

Holliston Open Space Committee/Agricultural Committee Joint meeting
Meeting minutes - June 18, 2019

In attendance from Open Space Committee: Lixy Carey, Chair; Ann Marie Pilc; John Vosburg, Matt Hodgdon. Christa Collins from Sudbury Valley Trustees attended at the invitation of the committee.

The meeting was called to order at 7 p.m.

Christa Collins updated the committee on the discussions with Charles Nickerson, owner of Thisteldew Farm, now operating as Upswing Farm on South Street in Ashland. This is a 30+ acre parcel along Highland Street at the Holliston/Ashland town line. A small portion of the land is in Ashland and the remaining acreage is in Holliston. The property includes a house and two barns. Mr. Nickerson currently lives in the house. He is 93 years old.

Mr. Nickerson has been leasing the farm land to Kevin and Brittany Overshiner and the three year lease will expire at the end of this growing season. The lease also contained a right of first refusal option for the Overshiners if Mr. Nickerson chose to sell the property. The Overshiners have agreed to release Mr. Nickerson from the right of first refusal option.

Mr. Nickerson applied to the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) for an agricultural preservation restriction (APR) grant for his property and received notification that his application had been approved in March for a grant of \$465,588. This amount is more than the \$10,000 per acre that the state usually grants for APRs. Mr. Nickerson has been talking with Adrian Collins and Kevin Drake, owners of Outpost Farm, about purchasing the property to expand Outpost farming, excluding a 5 acre portion where his house and barns are located for \$290,000, which is the equivalent of the agricultural value of the property (excluding the five acres with the house and the barn). The appraisal from the state assigned a fair market value of \$1.4 million to the 28+ acres. The grant of \$465,588 leaves a balance of \$644,000. Sudbury Valley Trustees is willing to conduct a private fundraising campaign toward that amount and the balance would come from Open Space Acquisition Funds, CPA Funds or other sources.

The state APR grant still requires federal approval which is expected in August or September. Ms. Collins noted that the federal representatives have already visited the property and were encouraging about the final approval.

Once the grant is approved, the town then has to approve the funding at Special Town Meeting in October. Mr. Nickerson will then be able to sign a purchase and sale agreement and allow the due diligence process to begin. When the sale is complete, the town and the state would jointly hold the APR and the 28+ acres would be owned by Adrian Collins and Kevin Drake. Separately, Mr. Nickerson is in conversation with Mr. Collins and Mr. Drake about purchasing his house and barns on 5 acres with Mr. Nickerson retaining life estate of the house.

Ms. Pilch asked if CPA funds can be used to purchase an APR if there are no plans for public access to the land. Mr. Vosbury said he would check with the CPC, It was noted that the land abuts Waseeka sanctuary owned by the Audubon Society and there might be an opportunity to connect the farm to some of the trails in Waseeka.

The question was asked about Mr. Nickerson's advanced age and what happens if he passes before the deal is finalized. Ms. Collins said that Michelle Padula from MDAR has asked Mr. Nickerson's lawyer, Brian Broderick, to ask Mr. Nickerson to remove the property from his will.

Ms. Collins also noted that Sudbury Valley Trustees is willing to help fund a new survey of the property if needed.

Ms. Carey suggested that perhaps the owners of Outpost Farm would be willing to contribute more to the purchase of the property, particularly if public access is not possible. The committee agreed that it will be difficult to get the town to approve using town funds for the APR if they don't have access to it as they do with other conserved properties in town.

Ann Mrie Pilch made a motion that the Open Space Committee supports this effort and will move forward to bring it to Town Meeting this fall. Mr. Vosburg seconded the motion and the committee voted "yes" unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 8 p.m.