

East Greenwich Planning Department

Growth Management Project 2021

Immediate Term Conservation Considerations

March 30, 2021

The East Greenwich Planning Board has been asked by the Town Council to consider effective growth management techniques since the Town appears poised to experience significant new development in the short term. The Town Council and Planning Board began a dialogue on this topic in February, 2021 and that conversation included Town professional staff as well as members of other Town Boards, notably the Municipal Land Trust and Affordable Housing Committee. Substantial consensus seemed to form around the idea of stepping up local land conservation efforts as an initial response to development pressure. The Land Trust has started to create a “short list” of properties to target for preservation in some way. Options include acquiring parcels outright through fee simple purchase or via land-owner donation; acquiring the development rights to target parcels through purchase of development rights or imposition of conservation easements; OR working with an owner or developer on “hybrid” solutions that might involve some future development occurring in concert with permanent protection of some portion of a given parcel. While the Land Trust continues work on their compiled list of suitable properties and develops outreach materials and a communications strategy for dealing with land owners, there is one target property that has long been of interest to the Town and that may be threatened with imminent development. Staff asks the Council to consider making the protection of this undeveloped parcel an advance priority.

1140 Tillinghast Road; Assessors Map 16, Plat 18, Lot 15

- Owned by William B. Pine III (since 1978). Location is the south end of Tillinghast Road – east side, near the recently acquired Tanner-Clark property on the west side. The Camp Fogarty National Guard facility abuts the property to the east.
- 41.9 acres in size and zoned F-1, Farm (one-acre lot size minimum – 1 of two “very low density” zones in Town)
- Vacant. A historically significant gable-roofed farmhouse stood on site for more than 200 years but it eventually deteriorated beyond repair and had to be removed.
- Was an active horse farm for many years with the front pasture becoming an important part of the Tillinghast Road viewshed. Until recent years, the fields were still mowed for hay to be used by other local farmers.
- Per the Tax Assessor’s records, currently valued at \$450,020 and enrolled in the Farm, Forest and Open Space Program.
- The historical name of the property is The Mawney Hopkins Farm – so-named in part to honor Peter Mawney and his descendants. Most local people seem to know that the

“Frenchtown” section of East Greenwich was given that name in recognition of the early Huguenot settlement in that area. “Mawney” is an Anglicized version of the French surname Lemoine. Peter Mawney (1689 – 1754) was the son of one of the original Huguenot settlers of Frenchtown. He married twice – both times to daughters of Pardon Tillinghast, the family for whom Tillinghast Road is named. The farmsteads remaining along Tillinghast Road are inextricably linked to the Town’s earliest days as an incorporated community.

- The subject property has been under consideration for Town acquisition for 30 years. The Town’s 1991 Comprehensive Community Plan identified the parcel as a “Candidate Parcel for Acquisition” citing it as an historic and aesthetic asset, noting its environmental concerns, especially as relates to the Hunt River watershed, and its value as a working farm.
- The Town’s first consolidated Open Space and Recreation Plan (1998) – a product of the Land Trust and Planning Board working in concert - reiterated the list of “Candidate Parcels” and emphasized this site. That Plan developed the concept of creating a “linear park” throughout Town as its primary open space strategy. The “Linear Park” was envisioned to consist of ribbons of land coming from several directions and converging in the “middle” of Town at Frenchtown Park. The subject property was the southern gateway property for the ribbon of land that would have served to preserve the rural character of Tillinghast Road and provide passive or active recreation amenities for residents.
- The 2002 Comprehensive Community Plan Update continued to cite this parcel as a candidate parcel for public ownership in light of the foregoing considerations.
- In 2003, the Town was awarded grant funds (\$250,000 from the RI DEM Greenways Council) toward acquisition of the “Mawney Hopkins Farm” for the purpose of creating a “Recreational Greenway.” The grant award was expected to leverage other funds to secure the property as part of the Town’s open space inventory. The Quonset Development Corporation supported the “Greenways” Acquisition and was willing to contribute \$60,000 as partial match for the Town’s purchase. The QDC saw the project as helping protect their wellhead. They noted the parcel is in the Hunt Aquifer Drainage Basin and it sits southwest of one of their drinking water wells. The conservation was consistent with their plans at the time and the Water Resources Board supported their use of funds for this purpose.
- Current staff is unsure exactly why the proposed purchase did not go forward in 2003 – 04.
- As part of the pending acquisition process in 2004, the Town contracted with Applied Bio-Systems, Inc. to perform a baseline environmental assessment of the lot – they found:

The perennial Hunt River crosses the lot from the northwest corner to the east lot line. The River has jurisdictional streambanks (100’ perimeter) and wetlands (50’ perimeter) associated with it and there is some wooded swamp along the northeast lot line. The stream bottom is stony and the adjacent land is level but poorly drained.

The balance of the property is essentially upland and/or sloping with well-drained soils. Vegetative species typical of upland deciduous forest are present – like red oak, black birch and hickory as well as bittersweet and poison ivy. No plant species found were considered

rare but they were indicative of valuable habitat. Wildlife spotted on site included a sizable flock of wild turkey, and a number of migratory songbirds. Bird species included: red tail hawk, indigo bunting, and chimney swifts. While these species are not threatened or endangered, some, like the Scarlet Tanager require large areas of forested land which is increasingly in short supply along their migratory routes, making the habitat provided here very valuable. In addition to the birds, there were wood frogs and brook trout spotted. Applied Biosystems concluded the stream habitat here is particularly important and worthy of protection in addition to the unfragmented area of forest habitat and open agricultural fields that serve as home to a variety of wildlife species.

- The subject property anchors the southern end of a National Register Historic District. The Tillinghast Road Historic District was entered into the National Register in 1988. It is a rural, linear District encompassing several 18th and 19th century farm complexes. It stretches along both sides of Tillinghast Road for about a mile southward from its starting place on the north side of Frenchtown Road. The National Register nomination in 1987 noted the pressures of suburbanization and the dotting of the landscape with 20th century new construction but it emphasized that the narrow, winding country road was still marked by farms, fields and second growth forest. The Tillinghast Road Historic District was found to be significant because it is a small but unique area where a “coherent relationship of historic structures and agrarian landscape retains sufficient integrity to provide a clear picture of the Town’s early rural settlement and its agricultural development from the early eighteenth century through the 20th century.” Historically, lands in this District were part of the five thousand acres granted to East Greenwich’s 48 original proprietors for their services rendered in King Philip’s War (1675-1676). The pattern of early land development in East Greenwich at the start of the 18th century was characterized by scattered farms in outlying areas and only the beginnings of a concentration of houses in what was to become the Town center on Greenwich Cove. The fertile soils, rolling topography, and available water inland lent itself well to agriculture while the port provided access to maritime trade along Narragansett Bay. The rest, as they say, is history.
- The property contains East Greenwich Historic Cemetery #95, rumored to be an African American burial ground but staff cannot confirm. At least 21 grave markers are present. Stones are crudely cut but square and they bear no discernable inscriptions. The cemetery is well-delineated and received some overdue maintenance and attention as well as a new sign in 2017 thanks to some local volunteers. The cemetery adds to the historical significance of the property.

Staff has therefore concluded that the property at 1140 Tillinghast Road has intrinsic aesthetic value and is exceptionally important to the Town’s history and cultural heritage. It is essentially part of our “origin story.” In addition, these 41 acres provide significant habitat and possess environmental importance both in terms of the flora and fauna supported and in terms of the health of the watershed. We would also note the subject property is outside the delineated Urban Services

Boundary (USB) as addressed by State land use mapping and planning documents. The State's Guide Plan, *Land Use 2025*, directs the state and communities to concentrate growth inside this mapped boundary line. The USB represents the general extent of the areas within which public services supporting urban development presently exist, or are likely to be provided through 2025. Within the boundary, most land should be served by public water service and many areas will have public sewer service available as well. Public transit service should be generally available. Several watersheds and other sensitive resource areas are excluded from the boundary, indicating that protection of these resources must be a principle concern limiting future development intensity potential. The State's guidance thus echoes local policies reflected in our own zoning ordinance and future land use mapping as contained in the Comprehensive Plan, which call for lands where public services are not available to remain in very low-density use, if developed at all. We therefore ask the Town Council to consider prioritizing the conservation of the property at 1140 Tillinghast Road and to authorize staff to work toward that outcome.