

## **RTM Postpones Vote on Hecker Ave Property to Get More Information**

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### **Update 10:27 p.m.:**

A vote on the proposed purchase of the strip of land along the back of Spring Grove Cemetery was postponed by the Representative Town Meeting on Monday night in order to get more information.

RTM members wanted to know more about what flood-mitigation measures would be allowed or forbidden under an easement with the Darien Land Trust, which was providing half the financing for the purchase in return for keeping the land as natural open space.

The proposal was removed from the agenda without discussion at Monday night's meeting.

### **Original article: 6:06 p.m.:**

A proposal to buy about 1.24 acres of land between Hecker Avenue and Town Hall is on the agenda for Monday night's meeting of the Representative Town Meeting.

The land may be used as a public park, barely developed, for the public to use in walking between Town Hall and Hecker Avenue at a spot just to the north of Darien Police Headquarters and Darien Library.

The Board of Selectmen has endorsed the proposed land purchase from the Spring Grove Cemetery Association, which would use the money for upkeep of the cemetery. The land is along Stony Brook, which runs along the north side of the cemetery.

The cemetery association would get \$275,000 for the property (known as 41 Hecker Ave.), with half (\$137,500) coming from the town and the other half from the Darien Land Trust, which would have a conservation easement with the town preventing any land development on the property.

The town's share of the cost would be paid for through a state grant already approved for Darien, so the cost to the town is only the time officials have already spent preparing to buy it and, in the future, to administer it.

The town would own the land, but build nothing on it other than a possible trail — something the land trust, with its experience building similar trails, is willing to help with.

An exception in the easement agreement with the land trust is possible flood mitigation projects. At a Jan. 25 public hearing before the Board of Selectmen, officials said they hadn't yet worked out the details of what the flood-mitigation work would be allowed.

Only the decision to purchase the property is before the Representative Town Meeting. Decisions about whether or how to develop the property as a natural walkway have not been made.

First Selectman Jayme Stevenson said that simply buying the property to prevent it from being subdivided into housing lots and built upon is itself an improvement that would help prevent more flooding in the neighborhood in the future.

Shirley Nichols, executive director of the Darien Land Trust, told selectmen that there is little open space in this area of the town, and the Hecker property "fits all the criteria for a piece of open space that helps wildlife: It has water, it has habitat and it has food, shelter."

Nichols also said: "We do think that it could be appropriate in the long term to create a little trail along the waterway, and perhaps people who are working in Town Hall or are going to the Town Hall for the Senior Center or [Mather Community Center] recreation center could walk through to the library."

If the town doesn't buy the property, the cemetery association is likely to sell it to someone who will develop

it, said Charles Goodyear, an official with the Darien Land Trust.

"This is really a one-time opportunity," he said. "They [the cemetery association] need the money; they want the money; and so this is not going to be around for a long time."

The cost of creating a gravel pathway and removing invasive plant species from the property to get it ready to serve as a public walkway would probably cost about \$10,000, Goodyear said. The fine gravel pathway that the land trust has on its property at Dunlap Woods can withstand occasional flooding, he said.

Michael Sawitsky of 67 Hecker Ave. told the Board of Selectmen that he hoped the town would pursue some flood-mitigation measures on the property, since the brook flooded parts of the neighborhood some years ago and was likely to do so again at some point.

"I'm looking for some type of direction on what can be done there to prevent future flooding, and what I'm hearing is nothing," Sawitsky said. "There's nothing in the plans to do anything about it."

Planing and Zoning Commission Chair Susan Cameron said the town studied flood mitigation possibilities for the area and found they'd be extremely expensive. So Sawitsky is correct, in a sense, she said — for flood mitigation plans for that spot there's "nothing that wouldn't have cost millions of dollars."

Another neighborhood resident asked whether or not it was possible to build a detention basin on the property. Stevenson said there is no plan for that. "What we can do is make a plan — which we should do — to clean the sedimentation basin that's in front of Town Hall (also on Stony Brook, further downstream from Hecker Avenue). I think that is probably the best use of taxpayer dollars at this point in time."

A basin, she said, "hasn't been a recommendation of any engineer that studied this parcel."