

Town, HCT Working To Acquire 31 Acres 27 January 2021

By: William F. Galvin

Jenkins Property Includes 20 Acres Of Cranberry Bogs

HARWICH — The nearly 20 acres of cranberry bogs along Route 124 and Headwaters Drive provide visual evidence of the town's agricultural heritage each fall as the red berries are floated and prepared for harvest. People line the bog banks with cameras to capture the beauty of the harvest.

But in the future, people may have to flip the pages of photo albums to revisit that scene. The town is working with the Harwich Conservation Trust to obtain funding to assist in acquiring the 31-acre Jenkins property, which includes 18.89 acres of cranberry bogs.

The town's real estate and open space committee filed an application a couple of months ago with the community preservation committee under the title "Hinckley's Pond Watershed Preservation Project." The application seeks \$360,000 as the town's contribution to the purchase. The property would be owned by the Harwich Conservation Trust, and the town would hold the conservation restriction on six of the eight parcels that make up the 31 acres.

According to the application, the two parcels west of the Cape Cod Rail Trail will also be subject to a conservation restriction. HCT is in discussion with the town about what property interests the town might hold in those two parcels.

HCT Executive Director Michael Lach said the Jenkins family reached out to the trust. Fred Jenkins is a fifth-generation cranberry grower, but economic pressures are forcing him to give up cranberry harvesting, Lach said, and the family is looking to a new chapter for the property as trails, scenic vistas and open space.

"A lot of Cape Cod cranberry growers are looking to exit the market due to the over-supply of cranberries, and they have a choice of developing the uplands or selling it to the town or a trust for land conservation and walking trails," Lach said.

Lach said if the property was developed, five or six houses could be built along the Headwaters Drive side and one more constructed along Pleasant Lake Avenue.

The property is owned by Jenkins Nominee Trust and is appraised at \$735,000. The sale price is \$732,500, and if the town contributes the \$360,000, HCT would raise the additional \$440,000 to fund the acquisition. The trust has a \$220,000 matching donor and is launching a fund-raising effort with a goal of \$220,000.

The total land acquisition budget is \$800,000, including expenses for the due diligence, legal fees and land stewardship. The town has the first right of refusal on the property under farm tax exemption provisions within state statutes. Lach said there are ongoing discussions with the town on the acquisition provisions.

The Cape Cod Rail Trail runs through the property, and Lach said the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, which has jurisdiction over the bike trail and an adjacent parking lot, could be a key partner in the acquisition. The bike trail provides scenic vistas over both the bogs and Hinckley's Pond.

Hinckley's Pond has suffered environmental setbacks in recent years with fish kills and algae blooms. The town spent just under \$400,000 on an alum treatment to bind excessive phosphorus that was driving the fish kills and algae blooms. A study of the health of the pond conducted in 2012 attributed 7 percent of the phosphorus contribution to the pond waters to nutrients used on the Jenkins bogs and another bog on the west side of the pond.

Lach said additional housing development there would impact the environment, but preservation of the land would protect the pond, a spawning pool for alewives, and the Herring River.

HCT is currently exploring ecological restoration opportunities to enhance habitat diversity, water quality, and walking trails should the trust be able to purchase the property. Lach said if the CPC does not recommend the funding to town meeting, the trust would have to re-evaluate whether it could make the purchase.

"I support this and think it's a great opportunity," CPC member Katherine Green said during discussion on the funding two weeks ago. "As much as we all appreciate the cranberry heritage in Harwich, I don't think it's feasible anymore and it boils down to either development or preservation for this particular property. I'm for preservation."

Several members of the committee voiced their support for the funding, but chairman David Nixon had some reservations. The CPC is expected to vote on its recommendations on Jan. 28.

There has been a move away from cranberry production in recent years, with the town and HCT purchasing a number of cranberry bogs – the Bank Street bogs, Sennott bogs, Great Swamp bogs and bogs along Main Street in North Harwich, most of which are inactive and reverting to naturalization.

The conservation commission approved a naturalization management plan in the fall for the town-owned bogs adjacent to the Herring River in West Harwich. The practice for years had been for the town to lease those bogs for cranberry production.

“I’m opposed to the town buying anymore cranberry bogs,” cranberry farmer Leo Cakounes said this week. “The cranberry industry has suffered enough on its own. The town doesn’t have the expertise for bog property management and you can’t let the land just sit fallow. You have to manage it and preserve it as open space.”

In neighboring Dennis in 1816, Henry Hall began experimenting with ways to plant cranberry vines and develop a sizable harvest. Harwich Captain Alvin Cahoon is credited with producing the first crop from a bog in Pleasant Lake in 1846. He was joined by his cousin, Captain Cyrus Cahoon, a year later, who began planting bogs in the Pleasant Lake area. Together they refined methods of cultivation and developed a commercial industry. The Harwich Historical Society emphasizes the importance of the cranberry industry to the town’s heritage with a permanent cranberry exhibit in the Brooks Academy Museum. The exhibit reflects a rich history that is being diminishing by over production in the midwest and Canada, driving an economic downturn for cranberry growers.