

December 10, 2000

Op-Ed Page, *The Day*, New London, Connecticut

Fight to Save Oswegatchie Hills

The East Lyme Board of Selectmen has revisited a proposal to create a Niantic River Gateway Commission to protect the undeveloped land along the shores of the Niantic River known as the Oswegatchie Hills. A similar plan will go before the Waterford Selectmen. Both towns should waste no time in putting the idea into action in their mutual interest of preserving the river and its environment. Meantime, a grass roots campaign needs to be organized to save this valuable expanse of open space. The *Day* invites anyone interested in taking part to contact the editorial page.

The leadership of the two first selectmen, Wayne Fraser, of East Lyme, and Paul Eccard, of Waterford, can go a long way toward getting the ball moving. But they need the backing of the people and area legislators. Succeeding will require good public relations campaign and a strong grass-roots effort, similar to the campaigns that preceded the state's acquisition of Bluff Point Coastal Reserve and Haley Farm State Park in Groton. A citizens group devoted to this purpose would give the matter the amplification and leverage it needs to come to fruition.

The hundreds of acres that make up the Oswegatchie Hills comprise the largest expanse of undeveloped land along the southeastern Connecticut shoreline. The unique land comprises a giant filter for water runoff along the western side of the Niantic River. Stripping the land of its foliage, creating septic systems, planting lawns and gardens and along this Stretch of land would severely damage a valuable body of water that is already under great stress. The land not only protects a recreational body of water, but itself offers great recreational potential because of its interesting terrain, beautiful vistas and diverse wildlife.

Preservation of this land has been a long-standing struggle. The legislation enabling East Lyme and Waterford to participate in a gateway Commission was passed in 1988 at the behest of former East Lyme First Selectman Dennis J. Murphy Jr.. But Waterford expressed no interest in the idea. This was shortsighted of that town, which shares the benefits of the Oswegatchie Hills both in the water quality of the river and its variety of its fisheries and in the views. The Waterford selectmen should take up the issue again and join with East Lyme in such a partnership.

The commission would create land use standards, which would have to be approved by both towns. Once these were in place, the commission would have a say in all development and zoning proposals for the property.

What has made the issue sticky is that the land is privately owned. Despite the fact that the terrain is rough and rocky, developers have had a longstanding interest in building expensive homes there because of the stunning views the location affords of the Niantic River.

For that reason, Mr. Murphy initiated an effort on another front, to attempt to acquire the land for open space, foreclosing the possibility of developing it. He succeeded in securing state funds for this purpose, but that effort eventually receded. Advocates for the Oswegatchie Hills again have interested the state in buying property there and establishing a preserve. Gov. John G. Rowland has bolstered hopes of through his commitment to buying open space lands, and the legislature has given him the financial wherewithal in the form of a generous open-space fund.

The Oswegatchie Hills have been spared from development in the past by economic downturns and the intervention. of the East Lyme government, which changed the zoning requirements for building lots from three to five acres (the change is being challenged in court). But a permanent solution is long overdue, one that sets aside the land in public trust.