

OPEN SPACE SUBCOMMITTEE

October 8, 2015

Sagamore Hill Conservation Project Benefits to Hamilton

This is a unique and unprecedented opportunity for Hamilton to participate in the permanent preservation of over 525 acres of contiguous open space. Sagamore Hill represents approximately 25% of the town's existing Chapter 61A/B land. It is one of the largest and most significant unprotected parcels in town.

To put Sagamore Hill in perspective, Chebacco Woods, at 113 acres was the last major parcel preserved in Hamilton and Manchester. In 1997, Chebacco Woods was the single largest parcel of open land preserved in the region since World War II. In almost two decades since then, 96 new homes have been built in Hamilton but acquisition of forested or agricultural land for preservation has been negligible¹.

Since Hamilton adopted the CPA in 2005, Town records show that only 11.5% of total CPA funds have been spent on preserving land for open space. Of this 11.5%, less than 9% was spent on open space acquisition, and even then, was partially for building recreation fields.

At an average of nearly 50 homes per decade, it is estimated that 300- 400 acres of land in Hamilton have been developed since Chebacco Woods was acquired, based on current zoning. The Sagamore Hill property would allow Hamilton to keep pace with development trends.

74% of Hamilton residents said "yes" in response to the Town's Open Space and Master Plan Survey, when asked if the Town should "put more effort into protecting open space".

Important Conservation Values

- Major portions of the property have been identified as core habitat for rare and sensitive wetland species.
- Hamilton has fewer protected acres of resilient land than Wenham and Ipswich. Hamilton is reported to have 159-233 acres per square mile of resilient land, and the Core Habitat protected by the Town is low at 18-35 percent when compared with surrounding towns, with Ipswich at 51-67 percent and Wenham at 67-99 percent.

¹ Ten Conservation Restrictions also have been added for about 100 acres.

- Streams and wetlands on the property drain into Chebacco Lake, Alewife Brook, Miles River, Castle Neck River and Soginese Creek, all critical components of the Great Marsh ecosystem.
- The property sits between Bradley Palmer State Park, the lower Great Marsh and the Essex Manchester Woods. If the property is protected, then a case can be made to strive to complete the links between these areas. If Sagamore Hill is developed, then it will no longer be possible to link these important areas.

Satisfies Town Planning Goals

- The Sagamore Hill property is noted in the 2006 Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) under the heading “Scenic Resources and Unique Environments” (p. 4-18). The OSRP states that “One of the most striking geologic features of Hamilton is its sharply rising hills, which afford spectacular views from their tops” and gives as one of the examples.
- The preservation of Sagamore Hill fulfills multiple goals noted in the OSRP and the Town’s Master Plan.

Substantial Public Benefits

- The property would be open to the public year round for hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, biking, and equestrian pursuits. The unique interior farm road could provide access for strollers and potentially wheelchairs.
- The property’s expansive hilltop hayfields provide unparalleled 360-degree views, as mentioned above, including panoramic beach and ocean views to the east.
- The existing 2.3 mile trail network on the property connects to the ECTA’s Donovan Hill Trail, which in turn connects across Sagamore Street into both the Clark and Sears Trails. The trails at Sagamore Hill would be improved and expanded.
- The property has 2,600 feet of frontage on Sagamore Street, with a half mile of stonewall and uninterrupted wooden edge. Sagamore Street is currently a Town designated Scenic Road.
- The personal uplifting value experienced by visiting a property whose presence transports the visitor back two or more centuries into a vast environment of ancient stone walls, climax growth trees, rolling open fields and undisturbed wildlife. This would be a priceless gift to townspeople seeking respite and renewal.

Importance for “Branding” of the Town

- Other towns, such as Essex (known for its clamming), Gloucester (known for its fishing and whaling), Ipswich (known for its first period, historical houses and Crane’s Beach, etc.) have drawn visitors because of this “branding”.
- Sagamore Hill would help build Hamilton’s reputation as a town with destination properties - for those seeking outdoor recreational opportunities such as hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, and horseback riding.

Hamilton’s Financial Contribution

- The Town has been asked to contribute up to \$1.75M in Community Preservation Act funds, others would pay the remaining \$3.35M of the purchase price plus the ongoing operating costs. Hamilton’s contribution would be less than 35% of the total acquisition cost.
- The LandVest appraisal for the 170 acres located in Hamilton was \$4.85M. Hamilton will be able to protect this 170 acres for only \$1.75M (plus an additional 355 acres at no cost to Hamilton).
- Because Sagamore Hill is currently a Chapter 61A/B property, its annual tax bill has been less than \$500. Thus, the project will not be depriving Hamilton of significant existing tax revenue.

Alternatives

- The 170 acres located in Hamilton has 2,600 feet of frontage on Sagamore Street, and is located in a Residence/Agriculture zone. Development of this property to its maximum will forever change and degrade the resource value of the land and the nature of the surrounding neighborhoods.
- If the Sagamore Hill project does not occur, it is not clear what the nearby landowners will do. In the context of the larger 525 acre conservation project, they have discussed with Greenbelt their willingness to donate conservation restrictions on parts of their land; but if the overall project does not happen, those donations may not occur.