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## Preservationists Get Land Deal

### Audubon Group Says \$500,000 Buys 57-Acre Haagenson Land

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June 30 2005

EAST HADDAM -- The Connecticut Audubon Society has made the Friends of Harlo Haagenson Preserve an offer - agree to pay the society \$500,000 and the Haagenson property is theirs.

According to a letter faxed to Todd Gelston, director of fund-raising for the preserve coalition, the Connecticut Audubon Society would give the coalition until today to submit a letter of intent to purchase the 57-acre property on the Connecticut River. The coalition would have until July 15 to make a deposit and until Dec. 30 to pay the balance, according to the letter Gelston received Tuesday night.

Coalition communications director Cynthia Matthew said the group won't try to raise the money.

"It's nearly impossible [to agree] to raise \$500,000 in two days," said Nancy MacKinnon, a member of the coalition.

Matthew said the letter and its deadline have made the coalition anxious.

"This deadline makes it sound like they have something brewing," said Matthew. "I think they've written us off ... and will now say that they have given us a chance to buy the land so that they can go ahead and sell to another buyer. ... We are worried that we will hear they sold the property at the end of the week."

The Connecticut Audubon Society did not return calls for comment Wednesday.

The society created a separate company, Owl Properties LLC, to sell the Haagenson preserve last year. Society President Robert Martinez is listed as the Owl Properties manager. When the society transferred the preserve's deed to Owl Properties, it changed the land's tax classification from forest to residential.

For the past year, the property has been listed for \$775,000.

The coalition believes that paying the \$500,000 would be contrary to Haagenson's intention, Matthew said. Haagenson and his wife were avid bird-watchers and donated the land to the Connecticut Audubon Society in 1989. The society put the property up for sale in August 2004, which many believe goes against Haagenson's wishes.

"We feel it would be improper [to pay this money]," said Matthew. "It would be in direct violation of the agreement that is specified in the [attorneys'] letters."

The letters, written by the two attorneys involved in the original transfer of the property deed in 1989, recently came to light.

The Connecticut Audubon Society's attorney, Bradley Morehouse, wrote to Harlo Haagenson's attorney, John Larson, on July 18, 1989:

"I suggest ... we be permitted to sell no more than two conforming lots, with the proceeds earmarked as an endowment for the Haagenson property ... The balance of the property would be devoted to sanctuary purposes."

Larson wrote back and agreed, and added that Haagenson's house could also be sold. But the size of the lots was not mentioned in the letters. And, according to the letters, all proceeds would be used only for endowment purposes - in other words, to maintain the preserve.

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal is looking into the issue and Haagenson's intent in donating the land.

"We are continuing investigating the restrictions as to how the land could be sold and what purpose is permissible for the sale," Blumenthal said Wednesday. "There were apparently a number of restrictions at the time of the donation, and we are investigating to ensure that any sale or use of the land is consistent with Mr. Haagenson's intent."

The coalition Tuesday offered to reimburse the Connecticut Audubon Society for all costs related to the upkeep of the property since 1989 in exchange for the property's deed being transferred to another conservation organization.

"We have many organizations that have expressed an interest in helping," said Matthew.

East Haddam Land Trust, Trust for Public Lands and the Potapaug Chapter of the National Audubon Society - a group not affiliated with Connecticut Audubon Society - have all expressed an interest in helping to raise money. Also, the town and the Gateway Commission, a state conservation organization, have expressed support.

According to the coalition, these organizations would help raise the money to reimburse the Connecticut Audubon Society for its expenses to date.

The coalition gave the society until the end of the week to respond to its proposal.

Three members of the coalition met with the Connecticut Audubon Society on June 21. MacKinnon, who was at the meeting, said they asked for a list of the society's total expenses spent on the property since 1989.

"We want a document that lists [how much] they have put into the property because then it would be easier to sell the idea to conservation coalitions for their help in reimbursing [the society]," said MacKinnon. "With proper documentation it would be easier to help Connecticut Audubon Society and also to preserve the property."

Connecticut Audubon Society has not responded to the coalition's recent offer of reimbursement, nor has it sent a list of expenses on the property to date.

"We are still trying to negotiate with Connecticut Audubon Society," said MacKinnon. "I am, as

always, overly, overly, optimistic. ... I hope that we can continue to educate [Connecticut Audubon Society] on the process of conservation."

The coalition plans to meet July 7.

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