

PLANNING
COMMISSION
EXHIBIT # 86

OLD SAYBROOK LAND TRUST
OPEN SPACE AND THE TOWN OF OLD SAYBROOK
Thursday, June 18, 1998

Outline

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Open Space and the quality of life in Old Saybrook

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Thank you for the opportunity, and your interest.

Informational Packet:

Written material

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NEMO maps

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OPEN SPACE AND THE TOWN OF OLD SAYBROOK

FIRST SELECTMAN'S MEETING

Judy Preston, President of the Old Saybrook Land Trust

Thursday, June 18, 1998

We appreciate the opportunity to address the first selectmen, and are here to talk to you today about the value of open space, the town of Old Saybrook, and specifically the Lyon and Gleason properties.

The Old Saybrook Land trust, as you know, is less than a year old, but the last year has been filled with a groundswell of support and commitment to address the protection of open space in Old Saybrook. Our model has been the myriad land trusts throughout the estuary and shoreline regions that have demonstrated the key role that land trusts can and do play in partnering with municipalities to protect land for the benefit of the community. We look forward to working with the town of Old Saybrook.

I'd like to take this opportunity to address the value of open space, by briefly exploring the quality of life, environmental and economic issues surrounding this issue.

OPEN SPACE AS A QUALITY OF LIFE BENEFIT

One of the salient comments that pervaded residents' responses in the recent Conservation and Planning commissions open space questionnaire (which had a strong response of 12%), was the desire to preserve the "small town atmosphere" and sense of community that attract so many people to the town of Old Saybrook.

The protection of open space is an opportunity to protect the natural, aesthetic and historical (including archaeological) heritage of the town, as well as provide passive recreation to residents. Conversely, the build out scenario, among other things, aggravates another commonly touched upon topic in the returned questionnaires: that of traffic congestion.

The preliminary results from the open space questionnaire indicate the following:

When asked if the town has enough or needs more open space, 74% of those responding (353/479) indicated that the town needs more open space.

When asked if the town should use taxpayer money to buy or protect open space in the town, 72% (340/470) said yes, use taxpayer money.

In response to the question, "would you be willing to contribute higher taxes to support open space acquisition/maintenance", 60% of those responding indicated that yes, they would be willing (282/471).

According to a 1988 report of the Governor's Committee on the Environment, the governors of 5 New England states recognized open space as a key element in the quality of life that brought about both economic growth and a multi-billion dollar tourism industry to the region. Although tourism can be a mixed blessing, clearly the natural assets of the town of Old Saybrook - including its small town atmosphere, are integral to its economic health. Wildlife viewing, particularly birding, is one of the fastest growing outdoor recreation activities. Old Saybrook is located along one of the nation's premier migratory pathways, and attracts birders from all over the state, and region.

OPEN SPACE AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFIT

Old Saybrook is fortunate to be blessed with a largely intact upland forested area in the northern part of town. In addition to the aesthetic benefits this affords, this area is the source, and maintenance of the town's aquifer. Conversion of land to development affects local water supplies by decreasing the volume

of water infiltrating into the soil and increasing water flows offsite into streams and rivers. This runoff, or non-point source pollution, often carries sediment and pollutants that risk important town water assets. Water washing over developed land, whether from rain, car washing or the watering of lawns, picks up an array of contaminants, including oil, sand, silt and salt from roadways, and nutrients and toxins from fertilizers, detergents and solvents.

Studies have shown that forestland produces about 50 tons of sediment per square mile per year. In contrast, land stripped for construction, if not properly maintained, can contribute 25,000 to 50,000 tons of sediment per year. Trickle down consequences of increased non point pollution that results from upland watershed development include: declines in water quality, ultimately impacting our marine resources downstream, and the decline of wetlands and wildlife habitat.

The University of Connecticut's NEMO project (non point education for municipal officials) tells us that study after study points to common thresholds for water quality degradation at 10 and 25%. In other words, development levels below 10% affords the most protection to water quality, and over 25% results in the degradation of our water assets. The demonstration of the town's build out scenario (enclosed) belies the risks of this upland development.

