

Daily Times Chronicle



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Landlocked parcel Members defeat \$100K article for consultant

By JOHN WHITE

BURLINGTON — On a standing count Monday night, Town Meeting turned down an article which would have funded \$100,000 for consulting services for the landlocked parcel.

The Ways and Means Committee had backed the article on an 11-1 vote.

Calling the town-owned property "a significant asset," Town Administrator Robert Mercier said the funds would allow the town to get a better idea on the value of the property.

Mercier said there is considerable interest in the 270-acre site, which is inaccessible by motor vehicle from Burlington.

"There have been inquiries to us," he stated.

The land is located at the interchange of routes 3 and 128, bordering Lexington and Bedford.

Burlington took the property by eminent domain in 1986, paying \$810,000 to the property owners. A subsequent legal challenge resulted in a Middlesex Superior Court jury awarding the property owners \$10.5 million.

Later negotiations lowered the figure to \$8.2 million, which, with interest, totals more than \$14 million.

The bond issue by which the town financed the purchase expires in 2010, explained Mercier.

He said a first-right-of-refusal for the property, part of the settlement, also expires in 2010.

"It's a very important and desirable asset for the town of Burlington," stated Mercier. "It's our property, we just can't get to it."

He said a consultant would provide information on value of the property and preliminary engineering costs for access.

Mercier stated the town has easements for access at two points — Northwest Park and the Network Drive campus.

The town administrator stressed the decision on disposition of the property rests with Town Meeting.

Members state views

Precinct 1 Rep. Juliet Perdichizzi, a member of a study committee for the landlocked parcel in the mid-1990s, said spending money on a consultant "is just foolhardy" until it is known how voters feel about the issue.

She raised the possibility of a ballot question in April.

"I think this is ludi-

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crous," she said of the article.

In discussing the nature of a consultant's study, Mercier said the property would be evaluated for residential, commercial, and industrial use. He said a report might be ready for the September Town Meeting.

Precinct 5 Rep. Christopher Murphy asked about the "shelf life" of any study.

Mercier responded that templates can be developed with regard to values in future years.

In reply to a question about the timing of the request, Mercier stated, "Why not now? is the question we (he and the Board of Selectmen) throw out."

He said it is part of what would be "a long drawn-out process."

There was skepticism expressed about the motivation for the proposal.

Mercier stated the article is simply to determine the value of the land, regardless of whether Town Meeting wants to sell all or a portion of the site, or keep it the way it is.

Precinct 6 Rep. John Cormier commented, "Clearly, there is intent to sell land over there."

He said the taxpayers should decide the issue.

"Why did we take this land and now why is it OK to develop part of it?" asked Cormier.

Precinct 3 Mildred Nash said there is no point to the study unless the town wants to sell the land. She called for a conservation study of the site.

The stated reasons for the eminent domain taking were to protect the water supply and preserve open space.

The article was defeated by a significant margin.