



Plymouth County makes \$700k investment in controversial Plymouth Wood Lot

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PLYMOUTH – It's a can of worms known as the Wood Lot. And it's re-opened.

At last week's annual meeting of the Plymouth County Advisory Board – the legislative segment of Plymouth County government – the board approved the transfer of \$700,000 from the sale of the old Brockton Registry building to an account for the purchase of real estate.

In this case Advisory Board members were told the money would be used to buy two small lots that would give the County additional access to its 106-acre property between Camelot Drive and Long Pond Road in Plymouth.

With Plymouth, Pembroke and Hanson opposed, the 27-member Advisory Board gave its approval to the most recent attempt by County officials to monetize a property many believe - including Plymouth town officials – should be largely preserved because of its beauty, biodiversity, and proximity to other important Plymouth conservation areas.

County Commissioner Dan Pallotta says the County has no specific plans to develop the property, yet, but that it has a "huge upside."

For centuries the property was maintained as a traditional wood lot, a source of wood for fuel, posts and, going back centuries, materials such as pitch and charcoal.

The County was given the property over 100 years ago and until this century maintained it in its traditional state.

But then, as the nation dropped into the 2008 recession and the County began selling off other properties, an “energy wonderland” was proposed for the site: sky-scraping wind turbines and other alternative energy systems meant to both educate and energize the community – and earn the County money.

That project never got off the ground.

A cell tower was erected on the northwestern side of the wood lot, and nearby a pile of concrete bridge abutments and several junk cars appeared, the start of what was hoped to be a training site for the County’s technical rescue team.

Those projects were never fully realized, either, in part because of access issues, and the technical rescue facility gave rise to a de facto dumping ground with old fire engines and other junk littering the site and blocking trails.

Then the County entered into an agreement with Kingstown Trucking to extract sand and gravel from the high point of the property with the promised end use of an immense solar array. A solar firm was selected, and Kingstown Trucking paid the County over \$300,000 for gravel it had yet to extract.

That project was stymied by property abutters, who – with the assistance of nationally-known environmental law firm Earthwise Law Center – went to court to fight the town’s original permitting.

That case was dismissed on the issue of “standing” but the County has yet to move forward on the project.

So here we go again?

Pallotta – who has been active in County politics for more than a decade – says this is different. He calls the \$700,000 they will spend on two lots at opposite ends of the property an “investment in the County’s future with a huge upside.”

The commissioner promises that the County is going to take its time, will form a commission to review the potential uses of the property, and will eventually choose the one that offers the best benefit to the entire County.

“We have no specific plan, yet,” Pallotta told the Old Colony. “I wouldn’t expect anything to happen on the site for years, maybe for decades. The best use might be a little bit of everything.”

Does a little bit of everything include conservation?

Pallotta says everything is on the table.

The state has long had its eyes on the property, and in the past two years town officials have also voiced support for its preservation.

The Wood Lot is adjacent to a number of conservation sites, including the multi-million dollar Eel River restoration site and the Town Forest, which is under a Division of Fish & Wildlife conservation restriction.

The town has gone so far as to make an offer on one of the same lots the County is interested in, apparently to block the County’s access.

Pallotta says he hopes the town does not continue to try and stymie their efforts here, pointing out that he is on record saying that the County has always had the best interests of all 27 County communities – and the abutters to the property – in mind.

“We actually already have access to the property through Tall Pines Road (a small development off Long Pond Road) and frontage there as well,” Pallotta said. “But we don’t want to disturb those neighbors.”

If they are able to finalize the purchase of these two properties they will have access to the Wood Lot through two different areas: one off Long Pond Road, and the other within the Camelot Industrial Park

Christine Silva, one of the litigants who sued the town trying to stop development of the property, has signed an agreement to sell her Long Pond Road property to the County for \$325,000 (twice what the town offered).

A lot on Raffael Road, owned by Shiretown Realty Trust, which has been assessed by the town at just over \$20,000, is set to be acquired by the County for \$375,000.

So, the County is willing to spend \$700,000 for access and has no plan, as of yet, for the property's development?

Pallotta says, yes, there is no plan, and that there is nothing to fear, no secret plan.

"It's not as if we can sell it to a developer and they can do what they want. If the County ever decided to sell any piece of this property," Pallotta said, "the first right of refusal goes to the commonwealth of Massachusetts and the community."

Plymouth Selectman John Mahoney says Pallotta's words are not nearly enough to assure him.

The town's representative on the Advisory Board, Mahoney says that after voting against the County's plans for the woodlot he was approached by the new County Advisory Board chairman, Marshfield Selectman Michael Bradley.

"He offered me a seat on the subgroup that they are going to set up to assess the best uses of the Woodlot," Mahoney told the Old Colony, "and said it would be in our best interest to participate. "

But Mahoney says it's a matter of trust, or a lack of it.

"At the end of the day it doesn't matter what I say," Mahoney said. "No matter what concerns or suggestions I might bring to that group. Ultimately they are going to do what they want to do."

Next week, Part 2: County versus Town

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