Another environmental consideration is air quality: It comes as no surprise that trees and other vegetation possess a large capacity for removing CO₂, particulates and other pollutants from air, as well as the ability to regulate air temperature. Although not quantified, it stands to reason that the significant acreage in the northern part of town, representing a quarter of the town's total acreage, provides a key environmental service.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

I would like to cite several recent studies that highlight the fact that the cost of services associated with residential development exceeds revenues from property taxes. The public costs associated with development fall under five categories: educating children; constructing and maintaining public facilities, such as water and sewage facilities, solid waste disposal and parks; providing public services, such as fire and police protection, and health and welfare services; construction and maintaining roads and parking facilities and; maintaining local government.

In the 1995 publication entitled The Effects of Development and Land Conservation on Property Taxes in Connecticut Towns, the Vermont based Ad Hoc Associates documents relationships between development, land conservation and the property tax bills of residents of Connecticut towns. This study provides an analysis of tax bills on median value homes in each of Connecticut's 169 towns.

The common assumption is that property taxes are higher in more rural towns that have small tax bases. The corollary to this is that growth and development, by expanding the tax base, will result in lower property taxes and that permanent land protection, by reducing the tax base and limiting development, will lead to higher tax bills. It would similarly seem logical that towns that have the most commercial and industrial activity would have the lowest tax bill.

These assumptions proved to be inaccurate in Connecticut. Although there are exceptions, tax bills are generally highest in towns that are most developed and lowest in the most rural towns.

In the 1995 publication The Cost of Community Services in Southern New England, ten communities in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island were studied. This analysis evaluated the financial costs and benefits to communities of various types of land uses. The results of this study indicate that "tax revenues received from residential properties are not sufficient to support the cost of services provided to them." This finding was apparent at the town, state and regional level.

The conclusions here are NOT that growth and development are bad, but that growth and development will not generally lower property tax bills. Townpeople should make decisions about where development and conservation take place based on their goals and vision for the future of their community and a clear understanding of the likely tax consequences – not on myths about property tax impacts.

In an October, 1996 editorial in the Pictorial Gazette, Ten Tansi, town resident and former selectman from the town of Simsbury, provided a brief analysis in support of the town purchasing the Lyon property (then offered to the town for \$2.4 million).

Mr. Tansi took a breakdown of current statistics provided by town hall: Population of town, 10,000; number of homes 4,830; condominiums, 666; grand list, \$1,157,803,373; school budget, \$10,661,530; number of students 1,283; cost per student; \$8,310; mill rate, 14.66 mills; average annual and residential property tax, \$3,050.

Then, he looked at the cost to the town of open space or recreational development by looking at the cost to the town to purchase the Lyon property. Working with the amount of \$2.4 million, if this were bonded for 20 years at 10 percent interest, the annual cost would be \$360,000. Mr. Tansi used a figure of 10 percent interest to be safe, but the cost would be less as municipal bond rates are currently in the 6 percent to 8 percent range. At the end of 20 years the town would be debt free.

Next, he comparatively looked at the cost to the town to develop this property into housing, referring to the developer's estimate, after surveying this property, that 350 houses could be built there. Conservatively at least 300 homes could be built. In this analysis, an average of one child per household was estimated. If the cost to educate each student is \$8,310 and a household pays \$3,050 in taxes, the shortfall (the difference between the cost to the town and tax income) is \$5,260. If 300 homes were constructed and occupied by families, it would be a cost to the town of \$1,578,000 annually. Mind you, this does not take into consideration the cost of new schools that may be necessary. Educational costs continue forever and, as we know, increase each year. It also does not consider the additional public services that were referred to earlier.

The comparison, or cost to the town, looks something like this: The annual cost difference between recreational, or open space development (\$360,000 for bonding) and housing development (\$1,578,000 for educational costs) is \$1,314,000 per year of future savings for the town. In addition, infrastructure costs (roads, police, fire) are significantly less for open space than a housing development.

Mr. Tansi's analysis was rudimentary, but adequately illustrates the power of numbers in addressing the economic issues surrounding open space versus residential development.

