

Northeastern rejects Ashland bids on Warren Woods

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ASHLAND — Northeastern University has rejected the town's two bids on the 140-acre Warren Woods, but selectmen said the town is still interested in buying the land.

Last night, the board lifted its gag order on negotiations with the school and disclosed that the town had bid on April 7 as much as \$3.5 million for the land. The school rejected the town's initial \$1.5 million offering.

Selectman Adam Shuster distributed a letter from Vincent Lembo, Northeastern's vice president and university counsel, saying the school was "considering offers," but had not negotiated with any other bidder.

"The university is under no pressure or obligation to sell Warren Woods," wrote Lembo. "Our position is that we will review offers on the property, and if an offer is made that is acceptable...we will move forward to consummate a sale."

Lembo also wrote that the university enjoyed a "warm and cordial" relationship with Ashland. "In that spirit, if the property is to be sold, it would be our desire to convey the land to the town, all other things being equal."

Lembo wrote that if the university received an acceptable bid from another bidder, the school would contact Ashland before selling the land.

Selectmen said that they are not currently in negotiations, but will reexamine the idea at a closed door meeting next week.

Shuster said the board had used an appraisal done by Avery Associates and paid for by the Massachusetts Audubon Society for part of its negotiations. The firm appraised the Ashland piece of the property at \$4.35 million. A smaller portion of the land lying in Holliston was appraised at \$350,000.

The warrant for the May 5 Town Meeting had a "placeholder" article to tap into Community Preservation Act money to buy the land. The board said that measure will likely be passed over at Town Meeting.

"I don't feel like the town is any worse for wear than we were 10 years ago," Selectman Michael Campbell said. "We've really hammered this thing out...and we are still going to consider it."

Most of the residents on hand last night took the board's announcement in stride.

"Being a former negotiator of land deals, I know what you are going through," said Eliot Street resident Jim Hanna, who has previously questioned the board's decision to keep mum on the negotiations. "For the first time in a long time, in fact since February, I feel comfortable in what you are doing."

Land use lawyer Carl Hakansson, however, questioned the town's negotiating techniques, saying they may have tainted the negotiations by offering too low a bid. He also urged the board to continue negotiations and consider appointing him to the negotiating team.

Shuster said the board would discuss it when they meet next week.