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Inside this Issue

- 1 Victory on Bennett's Pond north
- 2 McKeon's Farm Preservation Coalition
- 3 "Nature Matters" lecture series
- 4 Regional issues

Our mission: *To preserve the 680-acre Bennett's Pond property as open space in perpetuity, and to encourage the acquisition and preservation of open space throughout the town of Ridgefield.*

Ridgefield Open Space Association

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Ridgefield Open Space Association

Bennett's Pond Victory!

December 20, 2001 was an important day for open space preservation in Ridgefield. On that day, Ridgefield took title to the 458-acre north parcel of the Bennett's Pond property. After 3 years of intensive, grass-roots efforts by ROSA members and supporters, the north parcel was acquired by the town by eminent domain.

But the battle with Eureka goes on. Not surprisingly, they have contested the town's valuation of the parcel in court. However, they have also withdrawn all pending appeals of Zoning and Wetland decisions, and withdrew their last development application in March.

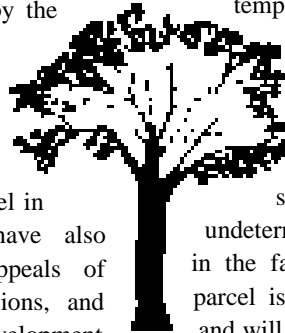
ROSA fought to acquire the entire property, both north and south parcels, for open space. However, despite our petition drive which garnered 2,800 signatures in favor of a referendum vote, the Ridgefield Board of Finance would not allow a referendum to take place on our strictly open space proposal. Instead, a compromise was crafted by the Selectmen to acquire the north parcel for open space, and the south parcel for future corporate development.

The referendum on this question was held on September 25th, 2001, and was overwhelmingly approved by the voters of Ridgefield.

The town proceeded quickly on the north parcel – the acquisition itself was not contested by Eureka, and was completed within 3 months. However, the 155-acre south parcel required a

number of procedural steps, including the creation of an Economic Development Commission and the approval of a master plan. Consequently, the offer was not made on that parcel until March, 2002. In anticipation of the town's action on the south, Eureka filed a request for injunctive relief in federal court, temporarily blocking the acquisition. Oral arguments in the case are scheduled for July.

Although the fate of the south parcel is still undetermined, we take great pride in the fact that the 458-acre north parcel is now owned by the town, and will remain in its current natural state in perpetuity.



Trail system design in progress

The funds from the state Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust committed to Bennett's Pond remain available, although it will be some time before the town actually conveys the property to the state in exchange for the state's \$4.25 million contribution. Before that can happen, some follow-up work to the Phase I environmental study must be done, a second appraisal and an A-2 survey must be obtained, and the old Burton house must be razed.

In the interim, ROSA members encouraged the Selectmen to delegate authority for Bennett's Pond north to the Ridgefield Conservation Commission so that trail design and mapping could commence. ROSA's Scott Sharlow is leading this project as a member of a committee appointed by the Conservation Commission.



Trail design is nearly completed. In the coming months, volunteers will be needed to help establish the trails and install the markers. Please call ROSA at 431-6662 if you would like to volunteer for this project.

We were distressed to see that some individual(s) have taken it upon themselves to blaze an unauthorized trail on the property, marking trees and rocks with fluorescent green paint. It is important that such activities be stopped. The trails currently being designed by the Conservation Commission committee will be established (with input from wildlife biologists) in areas to minimize erosion and disturbance of wildlife.



How long is “in perpetuity?”

In anticipation of the town conveying title to Bennett’s Pond to the state, the question was raised – will the land remain as open space in perpetuity, or could the state eventually use it for other purposes?

ROSA Secretary Bob Kleinberg researched this subject, and determined that, indeed, the state could utilize the land for other purposes in the future. Those uses would be limited by statute to recreational, scientific, educational, cultural and aesthetic purposes.

Although use of Bennett’s Pond for other than passive open space seems unlikely, we intend to work with Town officials and State Rep. John Frey to request conservation easements be granted to the town when title is conveyed. Although this type of easement will not prevent such alternate use in the future, it will provide some level of assurance that the land will remain in its current natural state.

