

Town Meeting Postpones Hinckleys Pond Land Purchase 12 May 2021

By: William F. Galvin

HARWICH — Voters expressed frustration at Saturday annual town meeting after being told they could not vote to purchase open space in the Hinckleys Pond watershed. Because the community preservation committee did not recommend the acquisition, the article had to be indefinitely postponed.

After three hours, voters managed to make it through the 49-article warrant, approving town and school budgets and several other community preservation funding requests.

Initially the Hinckleys Pond watershed preservation project costs were to be shared between the town, Harwich Conservation Trust and the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. The article before voters Saturday sought \$245,000 for only a 1.17 acre portion of the overall 31 acres.

The proposal put before the community preservation committee last fall sought \$360,000 in Community Preservation Act funds as the town's share of the acquisition. For its contribution, the town would receive a conservation restriction on the property. Harwich Conservation Trust would purchase the property, estimated to be in the \$723,000 range. The commonwealth has expressed interest in the purchase of one of the lots adjacent to the Cape Cod Rail Trail. The committee recommended the funding in January, but a lot happened quietly in the intervening months. The article was changed considerably. The initial proposal identified the conservation commission as having care and custody of the conservation restriction. But that was switched to the board of selectmen. The final language in the article said the acquisition of the 1.17 acres would be made by the board of selectmen and extended a conservation restriction to Harwich Conservation Trust.

But no one informed the community preservation committee of the changes in a timely manner. The committee called a meeting last Friday night, the eve of the annual town meeting, because the Community Preservation Act requires an affirmative recommendation from the committee before CPA funding is put before town meeting. Members of the committee said they did not have enough information on the changes to make a recommendation of support for the article, including a lack of information on the parcel appraisal and the reasoning for the changes made to the application they approved in January.

“It’s about the process, not the project in front of us,” committee member Donna Kalinick said. The committee voted 6-2 not to recommend the 1.17-acre acquisition.

On Saturday morning, Town Counsel John Giorgio said that without the committee’s favorable recommendation, the article had to be indefinitely postponed. “It’s your only option,” Giorgio said. “It can be brought back any time in the future as long as the community preservation committee supports it.”

The article was moved for indefinite postponement, but that didn't stop debate.

“I hope we’ll vote against this motion. I don’t want to see this whole parcel on the real estate market,” Bob Weiser said. “I want to see it preserved.”

“It’s a lost opportunity if we don’t act on this now,” Peter DeBakker said.

“There were a number of moving parts. The parts kept changing as late as last night,” Selectman Ed McManus said. Selectman Donald Howell added that the purchase could be brought back in a special town meeting in the fall. In the end, voters agreed to postpone the article.

The recreation department also had a tough time with its CPA funding article seeking \$83,500 for a revitalization of its Sand Pond project.

Recreation Director Eric Beebe said the funds would be used to remove the old boathouse, install a fence, repair potholes in the parking lot, cut dead trees, and add a playground with a swing and two spinners. The area of the playground would be upgraded to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

Debera First said ponds are for swimming and the area should remain natural. “We don’t need another playground. We need more natural,” First said.

Clara McLardy agreed, stating people are over-consuming and devouring the natural resources. Playground equipment is made of plastic and as it ages it will leach into the water when it rains, she said.

“Future generations will probably be drinking it in their water,” McLardy said.

Voters rejected the Sand Pond revitalization project funds.

The proposal to use \$1,150,000 in Community Preservation Act funding to provide historic Brooks Academy with a new foundation and expanded basement also drew debate. Sandy McLardy said he supports historic preservation but questioned the cost of the project. Sebastian Mudry also questioned the cost, pointing out the work costs the same as the quint fire truck the town had voted to fund earlier in the meeting.

“It’s absurd, the town can’t afford the luxury of doing it,” Mudry said.

The building dates to 1844, said Brooks Academy Museum Commission Chairman David Spitz. The expanded basement will allow storage of Harwich Historical Society material, opening up more room for museum display. It will provide space that can be used for the next 175 years, Spitz said.

“It may be a 19th century structure, but its a medieval basement,” Duncan Berry said of conditions underneath the building.

Richard Houston said CPA funds can only be spent on the categories listed in the CPA legislation and can’t be returned to taxpayers. “I can’t think of a better use of historical funds than on this project,” Houston said. Voters approved the funding.

Selectmen Chairman Larry Ballantine told the assembly the board requested a conservative budget. Although the local economy seems to be rebounding, the pandemic remains a concern and overall recovery is still uncertain, he said.

“As we have stated in the past and continue to state, Harwich’s finances are in great shape,” Ballantine said. “Nevertheless, a five-year plan running through FY25 has predicted a deficit starting in FY22 of \$400,000, reaching close to a \$3 million in FY25, if past spending practices continue.” Steps have been taken to decrease the projected deficits, he said.

With that voters approved a \$39,027,463 town annual operating budget and \$27,361,049 for Harwich’s share of the Monomoy Regional School District budget without comment. Voters also unanimously approved two debt exclusion articles, for a quint pumper/ladder truck for \$1,086,673 for the fire department and \$700,000 for the department of public works road maintenance plan funding. Both debt exclusions will have to be affirmed at the ballot box on May 18.

