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12/30/2017 8:34:00 AM

January 12, 2018

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City gets grant to buy land Second grant still needed to complete Omealia project

Andrew Mansfield
Reporter

GARDNER The city is one step closer to purchasing a large chunk of conservation and recreation land in west Gardner.

The City Council recently authorized the acceptance of a state grant to pay for part of the purchase.

Earlier this year, the City Council allowed for the city to pursue the purchase of a 122.3 acre property, owned by James and Melinda Omealia of Rumson, N.J., that is located off Clark Street and Leo Drive.

The purchase is being split into two parcels, the larger parcel being 93.5 acres of land west of Bailey Brook that contains forest and wetlands. That land would be conserved; Conservation Agent Jeffrey Legros has said doing so is part of efforts to protect the cold water stream habitat of the brook.

The smaller parcel included in the purchase is 28.8 acres of land to the east of Bailey Brook that the city intends to use for open space and recreation.

Earlier this month, the state's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs awarded Gardner \$71,038 from its Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity grant program, which is going toward the purchase of the conservation parcel.

At the Dec. 18 City Council meeting, councilors unanimously authorized the city's acceptance of that grant, although the overall project is still contingent upon the city receiving a second grant from the same state agency to purchase the open space and recreation parcel.

The city is anticipating it will receive a grant of over \$97,000 from the state's Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities program, but have not heard back yet.

Ashburnham-based land conservation consultant Janet Morrison has been hired to manage the purchasing project, and she said with both state grants, the hope was to know whether they were awarded by the end of this calendar year.

"I understand it should be soon," she said of hearing back on the PARC grant.

If that grant is awarded, Morrison said the plan would be to finalize the purchase of both parcels between July 1 and Dec. 31 of 2018, which is in fiscal year 2019.

The total expense for purchasing both parcels is listed as \$253,477, for which the city of Gardner would only pay \$58,052. Mayor Mark Hawke has said that funding from the city has already been appropriated and there is no need to borrow for it. In addition to the two state grants combining for \$168,426 and the city's contribution, Morrison said a \$27,000 federal North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant has been awarded for the project.

The appraised value for the entire property is listed as \$370,000, meaning the landowner has agreed to sell it below the market rate.

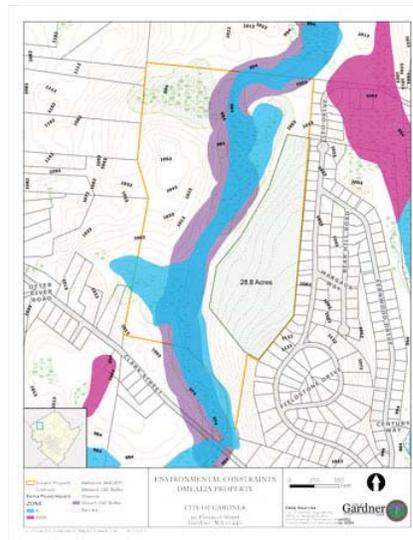
However, the landowner is making a donation to the project to complete the sale, and because of that, Morrison said they are eligible to receive a financial benefit through the Massachusetts Conservation Land Tax Credit Program.



+ click to enlarge

TGN file photo

The property is owned by James and Melinda Omealia and it extends behind homes on Leo Drive. Forest cutting took place there last year, changing the landscape.



+ click to enlarge

Courtesy map

The Omealia property can be seen above, with the larger portion of the property contained by an almost-rectangular line in the center of the map, and the 28.8 acres proposed for recreation on the right side of that parcel

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The enhancement to the **city** that both the conservation portion and open space and recreation portion of the property would bring have been discussed by Legros, with **city** councilors in particular emphasizing their support for the idea of having another recreation area for youth.

Legros said the desire for more athletic fields in that section of west Gardner off Leo Drive where the 28.8 acres of land is has been prioritized in the **city's** open space and recreation plan.

"What we're very much in need of is soccer fields," he said, saying two full-size soccer fields could be built on the parcel.

Legros has also said a playground and walking path could be constructed on the parcel.

Councilor James Walsh noted that before the **city** would develop the area, there would be a public input period to gather feedback.

He spoke of his support for buying the property for recreation, considering the number of residents in close proximity.

"As we all know, there has been a lot of residential development in that area of the **city** for over the past 20 years or so. The closest playground area is Ovilla Case, which is some distance away," he said.

Ovilla Case Playground is on Stuart Street, about two miles away from the Omealia property. The playground is near Allen and Park streets, close to where Burke's Market is.

After going over the reasons Legros laid out for why recreation space is needed in the Leo Drive neighborhood area, Councilor Scott Graves said "I'm sold" on the project.

If the **city** were to complete the purchase of the Omealia property, additional funding would be needed to then develop the land for recreation.

Morrison said that PARC **grants** can be used for both acquisition and development, meaning the **city** could apply for another **grant** through that program for the land development.

There would be two access points to the recreation land if developed. One access point would extend from Margaux Way, which connects Leo Drive to Bear Hill Road. The other access point would be farther down Leo Drive, by a traffic circle where the street used to have a cul-de-sac before it was further developed to connect with Brookside Drive in order to make room for additional homes.

The Omealia property connects with the 220 acres of the former Stanley Alisuskas property that the **city** bought earlier this year, which was also done with the help of state **grant** funding.

The Alisuskas property is located to the north of the Omealia property, connects to the same area and Bailey Brook runs through both.

Life

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