

Agreement in place to protect Davis Farm land in Stonington

By IAN HOLLIDAY / Sun Staff Writer |

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STONINGTON — For years, those interested in land preservation in town have identified one property as easily the most important parcel for conservation. This week, an agreement was reached that could preserve the property in perpetuity.

The Stonington Land Trust has reached an agreement with the owners of the Davis Farm to purchase a conservation easement on 168 acres of field and forest along Greenhaven Road and the banks of the Pawcatuck River.

If completed, the purchase of the easement would mean the entire 430-acre farm, believed to have been in continuous operation since 1654, would remain undeveloped. It would also create a continuous greenway of more than 1,000 acres stretching from the Barn Island Wildlife Management Area to the Pawcatuck River.

“It’s extremely important to preserve that property,” said Stanton Sim, chairman of the Stonington Conservation Commission and vice president of the land trust. “Both the Stonington Land Trust and the conservation commission have long considered the Davis property to be the most significant in town.”

The Davis Farm consists of land given to Thomas Stanton in 1654 as a reward for his role in the Pequot War. In 1670, Stanton built the house on the property now known as the Stanton-Davis Homestead Museum, the oldest home in Stonington. Stanton is considered one of the four founders of the town, and his descendents still operate a farm on the land.

John “Whit” Davis, an 11th-generation descendent of Stanton and the current owner of the farm, said a desire to preserve the history of the property contributed to his willingness to sell an easement to the land trust.

“As far as we know, that farm is the oldest in the state, and we haven’t missed a crop since 1654,” Davis said. “We just thought it would be an important thing to try to preserve.”

Under the agreement, Davis and his family would continue to own the property and operate the farm. What’s set to be sold is the right to develop

the 168 acres not already in conservation.

The agreement gives the land trust three years to raise the purchase price for the easement, a total of \$2 million. Sim said the land trust plans to raise the money through private donations by individuals and groups. Public funding, in the form of state grants for land preservation, is something the trust wouldn't seek until later in the process, if at all.

"There are enough important points about (the land) that we think we can generate interest," Sim said.

Of the total acreage of the farm, some 258 acres are already protected, Sim said. Similarly, a few acres around the homestead were taken off the market when it became a museum.

The 168 acres that would be preserved under the agreement are divided in two parts, Sim said. One part is 120 acres along Greenhaven Road, and the other part is 48 acres along the Pawcatuck River.

Sim said it's very rare to find undeveloped shoreline that isn't already in conservation, another feature that makes the property attractive. There's nearly half a mile of river frontage that would be preserved if the easement were finalized, he said.

"If you're in Avondale or Watch Hill and you're looking across the river, a good part of what you're seeing is this property," Sim said. "This gives us one of the largest coastal reserves in the region. . . . It's just something you don't find anymore."

Although the Davis Farm has long been a target for preservation, Stonington Land Trust President Jim Smith, who founded the land trust with his wife Laura and others in 2007, said "serious conversations" didn't begin with Davis and his son Larry, who recently took over the farm, until July. From there, it was a relatively quick process to get an agreement in place, he said.

"It was mutual," Smith said of the desire to preserve the property. "I really like Whit Davis and Larry. They're really salt of the Earth people."

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A view of the Davis Farm property from across the Pawcatuck River in the vicinity of the Watch Hill Boatyard (Photo courtesy of STUART COLE)