

2000 CFE Newsletter

Kelda Sale

Citizens for Easton has joined The Coalition for the Permanent Protection of Kelda Lands, which is a group of municipal leaders, legislators, environmental organizations, and private citizens formed for the purpose of protecting the 18,000 acres of land in Fairfield and Litchfield counties owned by Kelda. Given that Kelda, a British corporation, purchased Aquarion for 2.2 times its book value, there is widespread concern that much of that land could be at risk of sale. Nowhere should the concern be greater than in the Town of Easton, which contains over 6,000 acres, or approximately one third of all Kelda lands. The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection has mapped all of the Kelda lands and has expressed interest in preserving over 7,000 acres of the over 13,000 in Fairfield County for open space and recreational purposes. In addition, the towns and local land trusts have designated over 4500 more acres of concern. Maps showing where these lands are in Town are available in the First Selectman's office at Town Hall.

Since the outright purchase of all of the lands by the State might prove financially infeasible, two other options for preserving the land are also being explored. One is the idea of the purchasing of conservation easements in exchange for tax incentives for Kelda. The other is the creation of a public water authority, similar to the South-Central Water Authority in the New Haven area. In this case BHC (Aquarion) would be purchased by a public water authority, all lands would be preserved, local governments would receive payments in lieu of local property taxes and much of the land would be open for public recreation.

In order to study the economics of this scenario, a group of selectmen and mayors of several of the communities containing Kelda lands or using Kelda water have set aside funds, but additional money from the State will be necessary to complete this study. Let your Selectman and State Senators and Representatives know of your support for this course of action.

Regional Land Use Action

Increasingly, towns facing loss of character and natural resources to development have responded with preservationist efforts. The following represent some of the more dramatic successes, locally and around the state:

- Seymour: Town funds preserve 230 acres of forest, preventing development and it's subsequent service burdens.
- Shelton: Aldermen authorize preservation of a sixty-four acre farm, calling it a "pre-emptive strike" to prevent development and to keep a farm operational.
- Fairfield: Town budgets approximately \$4 million for thirty-eight acres of open space.
- Weston: Officials and residents concur in agreeing to allocate \$1 million to preserve Trout Brook Valley acreage in Weston.
- Norwalk: City allocates \$3.5 million for eight acres of open space.

In numerous other towns around Connecticut, local communities have demonstrated their support of preservation efforts by:

- Rejecting requests for zoning changes that would otherwise allow major developments.
- Endorsing real estate surveys that conclude mature trees add significantly to property values.
- Forming citizens' coalitions to crystallize support for various conservation and preservation efforts.

Over the years, CFE and other Easton groups have expressed concern that the town has no land bank, no land acquisition fund and no open space funding. It is now time we come together as a community to invest in the town's land and farms, thereby securing Easton's character for the future.

Easton Farmland Preservation Committee

Last March, First Selectman Bill Kupinse formed a committee comprised of citizens interested in working to preserve farmland in Easton. With the tempo of development in town reaching a crescendo, Bill's mission was both to preserve the remnants of Easton's agricultural heritage as well as to invite a close look at ways for the town to keep the rate of development from racing out of control. The Easton Farmland Preservation Committee (EFPC) is co-chaired by Fiona Tustian and Rosie Forte, with CFE's own Will Tressler as Vice Chair.

The EFPC have invited representatives of agricultural groups at the regional and state level to discuss how other towns have worked to achieve the benefits of saving farmland from development. In addition, all of Easton's farmland owners are encouraged to attend the meetings and are kept abreast of the proceedings. The farmers spoke of their desire to have the town citizens and leaders demonstrate a more "farm friendly" attitude toward their livelihood and promote a recognition of the value of farming as a prized part of our town heritage. They've offered to open their farms for school tours as a means for encouraging an interest in farming among our younger citizens, and help develop a brochure that highlights the joys of living in a rural area. The EFPC provides a valued service to both the farmers and the community by urging town officials and commissions to help farmers continue to keep their lands as farmland in the face of the exorbitant sums offered by developers for their lands.

Current plans are for the EFPC to continue its efforts. It has succeeded in instituting a dialogue between Easton's farmers and the committee, helped to promote and sustain the Easton Farmers' Market, and generated a laundry list of proposals (including the possibility of tax adjustments and regulatory changes for farmers) to present to the Selectmen later this fall. Again, anyone interested in participating in the EFPC meetings, please call Fiona (452-1304) or Rosie (268-7454).

Action on Easton's Tree Ordinance

The trees of Easton play an integral role in the town's natural beauty and rural character. The trees enhance the health, safety and quality of living of town residents by recycling oxygen, mitigating air and noise pollution, providing storm-water erosion control and wildlife habitat. The shade that cools both air and land, making Easton a welcome retreat during hot summer months, is also a boon to home owners as a means to reduce energy costs.

Thus begins the latest draft of a tree ordinance for Easton, which was begun in November, 1999, by a small group of local citizens who care deeply about preserving trees. When completed, the ordinance will seek to regulate the removal of trees in town by requiring a permit to cut trees along public roads in subdivisions and on newly created lots. The permit will encourage developers to save trees because the new municipal statutes will use a formula that will result in cost reductions to those who save rather than cut trees. Currently land developers are required to place a replacement tree every 50' along a new road, and the common practice is often to use small trees and/or unsuitable ornamental species.

