

# Ridgefield Open Space Association, Inc.



Our Mission: To preserve the 680-acre Bennetts Pond Property as open space in perpetuity,  
and to encourage the acquisition and preservation of open space throughout the town of Ridgefield

SUMMER, 2000

Volume 3, Number 1

## Bennett's Pond at the Crossroads

For nearly two years, the Ridgefield Open Space Association has talked about "The Future of Bennett's Pond." The future has now arrived. It has arrived in the form of a \$5 million commitment from the State of Connecticut to help finance the acquisition of most or all of the Bennett's Pond property for open space. This represents a very generous 44% of the \$11.25 million appraised value, making the land an incredible bargain for the town.

### Timing is critical

The state money, obtained largely through the efforts of State Representative John Frey, is on the table now, but it won't stay there forever. Next year it could well disappear in the wake of a new state budget, and pleas from other towns for help in preserving their open spaces.

This means if Ridgefield is ever going to buy the Bennett's Pond lands, the time is now. That much we know. What we don't know is whether or not Ridgefield voters are ready to spend an estimated \$6.25 million dollars to preserve the entire 680 acre property. Or would they be more willing to spend a smaller amount to preserve less land, anticipating future tax revenues from the densely-developed balance of the property? How do we reach our fellow citizens? What are the most important issues to bring to them? How do open space spending and school spending relate to each other? Does the property tax rate dominate the attention of the public?

### Consultation and decision-making

To begin to answer these questions, and to broaden its decision-making process, ROSA held a forum with several dozen supporters at a meeting in Town Hall on June 29. As luck would have it, this was the very day that Eureka's latest development plan was announced.

Discussion focused on the willingness of ROSA members and the wider Ridgefield populace to accept, in principle, some development on the Bennett's Pond property. This was weighed against the risks, costs and benefits of an eminent domain acquisition of some or all of the property.

### Consensus reached

The result of the 3-hour meeting was a consensus that the Bennett's Pond property should be preserved as open space to the maximum extent possible. Eureka's latest development plan (see story below) found no support whatsoever. There was considerable concern that an age-restricted development could be opened to the general

population, putting an additional load on our already-overcrowded schools. It was felt that the disadvantages of development – increased traffic and stress on the environment – overshadowed in importance the property taxes that might be collected from new developments. The group voted unanimously to start a petition drive to acquire the property by eminent domain, while keeping an open channel to town officials.

### A new development plan?

On June 29 the *Ridgefield Press* reported that First Selectman Rudy Marconi and Eureka V LLC, the present owners of the Bennett's Pond property, may be close to an agreement on a development plan. According to the article, the plan would include construction of 200 homes in a high-density configuration, 250,000 square feet of commercial space, and a 250 room hotel. All development would be south of Bennett's Farm Road, but with a catch – the road itself would be relocated to the north, providing the developers with additional acreage. In this scheme, approximately 480 acres would be purchased for open space.

The plan was only sketchily described in the *Press*. The residential development would be an age-restricted, "gated" community, thus minimizing school and road maintenance expenses. From an economic analysis previously submitted by Eureka, we expect the commercial component would employ about 1,100 workers and the hotel about 350 more.

We understand Mr. Marconi's impulse to take an active role in determining the future of Bennett's Pond. Unlike some previous town leaders, he seems determined to prevent the town from drifting into disaster – whether the issue is school construction, roads, or senior benefits. But while Mr. Marconi has negotiated in good faith, he knows, the town knows, and the Eureka organization should know, that a preliminary agreement with the First Selectman is only the beginning of a long and complex process.

First and foremost, the plan requires significant changes in the zoning regulations, and therefore is subject to Planning and Zoning Commission scrutiny. The legal status of age-restricted housing is unclear. The timing of a full-build out and related tax revenues is uncertain. Water and sewer service must be provided, requiring examination by local and state authorities. Most importantly, the people of Ridgefield must have input into the process. Ultimately it is up to the citizens to determine what our town will look like in the future.

Now that Eureka has had its say at the negotiating table, they will have to move over to make room for the people.

### Petition Drive to Begin

Due to the importance of the funding currently available from the State for the acquisition of Bennett's Pond, ROSA will soon commence a petition drive for a referendum to acquire some or all the property by purchase or eminent domain. Under the Town Charter, a referendum may be called by a petition signed by 5% of the electorate, which presently is approximately 750 voters.

