

December 1, 2004

The Day, New London, Connecticut

EL Group Buys Option On Oswegatchie Hills Land - 65-acre parcel borders land earmarked for condos by developer

By KARIN CROMPTON

Day Staff Writer, Lyme/Old Lyme

East Lyme — A local nonprofit group announced Tuesday that it has signed an option to purchase a 65-acre tract of land in the Oswegatchie Hills, kick-starting its effort to piece together a nature preserve in the area.

The announcement came at a directors' meeting for the Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, held at the home of board member Patricia Frank Sher in Saunders Point, Niantic.

“It's a huge first step,” said Michael Dunn, Friends vice president, who negotiated the deal and signed the agreement early Tuesday evening. “It gives us some incentive.”

The group launched membership and fund-raising campaigns in early November. Dunn said Tuesday that membership has grown since then from a dozen people to 165 and that the group has raised nearly \$12,000.

In attendance Tuesday night were state Senator-elect Andrea Stillman, D-Waterford; state Representative-elect Ed Jutila, D-East Lyme; state Representative-elect Betsy Ritter, D-Waterford; and East Lyme First Selectman Wayne Fraser.

The land that the group plans to buy belongs to Benajah Farms Limited Partnership of Waterford, of which Alan Gardiner, moderator of the Waterford Representative Town Meeting, is the principal. Dunn said the purchase price would be \$290,000.

The Friends plan to put down a deposit of \$3,000 by Dec. 15. The option agreement calls for the group to close on the property by the end of March, he said.

“(Dunn), along with a great number of other people, have been trying to keep the Oswegatchie Hills area as open space,” Gardiner said by phone Tuesday afternoon. “Mike Dunn approached me and suggested that our parcel would be well suited for that task, and we agreed.”

The parcel abuts property owned by developer Glenn Russo, who has an application pending before the town's Zoning Commission to allow him to build condominiums and affordable housing. Russo also has a federal lawsuit pending against the town in which he alleges that the commission's denial of a first housing application was racially motivated.

Gardiner acknowledged that Russo, owner of Landmark LLC, had approached him “several years ago, but not recently” about buying his land. Gardiner turned Russo down.

“It's not that we were against anybody, but it was more like we were in favor (of preserving the land),” Gardiner said.

Gardiner said an appraiser told him the fair market value of the land is about \$5,000 an acre. The Friends' purchase price comes out to \$4,454 per acre.

“The whole idea of keeping the Hills as open space is a great idea,” Gardiner said. “It's a privilege to work in a small way to make that happen.”

The Friends group plans to actively participate in a preservation partnership that Fraser formed in October. The partnership's goal is to purchase almost 700 acres in the Hills and preserve it as open space; the 65 acres is one of the targeted properties.

The legislators present Tuesday night each vowed to support the partnership's efforts, though they cautioned that state funds are scarce.

Also Tuesday night, the Friends announced the start of a \$2 million land purchase capital campaign, which was launched with a \$25,000 donation from chiropractor Chris Connaughty and his wife, Lynn, of Niantic.

“I don't necessarily feel like I have time to contribute, but I do feel like \$25,000 is a small contribution towards the greater effort,” Connaughty said. “I couldn't be more pleased. My house borders the Oswegatchie Hills and I've spent a lot of time there. ... I love the area and would love to see it preserved.”