

Group seeking advocacy for preservation of Ashland's Warren Woods

By Kendall Hatch/Daily News staff

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ASHLAND — Organizers of a group fighting to preserve the Warren Woods from development last night urged a packed room at the Public Library to get the word out about the property's importance and mobilize before May's Town Meeting.

Roberta Soolman, chairwoman of the Open Space Committee, encouraged the approximately 60 people on hand to get on the phone and start calling people to tell them about the financial, environmental and historical significance of preserving Warren Woods.

She also encouraged residents to promote the idea of Community Preservation Act funding, which would likely be used to buy Warren Woods.

Community Preservation Act money is accrued in an account separate from the town's general fund. It is collected as a tax surcharge and can only be used for projects that support the preservation of open space or historic resources, create or maintain low-income housing or recreation. There is a state match on funds appropriated for Community Preservation projects.

Warren Woods is an approximately 140-acre parcel off Chestnut Street that was placed on the market last year by its steward, Northeastern University.

The Board of Selectmen voted to enter into negotiations with Northeastern over a sale at its Feb. 17 meeting. At a meeting on Wednesday, the board announced it would not make any more public comment on the negotiations until talks concluded.

During last night's information session, land specialists from the Massachusetts Audubon Society and the Sudbury Valley Trustees talked about the importance of the land and laid out possible solutions to augment funding, should the town succeed in its talks with the university.

Susan Crane, land specialist at Sudbury Valley Trustees, said she took her first walk through the property recently and was struck by the amount of wildlife.

"The woods themselves are just beautiful," she said. "It was really exciting to see the creatures that use the woods and there were a lot of tracks from people too. ... These trails have been used and walked and loved for a long time."

Crane and Bob Ford, a land specialist at the Audubon Society, said their agencies would be willing to do whatever is possible to help the town save the property from development, including helping in negotiations with Northeastern.

Crane said she also could help the town find grants and other funding sources to reduce the cost to the town. She said Ashland would likely qualify for \$500,000 from the state's land grant program.

Resident Janet Platt said she was frustrated with the selectmen's choice to delegate negotiating responsibilities to Town Manager John Petrin and Town Counsel Lisa Mead when MassAudubon and the Sudbury Valley Trustees are volunteering their services.

"It seems to me that there are experts in negotiating open space availing themselves to the the town," she said. "It's frustrating to not see us using all the resources knowing that they are here."

Selectman Jon Fetherston said the board was sticking by its decision to keep mum and couldn't comment.

School Committee member Marcia Reni asked if there was anything residents could do in the way of advocacy to Northeastern, which also owns the Warren Conference Center, across Chestnut Street from the 140-acre parcel. The conference center is not for sale.

"Northeastern is a neighbor to us. They are going to stay in town," she said. "Is there any message we can send to them that would be productive?"

"Northeastern is very aware of what is going on in Ashland," said Soolman. "The advocacy should be focused on the residents here."

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