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A Regional Push for Preservation

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Waterford - A consortium of local, state and federal officials gathered at Sandy Point Beach last week to announce a major push to preserve East Lyme's Oswegatchie Hills through open space acquisition.

The 702-acre area is threatened by development, most notably by Landmark, LLC, which has an application pending with the East Lyme Zoning Commission to develop a portion of the land.

East Lyme First Selectman Wayne Fraser announced he would seek \$2 million from East Lyme voters toward open space acquisition.

"This winter," Fraser said, "I'll put up a proposal that we put \$2 million into our capital fund for land preservation.

"I'm hoping that the voters will support that," Fraser said. "East Lyme has to make this our commitment.

"The development pressure is pushing us to partner," he said. Fraser was flanked by the first selectmen from Waterford, Old Lyme and Salem, as well as representatives from non-profit environmental groups such as the Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, Inc., Save the River, Save the Hills, the East Lyme Land Conservation Trust, and The Nature Conservancy. They are collectively calling themselves the Partnership for Preservation.

State Department of Environmental Protection Deputy Director David Leff said, "If a picture is worth a thousand words, the view we have today is worth a thousand pictures." "It's not just about what we see here and now, it's about our future." He urged those groups present to "advocate with your elected officials" to go after funding for land acquisition.

Rep. Rob Simmons (R-2nd District) said, "When I return to Washington, D.C., I will enter into the process any figure you recommend to me to enter into the process ... to protect and to preserve these hills." He said, "I'm willing to request \$3 million for this project."

Simmons talked about becoming a lifetime member of the Sierra Club 30 years ago "to protect land slated for development," specifically talking about a 400-acre parcel that "is now a certified tree farm in Vermont."

Simmons also talked about the Route 11 Greenway Act of 2003 as an example of his dedication to environmental protection.

With regard to any legislative efforts concerning the Oswegatchie Hills, Simmons said, "We need to know more about the different parcels (in the hills), and what they bring to the table."

Simmons talked about the threat of development now, as compared with the past. "With the right equipment, you can reconfigure any piece of property in the world," he said.

The issue, Simmons said, is offering landowners fair market value for their properties. "If we're not willing to step up to the plate, we lose," Simmons said. "It's called altruism."

He warned, "The issues of sprawl are not going to go away."

But he also talked about the complexity of land preservation. "The federal government does not want to be the only player. ... When I make my presentation to my colleagues, I have to show interest from other parties."

Waterford First Selectman Paul Eccard pointed to the natural resource that divides East Lyme and Waterford. "Truly, the river does run through it," Eccard said. He talked about the partnership and the

knowledge many organizations such as The Nature Conservancy bring to the table.

Eccard said preserving the hills is something many, albeit separately, have talked about for a long time.

He said the partnership would "bring those voices, bring that knowledge together."

Michael Dunn, vice president of the Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, said, "With that kind of commitment from Wayne (Fraser) and from Rob Simmons, to get some money, that's awesome."

The first selectmen from Old Lyme and Salem, Timothy Griswold and Larry Reitz, respectively, echoed Eccard's thoughts.

Reitz said the consortium would allow for a "little bit of cross-fertilization of ideas," and Griswold said,

"If we can know what's going on in other towns, we can combine our objectives."