

Orleans nonprofit seeks to preserve Sipson Island



By Ethan Genter

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ORLEANS — A rare real estate gem could be open to the public if The Friends of Pleasant Bay has its way.

The Friends, a nonprofit environmental group, has proposed to purchase Sipson Island and make it conservation land.

The Friends submitted an application to the Orleans Community Preservation Committee detailing the plan, which would include a private backer who would buy the island, currently on the market with Robert Paul Properties, and sell it back to the town and the group.

“We envision a sanctuary accessible to the public and maintained primarily as open space in its natural state, providing recreational opportunities through its upland trails and beaches and educational resources through study of the surrounding marine environment and traces of Native American habitation,” the Friends wrote in its application.

Sipson Island sits in the middle of Pleasant Bay, just off South Orleans, and at nearly 25 acres is one of the largest pieces of unprotected land in town. The island is on the market for \$7.9 million for the “first time in generations,” according to the real estate listing. Split into nine parcels, the island has four dwellings, three docks, and is easily accessible by boat. The property also has a dock and boat ramp off Davis Road on the mainland.

“The island represents a conservation opportunity that is unlikely to occur again for many years if kept in private hands,” the application states.

The Friends of Pleasant Bay first started looking at the island about a year and a half ago, said Moncrieff Cochran, a member of the nonprofit organization’s board. The price tag was substantially higher at the time, but when the price started to come down in February, talks began to heat up.

“We’ve been marketing the property for a couple years,” said Fran Schofield, a senior associate with Robert Paul. “It’s a wonderful opportunity for the right buyer.”

Schofield declined to comment directly about the Friends’ proposal.

Although the group has submitted a plan to the Community Preservation Committee, it is far from finalized, Cochran said. The plan was submitted to make the committee’s funding deadlines and has not been approved by the Friends’ board, nor has final price been negotiated.

“It’s all very tentative from our standpoint,” he said.

But according to the plan, the group has found a private backer who would buy the island and sell most of it back to the town and an established nonprofit. To pay for the purchase, the Friends of Pleasant Bay is seeking between \$1.25 million and \$1.75 million in community preservation money, with plans to raise about twice as much through private donations. The Friends also would apply for a state grant of up to \$400,000.

“I think it’s an interesting proposal,” said Alan McClennen, chairman of the Board of Selectmen and the Community Preservation Committee.

The Open Space Committee approached selectmen about the parcel in August, and the board approved the committee to get an appraisal of the island.

Conservation restrictions would be drafted and a trust would be created to handle land management with the town. In all, according to the application, the purchase would be completed by January 2020 and the community preservation money would be bonded over 20 years.

The purchase would require town meeting approval for the preservation money. The Friends of Pleasant Bay would still have to raise the private funds, which would be the most substantial undertaking in the nonprofit's history, Cochran said.

A two-thirds vote at town meeting is required for municipal bonding, and that could be a difficult task for acquiring land for public use but not accessible to the entire public, McClennan said.

The project could serve as a green-tourist destination, complete with possible camping sites, walking trails and easy access from town landings at Portanimicut and Quanset roads. It also could serve as an outpost for the harbormaster overseeing boat traffic in the narrows.

The Conservation Commission supported the application to the Community Preservation Committee, which is set to review it on Thursday. Those discussions will be preliminary, and any project needs to go through the committee process before ending up on the town meeting warrant.

"This is a plan," Cochran said. "Whether we can follow the path remains to be seen."