

Land trust: Keep city from being 'one big parking lot'

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ATTLEBORO — If you're a landowner who's been thinking of donating some of your property for public use, but worry about the financial aspects of the move — relax. There are ways to do it so everybody wins.

Those methods are currently being explored by the new Attleboro Land Trust, a nonprofit group of citizens formed this year to promote land conservation through education and land acquisition.

The group has started a membership drive to make the public aware of the program. The trust is seeking support in the form of expertise, time and dollars to begin looking for a first acquisition.

President Charles Adler, who also heads the city's solid waste committee, says he first got the idea for a trust when he attended a conference about a year ago on the Canoe River water system.

Trusts have already been formed in several surrounding towns, including Seekonk, Norton, Mansfield, Plainville and Rehoboth, he said.

The Attleboro Land Trust is run by a board of directors who are elected annually. They act as managers of the trust lands, which are held in the public interest.

The purpose of the trust will be to acquire and preserve open land in Attleboro for its scenic beauty, to help protect water supplies and/or to create opportunities for passive recreation, such as hiking.

The trust is looking for members as a show of support and also to help in identifying potential parcels around the city.

A small land-locked piece of property, for



Staff photo by Mark Stockwell

No asphalt here

Checking out the Larson Farm on Wilmarth Street, one of the open spaces the Attleboro Land Trust is eyeing for preservation, are group members Leslie Leger, top left; Pat Campbell, top right; Charles Adler, bottom left; and Larry St. Pierre, bottom right.

example, could become a neighborhood "pocket park," explains membership chairwoman

Deborah Leach.

Parcels could also be developed with a system of nature

trails for use by school children as part of the trust's educational function.

"We don't want to see the city become one big parking lot, one big piece of asphalt," she says.

Ways and means

Adler says the trust does not itself have enough money right now to buy property, but hopes to use some of the membership dues to hire experts who can advise potential donors about estate planning, tax breaks and other incentives.

Giving land to the trust might be an option, for example, for a conservation-minded person who doesn't want to continue paying taxes on a parcel, but still wants to see his or her land stay green.

Adler says there are various ways land can be sheltered from development. Most city land in Attleboro, for example, is already in the public domain and protected. Property can also be environmentally protected through zoning, wetlands or floodplain regulations.

In addition, some private landowners who qualify have classified their undeveloped property as forest, farm or recreational land to take advantage of tax breaks offered by state law.

The statute also provides the city the first option to buy property if the owner decides to change its use.

At the moment, there is a chance the city may try to buy the Locust Valley golf course. The owners had planned to build a subdivision but have since filed for bankruptcy.

Members of the council have asked the city attorney to rule on whether the subdivision plan triggers the mechanism which would allow the city to make an offer.

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Land trust eyes open space

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If it does, the city has 120 days after being notified to exercise its right of first refusal. Some believe the city has enough bonding capacity to make the purchase and will go ahead.

However, if Attleboro should decide not to buy the property, Adler says, the city could transfer the option to the trust, which would do what it can to preserve all or part of the land for public use.

Although government grants are virtually nonexistent now, Adler says there are other ways to generate the revenue to buy property within the city.

The trust could, for example, sell part of a parcel for development in order to preserve the rest. The trust would work with developers to use the buildable land creatively, building cluster housing or shorter roads for example, to preserve as much of the remaining open land as possible.

The search for new members for the Attleboro Land Trust is ongoing.

Basic membership fees are \$15 for individuals and \$20 for families. The fee for seniors and students is \$2. Lifetime memberships are also available for individuals (\$150) and families (\$200).

Anyone interested in becoming a member or possibly donating