

Sipson Island Purchase And Sales Agreement Expected Soon

06 February 2019

By: Ed Maroney



Sipson Island. SPENCER KENNARD PHOTO

ORLEANS — A local man has agreed with the seller on a price for Sipson Island, and a purchase and sales agreement is expected to be signed this month. The price is confidential until then. The resident has been working with the Friends of Pleasant Bay and The Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts regarding the purchase, serving as a buyer/backer to take the property off the market.

The Friends intends to raise funds to buy 22 of the island's 24 acres from the buyer-backer, the remainder of which will be owned by the buyer, who is also making a million-dollar contribution to the overall purchase. In addition, a state grant program could provide \$400,000, and the town's open space committee has recommended that \$1.5 million in Community Preservation funds be dedicated to the acquisition.

Conservation restrictions on further development would be placed on the entire island and administered by the Compact, assuring public access.

Speaking to the community preservation committee Jan. 31, Mark Robinson, executive director of the Compact, described "a generational open space opportunity not only for the town of Orleans but the Pleasant Bay community... Of the 800 projects I've worked on (since 1986), I consider this among the top three."

Robinson, who was representing the Friends, said the group wants the island acquired for conservation and public access and managed by a new Sipson Island Trust. Four of

the acres could be devoted to a sustainability center for research and education programs. The new Trust would be responsible for maintenance of trails on the island.

For its contribution, Robinson said, the town would not be buying title to the land but rather paying for a conservation restriction. The \$1.5 million in community preservation funds “is less than 30 percent of the agreed-upon sale price,” he said.

The restriction would guarantee public access over the trails and use of most of the island's beaches. The buyer/backer's two acres would not be open to the public, but would be under a conservation restriction preventing expansion of an existing home by more than 25 percent.

Robinson praised the buyer/backer, calling such people rare as “hen's teeth. You don't find many people who will work with conservation groups” in such situations. He said the Orleans man is “our partner, our intermediary to secure the island, take it off the market, and give us the time to assemble funding, draw up the conservation restrictions, get to town meeting (for approval of funding), (apply for) state grants, and raise private funds. No one would be doing that work if this land were still on the market. This is the perfect solution to make this thing happen.”

Robinson said the private buyer/backer “seems very agreeable” to providing the non-profit Sipson Island Trust with a right of first option to buy his two-acre lot should he or his heirs want to sell the land at a later date.

By holding the conservation restriction, “the town can provide access without management responsibilities,” Robinson said. “Management will be by the Sipson Island Trust and the private individual owning a separate lot. The Trust will mow trails and make sure downed trees on trails are taken care of.”

That seemed to sit well with community preservation committee member Gilbert Merritt. “I don't want to be responsible for maintenance of this place,” he said. “I see no reason, unless there is oil under it, that the town own the property. We're purchasing a conservation restriction. No matter who owns it, that restriction is still there.”

Selectman Alan McClennen, who chairs the community preservation committee, cited the town's long history of acquiring open space. “It's incumbent on us as current stewards of the land in the town of Orleans to make sure we preserve it,” he said. “The cleanest way is with a conservation restriction. We can persuade people in this town to acquire and preserve land. It's more difficult to persuade the administration and the finance committee and voters to maintain it. Here's a concept (where) we're getting what we want and we don't have to mow the paths... We are controlling in large measure what ultimately happens there.”

It's true, McClennen said, that “citizens can't drive down and park and take a boat (to the island), but we are protecting something in the watershed of Pleasant Bay, the most

respected Area of Critical Environmental Concern in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.”

Robinson said Pleasant Bay Community Boating, whose mission is to make sailing financially accessible to all, provides boat rentals. There's also the possibility of commercial operators such as Blue Claw making the island's shores a stop “if somebody wanted to jump off.” Tenting by reservation is another “very limited” potential use.

In addition to the buyer/backer and state and town funds, the Friends of Pleasant Bay “will be looking for significant private donations to make this work,” Robinson said. “Tell your friends.”

The community preservation committee will continue to review this year's funding requests at a meeting today (Feb. 7) at 4:30 p.m. Its recommendations will then be considered by the board of selectmen and finance committee and voted up or down at town meeting.