REGIONAL EXAMPLES

The topic of open space has been gaining steady momentum within the state. It has become a politically hot topic as well, as evidenced by the governor's appointment of the open space task force, and subsequent passing of legislation in support of state acquisition, and municipal matching funds for the acquisition of open space.

Several recent, large scale and highly visible municipal/land trust land acquisitions in the region underscore the overwhelming public support for open space. In addition, other towns in the estuary and shoreline area (Old Lyme, Essex) are initiating open space planning committees.

Killingworth - in December, 1997, town voters overwhelmingly approved the \$4 million purchase of 339 acres as open space. Donald Venuti, the landowner, stated: "Had the tract been developed, taxpayers would have seen the tax rate skyrocket to support another 200 children in the school system and infrastructure improvements such as road maintenance."

Madison - within the last year the town of Madison purchased 659 acres of open space for \$4.8 million. The town split the cost of a property appraisal and fiscal impact analysis with the land trust. 1500 people turned out for a public referendum to vote in favor of the purchase. The First Selectman "firmly believed that the town would save significant amounts of money in the future by purchasing the land, rather than having the land privately developed."

LYON/GLEASON LAND

A map is enclosed showing the locations of the Lyon and Gleason properties in the town. Although these are not the only parcels of importance for open space preservation in Old Saybrook, current circumstances, and the fact that these two parcels constitute, collectively, an opportunity of regional significance, are why we are here today to recommend town action regarding these tracts.

Although currently under contract, and potentially mired in legal issues, the 960 acre Lyon property constitutes an unprecedented opportunity for the town to demonstrate its commitment to open space. Briefly, the Lyon land is significant to the town of Old Saybrook for the following reasons: it is a large unfragmented woodland, one of very few of this size remaining in the state along the north Atlantic coast, with connectivity to state protected forested land to the north and west of the site. This provides essential habitat for migratory, forest interior birds, and wildlife requiring large open space. This land is important to aquifer protection in the town, harbors tremendous inland wetland habitat, and is known to support rare and endangered plant species, including a high quality Atlantic white cedar swamp, one of the twelve most imperiled natural communities in the state.

Similarly, the Gleason property, comprising two (possibly three) tracts off Ingham Hill Road, comprises approximately 350 acres. This land has, among other things, rich habitat diversity, including open field, woodland, Chaulker Pond (representing the northernmost reaches of the tidal Oyster River, and potential for fisheries reintroduction), Atlantic white cedar, and several ponds that are botanically noteworthy at the state level.

The two properties, when combined with the existing town park off Schoolhouse road, could provide an interconnected greenway for passive recreation that was originally envisioned close to five years ago through the Conservation Commission's conservation plan for the town. Collectively, these two properties constitute close to 1200 acres of coastal woodland that, regionally, is both biologically important as well as an unprecedented opportunity to protect a dwindling Connecticut commodity; undeveloped land.

There is strong support from surrounding communities and interest at the state level. All are dependent on leadership from the town of Old Saybrook. The first selectmen from the neighboring towns of Westbrook and Essex have both indicated their strong support for the open space protection of the Lyon property. The Westbrook Chair of the conservation commission has indicated his support as well, as has the Essex conservation commission. The Essex Land Trust has even gone so far as to offer substantial financial support (50K) toward this project.

The Old Saybrook Land Trust has received strong support and much encouragement from the community. Through 300 new members, financial support exceeded our expectations (and continues) we are optimistic about the groundswell of residents that not only share a vision for the town, but are eager to make it happen. Similarly, with the receptive and supportive leadership that we have seen from the town's selectmen, we believe this is an opportune time to move forward.

IN CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we, the board of the Old Saybrook Land Trust are asking to partner with the town of Old Saybrook. We request that the Board of Selectmen vote to undertake a fiscal impact analysis (for which the Old Saybrook Land Trust will share the expense), with the understanding that this represents a commitment by the town to move forward and initiate the process of acquiring the Lyon and Gleason properties.

We also hereby request the selectman's permission to name the Town of Old Saybrook as a willing partner with the Old Saybrook Land Trust in an application for matching funds for acquisition from the state of Connecticut.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to present this information, and for your attention to this vital, and urgent issue.

*The Board of the Old Saybrook Land Trust
June 18, 1998*