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**Nonprofit Group Buys Oswegatchie Hills Land - 'Friends' Pay Cash For Key 65-acre Tract**

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East Lyme — A nonprofit group closed Thursday afternoon on a 65-acre parcel in an area considered key to blocking potential southward development in the Oswegatchie Hills.

The Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve paid \$290,000 cash for the property, formerly owned by Benajah Farms Limited Partnership of Waterford. Alan Gardiner of Waterford is the principal. Gardiner, who is the moderator of the Waterford Representative Town Meeting, said in late November that 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 Friends “are more than fulfilling their promise to raise funds and be a real leader in the preservation effort,” First Selectman Wayne Fraser said Thursday. “This first sale is the signal to the public and to other funding agencies that East Lyme is serious and we're together.”

The property is located in the northern half of the Hills, a 700-acre expanse of woodlands that fronts the Niantic River. The parcel is accessible from the Chapman Woods development and has a trail system that crosses private property and connects to a former granite quarry not on the Benajah Farms parcel.

To the south are 130 acres already owned and preserved by the East Lyme Land Conservation Trust, a private group.

To the north is land that developer Glenn Russo either owns or has an option to buy. Russo's company, Landmark Development LLC, has twice applied to the town to build condominiums and affordable housing in the Hills. Both times the town's Zoning Commission has denied his application.

An appeal of the second decision is pending in state Superior Court, and a civil rights discrimination lawsuit Russo brought against East Lyme is still pending in federal District Court.

With Thursday's purchase nearly 200 acres stand in the way of Landmark's expansion to the south should the company be allowed to develop its property. Its current proposal calls for a first phase of 352 housing units.

“It's a big step in the right direction,” said Mike Dunn, vice president of the Friends.

The Friends are one entity in the Partnership for Preservation, whose membership includes nonprofit groups and town and state agencies intent on buying hundreds of acres in the Hills and preserving them as open space.

In the past two weeks, the boards of selectmen and finance each voted unanimously to approve a \$2 million bonding resolution to buy open space in town. A town meeting vote will be scheduled for 7 p.m. on April 11 at the high school, Fraser said.

The goal is for each of four segments — the town, state and federal governments, and private entities — to commit \$2 million toward open-space purchases for a total of \$8 million.

Should residents approve of the bonding, the Board of Selectmen would then decide whether to pay for half of the Benajah Farms purchase, using \$145,000 of the bond money. Residents would ultimately vote on the purchase.

Dunn said the town would then own the land and the Friends would hold a conservation easement on it.

The Friends are working with the National Trust for Public Land to negotiate with landowners in the Hills. The Trust helps local nonprofits find federal money to preserve land.

Dunn said the Trust will pay the cost of appraisals and surveys, and that it had put in a preliminary request for a federal grant.

At the end of November the Friends announced the start of a \$2 million land-purchase capital campaign.

Dunn said the Friends now have about \$66,000 remaining in their capital account.