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Group Pitches Plan To Preserve Swaths Of Oswegatchie Hills

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East Lyme — Individual property owners could buy and preserve hundreds of acres in the Oswegatchie Hills for just \$17 a year over 20 years, according to a local nonprofit group.

Members of the Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve detailed Wednesday night how a partnership would purchase property in the Hills, using a \$2 million state bond as the starting point for fund-raising efforts.

The Friends hosted a meeting at Town Hall, and invited the Boards of Selectmen and Finance as well as the public to attend.

The Friends are one cog in a group called the Partnership for Preservation, whose membership includes nonprofits and town and state officials intent on buying hundreds of acres in the Hills and preserving them as open space.

The partnership's plan is for residents to approve spending \$2 million toward the effort. They hope the money would be matched by state and federal funds. The Friends also is running a \$2 million capital campaign for a total of \$8 million.

The key, according to the Friends and state and town officials who attended, is for residents to approve the money. That would demonstrate to the state legislature that East Lyme is serious about preserving the land, they said.

Earlier in the day, the legislature's Environment Committee voted in favor of a bill that would grant the town a bond to purchase land in the Hills. The committee approved the legislation by a unanimous voice vote. The bill next moves on to the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee.

"This is kind of like hitting a solo home run in the third inning of the ballgame," said state Rep. Ed Jutila, D-East Lyme, who attended the Friends meeting. "It feels really good, we've got momentum, but it's still a long game and there are quite a few innings to go."

The \$2 million would work as a sort of savings account from which the town could withdraw money to purchase land. Each property that became available would need town meeting approval before its purchase.

Also Wednesday, the Friends received a check for \$10,325 from the Niantic Rotary Foundation. Mike Dunn, the group's vice president, said the money would go toward the capital campaign and land purchase.

The Friends formally asked the town to contribute half the price of a property the group expects to close on later this month. The Friends purchased an option to buy 65 acres in the Hills known as the Gardiner Property. The total purchase price is \$290,000; the Friends asked the town for \$145,000.

Dunn said the group could close on the parcel and then sell it to the town at "half price."