

NEWTON TAB

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WEDNESDAY, JULY 7, 2004

Vol. 27, No. 13 ■ 50 Pag

Farm plan sows seeds of enthusiasm, skepticism

By Sarah Andrews
STAFF WRITER

People wearing straw hats and dirt-covered jeans aren't a common sight at Newton City Hall. But last week's Community Preservation Commission meeting was a rare exception.

Over 30 people, including farmers from neighboring towns, crowded into a second-floor room to urge the city to spend \$2.5 million of Community Preservation Act funds to purchase the Angino Family Farm at the corner of Nahanton and Winchester streets.

A proposal, submitted by the Newton Conservators and an independent Farm Advisory Committee, which was created last month in an effort to garner support for the farm, asks the city to allocate CPA funds toward the 2.26-acre lot, preserve the existing house and barn and lease the land to a non-profit organization who will open the site as a community farm.

The proposal has sparked both excitement and skepticism from the CPC. Though most members say the farm would be an asset to the community, while also fulfilling at least three of their charges — historic and open space preservation and community housing — some question what would happen if the community interest isn't there and the farm fails.

"Your budget makes me very nervous," CPC member Joyce Moss told the crowd last Wednesday. "How can 1.5 acres [of farming space] do anything like this? What happens if you have a bad year and the crops don't get going? I've watched farmers suffer for years and all of this strikes me as being extremely optimistic."

But farmers from other communities argued that under the control of a non-profit entity, several farms of similar sizes have prospered for decades in the state.

Chris Yoder, founder of Vanguard Farms in Dover who spent two years farming with Jerry Angino in the late 1980's, said that a non-profit would be able to sustain the farm by managing the site, offering educational programs and fundraising.

And Brian Donahue, one of the founders of Land's Sake Farm in Weston, said though his particular farm has some support from the town, he thought the farm could survive without it. He admitted the farm has had good and bad years, but said, "We survived them and now we're going strong. Once you get a non-profit organization in place and a board to look after it, you can weather these kinds of iterations."

Though communities across the state use a variety of models to operate farms, the Conservators presented two models they believe to be most successful for small scale farms.

One commonly-used model is a CSA, which stands for Community Supported Agriculture and is employed by farms in Dover, Waltham and Framingham. The CSA model is adapted from a Japanese model called "Teikei," which translates to "partnership," according to the Robyn Van En Center.

In this model, people purchase shares of the farm and then receive shares of the produce.

One CSA example is Stearns Farm in Framingham. A 2.5 acre lot, it has 150 shareholders each of whom pay \$450 a year and are required to work 12 hours a year in the field. During the 20-week harvest season, shareholders receive enough produce to feed a family of four weekly.

Stearns has an annual budget of \$63,000, most of which comes

from shareholders and variations of work shares. They've also established a fundraising board.

Some CSA farms also offer options like splitting shares between two families.

Kerisa Perazella, the assistant farmer at Stearns, estimated last week that Angino could support 75 to 85 families or shareholders, as well as offer educational opportunities about farming. The Farm Advisory Committee says they already have 8 families who have committed to purchasing a share at \$500 each.

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In another model, called the "Market Model," the entire farm would be dedicated to growing food for a particular market or restaurant, such as Cold Springs Farmer's Market. Profits could be maximized by concentrating on specialty herbs or high-end flowers, said Perazella.

Under either model, the Farm Committee says they will offer educational programs, opening the farm up to local schools and running summer programs. They cite programs at Land's Sake Farm and the Natick Community Organic Farm, which have formed alliances with the public schools, as well as at-risk youth programs.

"The cooler things community farms can do is to teach through what they're doing," said Perazella.

The Conservators estimate that Angino would require an annual budget of \$72,100 to be self-sustaining and Jon Regosin, the chairperson of the Farm Advisory Committee, says they need about \$25,000 in start-up costs, \$15,000 of which they've already raised and \$7,500 of which has been pledged by the Conservators if the farm is approved.

"We do not anticipate start-up or building/rehabilitation costs coming from the CPC," said Regosin. "For this we will fundraise and possibly generate up-front revenue through the sale of CSA shares. We anticipate that the farm will be entirely self-sufficient through the sale of produce, educational programs and from modest fundraising campaigns."

In a model budget they submitted to the CPC, the Conservators figure that sixty percent of the farm's revenue would come from shareholders and twenty percent would come from fundraising and grants. Sales at Cold Spring Farmer's Market would bring in \$5,000 and the house would be leased to someone involved with the farm for \$800 a month.