McKeon’s Farm – The Next Preservation Goal

Arguably the most scenic property in Ridgefield, the 85-acre McKeon’s Farm is targeted for purchase by the Town. In an effort to avoid additional burden to Ridgefield taxpayers, First Selectman Rudy Marconi has proposed a joint public/private effort to save this beautiful land.



State funds secured

Thanks to the efforts of Conservation Commission Chairman George Orlan, State Representative John Frey, and First Selectman Marconi, the Town obtained a \$641,250 open space grant from the State toward the purchase of McKeon’s. With a total purchase price of \$2.4 million, the town plans to sell two building lots for at least \$1.2 million, leaving a shortfall of approximately \$600,000. The Conservation Commission will contribute \$300,000, and the balance must be raised from individual and corporate donors.

Coalition Formed

Knowing that significant fundraising would be necessary to save McKeon’s, ROSA formed a coalition with the Ridgefield Conservation Commission and the Land Conservancy of Ridgefield. In February, we wrote and designed a fundraising brochure that we mailed to about 3,000 households. This brochure has raised about \$26,000 to date. An additional \$25,000 contribution was received from one very generous individual, bringing the total raised to slightly over \$50,000. Recently, the Land Conservancy committed \$20,000 towards the purchase. But there remains a shortfall that must be raised from other sources.

Bentley raffle planned

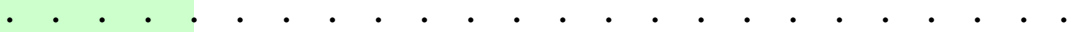
Yet another generous Ridgefielder has donated a Bentley automobile to the McKeon’s fundraising effort. In order to maximize the proceeds from this donation, ROSA may conduct a raffle for this unique vintage car. Please watch for us (and the Bentley) this summer!

ROSA: Why are we here?

ROSA was formed in 1999 with the mission to “save the Bennett’s Pond property as open space in perpetuity.” Since the north parcel is saved, and the south parcel is in litigation – why are we here?

The answer is, of course, that we are the **Ridgefield** Open Space Association, not the Bennett’s Pond Association. There are many additional parcels, both large and small, that should be preserved as open space, beginning with McKeon’s. We also believe our mission should include local environmental matters, including wetlands, water quality, and aquifer protection. Consequently, we will continue to attend P&Z meetings and hearings, and to advocate for improved protection of our important and irreplaceable natural resources.

As a grass-roots, environmental advocacy organization, we can research issues, provide testimony at public hearings, lobby our elected officials for improved regulations, support candidates for elective office who share our vision for the future of Ridgefield, and help to educate the public on local environmental issues.



“Friends of Bennett’s Pond” to be formed

While ROSA will continue in its role as an environmental advocacy organization (see box on Page 2), we plan to form a new, separate, charitable organization dedicated to the maintenance, protection and restoration of the Bennett’s Pond property. Funds raised would be used for development of a natural resource management plan, eradication of invasive species, and restoration of the stone wall and root cellar on Bennett’s Farm Road. All efforts would be conducted under the authority and direction of the responsible town or state agency.



“Nature Matters” Lecture Series Begins

ROSA has collaborated with the Ridgefield Library on several events in recent months.

In January, ROSA members were invited to a pre-screening of the National Geographic special on “BioBlitz”, an event that took place last June at Danbury’s Tarrywile Park. The National Geographic Explorer program was aired on the Discovery Channel in March.

This Spring, ROSA is co-sponsoring a lecture series entitled “Nature Matters,” presented by the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History. The first two lectures took place in March and April, and were very well received. See *Upcoming Events* box for details on the May lecture.

The series will continue in the fall with three additional lectures. The interaction between Ridgefield and the State Museum of Natural History is

thanks to the efforts of Ridgefielders Christine Lodewick, Walter Slavin and Bill Morlock.

Bennett’s Pond: Danbury parcel status

Approximately 69 acres of the Bennett’s Pond property lie in Danbury – just 3 acres south of Bennett’s Farm Road, and the balance to the north.

