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Council OKs pursuit of conservation land

Could become recreation spot for west Gardner

Andrew Mansfield
Reporter

GARDNER The City Council has authorized the city to proceed with purchasing land in west Gardner for both conservation and recreational purposes.

The 122-acre property, owned by James and Melinda Omealia of Rumson, N.J., is located off Clark Street and Leo Drive.

The City Council's support does not guarantee the city will execute a purchase agreement with the owners, but rather it allows the city to apply for state and federal grant funding that would pay for a majority of the cost. The purchase is contingent upon funding being awarded, and if that does happen, the net cost to the city is projected to be \$67,242 of the total cost of \$317,000.

A major selling point is that the city would plan to develop a 29-acre portion of the property off Leo Drive for recreation, such as a park, playground or athletic fields for youth.

Council President Ronald Cormier said he thinks doing so is a "great idea." Conservation Agent Jeffrey Legros identified soccer, flag football and lacrosse as youth sports that are growing in participation in the city, which fields could be developed for.

He also cited that in the city's open space and recreation plan, adding recreation space in west Gardner has been targeted as a need due to the housing development that has taken place there over the last few decades.

That neighborhood, which is located off Clark Street, includes Leo Drive, Fieldstone Drive, Bear Hill Road, Fernwood Drive, Brookside Drive and Century Way.

The city is working with land conservation consultant Janet Morrison on the project, who spoke to the council recently about developing the land behind Leo Drive homes for recreation.

While the land does slope down, she said some grading would be needed but that it "looks to be manageable."

"It is a remarkably suitable place for these types of fields. It is relatively flat," she said.

Morrison also said there would be two access points from Leo Drive for residents to travel in and out of the recreation land. One access point would extend from Margaux Way, which connects Leo Drive to Bear Hill Road.

The other access point would be farther down Leo Drive, by a traffic circle where the street used to have a cul-de-sac before it was further developed to connect with Brookside Drive in order to make room for additional homes.

A timber harvest was conducted last year on that portion of the Omealia property directly behind Leo Drive homes. Debris was left behind and the overall landscape of the area was impacted, which residents have historically used to take walks through the woods.

A group of abutting Leo Drive residents recently submitted a petition to the city advocating for the land to be conserved, but ultimately it was determined that portion of the property was well suited for development.

"I didn't want to conserve land just to conserve land," Mayor Mark Hawke said. After being informed of the plan, the City Council was mostly supportive, voting 8-2 in favor of authorizing the purchase, with Councilors James Boone and James Johnson being in opposition.

Councilor Paul Tassone stated he lived in the neighborhood nearby the Omealia property for over 10 years, saying many children live there and that it would be safer for them to use recreational fields off Leo Drive.

Currently, the closest playground and recreational area available to those children is Ovila Case Playground on Stuart Street, which is about two miles away.

"I look forward to it. I know it's in the beginning stages, but I think this is the right direction," Tassone said.

In his opposition, Boone voiced concern over reserving the Omealia property for public uses instead of having it available for private sale and potentially housing construction.

"I think we've done a heck of a job in Gardner having conservation land, but at some point, stop taking away this



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The Omealia property can be seen behind the backyards of the even-numbered Leo Drive homes, such as at this residence.

News staff photo by ANDREW MANSFIELD

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property that can be developed and taxed," he said.

Boone was also against the city's recent purchase of over 220 acres of conservation land along the Gardner-Winchendon border that was formerly owned by Stanley Alisaukas.

The former Alisaukas property connects with the Omealia property, being located to the north. Bailey Brook runs through both properties, which is a main reason the Conservation Commission has advocated for the benefits of conserving these lands, citing doing so protects both forest and wetlands habitat.

The 29 acres of the Omealia property to be used for recreation is located on the east side of Bailey Brook; the over 93 acres located on the west side of the brook would be reserved for conservation.

To fund purchasing the conservation area, the city is applying for an about \$82,000 grant through the state's Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity Program.

The city also plans to apply for \$35,000 in federal funds through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant program for conservation.

To fund purchasing the recreational area, the city is applying for an about \$125,000 grant through the state's Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities Program.

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

Morrison has indicated the city could expect to hear back about those grant applications around the end of the year.

Gardner Living

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