



EDITORIAL INK DROPS

Doing It Well

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There is an unspoken principle that characterizes the spirit and culture of Newtown that the community applies pretty much across the board from its youth athletic fields to its board rooms: If you are going to do something, do it well. It is an approach that has worked well for the town, despite the contention and conundrums that attend almost any goal worth pursuing. So when two worthy goals — the preservation of open space and the creation of a permanent memorial honoring the victims of 12/14 — bumped up against each other in the deliberations of the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission (SHPMC), it appears that doing both things well might be a bigger challenge than anyone anticipated.

In a slow, deliberate process spanning a couple of years, the commission has winnowed a list of 30 possible sites for the memorial to its one preferred site: the High Meadow at Fairfield Hills. If you are looking for an environment for peace and reflection, most would agree this open hilltop is as good a place as any in Newtown. People seeking quick refuge from the stresses of daily life have been finding themselves in this meadow for years, outfitted with field glasses, or a dog, or simply a wandering mind.

Recognizing the High Meadow as one of the few remaining undeveloped grasslands in town with spectacular views and habitats for declining bird species and native plants, both the Board of Selectmen and the Planning and Zoning Commission declared the tract in 2013 to be open space “in perpetuity,” preserving it from development and for the passive use and enjoyment of the people of Newtown. Despite all the declarations and perpetual promises by public officials, however, we learned from a town attorney last week that the property was not really open space at all, since someone forgot to formally file a legally binding restrictive covenant on the land — an oversight the Land Use Department promised to quickly remedy.

Town officials are emphasizing, however, that the open space designation of the High Meadow should not preclude the construction of a permanent memorial to 12/14 there, along with its ancillary access road, parking lot, signage, security cameras, lighting, and police patrols. “It doesn’t affect the path we’re on,” First Selectman Pat Llodra explained last week. This kind of development in the High Meadow passes muster because it constitutes “passive recreation,” according to the town’s planning director. This assertion raised eyebrows among High Meadow regulars, who wondered what this brand of bulldozed passivity would do to the meadow’s prized ecosystem of flora and fauna.

The Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial and the preservation of the High Meadow are two important and compelling priorities for the people of Newtown. They are worth doing, and — need we say it? — they are worth doing well. Shoehorning the requirements for each into the limitations of the other may not meet our

standards for doing it well. If we cannot completely respect the purpose and prerequisites of each of these priorities by lumping them together in this way, we may need to think it through again and consider letting them go their separate ways.