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7/11/2017 3:24:00 AM

City eyes conservation property May purchase land near spot bought last year

Andrew Mansfield
Reporter

GARDNER - The Conservation Commission is advocating the **city** pursue the purchase of 122 acres of land in west Gardner for both conservation and recreational uses.

At this week's meeting, the commission unanimously approved spending \$2,800 to appraise the property, an initial sign of support.

"I'm all for it," Chairman Greg Dumas said.

The land is located off Clark Street and Leo Drive and it is owned by James and Melinda Omealia of Rumson, New Jersey, according to **city** property records.

The project would be subsidized through state grant funding and is expected to cost the **city** between \$60,000 and \$70,000, Conservation Agent Jeffrey Legros reported at the Conservation Commission meeting.

The overall cost is projected to be in the \$300,000 range and Dumas did voice concern over the projected 22 percent the **city** would pay for, stating that "definitely needs to come down."

The **City** Council will need to vote in favor of supporting the project for it to move forward. The Conservation Commission recently sent a letter to Mayor Mark Hawke who then expressed interest in looking into it.

Legros indicated that Hawke wanted to know if the land could have other uses besides just being reserved for conservation.

"What we came up with was the possibility for some open space park plan and athletic fields for the **city**," Legros said. "It's not just conservation for the sake of conservation."

He explained that in the **city's** open space and recreation plan, there is an identified need for recreation land in west Gardner.

With housing development that has taken place over the last 30 years, Legros said there is now a "large population" in that part of the **city**.

It includes the neighborhood area of Leo Drive, Fieldstone Drive, Bear Hill Road, Fernwood Drive, Brookside Drive and Century Way.

Legros stated a buffer of trees would be in between where the Leo Drive residents' properties end and the portion of the Omealia property targeted for possible development begins.

He indicated that section of the Omealia property off Leo Drive is in an approved subdivision plan for the neighborhood, and slopes down from a plateau.

He stated thinking it "may not be ideal for large housing development," but from the **city's** perspective, it could be developed into an area for a park, playground and athletic fields such as for soccer. The access point to the Omealia property off Leo Drive would extend from Margaux Way which connects Leo Drive to Bear Hill Road.

Hawke also provided his thoughts on the matter. He spoke about being approached recently with a petition spearheaded by an abutting Leo Drive resident that was signed by neighbors and urged the **city** to try and conserve the Omealia property.

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July 11, 2017



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News staff photo by Andrew Mansfield

The property is owned by James and Melinda Omealia and it extends behind homes on Leo Drive. Forest cutting took place there last year, changing the landscape.



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News staff photo by ANDREW MANSFIELD

The property contains wetlands along Bailey Brook.

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Last year, forest cutting on the property behind those homes was conducted, which impacted an area that contained trails that residents for years had used when taking walks through the woods. Hawke described being able to conserve a large portion of the Omealia property while leaving some available for development as a "meeting in the middle," calling it a "perfect opportunity" for the **city** to add another park.

"It greatly enhances our options and protects the cold water stream (of Bailey Brook)," he said. "We have to do what's right for the entire **city**. Hopefully, this will balance those competing factors." The project is contingent on the **city** receiving two grants from the state. To fund purchasing the 93 acres on the western part of the property which contains the stream riverfront and wetland resource area of Bailey Brook, the **city** would apply for a grant through the state's Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity Program.

For the 29 acres of land that could be used for recreation, the **city** would apply for a grant through the state's Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities Program.

Both of those programs are run through the state Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and the deadline for fiscal 2018 grant round applications is July 12.

The **city** is working with Ashburnham-based land conservation consultant Janet Morrison on the project. Pending **City** Council support, she indicated the applications would be submitted and the **city** could expect to hear back about grant awards around the end of the year.

Morrison provided additional context on the situation, saying that through the state-funded Gardner and Winchendon Landscape Connection Project, which she also consulted on and which was awarded last year, the former property of Stanley Alisauskas along the border of the two municipalities was recently conserved.

The **city** of Gardner purchased over 220 acres of that property, which was finalized about a month ago. It is located to the north of the Omealia property, connects to the same area and Bailey Brook runs through both properties.

Morrison stated part of the Omealia property had been involved in the earlier Landscape Connection Project, but there was not sufficient funding to conserve it at that time.

She indicated James and Melinda Omealia have agreed to participate in this new project the **city** is considering to preserve their land.

The matter has been placed on the **City** Council agenda for its next meeting, on Monday, July 3.

Gardner Living

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