



Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve

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Newsletter—Summer 2012

FOHNP thanks Dominion for printing this newsletter

Fight for those Hills

We are at a critical juncture in our ongoing efforts to push back on Landmark's plans to overpopulate the environmentally sensitive Oswegatchie Hills. The Day's 8/23/12 editorial headlined "Fight for those Hills" said "The loss of such stunningly picturesque land would be compounded by storm runoff into the river and additional environmental degradation. This must not happen."

You can help protect this irreplaceable asset by making your concerns visible with your presence. Sixty people attended the opening of the Water and Sewer Commission public hearing on 8/28/12 for up to 1518 new residential units in Oswegatchie Hills. Please come to the continuation meeting at 6:30pm on 9/25/12.

Also, on Thursday September 6th at 7:30pm at EL Town Hall, the Zoning Commission will hear a request from Landmark to revise the zoning regulations as remanded by last year's court decision. This will not be a public hearing, but an opportunity to listen and become informed.

The Niantic River is on DEEP's list of endangered water bodies. Also, the abutting Oswegatchie Hills has steep slopes and shallow bedrock which makes this land less able to absorb and filter surface water runoff pollution.

These factors, combined with Landmark's appetite for incredibly dense development is a recipe for environmental disaster. The clear-cutting, blasting and resulting impervious surfaces would likely push the Niantic River

beyond being even marginally safe for swimming.

1518 residential units would increase the population of East Lyme by 3,387 people by Landmark's estimate. That 18% increase in the town's population would require construction of new schools and the traffic from all of these new people would be squeezed through the tiny neighborhood of Golden Spur.

The developer is attempting to use the affordable housing statute as a blunt instrument to beat the town into submission. Last year's court decision may yield more friendly zoning regulations and may even help them eventually get a zoning approval for the preliminary application. But, the court does not bind the Zoning Commission to grant approval of a completed full application.

More importantly, neither the judge's decision, nor the affordable housing statute, encumbers the other agencies which must review and approve this. Landmark must obtain approval from Inland Wetlands, Coastal Area Management (CAM), Water and Sewer Commission, DEEP (if community septic), State Traffic Commission and the Gateway Commission.

The Friends and our partners have raised nearly \$3 million to buy land from landowners at fair market value for the current OH nature preserve. Let's protect the rest of Oswegatchie Hills before it's too late. John Sawhill said "In the end, our society will be defined not only by what we create, but by what we refuse to destroy."

Michael Dunn, Director, Land Acquisition and Legal Issues

Treasure Hunting in The Hills

Looking for a couple of great family activities in Oswegatchie Hills that combine hiking and treasure hunting? Try out geocaching or letterboxing! Both involve using clues to find a hidden container – geocaching uses Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates, and letterboxing uses descriptive clues. Several geocaches and letterboxes are stashed in the Hills and now is a good time to try and find them!

Letterboxing began in the mid-1800s and required deciphering clues left in landmarks. Today, the activity is still going strong (over 20,000 letterboxes are hidden in North America alone) and uses online clues to help you find the hidden stash. Letterboxes contain a rubber stamp to imprint in your own log book and you leave your signature with an imprint of your personalized stamp. Visit www.letterboxing.org for clues to letterboxes in the area.



Geocaching is derived from letterboxing, but has a technological twist to the story. In 2000, GPS signal accuracy improvement brought the use of GPS systems to households around the world. On May 3, 2000, an Oregon resident hid a bucket with several items inside and posted the coordinates online. The rule for the finders was simply: “Take some stuff, leave some stuff.” Within three days, it had been found twice and geocaching was born.

So are you ready to try geocaching? Visit www.geocaching.com and type in your zip code for a list of caches in the area. Basic membership is required (don’t worry, it’s free) to get the coordinates. Each listing will have additional information such as the size of the cache and two numbers indicating the degrees of difficulty for finding the cache and for the terrain you’ll be traversing. For example, a 1/4 means that the cache is easy to locate but you’ll need to climb a tree to get to it. The GPS coordinates will probably get you within 20 ft of the hidden cache, but sometimes they are cleverly camouflaged or hidden inside something else.

