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News

## Weighing in on fate of Griswold Airport property

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By Rita Papazian, Special to the Times

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Madison residents have a rare opportunity to save a unique piece of land whose environmental, geographic and possible use have the potential of having a sweeping impact not only enjoyment for a range of age groups and generations to come, but also individual property values and town-wide appeal.

That may be a lot to digest but interviews with a broad base of people involved in the future of the Griswold Airport property, expressed views that the town is standing on a runway of thought contemplating the benefits that can soar if voters agree to the town's purchase.

The 42-acre site is currently in contract agreement between The Trust for Public Land and the developer Leyland Alliance, LLC of Tuxedo Park, NY, who had proposed 147-residential units of adult living, ranging from condominiums, townhouses and single-family homes for the site. The developers have received all approvals and permits to go ahead with the project, if the town does not buy the property. Construction is estimated to begin in the spring of 2010.

According to the contract agreement the Trust for Public Land will raise \$1.7 million for the purchase with the town responsible for the remaining \$8 million. Officials estimate the town will need an additional one million to cover demolition and renovation costs on the site.

The town has conducted two appraisals of the site with assessments valued at \$9.6 and \$10.5. The proposed purchase price comes right in the middle, First Selectman Fillmore McPherson noted during an interview in his office last week.

During a recent Board of Selectmen meeting, local architect Duo Dickinson, 94 Bradley Rd., donated his services to the town with his presentation of three suggested plans for the site, which if the town owned the property would be subject to review by all appropriate town land use departments, boards and commissions. If the purchase were to happen, the town's Beach and Recreation Department would manage the site.

The town has scheduled a public town meeting on the proposed Griswold property purchase for Jan. 19 at 7:30 p.m. at the Brown Middle School. The referendum is slated for Jan. 26.

Alicia Betty, Trust for Public Land project manager who spearheaded the contract agreement between the town and LeylandAlliance, following the town's request to do so in 2007, described the proposed purchase as a "rare opportunity" for the town. In an interview this week, Betty, who moved from Rowayton to Madison two years ago, said there are "few opportunities for people to play and enjoy the outdoors."

A Trust employee the past 11 years, Betty emphasized the nonprofit's mission is to help obtain land for the people "We're seen as a catalyst for these programs after the town can't do it for themselves...there's little opportunity to create new amenities for the town. Once the land is gone, it's gone."

Betty has no doubt LeylandAlliance will build the proposed project if the town turns down the purchased. "They have the permits to do it. They have quite a lot of money and time invested in the project."

She explained that the Trust, whose intent is always for the people to use the land, has a strong work ethic for protecting land and for preserving the town's character for future generations.

Preserving the town's character is a strong benefit of the town owning the property, according to architect Dickinson. During a recent interview he took issue with opponents' focus on the current cost to the town, especially the tax increase cost incurred with bonding for the purchase and also the loss of tax revenue dollars that can come from property taxes on the 127 residential units. He cited other properties in town that some residents had questioned the value of town purchase, such as the Hammonasset School, now the Madison Town Campus.

Dickinson said homeowners have to consider the 'long-term economic sense and the benefits they can receive from the town owning Griswold. He said while everybody knows the Griswold property, if owned by the town. would be a loss of tax revenue, taxpayers need to look at the broader, long-term picture and see how the town's owning the property increases home values. Amenities, such as the town beaches, the Surf Club and other town owned properties add value to homes, he said.

"This project would make every property owner's home increase in value. It takes courage to do it." Dickinson described the site which is adjacent to Hammonasset State Park and just off the Boston Post Road, a "a unique part of the shoreline" with its open spaces, salt marshes, bird nesting areas

"Every one cares about what their house is worth. Over time, you can accrue benefits with the town's purchase," Dickinson said. "It's an incredible investment for all of us."

At the Board of Selectmen meeting, Dickinson presented three proposals, copies of which are available in the selectmen's office in town hall. Each proposed plan presents a combination of active and passive use. Each plan includes a dedicated area for three or four athletic fields, a field house, canoe/kayak launch, bird-viewing platform, etc.

In addition, Dickinson presented the possibility of a private/public partnership to construct a regional open space arts facility. A board member of the Shoreline Arts Alliance and one of the founders of the Madison Cultural Arts, Dickinson spoke of the need and benefits to the community with such an arts facility which would offer space for a range of arts performances, including dance, theatre, music and the arts.

Patrick Comins, director of Bird Conservation for the Audubon Society in Connecticut, said the suggested plans that Dickinson presented are compatible with the current site's natural habitats and environmental characteristics, providing the current restrictions with the agreement are in place. For example, there would be no lighting for the athletic fields He also advises maintenance of the athletic fields be "as organic as feasible" to ensure minimal negative impact on the habitats. He also suggest the site be as open as possible in terms of structures.

Comins is not in favor of the LeylandAlliance site for such development would divide the site into "separate kingdoms:"

McPherson agrees that even though the LeylandAlliance project would set aside some areas of open space with public access to walkways and trails, such a design would not be conducive to maintaining the existing natural habitats.

First Selectman McPherson who has publicly expressed his support for the town's purchase of the Griswold property deems the site a "valuable conservation resource." He said he can understand there is some opposition to the town purchasing the property because of the cost at these economic times and also the loss of tax revenue from the land's development for residential. However, he said people should look at the balance between the monetary cost and tax revenue loss and the gains for the town overall and for the residents individually now and long-term, especially in terms

of the added beauty the property brings to the town. He said if people keep the focus on revenues then why not allow factories and malls and if people looked solely at the environmental benefits then we would stop all development in its tracks and not cut down another tree.

McPherson said the town's proposed purchase is a 'balanced viewpoint. "This proposal has a lot of features and the land deserves to be saved."

In a conversation Monday, Howard Kaufman, a principal and General Counsel for LeylandAlliance acknowledged that the town would lose tax revenue which he estimates could be more than one million dollars a year if the proposed project is built. Although he was reluctant to state the anticipated selling price of the residential units, pending market value and costs at the time of construction, he said the prices possibly could range between \$400,000 and \$900,00 a unit.

If the town does not purchase the property, LeylandAlliance is prepared to move forward with construction, probably by the spring of 2010. He said LeylandAlliance decided to enter an agreement with The Trust for Public Land because the company is heading in a new direction with private and public partnerships of urban mixed projects Madison Landing is one of LeylandAlliance's last private projects.

Kaufman recognizes the unique environmental and geographic value of the Griswold property and its value to the town. He said the land issue comes down to a simple question: whether the land's value is significant enough for the town to preserve. "We're just presenting an opportunity to the town to decide what it would like to do[with the property]"

He noted that the proposed purchase price is "less than the assessed value of the land and less than what we have invested in the property. We would be selling it at a loss.

"We have very mixed feelings about this. We have a lot of friends in Madison who are disappointed if it is not developed."

The Trust's Project Manager Betty said the proposed purchase of the Griswold property is the first time she has the opportunity to work on a Trust project in her own town. "This will make Madison a very special place," she said.

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