

# Southampton TM passes 21 articles, OKs \$13 million budget; 200 acres preserved

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Staff Writer



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SOUTHAMPTON - Annual Town Meeting voters applauded the approval of an article Tuesday night that preserves 200 acres of property off of Fomer Road with water resources, wildlife and historic sites. The measure was one of 21 articles that passed at Town Meeting.

The Conservation Commission is set to adapt the site and enable public access for recreation. The land is still owned by Edward Searle, but the Conservation Commission holds the restriction. The Searle family will receive a payment of \$350,000 for giving up future development rights.

"That's quite a gift to all of us," said Mark Kassis, of the Winding River Land Conservancy, which collaborated with the Conservation Commission for three years to purchase the restriction. "This is a beautiful piece of land."

A \$244,800 state grant was awarded for the restriction. Community Preservation Act funds will account for about \$117,000 of the purchase, parking and signage costs.

"Only three cities in western Mass. were lucky to get such a grant and only 30 percent of applications were actually recognized by the state," said Charles McDonald, Conservation Commission chairman.

Community Preservation Committee chairwoman Virginia Ahart noted the restriction purchase is the first open-space project funded by Community Preservation Act funds. The open-space account balance is \$115,195.

"To have this amount of money and to only be able to use it for this kind of project should be an important thing you think about," Ahart said before the vote was taken.

Selectman and self-described "avid outdoorsman" Douglas Blanchard said before the vote, "This is going to be one of the most wonderful things that the town could get for our children, their children and the town (people) forever. If the Searles sell the property, that restriction goes with it for ever and ever and ever."

Voters Tuesday also approved the town's fiscal 2010 \$13 million operating budget - as compared to the current year's \$13.03 million budget - and a \$169,325 capital improvement plan. Most department heads cut 7 percent from their original requests to balance the budget, which is a 0.2 percent reduction from the budget presented last year.

"This budget has been hammered out in many meetings," said Finance Committee Chairman Robert Blanchette. "Like every town, we don't know what our numbers are going to be from the state. This budget looks like it might be manageable."

Blanchette noted that if revenues are significantly lower than the committee projected, town voters may be asked to weigh in on a different budget.

A petitioned article asking voters to adopt an updated non-exempt wage and salary scale for non-school, non-elected and non-union employees failed. Petitioner Barbara LaFlam, of 20 Cook Road,

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noted the hourly compensation rates for Council on Aging staff, library personnel and non-elected Town Hall employees has not been updated to adjust for inflation or cost of living adjustments since January 2003.

"The town employees that are covered in positions outlined on the handout have been neglected," LaFlam said. "To be ignored and not have the compensation recognition that they deserve is tragic."

The Finance Committee, Personnel, Policy and Procedures Board, and Board of Selectmen did not support the article.

"I also represent the taxpayers of the town, and in that sense we have to look at both sides of the issue and evaluate it," said Selectman Michael Phelan.

Voters approved the purchase of a \$264,500 pumper tanker truck for the Fire Department. It will be funded by the capital improvement plan.

Fire Chief Stephen Hyde said the truck would carry about 1,000 gallons of water and replace a "rotting" 1972 pumper truck, which is no longer in service. The department has 2005, 1986 and 1972 pumpers, 2007 and 2002 ambulances, and a 1986 military truck that operates as a brush truck.

Voters approved the update of three town bylaws regarding Town Meeting, the town administrator's contract and town contracts.

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