

KEY OPEN SPACE PARCELS LIKELY TO BE PRESERVED

By Joe Wojtas Publication: The Times
Article published Jan 10, 2013

For years, there have been two parcels in town that many conservation-minded residents have wanted to see protected from development.

With two recent announcements, it now appears that both the Davis Farm in Pawcatuck and the Coogan Farm in Mystic are well on their way to being preserved for future generations.

The Stonington Land Trust has announced that it has obtained an option to purchase a conservation easement on 168 acres of the Davis Farm while the state has given a \$500,000 grant to the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center to help it acquire a 34-acre portion of the Coogan Farm property.

The nonprofit land trust, which has acquired several properties during its five-year existence, now has three years to raise the \$2 million needed to purchase the easement. The land trust paid \$60,000 for the three-year option.

The Davis family and their ancestors have farmed the land since 1654. Before that, it played an important role in Native American history.

"This is just an amazing piece of property," said land trust President Jim Smith. "And it's a tribute to the Davis family that they are willing to put an easement on it."

The land is comprised of 120 acres off Greenhaven Road that borders the 1,013-acre Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, and 48 acres that is the last piece of undeveloped property along the Pawcatuck River. The rest of the farm is already preserved.

If the land trust eventually purchases the conservation easement, the Davis family would still own the land and be able to farm it but would not be able to develop it.

The land trust will begin a campaign to raise the \$2 million this spring.

"I'm very optimistic at this point we can do it," Smith said, adding that some donations have come in and several potential large donors have indicated they may be willing to support the effort.

In addition, Marion Gilbert has also donated a 3-acre tract that borders the 48 acres to the land trust. That land contains American Indian ceremonial grounds that date back as much as 7,000 years.

The nature center, meanwhile, has until March when its option expires, to purchase the Coogan Farm land.

Last week, when Gov. Dannel P. Malloy announced that the state was awarding more than \$9 million in Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition grants to 35 organizations, the nature center learned it would receive \$500,000, among the largest of the grants.

Nature center Executive Director Maggie Jones called the grant a "keystone donation."

"This is a big deal for us. We're happy the money came through," she said. "Had we not received a substantial amount we would have had to re-evaluate our strategy."

The nature center has now raised \$2.3 million of the \$2.8 million it needs to buy the property from the Clara C. Coogan Trust. The had set a goal of raising \$2 million by end of this year.

Jones has stressed that the purchase will not only preserve an important part of Mystic for residents and give them a great opportunity to connect with nature but will help maintain the atmosphere that draws tourists to town.

The Coogan Farm property, which contains a house, barns, old farmland, meadows, orchards and forest, also borders hundreds of acres of other open space parcels.

The developer of a proposed 245-unit assisted living project on another section of the farm has donated another 11 acres to the nature center to add to the 34 acres it wants to buy.

Earlier this year, town officials rejected a request from the nature center and the Trust for Public Land to ask voters to approve \$1.5 million in bonding toward the purchase and improvements, which would total \$3.5 million. The nature center then proceeded with its campaign to raise all the money itself.

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