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North Shore Looks to Limited Development

By Aglaia Pikounis

NOT TOO LONG AGO, IPSWICH CONSERVATIONISTS were nervously eyeing Scott Farm and hoping that a plan to put 39 new homes on part of it wouldn't pan out.

Today, most of the farmland is permanently preserved as open space, and the rest is protected from full-scale development with strict land-use rules.

Had it not been for a unique partnership between local environmentalists, a Boston-based developer and the town, the Scott Farm – with its scenic views and frontage along Ipswich River – could have easily been a distant memory. While a portion of the 83-acre farm can still be built into a cluster-style development of up to eight homes, local conservationists view that as a much better alternative than the 39 single-family homes originally slated for the property.

"This is one of those creative compromises and approaches that help stretch local dollars for open space protection," said Tracie Hines, Ipswich's open space program manager.

With skyrocketing real estate prices, North Shore communities may have to start embracing such alternatives and creative solutions to protecting precious open space and watershed areas, according to local leaders.

Traditionally, many groups and land trusts would buy land outright and preserve it. However, such strategies aren't always economically feasible in a strong real estate market, said Hines.

During the last several years, local conservation groups on Martha's Vineyard and in Nantucket, realizing they can't always afford to purchase high-priced properties, have brokered complicated deals that prevented or at the very least limited development.

In one case, the Nature Conservancy teamed up with two software executives and a farming agricultural group to preserve Herring Creek Farm on Martha's Vineyard, a 215-acre parcel that was slated to become a

33-lot subdivision. But a \$64 million deal saved part of the land as grassland and allows for the development of up to six new homes on the property.

On the North Shore, however, communities haven't been so quick to engage in projects that involve limited development on open space, according to Hines.

"I don't think local communities are rushing to do this," said Hines, who added that she expects more communities to be receptive to in the future.

According to a conservation-minded developer in Boston, there have been several limited development projects in North Shore communities.

'Tide Changing'

Peter H. Creighton, principal of Land Resources Assoc. in Boston, said his company has helped protect open space in Middleton through limited development projects. In most cases, Land Resources Assoc. purchases land and then proceeds with a limited development plan, preserving and conserving open space.

In Middleton, for example, Land Resources Assoc. recently purchased 114 acres. Eighty-three of those acres were sold back to the town and two conservation groups at a discount rate, and Land Resources Assoc. developed the remaining land into four single-family home lots, which were then sold to builders. The land could have accommodated more than 30 homes. By incorporating a conservation element into such projects, developers often find communities more receptive to their



Photo courtesy Land Resources Assoc.

This working 19th century horse barn is located on an 83-acre farm in Ipswich that residents, town officials and a Boston-based developer were able to preserve as open space.

plans, which speeds the permitting process.

In other cases, Land Resources Assoc. acts as a conservation consultant, instead of a developer. That was the case with the Scott Property in Ipswich. Land Resources Assoc. provided guidance to the Ipswich River Preservation, a group of local conservationists and abutters, and town officials as they tried to preserve the land.

Ipswich River Preservation spent more than \$1.5 million to purchase the property. Meanwhile, the town spent \$1.45 million from a \$10 million open space bond they passed last year, to purchase a conservation restriction on 45 acres of the property. The restriction permanently protects fields along Mill Road, over half a mile of Ipswich River frontage, and areas that are home to wildlife and plants, from development. It also limits the number of homes that can be built to eight.

Land Resources Assoc. originally wanted to buy the property, but soon discovered that it was a risky deal. That was because as part of an estate, the Scott Farm belonged to four siblings. Three of them were interested in preserving the land, but still wanted to make some profit from the land and were willing to sell, according to

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Creighton. The fourth wasn't interested in selling, and without any other alternatives, the siblings were considering a development proposal that would have created a 39-lot subdivision on the land.

Land Resources Assoc., not knowing what part of the land belonged to whom and what would happen to the remaining land, was unwilling to purchase just three-quarters of the property.

In April 1999, the Ipswich River Preservation, which Land Resources Assoc. formed by organizing residents who wanted to protect the land, stepped forward to buy most of the property.

"That was a risky step for everyone involved," said Creighton, explaining that no one knew if the other part of the land would be heavily developed.

By this summer, the fourth sibling had

agreed to sell his part of the property.

Creighton praised Ipswich for approving the \$10 million open space bond and realizing that money needed to be set aside to preserve farmland.

"A lot of other towns in the North Shore are realizing that their farms are disappearing," said Creighton. But saddled with other major expenses, they can't afford to set aside a significant pot of money to make open space purchases, he said.

It doesn't help that, in the past, developers have not been too interested in conservation. Most developers believe that having the maximum number of homes on a property is more profitable, said Creighton.

But what many don't take into account is that it takes money and a lot of time to get through the permitting process and costly infrastructure improvements that come

along with larger subdivisions, said Creighton.

In Middleton, for example, Creighton said his company could have developed more than 30 house lots on the 114-acre tract it purchased, but it would have taken years to get permits and make the necessary improvements to make the project work.

However, more and more developers are starting to see that conservation makes sense, he said.

"We do see the tide changing on the North Shore," Creighton said.

Hines believes that more communities will also start to consider limited development as an alternative. Already Hines has been approached by officials from the town of Hamilton who are interested in learning more about how Ipswich managed to protect Scott Farm. ■