We ask those of you who are willing to help gather signatures on this petition to contact Ellen Burns at 431-3796 or email us at ROSA@mags.net. There is a real danger that these state funds will no longer be available for Bennett's Pond if we don't act soon.

### Open Space – A Regional Perspective

When we think about the future of Bennett's Pond, it is easy to forget that other towns are also in the process of weighing demands for development against the loss of fields and forests. The conversion of a large tract of open space to residential and commercial use has a large impact no matter where it takes place. How are neighboring towns dealing with this issue?

#### Wilton

Like Ridgefield, Wilton is under intense development pressure. Their response has been to accelerate open space purchases. In this year's budget referendum, a proposal to buy 88 acres of open space for \$4.1 million dollars was approved by 83% of the voters. But this astonishing victory for open space pales when compared to last year, when 90% voted to spend \$8 million for 142 acres. While we note that the turnout in both elections was low, there is no indication that large anti-open space forces stayed at home while \$12 million dollars was being appropriated to buy 230 acres. [Compare this with our opportunity to acquire three times as much land for half as much money.]

#### Bethel

In June, Bethel voters rejected by 58% to 42% a plan to turn 400 acres of forested watershed land, known as Terra Haute, into a golf course. Significant environmental and open space issues were successfully raised by opponents of the golf course development.

#### Brookfield

In January, Brookfield bought two farms totaling 190 acres for \$1.65 million. Brookfield voters approved the purchases at referendum by an almost-incredible majority of 89% to 11%. The land is to be preserved as open space.

#### Danbury

Late last year, Danbury made a major addition to open space at Tarrywile Park. It is now engaged in negotiations with several landowners to complete an arc of open space that runs from the Terra Haute land, through Tarrywile and Wooster State Park, to Bennett's Pond. This is one of several ways that Mayor Gene Eriquez is taking a leading role in planning for smart growth.

#### Redding

Redding's permanently preserved open space totals 3,500 acres, and this does not include large tracts of undeveloped land owned by the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company. Last year, Redding spent \$2 million to buy 70 acres of land off Sunset Hill Road. Redding's long-standing commitment to open space preservation, low density housing, and negligible commercial development has enabled it to remain a very attractive small town completely free of congestion – with a tax rate comparable to Ridgefield's.

#### Lewisboro, NY

Open space concerns do not stop at the state line. According to a headline this spring in the *Lewisboro Ledger*, "Preservation Tops Agenda.." The article goes on to say "For the past two years the single most important issue concerning town residents is the effort to preserve open space by acquisition"

Ridgefield is completely surrounded by towns that take open space preservation very seriously. Why are our neighbors so concerned with this issue? Surely many people share our appreciation of beautiful land and an unspoiled environment. But what about the impact of overdevelopment on property values? Communities like Danbury and Bethel are recognizing the importance of open space preservation to enhance the quality of life for their residents and to maintain property values. Towns like Lewisboro, Wilton, and Redding have seen the fiscal benefits of a rural atmosphere, and are not complacently sitting back while it disappears under the blade of a bulldozer. Where does that leave Ridgefield? If we pack high density housing and out-of-scale commercial development into our town, how are we going to compare to neighboring towns that are moving in the other direction?

### Bennett's Pond and Taxes

Many who keep up with town affairs have by now figured out that Ridgefield taxpayers will soon be experiencing "sticker shock". Due to the poor planning and inaction of previous town administrations, school crowding has reached the crisis point. Funds for a new middle school have already been approved by voters, and in the fall, more money – a lot more – will be requested for other school construction.

#### Schools & open space

ROSA strongly believes there is no conflict between an excellent school system and an active open space acquisition program. Both are essential for the long-term health of the town. Among the most important permanent benefits we can give our children are a good education and an unspoiled natural environment.

Many will ask whether we can afford both schools and land. We need to examine fiscal realities to make sure well-intentioned spending does not lead to fiscal crisis.

The present town debt is about \$33 million, which, as a percentage of tax revenues, is about average for Fairfield County towns. ROSA estimates additional bonding for schools and miscellaneous items will approximately quadruple the debt. While this sounds fiscally irresponsible, it is actually fairly typical of towns in the midst of major school building campaigns. For example,

between 1996 and 1998, both Newtown and Monroe doubled their bonded indebtedness, while between 1994 and 1998, Darien and New Canaan increased their debt by factors of five or more. The general pattern is for debt to increase sharply during periods of school building, and then slowly decrease over a longer period as those bonds are paid off.

