

Town of Natick, Massachusetts
Department of Community and Economic Development
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James Freas, AICP
Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 13, 2021

To: Select Board

FROM: Marianne Iarossi, Open Space Planner/Conservation Agent
James Freas, Director of Community & Economic Development

RE: Department Letter of Recommendation – 82 Rockland Street

Meeting Date: May 19, 2021

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide the Select Board with background information, research conducted to date, and the Department of Community & Economic Development's recommendation for the right of first refusal option to purchase the land at 82 Rockland Street (Parcel ID 66-10).

The Town of Natick is mostly a built-out community experiencing healthy rates of new development. Large, undeveloped and privately owned properties are rare when considering open space acquisitions. The Town will need to be innovative in balancing development trends with land conservation needs. However, the Town also needs to be strategic as land acquisition opportunities arise: Where is open space lacking? What lands are environmentally sensitive and need to be prioritized? How can we fund these acquisitions?

The parcel located at 82 Rockland Street is enrolled in the Chapter 61 program, giving the Town the opportunity of right of first refusal should the property come up for sale. The property owner submitted necessary paperwork in April 2021 of their intent to sell. The following information serves to provide the Select Board with parcel context and staff research to aid in the decision whether to acquire 82 Rockland Street for open space.

Natural Resources Assessment (see attached map)

The 7.73 acre property is located in a predominantly residential neighborhood. A natural resources assessment demonstrated that the property is mainly comprised of disturbed agricultural lands. A Bordering Vegetated Wetland (shallow marsh meadow) is located on the northeast corner of the property, which can sometimes triple in size during heavy rain events. The southern side of the property contains vegetated tree cover. Power lines bisect the property. Open spaces protected as part of nearby residential cluster developments directly abut the property on the north, east, and southeast sides.

There was no evidence of rare or endangered species, vernal pool habitat, or prime farmland soils discovered on-site – factors that would make the land more valuable for conservation.

Partnership Consideration

We reached out to various agencies and non-profits to gauge interest in seeing the Rockland Street parcel protected. For a number of reasons such as small parcel size, location, limited staff and financial resources, and lack of natural resource characteristics as listed above, these entities were not strongly interested. These agencies included:

- Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources
- Sudbury Valley Trustees
- Natick Community Organic Farm
- MassAudubon
- Trustees of Reservation
- Upper Charles Conservation Land Trust (expressed interest in playing a non-profit, fundraising role but pointed out the limited length of time in fundraising such a large amount of money)

Public Comments

The Department received a number of public comments. The comments were generally in favor of acquiring the property and preserving it in its existing state or converting it into active parkland. Public concerns ranged from safety and traffic on Rockland Street if the site were to be developed for housing, the recent loss of undeveloped land in the immediate area (especially with the new McHugh Farms development), need of parkland in the neighborhood, and loss of agricultural character. Many residents have expressed interest in assisting with fundraising and donations to see the property protected.

Relationship to the Natick 2020 Open Space & Recreation Plan

The Open Space Advisory Committee and Town staff regularly update and track priority properties for open space protection. Although the 82 Rockland Street property is listed as a Priority B parcel in the Open Space Interest List (Priority A being highest, Priority C being lowest) the consideration of parcels for this list does not account for costs of acquisition. Acquisition costs are dictated by the real estate market and it is impossible to account for this without conducting appraisals for all the considered properties. Acquisition costs are considered when an opportunity arises, such as now for 82 Rockland Street. The agreed purchase price included in the Purchase and Sale Agreement for 82 Rockland Street is listed at \$2,000,000.

Proposed Use of Land

The potential buyer of the property proposes to develop the land under the Town's recently updated Single Family Cluster Development Bylaw. Although not a guarantee, if the property receives approval to develop under this Bylaw, 50% of the land area will be conserved as open space in perpetuity (in which 50% of the on-site wetlands cannot be included in the total). We strongly believe the potential buyer will move forward with such a development due to site constraints limiting the viability of a conventional subdivision. Our analysis shows developing under the Cluster Development Bylaw will yield

a greater number of units compared to a conventional subdivision while reducing overall development costs. In addition, the presence of the power lines limits the potential for a conventional subdivision while increasing infrastructure costs.

Building Conditions

The site contains a single family house and multiple accessory farm structures. All of the structures were built as early as 1969 and no later than 1983. The single family house is in useable condition. The farm structures would likely need to be demolished unless used for agricultural purposes. All of the buildings would require some type of improvement/operation costs. This assessment is based upon a site visit by the Building Commissioner and Open Space Planner conducted on 5/6/2021.




Conclusion

At no cost, the Town could gain 3.8 acres of open space if the property is developed under the Cluster Development Bylaw. Purchasing the additional 3.8 acres for \$2,000,000 should not be a priority for the Town. We believe there will be other opportunities to acquire properties – those with more valuable natural resources or located in areas where open space is desperately needed – that should be considered as a higher priority.

In addition to the open space benefits of a cluster development, such a project would also provide new affordable housing and the new housing would contribute to the overall need for diverse housing options identified in the Natick 2030+ Comprehensive Plan. A cluster development at this location would create new housing opportunities in an existing Natick neighborhood with no significant expansion in infrastructure while preserving the most ecologically significant aspects of the property in a way that would link up with other preserved properties.



0 100 200 Feet

-  Stream
-  Wetlands
-  McHugh Farms and Hopewell Farms Open Space

82 Rockland Street - Natural Resources Map
Town of Natick
May 2021