Development in town has cost and continues to cost Easton its valuable tree canopy, its woods, its groves of rare trees, its large individual trees. The newer streets in town often look naked, denuded of large indigenous trees that for so long have helped form Easton's desirable rural character.

When arborists measure the overall tree health of a community they often begin by measuring the canopy, or the volume of the umbrella of trees covering an area. As the canopy is eroded by continued tree removal, the thinning tree umbrella, not unlike the ozone layer, begins to lose its ability to protect what is below. Decreasing our woods, not only robs the town of its natural beauty, but deprives wildlife a refuge. Ecosystems are threatened and destroyed, a more serious problem than the problems that we notice day to day, such as increasing numbers of deer foraging in our yards.

As our current robust economy continues to drive widespread development, it is with a sense of urgency that work continues to complete a tree ordinance that we hope to have the final draft completed this fall.

The Bradley-Hubbell House: The History Continues

Ten months have passed since the Historical Society of Easton officially preserved the Bradley-Hubbell House by securing a lease for the property from BHC. The restoration began in earnest, when the reconstruction team of Jim DiCuffa, Dan Magner and Randy Gould initiated the process of stabilizing and preserving the house. With the guidance of historical house experts Bill Gould, Richard Hershner, Myron Stachiw, Tom Paske and Dan Cruson, the team has accomplished much already. They've removed the front and side porches (both more modern additions to the house), replaced three of the decayed sills, reconstructed the southwest corner post, removed old plumbing and heating equipment, reglazed and repaired broken windows, uncovered the bay to the original cellar opening, and have begun to make replacement shakes by hand to match those original ones.

The team's careful labors have unearthed many fascinating bits of information about the house's original structure and layout – all essential parts of restoring a museum quality historic structure. Under Will Tressler's direction, six Volunteer Workdays have provided citizens opportunities for a first hand look at the progress as well as a chance to invest their own sweat equity in the project. Dan Cruson, President of the CT Archeological Society and Nick Bellantoni, CT State Archeologist, concur that the collection of artifacts unearthed by Dan Magner and others is quite significant. Among the items discovered are sizeable chunks of Redware and other pottery, old hand forged and cut nails, marbles, bits of leather and many china shards, all dating back to the late 1700's and early 1800's.

Next on the docket for the house is to "button up" the openings over the new sills, install a temporary heating system and to have the house scraped and painted by winter. CFE encourages any persons interested in learning more about the project, lending a hand during the volunteer workdays or providing financial contributions to the restoration efforts to contact Historical Society president, Lois Bloom at 261-2090. Donations should be sent to Historical Society, P.O. Box 121, Easton, Connecticut 06612.

A Town Plan For Conservation and Development

"The key to orderly growth and wise allocation of scarce land resources is a comprehensive Town Plan. [Such a plan] designates future land use and public facilities for the optimum benefit of the townspeople and seeks protection of the Town's natural and cultural environment." As this newsletter goes to press, the process has officially begun! Easton's Planning and Zoning Commission is seeking input from various townspeople, town organizations and officials with respect to the many issues which the Town Plan must address.

Citizens for Easton has long considered a Town Plan to be one of the most important first steps to preserving the rural and unique characteristics of our town. We invited two of Cheshire's town planners to speak at the CFE Annual Meeting last May to discuss the formation of their town plan. They reviewed the Cheshire Town Plan and discussed how referendum support was developed for open space in Cheshire. Insightful questions from the audience and a lively discussion followed, whetting the appetite of all those from Easton for a Town Plan.

A Town Plan for Conservation and Development will have a significant impact on all future decisions and regulations pertaining to land use in town and can affect many aspects of our community. All open space lands in private and public ownership will be identified and lands can be earmarked for preservation or municipal purposes. We encourage our members as well as every Easton resident to take advantage of this momentous opportunity to help shape our town.

It's the Little Things

Particularly during the beautiful fall season, we stop frequently to appreciate some of the unique elements of our town. The splendor of the foliage, billowing white clouds reflected on the cold black surface of our reservoirs and ponds, the joy of a meandering drive along our country roads flanked by rustic stonewalls. Individual citizens can make a difference in maintaining the country feel of the town:

- Our trees are our first line of defense against suburbanization. They hold our soil, help recharge our aquifers by preventing runoff, and even cool our homes in the heat of summer. There are many species of both hardwoods and soft woods native to the area, and these should be maintained and encouraged.
- As Easton residents, we are sitting on top of the water table, which supplies drinking water for ourselves as well as much of the population of surrounding cities and towns. The rain which falls on our property is a precious resource to be preserved for all of us. Landscaping that encourages the absorption of rainfall rather than runoff is beneficial. Keeping in mind the adage, "What goes around, comes around" can guide us in the judicious and sparing use of chemicals and fertilizers in our yards.
- Easton is defined by many old stone walls. They run along many of the roadsides, cross fields, and snake through our woods. These walls are often over 200 years old, and are true historical artifacts. They are another element of rural Easton that needs to be preserved or repaired rather than torn down and replaced by "tidier" walls or - gasp - sold for the stone content!