

## Warren Woods buy won't be on Ashland ballot

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ASHLAND — Town leaders won't proceed with a ballot question on Warren Woods as planned, though they say they're still trying to reach a deal to buy the 140-acre parcel off Chestnut Street.

"What we said in our initial decision is that if we came to an agreement, it would go to Town Meeting and we would put a non-binding question on the (May 18) ballot," Selectmen Adam Shuster said.

Following the election, the board, which has the ultimate say on land acquisitions, would then vote on whether to purchase the property. Also, Town Meeting would need to authorize the use of Community Preservation Act money to pay for the land.

The board issued a statement Monday night, saying it would not put a question on the ballot because the town has not yet reached an agreement with Northeastern University, which owns the land.

Under state law, local ballots must be approved 35 days before an election. The deadline for ballot submission for the May 18 town election was Monday night.

Shuster said the board decided to omit the ballot question because there was no possibility to attach a monetary value to the purchase for the non-binding question.

"You have to have a finalized question," he said. "In this case we didn't have a question."

The question should ask "are they willing to spend 'x' to get the land," he said. "We don't know what 'x' is."

Eliot Street resident Jim Hanna, an outspoken proponent of purchasing the woods, said he was disappointed. He said the board could have put a question without a cash value attached to gauge public interest in the purchase.

"This smells like sour grapes to me," he said.

Hanna at first disliked the idea of having a non-binding question on the ballot.

"But we took it as something," he said. "Better than nothing."

Some in town have questioned the board's approach to an eventual purchase of the land, saying the selectmen are not making enough information public.

The selectmen have remained mum on the ongoing negotiations through most of the process, saying only that they are still talking with Northeastern. The board said the university has pledged to not sell the property without first having a conversation with Ashland officials.

When the board first unveiled its approach to buying the land, some residents, like Hanna, were upset that there would be a non-binding referendum on Warren Woods, saying Town Meeting was the appropriate place to make such decisions, and the selectmen should take their cue for their final vote from the decision made on Town Meeting floor.

"Town Meeting is the town's legislative body and the decision of Town Meeting should be final," said Roberta Soolman, chairwoman of the Open Space Committee. "If the (election) vote was contrary to Town Meeting's, which will of the people are you going to ignore?"

Board members said on Feb. 17 that they chose their three-pronged process as a way to ensure that as many voices as possible could be heard. At a Town Meeting, where votes are cast in the public eye, people who oppose the purchase might be less likely to make their voices heard, members said.

Although the warrant for the May 5 Town Meeting is closed, there is a place-holder article for the use of CPA funds toward a purchase of the property.

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