

Farm saved by TM - Town will buy restriction on Chestnut Hill

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SOUTHBOROUGH - Town Meeting overwhelmingly supported purchasing a conservation restriction on the Chestnut Hill Farm, after amending a warrant article and alleviating need for voter approval at the poles.

At yesterday's four-hour long Special Town Meeting, 584 registered voters packed the Trotter Middle School auditorium to vote on 14 warrant articles, including the Chestnut Hill Farm.

Town Meeting members erupted into applause and cheered after a two-third's majority voted to pass an amended article - giving the town authorization to spend \$4.5 million to buy the conservation restriction on 109-acres of land on Chestnut Hill Road.

The amendment lets the town use approval from 1998 Town Meeting, which created a preauthorized Open Space Bond, allowing future town meetings to borrow up to \$5 million in funds for preservation of open space.

The amendment eliminated a vote at Saturday's Special Town Election for borrowing funds under a Proposition 21/2 debt exclusion override.

However, residents will still face the same tax increases under the Open Space Bond, as

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they would have under a Prop. 21/2 override.

Taxpayers are only funding 33 percent of the total cost, he said. Sixty-seven percent of the cost is being covered by CPA funds, donations and a state grant, he said.

The actual cost to taxpayers, for the town's portion - a \$1.65 million bond - will be about \$33 to \$35 per year, Selectmen Roger Challen said. The rate was based on an average assessed value for a \$550,000 home. Taxpayers would pay the increase for the duration of the bond, Challen said.

"The funds aren't in the bank," he said of the Open Space Bond. It's pre-authorization to borrow, and either way, will increase taxes, he said.

With the purchase of the conservation restriction, which has to be finalized by June 2006, the town will own the development rights, prohibiting development of the property and preserving the land as open space forever. The Beals Family Trust, current owners of the land, will continue to own the land.

Challen said the town and the Beals Family Trust agreed on a total price of \$5.1 million for the conservation restriction. Of that, \$575,000 will be raised by private donations, and the town would come up with the remaining \$4.5 million through the various sources.

Warrant Article 12, which passed, asked for \$4.5 million to buy the conservation restriction. Articles 13 and 14 also passed and they sought approval for a \$500,000 payment from Community Preservation Act funds, and a separate \$1.85 million 20-year bond through the CPA. The town has already received a \$500,000 grant from the State Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, which would further defray the cost to the town. The town would need to bond \$1.65 million for the project.

Selectmen Chairman William Christensen said he would've liked the article to go before voters at the polls Saturday, to ensure all residents were in favor of preserving the land.

"It was the wrong funding source... but I support the project," Christensen said.

Landowners Elaine and Philip Beals, 55-year residents, attended the meeting. "We're feeling on top of the world," Elaine Beals said after the vote.

Whitney Beals, a member of the family trust, said Town Meeting "validated what my parents have been doing for over 55 years in Southborough, protecting open space."

Also at Special Town Meeting residents:

U Voted to indefinitely postpone Articles 5 and 6, allowing more time for debate on the fate of Fayville Village Hall and the Delarda House.

U Passed Article 7, seeking \$325,000 for an engineering and architectural study for renovation of Cordaville Hall, which will need approval at special election for a Proposition 2 1/2 debt exclusion override.

U Passed Article 8, seeking \$50,000 for a site feasibility study for a new public safety complex at the current location. That is also contingent upon voter approval at town election for a debt exclusion override.

U Passed Article 3, for \$295,000 to buy the land and home at 1 Cordaville Road, for affordable housing and to help with re-configuration of the intersection.

Special Town Election is scheduled for Saturday, from 12-8 p.m. Contact the town clerk's office for more information at 508-485-0710.

(Lisa Gentes can be reached at 508-490-7461 or lgentes@cnc.com.)

• Caption: Barbara Taylor, left, and Bert McCue raise their hands to cast a vote at a special Southborough Town Meeting yesterday.
PHOTO BY SHANE GERARDI

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