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## City receives 2nd grant for land purchase

West Gardner property to be used for conservation and recreation

Andrew Mansfield  
Reporter

GARDNER - After receiving another state grant, the city is poised to purchase over 120 acres of land in west Gardner for conservation and recreation.

The city has just been given a \$97,388 grant to go toward the purchase of 28.8 acres of land off Leo Drive to develop into athletic fields and a playground area.

The Baker administration announced the grant as part of \$6.4 million in grants to 22 communities from the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs' Parklands Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) grant program.

This comes after the city received a \$71,038 grant from the same state agency last month from the Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity (LAND) grant program, which is going toward the purchase of 93.5 acres of land on the same property to be reserved for conservation.

Purchasing the property was contingent upon the city receiving both grants.

"Really, the Conservation Commission was very excited to get the news that we did get the second grant," Conservation Agent Jeffrey Legros said. "We couldn't be happier and now we're looking forward to acquiring the property, then looking into grant funding to develop the park area."

The City Council still has to vote to accept the PARC grant, which could happen within the next few council meetings.

Approval would be expected considering the council in previous votes allowed the city to pursue the purchase of the property in the first place, and then last month accepted the LAND grant.

The property is being purchased from owners James and Melinda Omealia of Rumson, N.J., and totals 122.3 acres, some of which is off of Clark Street. Bailey Brook runs through the property and most of the 93.5 acres to be conserved is west of the brook.

The 28.8 acres to be used for recreation is east of the brook, which is just behind the properties of homeowners on Leo Drive who have even-numbered addresses.

The total expense for purchasing both parcels is listed as \$253,477, for which the city of Gardner would only pay \$58,052.

Mayor Mark Hawke has said that funding from the city has already been appropriated and there is no need to borrow for it.

In addition to the two state grants combining for \$168,426 and the city's contribution, a \$27,000 federal North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant has been awarded for the project as well.

The appraised value for the entire property is listed as \$370,000, meaning the landowner has agreed to sell it below the market rate.

The Omealias are making a donation to complete the sale which will make them eligible to receive a financial benefit through the Massachusetts Conservation Land Tax Credit Program.

All of the funding dedicated to the purchase will be spent in fiscal year 2019, which begins July 1. Legros said the timeline for the city to close on the purchase is sometime during July through December of 2018.

Considering the city will pay only about \$60,000 for the property which will serve multiple purposes, it has received broad support from Hawke and the City Council.

"To have this open space and recreation area for generations and generations to come, it offers great value," Legros said.

For the recreation portion of the land, developing soccer fields and a playground has been discussed, which Legros said is "much needed" in that part of the city, which has seen a lot of neighborhood development over the last few decades.



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Courtesy map

The Omealia property can be seen above, with the larger portion of the property contained by an almost-rectangular line in the center of the map, and the 28.8 acres proposed for recreation on the right side of that parcel

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That being said, city officials have stated there will be an opportunity for public input before any final decisions are made on how to develop the recreation land.

As for the conservation land, its benefits are tied to the presence of Bailey Brook and surrounding habitat.

Legros went over how the state recognizes the importance of conserving cold water fishing areas, which are "vulnerable to development."

Brook trout is one type of fish that Bailey Brook provides habitat for. Also, the surrounding wetland habitat is home to birds, turtles and other wildlife.

Next to the Omealia property, located to the north, is the former Alisaukas property which the city also purchased 220 acres of as conservation land through grant funding in a deal that was finalized last year.

Bailey Brook runs through both properties and conserving the Omealia property means there will be a large, contiguous block of undisturbed habitat.

Legros said the Bailey Brook area is "truly one of the most important areas for conservation value within the city."

In addition to the Omealia and Alisaukas conservation lands, to the east of the Alisaukas property is the 175-acre Rome Conservation Area owned by the North County Land Trust, which is off Brookside Drive, in the same neighborhood area as the other properties.

Legros explained nearby the Rome property is city forest land that is located north of the Perley Brook reservoir and extends up to Route 140.

Putting all those properties together, they will be accessible to residents for outdoor activities such as mountain biking, hiking and fishing, which Legros described as a "real draw."

He added "the people and the city can be really proud" that such a large area of land will be protected to both preserve habitat and be a place where people can enjoy the natural outdoors, saying that the city doing so "can serve as a model to communities statewide."

As for the future development of park land on the Omealia property, Legros said there would be buffer zones put in place for between the Leo Drive properties and the park area, and for between the park area and conservation land.

Creating parking would be part of developing the recreation land, and there are available access points, including by extending the paving of Margaux Way into the Omealia property. Margaux Way currently runs between Leo Drive and Bear Hill Road.

Legros explained the city will be looking into future funding to help develop the park area, which could come from state, federal or private sources. For example, the city could apply next fiscal year for another PARC grant.

For the conservation land, he said further grant funding could be pursued to provide a footbridge over Bailey Brook and trail signs for the already-existing trail.

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