

The New Haven Register (nhregister.com), Serving New Haven, CT

News > Shoreline

Madison voters approve land acquisition

Wednesday, January 27, 2010

By Amanda Pinto, Register Staff

MADISON — The town will soon become the owner of the Griswold Airport site, after voters Tuesday decided to buy the 42 acres for \$9 million in order to save it as open space.

The purchase, which was approved by an 831-vote margin, will prevent the construction of a 127-unit adult housing community that had been planned for the site.

"I'm absolutely delighted that the people of this town had the wisdom to vote positively on this issue," said Bill McCullough of Save Griswold, who has fought development on the site for a decade. "I think it will be something people of the town of Madison will celebrate for years to come."

The town will pay \$9 million, which includes maintenance, and The Trust for Public Land estimates it will raise about \$1.7 million toward the \$9.5 million purchase price.

The proposal won 57 percent of the vote; the final tally of 3,275 to 2,444 votes was a "definitive win," McCullough said.

Alicia Betty, project manager at The Trust for Public Land, has said the owner of a median-price home, assessed at \$570,000, would pay \$64 per year for 20 years toward the purchase.

The town plans to conserve most of the land for open space, but will include sports fields, a walking trail and bird-watching platform, as well as a play area for children for the site. Some of the proposed designs include room for commercial space or an area arts facility.

The developer, LeylandAlliance LLC, will sell the property to Madison as per an agreement with The Trust for Public Land, an environmental nonprofit.

"We obviously have some mixed feelings about selling the land, but clearly the town is going to be acquiring a spectacular property for the citizens of Madison, and I do think it's a great thing," Howard Kaufman, principal of LeylandAlliance, said Tuesday.

Betty said the vote reflected the passion and effort of the residents.

"Today's outcome demonstrates that even in hard times, voters are willing to seize opportunities to preserve landscapes that are important to the character of their communities," Betty said in a statement.

Leyland had been under contract for the property for a decade, and bought it for \$4.4 million in February 2007. Leyland's plans to build Madison Landing had been the subject of years of legal wrangling; although there has been much discussion about what is best to do with the site, townspeople Tuesday were given their first opportunity to put the

issue to a vote.

"I'm very pleased with this outcome and I think future generations of Madisonians will be happy we took this action today," First Selectman Fillmore McPherson said.

Not everyone was happy with the purchase; some residents at recent town meetings said the price is too high in a recession, when the town has other projects on the horizon.

"Obviously, I am disappointed," said Tom Banisch, chairman of the Republican Town Committee, who opposed the purchase only on his own behalf. "It was kind of a David and Goliath situation. (The Trust for Public Land) spent a lot of money putting on this big show, they have a lot to live up to now."

"We saved an unbelievable piece of land, which is integral to the health of the Hammonasset River and the rest of the estuary," said Herb Gram, one of the longest advocates for preserving the land. "The second thing that came out of this is we have a senior citizen tax problem. The 'no' votes were not from people who were against protecting the land, they were from people who can't afford to protect the land."

McPherson said he plans to soon address senior tax issues. The contract for the Griswold site will be signed before April 1, he said.

For those who supported the purchase, Tuesday night was largely about celebration.

"I can tell you, after nine years (fighting development), I'm one helluva happy camper," Gram said.

Amanda Pinto can be reached at apinto@newhavenregister.com or 203-789-5734.

URL: http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2010/01/27/news/shoreline/a1_--_madref_0127.prt

© 2010 nhregister.com, a **Journal Register** Property