Expenses would go mostly to labor, about \$49,600. Labor would be a full-time farm manager, who would stay active with fundraising efforts in the off-season, and an assistant farmer in the on-season. The rest of the revenue would go toward maintenance, equipment and seeds.

Paul Green, a former ward 5 alderman candidate, said he's watched the CPC process with Angino carefully and feels the current proposal is better than previous ones which had market-rate housing components. But he said the plan needs to be "fleshed out."

"If it's sustainable and they can work out the details, I would like to see a farm there," he said. "I haven't liked what was proposed there previously for the [luxury] housing, specifically because I don't think it would benefit enough people."

"My concern with Angino Farm is about access. I want to be a lot of access and if there are \$3 million homes there, people in those homes are going to want million dollar frontage," he added.

CPC Chairman Jeffrey Sachs said the commission still needs answers to various questions, such as which city department would have ultimate responsibility for the land, and would need a more firm proposal if they were to recommend the plan to the Board of Aldermen. A few CPC members agreed to meet with the Farm Advisory Committee over the next month to hammer out the details and hope to report back to the July CPC meeting for a vote.

"I think we're very interested in this proposal," said CPC member Doug Dickson. "We just need to work it out... so it's something we can sell to the Board of Aldermen."

For more information on becoming involved with the farm, contact Jon Regosin at jon.regosin@highstream.net.

Sarah Andrews can be reached at sandrews@cnc.com.

Green acres in the Garden City

Newton, like most Boston suburbs, started its life as a vibrant farming community. But like these other communities, remnants of farm life have slowly been eliminated over the decades and replaced by housing or retail.

In the 1970's alone, two of Newton's largest farms, the 15-acre Spezzano farm in Chestnut Hill and the 30-acre Murley farm on Dedham Street, were both purchased by developers and replaced by apartment and housing complexes.

While most evidence of Newton's farming history is gone, the Community Preservation Commission may now have a chance to return a small part of it to the community if they vote to buy Newton's last farm, the Angino family farm in Ward 8.

According to a proposal now under the CPC's review, it would cost the city \$2.5 million of Community Preservation Act funds to buy the 2.2 acre lot. The proposal, submitted by the Newton Conservators, is based on a city appraisal and suggests the city lease the lot to a non-profit entity, which would run the farm based on revenue from crops and shareholders and who would open the site to the public for educational opportunities.

It's a unique project idea that would not only preserve a landscape, but would enrich the lives of Newton residents by offering people the chance to learn to farm in their own city.

The CPC has, rightly so, asked for more details from the Conservators before moving to a vote this month or next. The proposal, while thoughtful, is still sparse in some areas. Questions like who will manage the farm's non-profit, who will rent the Angino family home and how much it will cost to renovate the house, are important to answer before the city decides to sink a big portion of its annual budget into the project.

There are 59 communities in the state with successful, privately run community farms. Of course, not all of these farms were purchased with city money, but purchasing Angino would still be a solid investment for the city.

The Angino family has already turned down offers from developers for \$1 million more and if the farm ultimately fails, the city would likely be able to recoup its money or invest the land in other uses, like affordable housing.

CPA money is often a source of controversy in the city, but the CPC has done a fairly balanced job of allocating its annual funds, mostly to open space and affordable housing, two of the city's largest needs. The purchase of Angino Farm would be a smart step in fulfilling more than one of the commission's goals.

Skeptics of the plan raise good questions. Hopefully, the Farm Committee and CPC will be able to find the answers before the opportunity is gone.

Globe West

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE JULY 25, 2004

Hearing set on fate of Newton's last farm

By Rhonda Stewart

GLOBE STAFF

With a proposal pending to buy Newton's last remaining farm, the city's Community Preservation Committee wants to hear from the public.

The committee will hold a hearing Wednesday on a request from the Newton Conservators to purchase Angino Farm, which once produced vegetables and flowers. The Nahanton Street farm, which has been inactive for several years, sits on a 2¼-acre parcel that also includes a historic house and barn.

The Newton Conservators are asking for \$2.5 million in Community Preservation Act funds to buy the property and develop a community farm.

The proposal also asks for a conservation restriction on part of the site and a preservation restriction for the house and barn.

The house, which has Greek Revival details on its exterior, dates from the 1850s. A deed restriction would be placed on the dwelling to keep it as community housing.

Jeff Sacks, chairman of the Community Preservation Com-

mittee, said buying the farm would not be possible without Community Preservation Act funds.

"Everybody I've talked to is really excited about this because it's new in Newton," he said of the farm proposal. "If we can pull this off, it will bring people in the community together in a new way."

