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Oswegatchie Group Celebrates Year Of Land Acquisitions

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East Lyme — A nonprofit group intent on creating a nature preserve in the Oswegatchie Hills held its first annual meeting Saturday, deeming the balmy day one of celebration after a year of record growth and land acquisitions.

According to its annual report, the Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, Inc. has raised \$450,000 toward its goal of \$2 million in private funding to match equal amounts from state and federal sources and from the town of East Lyme.

In March, the group negotiated to purchase a 65-acre parcel in the Hills, ultimately splitting the purchase price with the town. And the group has worked with The Trust for Public Land, a national nonprofit conservation organization, which signed a purchase and sales agreement in August on two additional properties totaling 157 acres in the southern end of the Hills.

“We've had a great year,” Michael Dunn, vice president of the Friends, said during the meeting on Saturday. “... Today is really a celebration of what we've been able to accomplish.”

About 30 people attended the meeting, held in the town's Community Center. About the same number then met at Veterans Memorial Field to hike the two latest properties, known as the Clark Pond property and the Bayberry Property.

The Friends launched a membership campaign last November and formalized its Board of Directors last year as well. It joined a partnership formed in October 2004 with a goal of buying and preserving almost 700 acres in the Hills.

State Sen. Andrea Stillman, D-Waterford, gave an update Saturday on a \$2 million bond authorization for open space purchases in town.

Stillman said Gov. M. Jodi Rell controls the agenda for the bond commission, which next meets Dec. 9, and cautioned the group that the governor “is not interested in too much more bonding before the end of the year”.

But Stillman said she is optimistic that if the bond commission does not vote on the bond next month, it will go through in January or February, a new calendar year when “we start from zero”.

The group passed around a petition Saturday urging the governor to add the item to the bond commission's December agenda, and Dunn asked them to take copies of the petition home and gather more signatures.

The partnership is awaiting word from the state Department of Environmental Protection on whether it approved grant money that would cover up to half the purchase price of the two newest parcels, and on a federal grant, called the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELCP), for up to \$250,000.