

Hikers enlist in cause of saving Oswegatchie Hills

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DEEP commissioner joins students, says state should kick in

East Lyme — In the 15 years since the Friends of Oswegatchie Hills formed to preserve the rocky wooded slopes along the Niantic River and fight development of the area, the group never attracted a hiking-boots-on-the-trail ally like the one who came to town Monday, nor the crowd of potential enlistees who followed him.

"I'm glad I got to see the property. It's the kind of place we're interested in preserving," Rob Klee, commissioner of the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, said Monday, as he trekked the blue trail on the return leg of an hourlong hike in the 420-acre Oswegatchie Hills Preserve. With him were 90 seventh- and eighth-graders from East Lyme Middle School and two of his senior staff members, plus First Selectman Paul Formica, state Rep. Ed Jutila and several members of the Friends group and other conservation organizations.

A rare coastal forest similar to the 1,000 acres in Old Saybrook known as The Preserve, Oswegatchie Hills is also deserving of the state's help in finally securing its future as protected land, Klee said. The state has pledged \$2 million toward the purchase of the Old Saybrook property, and a referendum in Old Saybrook authorizing the town to contribute \$3 million is pending. A coalition of groups joined the effort to save The Preserve from development, including the Connecticut Fund for the Environment-Save the Sound and the Trust for Public Land, both of which were represented at Oswegatchie Hills on Monday.

"We're willing to work with them on this, with The Preserve as a new model to follow, but we need a willing seller," Klee said. "We (DEEP) can use our ability to leverage federal funds."

Mike Dunn, director of land acquisition and legal defense for the Friends group, organized the visit from Klee and hike with middle school math teacher Sean Ashburner, a new director of the Friends who said he became so impressed by the group's passion he wanted to share it with his students.

About 420 acres of Oswegatchie Hills are currently protected, and another 41 will be added this summer when the purchase of the Bayreuther property is completed, with \$100,000 in state funds and \$300,000 in donations. The missing piece is the 236 acres next door owned by Landmark Development, the focus of a long and contentious battle between the town and preservation groups on one side, and would-be developer Glenn Russo on the other. Russo's latest proposal is for 840 homes on the 236-acre parcel, 252 of which would be sold

as affordable housing. A judge's ruling in a court case over how much public sewer capacity the town would allocate to the development could be issued in September, Dunn said. Whatever the outcome, he added, the Friends group is committed to continuing its push to add the Landmark property to the Oswegatchie Hills Preserve.

"Our goal is to finish it," he said. "We hope to be able to buy it at fair market value. And we're geared up to continue the lawsuit, arguing our case about the environmental impact that development of the hills would have. I hope the commissioner saw what a tremendous resource this property is for the whole state."

Dunn, who helped found the Friends group in response to Russo's first development proposal, said this is the first time a DEEP commissioner has visited the hills. Attorney General George Jepsen, who helped secure the \$100,000 for the Bayreuther purchase property, spoke briefly to the 90 students before the hike, recounting his long involvement with land preservation.

Before the hike, Klee, DEEP Policy Director Jessie Stratton and Graham Stevens, director of DEEP's Office of Constituent Affairs and Land Management, traveled up the Niantic River on a marine patrol boat to see the woodlands from the water, hearing a pitch for preservation from Dunn and others along the way. The purpose, Dunn said, was to impress on the commissioner what is at stake if the Landmark property were developed. The 236-acre parcel includes a mile of shoreline and steep forest with a shallow layer of topsoil over bedrock.

"With more nitrogen and bacteria coming into the river from runoff, the river could pass the tipping point of being swimmable," Dunn said.

The river, he noted, is already on the state's list of impaired waterways, and bacteria counts are often elevated after heavy rainstorms.

Gwen Macdonald, director of habitat restoration for Save the Sound, said runoff from the development would also harm Latimer Brook, an important waterway for migrating river herring.

"This is a really significant length of the river," said Macdonald, who lives in Waterford and hikes the Oswegatchie Hills once a week.

During the hike, Friends director Rich Gallagher invited passing hikers to take a whiff of the sweet, peppery smell of black birch branch, and Friends President Kris Lambert pointed out the shell of a baby snapping turtle she found beside a tree.

"Do they bite?" one student asked her.

"They can, when they get large," she said.

School Principal Judy DeLeeuw hiked the hills for the first time with the group, enjoying a day outdoors but remaining the authority figure, reminding students to stay on the trail.

"I don't think they've ever seen me out of my suits and high heels," said DeLeeuw, wearing jeans and sneakers for the outing. "This is so good for the kids."

Anagha Gogate, 13, said she'd never hiked the hills before, but is now convinced the whole areas should be protected.

"It's important to preserve this habitat," she said.

Had they been in school, the students would have been hunkered over writing exercises and algebraic expressions instead of clambering over boulders, hopping across streams and gathering at an overlook called "the rocky bald" to hear the DEEP commissioner answer their questions about his job.

Eighth grader Christopher Cicchiello said he hiked the hills once several years ago with his family, and enjoyed a chance to get reacquainted with the trails and spend the morning outdoors.

"I forgot how nice it is," he said.