

East Lyme, developer to sign memorandum of understanding over Oswegatchie Hills

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East Lyme — Representatives for the town and Landmark Development are expected to sign a memorandum of understanding in which both would "sit at the same table" to see if they could find another land parcel in exchange for development rights in the Oswegatchie Hills.

For more than 15 years, Landmark Development, a Middletown-based company under developer Glenn Russo, has been trying to develop 236 acres it owns in the Oswegatchie Hills. Landmark has filed several applications, as well as lawsuits, concerning building affordable housing there.

On Wednesday, the Board of Selectmen praised the idea and unanimously voted to authorize First Selectman Mark Nickerson to sign the memorandum.

Nickerson said he and Russo will sign the memorandum at a yet to be determined time.

The town would then work with the state or federal government to see if it could find another land parcel that would be advantageous for Landmark to develop.

Nickerson told the selectmen the MOU essentially says "let's sit at the same table" and see how the parties could find a solution in which land in the Oswegatchie Hills would be conserved, but Landmark would still be able to develop another property.

The land proposed for development doesn't need to be in the town or even the state and could be anywhere, Nickerson said. He said the town will call on state and federal representatives in working toward a solution.

Nickerson, who completed the negotiations, said state Sen. Paul Formica, R-East Lyme, began them while he was first selectman of East Lyme.

Nickerson said the conversation started with the idea of proposing a brownfield land, but he said there are also other ideas, such as a parcel abandoned by the government.

Formica said in a phone interview that the town has been working for some time to try to locate another property that could be offered in return for conserving the land in the Oswegatchie Hills.

"We think we're very close to doing that," he said. He said he has been in contact with U.S. Sens. Chris Murphy and Richard Blumenthal, as well as U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, and the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and is hopeful a resolution can be reached.

He said the specific legal mechanism for exchanging the development rights would still need to be worked out. He praised Russo for his willingness to consider options.

Meanwhile, Landmark has recently submitted to the town an application to rezone 123 acres within the hills as an affordable housing district. The preliminary site plan calls for building 840 residential units on 36 acres and setting aside 87 acres as open space.

The Planning Commission is reviewing the application to see if it is consistent with the town's Plan of Conservation and Development, and the Zoning Commission is scheduled to hold a public hearing on the application on May 21.

For now, Landmark is expected to continue with its application.

"This is a great first step," said Mike Dunn, the director of land acquisition and legal defense for The Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, about the MOU.

"We're really excited about this opportunity, and we're hopeful," Nickerson said. "It's not a guarantee, but it's a hopeful situation that we might be able to find a solution."

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