

Common Ground On Preserve

August 5 2005

EAST HADDAM -- A decision by the Connecticut Audubon Society to sell its 57-acre Harlo Haagenson Preserve in East Haddam has raised understandable alarm among residents as well as questions about whether the society is honoring the intentions of the property's donor, Mr. Haagenson.

The sale of this property by a group long associated with the cause of preservation is a startling development. It also raises questions about the group's mission and its responsibilities. Yet on one point there can be no question: Mr. Haagenson's intentions must be fully explored - and respected.

Mr. Haagenson, who died in 1995, donated the wooded parcel near the Connecticut River to the society in 1989. He did not provide an endowment for maintaining the land, however. Robert Martinez, president of the Connecticut Audubon Society, says those costs have become too burdensome, although he was unable to provide specific figures. He also says that Mr. Haagenson acknowledged the lack of an endowment might create difficulties, and that he gave Audubon permission to develop up to three house lots and preserve the rest of the land.

Audubon should have searched for a land trust or other conservation group to buy and protect the property. Last August, however, the group placed the entire preserve on the market for \$750,000. It included deed restrictions limiting development to one house and requiring the rest of the property be preserved.

Neighbors found the listing on a real-estate website.

State Attorney General Richard Blumenthal wrote Mr. Martinez July 1 asking the society to refrain from transferring the property until his office can review all documents clarifying Mr. Haagenson's intentions. A spokeswoman for the group says Connecticut Audubon agreed.

Mr. Blumenthal's involvement will protect public confidence in the disposition of this property - and in Connecticut Audubon.

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