Last fall, Danbury voters approved a bond issue that included \$375,000 for the purchase of the 69 acres, representing 50% of its appraised value. The balance of the funds would be obtained from the DEP open space grant program. ROSA intends to solicit help from our friends in Danbury to meet with Danbury Mayor Boughton and encourage the pursuit of this important component of the “Ives Trail” open space concept: a vast area of open space land that begins at the Terre Haute land in Bethel, extends to Tarrywile Park and Wooster Mountain in Danbury, to Bennett’s Pond, Pine Mountain, Hemlock Hills and McKeon’s Farm in Ridgefield.

Bennett’s Pond north: Go for a hike!

We encourage you to visit Ridgefield’s newest and largest open space parcel! There are several areas available for parking on Bennett’s Farm Road: by the old Burton property (old blue, boarded-up farmhouse) and near the entrance to the old Fox Hill Inn. Both areas are gated, but there is room for a few cars at each location.

Scott Sharlow provided an excellent introductory hike on Bennett’s Pond in March, an event that was co-sponsored with the *Discovery Center* and was much enjoyed by the participants.

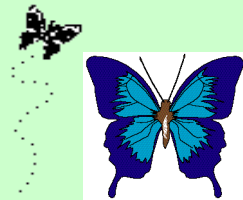
Upcoming Events

Thursday, May 16
7:00 p.m., Ridgefield Library
“Nature Matters” Lecture

“Moths, Butterflies & their Caterpillars: A Treasure-Trove of Biodiversity”

The third in a series presented by the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History, co-sponsored by ROSA and the Ridgefield Library.

Dr. David Wagner, Professor of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, UCONN-Storrs will introduce the remarkable diversity found in this group of animals, from homegrown natives to those found in the rainforests of Costa Rica.



Saturday, June 1 – National Trails Day Hike on Bennett’s Pond, 9 am – 1 pm

Co-sponsored by ROSA with the Norwalk River Watershed Association, Ridgefield Conservation Commission and the Discovery Center. This is your opportunity for an introduction to Ridgefield’s newest and largest open space. Call ROSA or Lillian Willis (438-8653) for details.



If you missed that opportunity, and would like a guide for your first visit, please plan to attend the *National Trails Day* hike on Bennett's Pond – see Upcoming Events box for details.

Regional Issues

Kelda Lands Saved!

The largest single acquisition of open space in Connecticut history occurred in 2001! Permanent protection of 18,700 acres of water company lands in western Connecticut was achieved last year when the State agreed to purchase the BHC/Kelda lands for \$90 million, \$10 million of which will be provided by *The Nature Conservancy*.

This tremendous success story is a result of the cooperation of land conservancy organizations, state and local government officials, and a large group of grass-roots activists that formed the *Coalition for the Permanent Protection of Kelda Lands* under the

leadership of the *Connecticut Fund for the Environment*. Although not directly involved with this effort, ROSA was an early member of the coalition, and our members lobbied officials in support of the purchase of this important land. While only a small amount of this property is located in Ridgefield, our region would have been severely impacted by development of these watershed lands. We are grateful to State Rep. John Frey who steadfastly supported this important legislation.

A Casino in our backyard?

Call us NIMBYs – we don't care. The Schaghticoke tribe of Kent is pursuing federal recognition, which would enable them to build a gambling casino anywhere they choose, with no local control or input. Tribal leaders are reportedly considering several sites in southwestern Connecticut, including the Dow Chemical (former Union Carbide) property in Danbury, just off of Route 84 near the Ridgefield town line.

Without a doubt, this would be the most devastating development our region has ever seen. ROSA will assist our town officials in any way possible to ensure that such a casino never becomes a reality.

Ridgefield Open Space Association Board Members

- Ellen Burns, President
- Debby Mandelbaum, V.P.
- Bob Kleinberg, Corresp. Secy.
- Guy Bocchino, Recording Secy
- Jenny Bocchino
- Scott Sharlow
- Pete Stewart
- Eric Kristoffersen
- Barb Jennes
- Patricia Baker
- Tom Elliott
- Susan Baker
- Patricia Sesto

Albert M. Baker (1934-2001)

Please consider making a donation to ROSA to help us continue our efforts for Ridgefield. We thank you for your support.

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