In its simplest form, a cache always contains a log for you to record your find. Geocaches vary greatly in size and appearance, from tiny magnetic containers with only enough room for a log sheet to ammo boxes that can hold lots of items to trade. These items turn the adventure into a true treasure hunt and may include small toys or trackable items. Trackable items, such as Geocoins or Travel Bugs, have a unique code so their movements can be tracked online. They may have a destination to reach or have a goal to log as many miles as possible, so it’s a good idea to move these along to another cache as soon as you can. Generally, if you take an item, leave something of equal or greater value in return. You also don’t want to put food or heavily scented items in the cache, so as not to attract any animals. Keep track of your finds at www.geocaching.com and find more cache locations just about anywhere in the world.

Here are some additional things to keep in mind. When geocaching with kids, take note of the terrain and the difficulty of the cache. Some stealth is required for caches located in more urban settings. You want to be careful not to give away the location to non-geocachers. Most of all, have fun! Geocaching has taken me to places I would have never visited and adds excitement to any hike or road trip.

Susan Gonzalez, FOHNP Board of Directors

Bluebirds Making the Preserve Their Home of Choice

The Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) is making its home in the Preserve, thanks to both human help and natural habitat. Common throughout the state in the early to mid-1800s, this important bird declined in numbers from the late 1800s through the 1980s. One significant contributing factor to this decline was the lack of suitable nesting cavities needed by the bluebird to successfully raise young. This lack of nesting cavities resulted from changing land use patterns and increasing urbanization. (Source: CT DEEP)

Thanks to the construction of nesting boxes, bluebirds are making a significant comeback. And thanks to WildBirds Unlimited of Niantic, two boxes were placed in the Preserve in 2011.

We are happy to report that 2012 saw the first bluebird inhabitants of a box, on the Blue Trail.



Papa Bluebird brings food to give to the nestlings in the box on the Blue Trail

Two young were hatched in this nest, and we believe one was fledged in early summer. We are hoping this pair will choose the Preserve again next year.

Another nest was discovered, also near the Blue Trail, in a natural nesting cavity. The male is seen entering the cavity in the photo below. We are happy and proud to have the Eastern Bluebird among the Preserve's inhabitants.



Check us out on Facebook



FOHNP now has a Facebook page! Check it out at www.facebook.com/fohnp for updates on Preserve activities and opportunities. We'd love to hear your feedback as well. Feel free to post your own comments and photos.

Riparian Buffer Project Continues to Make Big Progress

Phase One of the Riparian Buffer Project at the entrance to the Preserve at Vets Field has been completed with the placement of 30 boulders that will define the paths through the planned wildflower meadow and the planting of 50+ native shrubs and Juniper trees on the upland



portion of the buffer zone. As part of an effort to control the erosion on the hillside, a 100 foot silt fence (shown below, after its first BIG test!) was also installed to control the storm water

runoff from the ball fields.

All of this was accomplished with the help of many volunteers at different times this past spring. The Town Public Works Department provided the stones as well as the backhoe to meticulously place them. A very rainy day in May did not deter the planting of the native shrubs and trees by the staff of the Dominion Environmental Lab and several other associates.



Seen Around the Preserve

The Town Public Works and Parks & Recreation Departments provided assistance with a backhoe to dig the holes for the larger Junipers. The silt fence was installed with guidance from Town Engineering, with labor provided by several FOHNP Board members and OHNP volunteers Ray Heller, Penny Howell and Mike Roche.

The new plantings needed nurturing during the hot summer months and a local Boy Scout, Tim Petersen, from Troop 24 (shown below), provided that assistance by biking to the site twice a week through the summer to water all of the plants and trees. His community service ensured that the plants stayed well hydrated and his efforts played an important part in the project so far being successful.



Phase Two is planned for this September/October and includes spreading top soil on the eroded sections of the hillside and seeding with grass seed to help stabilize the area until the wildflower meadow seed can be applied after the first killing frost. Also in these months, the shoreline of Clark Pond will be cleared of invasive plants and supplemented with native plant species of Highbush Blueberry, Serviceberry, Grey and Silky Dogwood and Sweet Pepperbush. We will be looking for help in these efforts and if you would like to help please let us know by calling Greg Decker at (860) 739-9177 or email us at volunteers@oswhills.org.



A Dwarf Ginseng (Panax trifolius) flower, photographed off the Red Trail.



Northern Water Snake (Nerodia sipedon), spotted near the main entrance to the Preserve



Downy Woodpecker, by the Blue Trail