The idea for a community farm was inspired, in part, by the success of other such operations, including the Waltham Fields Community Farm and Stearns Farm in Framingham.

The farms participate in a community-supported agriculture system, through which subscribers pay a lump sum for a share of produce harvested weekly. Subscribers can also help out with chores as part of their payment. The Angino proposal estimates that the site could support 85 to 100 shares at \$450 to \$500 per share.

A committee has been formed that would establish a nonprofit organization to operate the farm. Supporters also envision the farm as a source for donations to food pantries and a learning center for area schoolchildren.

Jon Regosin, who is on the

Newton Conservators' board of directors, said 20 people have already pledged to buy shares.

"A lot of people have lost touch with growing their own food," he said. "This is a real opportunity for kids to see how it's done. You can teach about history, you can teach about photosynthesis, you can teach about sustainability."

The Newton Conservators originally sought \$3 million, but were able to shave \$500,000 by negotiating a lower purchase price with the Angino family.

In 2001, Newton voters adopted the Community Preservation Act, which provides state funds to match those raised through a 1 percent property tax surcharge.

Newton expects to have \$6.8 million in preservation act funds for the new fiscal year.

Wednesday's public hearing will take place at 7 p.m. in Room 209 at City Hall.

After the hearing, the Community Preservation Committee will hold another working session on the proposal. It may take a vote as early as that night. If the plan is approved, it would eventually go to the Board of Aldermen for consideration.

CPA \$ may be put to pasture

By Sarah Andrews
STAFF WRITER

By all accounts, the modest house at Winchester and Nahanton Streets is something unique. In a city besieged by new development and dwindling open space resources, the Angino family home is Newton's last standing farm.

And because of this, the Community Preservation Committee may vote to pay up to \$2.5 million of CPA money to acquire the property, preserve the house and start a community farm.

Earlier this year, the Newton Conservators entered into a purchasing agreement with the farm's owners, the Angino Family.

To support an asking price of \$3.5 million, which the Conservators knew the city couldn't afford, the group, led by Duane Hillis and Eric Reenstierna, proposed selling part of the farm's 2.26 acres to developers for three single-family lots.

Under the initial proposal, the rest of the land, about 1.5 acres, would be conserved as open space.

But after lengthy debate at last week's CPC meeting on whether the open space could be put to good use in the backyard of three homes, the committee said it would rather save the whole site, preserving and selling the house to a single family and opening the lot up to a community farming group.

"I think we have to wait and see what proposals come to us ... but [by buying Angino farm] we would hit [many] important goals of our funding," said CPC Chair-

man Jeffrey Sacks, referring to the goals of preserving open space, recreation and history. "It's a real unique site and that's a reason why we may spend an extraordinary amount of money to control it."

**"The Angino farm
is in dire straits if
both of those
groups don't come
forward in a
month."**

Eric Reenstierna

If the CPC paid \$2.5 million for the Angino farm, it would be spending about half of their budget for the coming year. Sacks compared this to the recent purchasing of Kessler Woods and Forte Park.

But at the core of the debate is the property's value.

Chris Bowler of Avery Associates recently appraised the land for the city at \$2 million. But the Angino's, who have already rejected a \$3.75 million offer from developers, have received a higher appraisal based on selling the lot to developers who want to build up to 20 units of housing.

Doing so, however, would require getting zoning laws changed and could take several years if it happened at all. Bowler says he thinks it's unlikely.

"That's wildly speculative," he said. "You're talking about a density of nine units per acre."

Nick Coppola, who represents the Angino family, did not return phone calls before the TAB's deadline.

In the original proposal, the Conservators had until June 1 to make an offer, but Reenstierna hopes the family will extend the timeline and listen to their new proposal with the \$2.5 million figure.

But now, he says, the Conservators need two things — to find a community group or non-profit entity to run the farm and a home-buyer that doesn't mind a farm in their backyard.

"The Angino farm is in dire straits if both of those groups don't come forward in a month," said Reenstierna.

Two residents, John Regosin and Leah Postman, spoke at the meeting about their interest in farming. They both say that they've heard from several interested people in Newton and are working on compiling information about community farming.

"I think it's exciting that people are focusing on saving the farm and the historic landscape as a whole," said Regosin. "On the other hand there's a real urgency and need for a commitment from the city. Everything needs to fall in place quickly to make it work...this opportunity only comes up once and I hope the city will step to the plate."

"I don't see it as a question of can we afford it, it's can we afford not to," said Postman. "It doesn't have to be lucrative, it just has to be sustainable."

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