

SHORELINE

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TIMES

Voters have opportunity with airport purchase

By Robert C. Pollack
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You might call it Goss Light – though we hope Madison voters don't.

The "it" is the proposed \$9 million purchase of the 42-acre Griswold Airport property by the non-profit Trust for Public Land on behalf of Madison.

Madison Landing Co, a division of Leyland Alliance LLC, had planned to build 127-units of condominium housing for those 55 and over on the waterfront parcel.

The proposal had been hotly contested by a citizens' environmental group for the better part of nine years. Their opposition was based on a strong conviction that the units and a small sewer treatment plant that was part of the development would destroy the salt marsh and tidal wetlands there and would turn a gorgeous part of town into just another condominium complex, no matter how luxurious. Now, thanks to a number of people led by Madison First Selectman Al Goldberg, the town will – if voters approve the deal in a December referendum – purchase the property for both passive and active recreation and open space.

Goldberg credited citizens' opposition – led by such activists as Bill McCullough, Carol Altieri and Jim Levine – as delaying the condo development long enough to allow this plan to take shape.

Goldberg, a Democrat, said the idea of buying the property was the result of an intense door knocking campaign he conducted two years ago that led to his upset election victory in a town that is traditionally Republican. He said everywhere he went, people were opposed to the housing deal, despite the taxes it would have generated, and did not want to see the property – contiguous to one side of the Hammonasset Park and bordering the Hammonasset River – lost forever.

But it took the better part of those two years for negotiations between Leyland and the Trust for Public Land to consummate the proposal.

The trust, a national organization which helps communities preserve open space, has agreed to raise \$1.7 million of the purchase price through grants and donations. The town would pay the other \$8 million to buy the land, plus \$1 million to restore the property, demolish the airport and build ball fields and a parking lot and even a canoe launch if voters say yes.

"This proposal is reflective of many values Madison residents hold dear," Goldberg said. Two independent appraisals are being sought to assess 70 percent of the fair market value of the property, he added, saying all those knowledgeable in real estate matters have told him they expect both appraised to be higher – possibly even much higher – than the agreed on price.

In the midst of the current economic crisis, the question is: will Madison voters support spending \$9 million of their money – taxpayers' money – to consummate the deal?

Goldberg said it would cost property owners \$17 a year for every \$100,000 of their assessed property. That means, he pointed out, if a house is given an assessed, 70 percent fair market value of \$300,000, it would cost that homeowner \$51 a year for the 20 year life of the bond to preserve the property forever.

While there is strong sentiment all over town to slow housing development and preserve the rural beauty of Madison, the question remains: Will residents approve the deal in the midst of the recession?

In Guilford last January, voters did just that in voting by an astonishing 5½ to 1 margin for the town purchase of the 624-acre Goss property for \$14.4 million – \$3 million of which is being paid with a federal grant.

While it is true that 624 acres is a lot more than the 42 involved in the Griswold deal, the Goss property, lovely though it is, consists of woodlands and meadows and is worth far less per acre than the airport waterfront property, as the pending appraisals will prove.

Voters in Guilford made it clear they did not want 110 luxury houses built on the Goss property – which would have been the land's fate if the town had not bought it for open space. Residents seemed to say with one voice that once beautiful rural land is developed, it is gone forever.

The same issue would seem to be in play here.

Goldberg's Republican opponent in next month's election, Board of Finance member Fillmore McPherson gave the plan a thumbs up. Though wryly noting the timing of the purchase proposal – a little more than a month before the election – he said simply: "I am in favor of this deal and when I step into the voters' booth in December, I will vote yes."

That seemed to be the feeling all over town last week. But until the votes are counted, proponents warn people not to take approval for granted and urge a large voter turnout.

But we urge Madison taxpayers to overwhelmingly approve this plan – as was done to the Goss proposal in Guilford – to send a loud and clear message: They do not want to see their town lose more and more of its rural beauty to housing and other development.