

Petition Forces May 31 Special Town Meeting on Remaining South Park Parcel



Enough residents signed a petition to force a special town meeting scheduled for May 31 and a possible referendum vote to place a permanent conservation easement on 10 acres of town-owned land on South Park Avenue.

The 10 acres are part of a 29-acre town-owned parcel. Earlier this month voters approved selling roughly 19 acres of the land to the Aspetuck Land Trust by a 1056 to 574 vote margin. Those who opposed the partial sale of the land to ALT argued that splitting the parcel would leave the 10 remaining acres vulnerable to development. The property is one of several identified in the town's proposed affordable housing plan.

More than 700 people signed the petition. Only 50 verified signatures were needed to force the town to hold a special town meeting within 21 days, per state statute. The meeting will be held May 31 at 7 p.m. at Samuel Staples Elementary School.

June Logie, the treasurer of the group Citizens for Responsible Government and a vocal opponent of the recently approved land trust sale, presented the petition to town officials last week. At the May 19 Board of Selectmen meeting Logie said the petition

was put forth by Preserve 06612, which she described as “an organization made up of a consortium of people that wanted to see (the remaining acreage) preserved for many, many years.”

Petition for Town Meeting

We, the undersigned electors or voters of the Town of Easton, do hereby petition the Board of Selectmen, pursuant to Chapter 200 of the Town of Easton Ordinances and Section 7-1 for the Connecticut State Statutes, to convene a special Town Meeting to discuss and vote on the following:

After the applicable referendum, to be voted on May 3, 2022 is completed, The Town of Easton shall provide a permanent conservation easement on the remaining portion of the real property owned by the Town and commonly known as 18-22 South Park Avenue. The permanent conservation easement will provide that the property remains in a natural and open condition for the conservation, open space, agriculture, green space or water supply purposes. The easement will include a requirement that the property be made available to the general public for passive recreational purposes.

This permanent conservation easement will not preclude the Town from selling the property to Aspetuck Land Trust Inc. at a time when the purchase price is determined by independent appraisal and Aspetuck Land Trust has the fund to accomplish this sale.

| # | SIGNATURE | PRINTED NAME | ADDRESS |
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Detail from the petition submitted to “provide a permanent conservation easement” on the remaining town-owned South Park Avenue property.

The petition (see above) asks that the town place a permanent conservation easement on the 10 acres and that it “remains in a natural and open condition for the conservation, open space, agriculture, green space or water supply purposes.” It also stipulates that “the property be made available to the general public for passive recreational purposes.” The petition states that the easement “will not preclude the Town from selling the property to Aspetuck Land Trust Inc. at a time when the purchase price is determined by independent appraisal and Aspetuck Land Trust has the fund to accomplish this sale.”

But during the May 19 meeting the Board of Selectmen agreed that the petition as written raises many unanswered questions that need to be answered before a formalized legal conservation easement document can be brought before the townspeople to vote on.

“You have to come up with a legal document that lays out what this conservation easement is,” Selectman Kristi Sogofsky said. “In order to draft that legal document, we have to figure out the intentions or desires of what is.”

First Selectman David Bindelglass told the Courier last week that several additional issues have been raised by the selectmen for clarification, beginning with the fundamental question of whether a “permanent” easement can be created in the first place. It is also unclear if “an easement can encompass something less than the entire remainder of the site,” Bindelglass said.

The May 19 meeting also addressed the future of the current tenants who run the New England Prayer Center on the site and if they could be allowed to remain on the property. Gina and Daniel Blaze currently rent the property from the town for \$3,000 a month and want to buy roughly 5 acres or half of the remaining parcel. The definition of “passive recreation” included in the petition may also need to be clarified.

Bindelglass has sought legal counsel to address several of the unanswered questions in the petition before the May 31 town meeting. He said after the proposed conservation easement has been legally vetted, voters will likely decide its fate during a town-wide referendum later this year. The cost to hold a referendum is about \$4,000 in addition to legal fees associated with researching and crafting the legal language of a final conservation easement document.

“In my mind it goes to referendum,” Bindelglass said.

Additional information about the May 31 meeting, including the Zoom link for remote access, is available on the town website here:

<https://www.eastonct.gov/home/news/05312022-special-town-meeting-700-pm-sses>.