#### Debt analysis

Against this backdrop of major school spending, purchase of the Bennett's Pond property is no more than a drop in the bucket. The property has been assessed at \$11.25 million, of which the state has offered to contribute \$5 million. The town's contribution will be approximately \$6.25 million. We must point out that if the land is acquired by eminent domain, the court may require the town to pay more; Connecticut precedents suggest an additional 3%-10%.

What does debt mean to the taxpayer? At current interest rates, annual debt repayment is about 10% of the face value of the bond. Assuming a \$7 million Bennett's Pond bond, that amounts to an increase of 1% in the mill rate. Of course, once the bond is paid off this expenditure returns to zero.

Another consideration is the revenue forgone as a result of not allowing the land to be developed. The most recent Eureka plan for Bennett's Pond includes 200 age-restricted town houses, 250,000 square feet of office space and a 250 room hotel. The gross tax revenue from this development is estimated to be \$2.5 million when and if everything is built - which could take up to 5 years or more, depending on market conditions. However, developments require town services. Eureka estimated (in connection with a previous, similar plan) that these expenses would amount to 25% of revenue. Then, we can expect the net tax revenue from development to be about \$1.9 million per year, 2.7% of the present town budget.

The tax rate is important. A vocal group of "tax hawks" regularly write letters to the *Ridgefield Press* about it. Our Board of Finance is charged with monitoring it closely. But we have to ask ourselves, why did we move to Ridgefield? For the amenities and the beauty of the town, or for the tax rate? And, by the same token, what is going to motivate the buyer of your home, if and when you move away? A huge public park in town, or a fraction of a mill increase in the tax rate?

### New Yard Signs Available!

ROSA has purchased a quantity of new yard signs for display throughout Ridgefield. The green and white signs read "Bennett's Pond: Save it Now... or Lose it Forever!" and are printed on a weatherproof vinyl. The signs are available at no charge for those who purchased our previous sign, and for \$15.00 for all others. Please call Jenny Bocchino at 438-5308 or email us at ROSA@mags.net for arrange for delivery.

### Other News & Events

• ROSA's first benefit event of the year was held at the Aldrich Museum on May 20th. Approximately 130 open space supporters turned out for an evening of music,

modern art and merriment, as well as a bit of "politicking." Congressman Jim Maloney, State Representative John Frey, Ridgefield First Selectman Rudy Marconi, Selectmen Steve Zemo and Barbara Manners all joined us for the event.

• ROSA member Scott Sharlow was instrumental in bringing Dr. Michael Klemens, the foremost herpetologist of our region, to Ridgefield. Dr. Klemens made a presentation entitled "Sustaining Ecosystems in a Changing Landscape" on June 15th to a large group of area residents. ROSA hopes to persuade our elected officials to pursue a multi-town effort toward this end along with Danbury, Redding and Bethel.

• On July 8th ROSA again participated in the "Sale-ation" event on Main Street. ROSA volunteers manned a booth for the all-day event, speaking to hundreds of area residents about the importance of open space preservation.

• ROSA will be one of the participating organizations at the Newcomer's Club Annual Kick-off event at the Community Center on September 14th and 15th. The Newcomers Club currently has 450 member families, and we hope to garner support for our efforts from these new Ridgefielders.

• In February, ROSA joined a coalition of organizations to support the protection of BHC watershed lands at risk for development as a result of the acquisition of Aquarian/BHC by the UK-based Kelda corporation. Enclosed with this newsletter is a brochure on the Coalition for the Permanent Preservation of Kelda Lands, its activities, and how you can help save the 10,000 acres now at risk in Connecticut.

• ROSA vocally supported the designation of the 57-acre Shadow Lake parcel as open space in perpetuity. Thanks to the leadership of Rudy Marconi, the efforts of our Ridgebury neighbors, and ROSA's activism in bringing open space preservation to the forefront of public discussion in Ridgefield, the Board of Selectmen unanimously voted in June to permanently designate the land as open space.

• The Parks & Recreation Department survey on recreational needs in Ridgefield showed some interesting results: 85.8% of the respondents supported more walking/nature trails, and 66.6% supported additional open space. The survey was mailed to 2,500 randomly selected Ridgefielders. It was conducted by an outside organization and the response rate was a very impressive 29.4%.

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