buffer zone along the river where no building could take place. This is the least that should be done to protect the land and river.

These measures will be presented at a public hearing at 7:30 tonight at Town Hall. A good turn-out in favor of the changes would add to the momentum that is building to save this area from being despoiled. Michael Dunn, a developer who lives near the Oswegatchie Hills, has been circulating petitions to the state to establish the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve. Many of his supporters are neighbors. Mr. Fraser grew up near the Oswegatchie Hills in Golden Spur. Such people appreciate what a wonderful gift this property is.

But the future of the Oswegatchie Hills is not a parochial issue involving just the nearby property owners. Saving such valuable natural resources is a state issue, which Gov. John G. Rowland recognized when he proposed new investment in open space.

Other towns around the region should join in calling attention to the potential of saving this land and putting it to limited public recreational uses, such as hiking.

Conditions for preserving this wonderful natural heritage have never been better. Those who join in this effort can tell their grandchildren they took part in creating the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve.