

## Lachat Advisory Committee

## Public suggests restoring buildings, agricultural uses

by JAN HOWARD

The need for restoration of existing buildings and possible future educational and agricultural uses dominated discussion during a public meeting Monday regarding the Lachat property on Godfrey Road West.

Speakers were concerned about increased use of the property by

the public if it were developed, access to the property, aesthetics, and traffic safety, as well as financial aspects and townspeople's willingness to support its development.

About 35 people attended the approximately two-hour meeting in the community room of the library. It was the second public hearing regarding possible

uses for the property. Selectman W. Glenn Major, a member of the Lachat Advisory Committee, presided over the hearing.

Mr. Major explained that the agreement to purchase the property included certain restrictions on uses that would or would not be allowed in certain areas. In regard to conservation restrictions, there are no changes, but

the Nature Conservancy's list of what was to be included on the property has changed.

"We are back to square one," he said. The Nature Conservancy wants the land conserved but is not looking at adding educational programs, he said.

"There is no list," he said. "The original list is off the table."

The purpose of the public hearings, he said, was "to try to cull input into basic concepts" and pass them on to the Lachat Nature Center Design Committee. The design committee, which consists of three members of the public and three representatives from the Nature Conservancy, would then work out a suitable plan for the property. The plan would be submitted for approval to the Nature Conservancy and town agencies.

Mr. Major said the overall original plan was approved but that budgeting for it was voted down in April. "These are not consistent with each other," he said.

Fredric Rosen called the dual ownership and maintenance of the property "a sweetheart deal."

"It's a wonderful opportunity," he said. The property, he added, "should be protected and preserved."

Don Eldon presented a proposal for the property that included a 2,000 square foot barn on the same footprint as an existing barn for use by the public and 20-plus parking spaces.

The 42-acre Lachat property consists of a 32-acre homestead parcel and 10 acres of hillside and meadows. In 1997 and 1999, the town of Weston and the Nature Conservancy jointly purchased the properties from Leon Lachat, who retained a life-estate interest and lived there until his death in 2003.

The property is adjacent to the Devil's Den Preserve, which is overseen by the Nature Conservancy.

In 2005, the town and the Nature Conservancy presented a plan to the Planning and Zoning Commission that called for renovation of several buildings, construction of a parking lot, and a new 5,204-square-foot visitors center. The plan was heavily opposed by members of the public and was withdrawn prior

to a vote.

In April, voters turned down a \$450,000 appropriation for the project, nearly two years after a Town Meeting voted overwhelmingly to approve the payment plan for future development of the land.

At that time, Dr. Steve Patton, the director of Devil's Den, said the Nature Conservancy would support whatever the town wanted to do with the property. The Board of Selectmen then appointed five members to the Lachat Advisory Committee to gather public input in regard to use of the property. About 50 people turned out for the first public hearing on Sept. 12.

#### Building Restoration

On Monday, several townspeople voiced support for restoration of existing buildings on the property.

"This is a unique piece of property," Katherine DeSousa said, noting the need for stabilization and rehabilitation of the buildings.

David Christopher, advisory committee member, agreed there is a need for restoration of the barns and house. "We have to do something," he said.

Lucy Bowden of Stonehenge Road said there should be minimal impact to the buildings and a minimum amount of parking at the site.

"I think you will get strong support for the restoration part of the plan," Mr. Rosen said.

Mr. Major agreed that the buildings need immediate attention to preserve them.

First Selectman Woody Bliss said there is a restoration plan, and some minimal work has been done.

"I hope the committee comes back rapidly with an integrated plan," he said.

#### Agricultural and educational

Amy Kalafa and Carol Baldwin advocated for agricultural use of the Lachat property.

Ms. Kalafa discussed Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms that are owned cooperatively. Such a farm, she said, might be in line with what Mr. Lachat saw for its future use, and also be educational for children to learn about farming, since Weston was a farming community.

Ms. Kalafa said there are prototypes for educational uses of such properties for science, math, nutrition, and other subjects. There are models for CSA farms in every state, she added.

Traditional farming preserves land, Ms. Kalafa said. An investment would be required, but a CSA farm is self-sustaining. Grant money is available from the government, she noted. The cost depends on the size of the farm and the interest of the town.

Ms. Baldwin suggested the property could be leased to a farmer and members of the public could be subscribers to the farm. There are 22 such farms in Connecticut, she said.

"It's an interesting way of preserving farms," she said, adding that five acres are needed for a CSA farm.

Eileen Rosen questioned if many people would become involved with community gardens. She said she supports conservation and education aspects on the property.

Though he didn't think community gardens would be successful, Ernie Albin of the Weston Historical Society said he would like to see farm tools from the Lachat barns, now in the society's possession, reinstalled in the barns for historic purposes.

He said the society would like to extend its facility and use one of the barns on the property as an example of what a cow barn looked like.

Jack Beal, a member of the design committee, said he is looking for an educational role for this property, "someplace other than in a classroom."

#### Community center

Clem Malin of Weston Cares said the committee should consider expanding development plans to include a community center.

However, Mr. Major said he is concerned about how the concept of a community center would fall in regard to restrictions in the agreement between the town and Nature Conservancy.

Some speakers disagreed with a community center on the Lachat property.

A walk of the Lachat property, open to the public, is being considered.