

Selectmen Approve \$6.25M to Buy Most of the Ox Ridge Hunt Club Large Field

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The Board of Selectmen approved buying 16.3 acres of the Ox Ridge Hunt Club main field for \$6.25 million — nearly all of the field, it appeared, according to a map of the site distributed Monday night.

The purchase would allow the club to use the field for one week a year for its annual charity horse show, an event that brings thousands of horse lovers to Darien each June. For the rest of the year, the town expects to use part of the tract for sports fields that don't require permanent fixtures.

That means, for example, a baseball field, which usually requires a backstop structure, would not be created on the land, First Selectman Jayme Stevenson said. But lacrosse and soccer games wouldn't require permanent goal posts or other structures and would be good fits, she said. Football could be allowed if the goal posts can be removed.

With many of the town's sports fields being intensively used now, Stevenson said, new fields at [Ox Ridge Hunt Club](#) could especially come in handy. As many as four sports fields could be put on the site. Artificial turf is prohibited. No sports field lighting is planned.

"We appreciate the important place that the Ox Ridge Hunt Club holds in our community," Stevenson said. "You've been an iconic institution, beloved by many." The purchase will buy the town about two-thirds of the club's open field space at its 512 Middlesex Road property. The sale "will allow the Hunt Club to continue to run their operations"

Minimal Changes to the Land Expected

The town and the club "want the land to look today as it did yesterday, so there's little aesthetic impact to the neighborhood" and it will still look essentially the way it has since the Ox Ridge Hunt Club has been using it, she said. Stevenson added that the purchase "is their best chance to continue to have a hunt club environment well into the future as it has been for the past 100 years. [...] We really represent the best chance for preservation."

Under the agreement, the town would be allowed to create a parking area, some walkways and a single building — no more than 1,000 square feet in size (a 40-foot by 25-foot building would be that size) and no more than a single story high, with storage space, restrooms and possibly a concession stand, Stevenson said.

The town would also be allowed to put in an irrigation system, if it chose to do so, along with a drainage system and install either a sewer connection or septic system, she said.

Strong Support for the Idea

The board approved the purchase with a unanimous vote. The Board of Finance will next take up the proposal and vote on a way to pay for it, most likely with a municipal bond. The Representative Town Meeting would then vote on the proposal.

Selectman Rob Richards said that he tends not to want to spend even a dime on new projects, but "There are times when things come up where you have to spend a dime, either when something breaks or when a rare opportunity comes up." This opportunity allows the town to do something good for the horse club and for the town, he said.

Selectman Susan Marks agreed: "This to me is a project that is a win-win" for the town and the club, she said. The extra open space, which the town can use, will require few changes, she added.

Darienite.com was the first to report on the proposal. Here's our article, published Friday:

- [Selectmen on Verge of Buying 16+ Acres From Ox Ridge Hunt Club](#)

Selectman Kip Koons and Marc Thorne also said they supported the purchase. Thorne said that even before he moved to town he would drive by the Hunt Club and marvel at the wide open space. Koons said, "I'm delighted to be able to support this proposal."

No one at the meeting spoke against the proposed purchase. Two neighbors of the club told selectmen that they strongly supported the idea, and other neighbors were largely supportive.

"This property has a lot of value," said Jenny Schwartz of Saddle Ridge Road. "It really is a crown jewel" for the town. "Some of the greatest riders in our sport, including Olympic levels, came out of there. [...] No other town as close to New York City has a riding club like this."

Lee Lee Klein of Saddle Ridge Road said she's been in contact with about 30 neighbors in the area of the riding club and said there was broad support for the purchase. "We want to see the field preserved," she said.

Chris Noe, a former independent candidate for first selectman, said he hoped the town wasn't taking advantage of the club, which he said has been widely considered an important town asset. He said he hoped the open space restrictions on the land would be permanent. Stevenson said that the restrictions were negotiated and agreed to in 2012 and are a feature that the town and club are now working with, not a new proposal.

Financing the Purchase

Jack Davis, chairman of the RTM Finance & Bonding Committee, spoke at the Board of Selectmen meeting. He said the town has the capacity to borrow about \$100 million through bonding, and all the bonding projects so far discussed, along with the price of the Ox Ridge Hunt Club purchase, would amount to only about \$60 million. Approving this purchase wouldn't crowd out any current or expected proposals from the Board of Education, he said.

The town would lose roughly \$44,500 a year in tax revenues by buying the land, according to a handout Stevenson distributed to the public at the meeting.

"In all likelihood, the Board of Finance would choose to bond this, and the Board of Selectmen will be approving a bond resolution to facilitate this, should the Board of Finance choose to bond," according to the handout, which also states:

With the current pay-down rate of our outstanding debt, the bonding of this acquisition may or may not increase our mill rate. That depends on the structure the Board of Finance chooses. Whenever the Board of Finance plans bond sales, they consider anticipated projects as well as existing debt and plan accordingly.

Transaction costs will be approximately \$90,000 and may be bonded.

Town officials don't have estimates on expected costs to develop the land, although development is expected to be minimal.

Club Expects to Use the Money for Improvements

After the selectmen voted, Richard Colligan, president of the club, said outside the meeting room that the

money from the sale "will be used to expand and enhance the club facilities. The club definitely has plans. They're exciting. The membership is supportive of them."

Asked how many members the club has at present, Colligan refused to say. He said the club could describe its plans to news organizations at a later time, but didn't specify when.

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In 2012, the Ox Ridge Hunt Club and the town's country clubs all entered into tax settlement agreements with the town to give Darien's local government the right of first refusal to buy property sold by the clubs. That right lasts for 40 years, until 2052. The entire Ox Ridge Hunt Club property — 36.9 acres — is included in that agreement.

As part of the same agreement with the club, a total of 22.7 acres of the club's land (including the 16.3 acres the town now may buy) has a 30-year deed restriction which forbids using the land for any purpose other than "open space." The open space agreement essentially allows what the club already uses the land for — horse riding — and what the town wants to use the land for, with minor modifications expected to be made as part of the sale.

The club now, and any future owner, would also be under the open space restriction, which ends in June 2042 on a total of 22.7 acres now owned by the club, including the land proposed for purchase. After that, the parties that own the property could build whatever they want on the land, subject to approval by town land use commissions.