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270-acre parcel with no access poses dilemma for Burlington

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BURLINGTON -- Voters will choose April 5 what they would like to see done with a 270-acre section of woods, meadows, wetlands and vernal pools alongside Route 3 that is costing the town nearly \$14.1 million but that residents cannot reach.

It is unreachable -- legally, that is -- from Burlington because it is nestled between Route 128, Route 3 and the Lexington and Bedford town lines, with no road running through it or to its edge. Hence its name, The Landlocked Parcel.

"The only people with access to the parcel are Lexington and Bedford residents," said Juliet Perdichizzi, chairwoman of the town committee that has been exploring uses of the site. "They walk there. They hunt there. They ride horses there. We're paying \$14 million for open space for people in Lexington and Bedford. It doesn't help Burlington in any way."

Options in the nonbinding referendum vote are:

1. A public multiple-use recreational facility, including a golf course. According to Perdichizzi's committee, which represents town government and business interests, a golf course would make this plan pay for itself. This option would probably qualify for a bridge over Route 3 built by the state.
2. A passive recreation area, with only picnic sites and paths for walking and cycling. It would probably not qualify for a state-financed bridge, leaving that expense to the town.
3. Leave the parcel untouched, with no access for townspeople.

Ultimately, if the plan town officials adopt changes current usage, it must be approved by Town Meeting.

Informational meetings on the advisory referendum are scheduled for 7 p.m. April 1 and April 3 in the Harvard Community Health building's Ebert 2 room at Cambridge and Wall streets.

Town Meeting in June 1996 deadlocked over a proposal by the landlocked parcel access and use committee to proceed with a plan for an 18-hole (par 72, 6,870 yards) golf course, plus a swimming pool, ballfields, soccer fields, tennis courts, picnic areas and 4.5 miles of hiking and cycling paths. A two-thirds vote was required.

"We were quite surprised," Perdichizzi said. "We had held two public forums, with 60 people at one and 30 or 40 at the other. Maybe we didn't take the town along in the process enough. Maybe we need to solicit ideas from the public and make it their plan."

The parcel, which had once been farmland, was acquired by the town by eminent domain in 1985 to protect its nearby Pine Brook aquifer. The town paid \$880,000, what its appraiser said it was worth. But the owners -- Cadillac Fairview, now Prentice Properties, Roger Nordblom and George Macomber -- sued the town. Eventually a price of \$8.2 million was negotiated. Including fees and interest through the year 2010, the town will pay just over \$14 million.

In the late 1980s the town of Bedford obtained a conservation easement on a strip of its land bordering the landlocked parcel, preventing access from Route 62.

The landlocked parcel committee, created by the Burlington Board of Selectmen, recommends option 1.

"We wanted something of benefit to the majority of people in town," said Perdichizzi, former assistant director of graduate engineering at Northeastern University. "It had to be environmentally friendly . . . We had site evaluation and market demand studies done. They found that the golf course and all other recreational uses would leave 100 acres in its natural state. We found the demand for golf so great that this area could support four 18-hole courses."

Her committee determined that revenues from a golf course would pay not only for design of a bridge and an access road from the Middlesex Turnpike but also a swimming pool and playing fields as well as maintenance of the entire property.