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## NEWS ARTICLE

### **A Maiden Voyage For Land Trust In Bethlehem**

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BETHLEHEM-The Bethlehem Land Trust is close to making its very first land purchase, but needs the community's help to seal the deal.

The trust is interested in purchasing a 10-acre tract of land along Guilds Hollow Road (Route 132), near the intersection of Arch Bridge Road, that consists mainly of wetlands and woodlands.

In a press release, Bethlehem resident and land trust member Tom Keilty referred to the parcel as an "irreplaceable gem," noting that the property "contains a significant portion of the headwaters of the Pomperaug Watershed and includes the confluence of the Weekeepemee River and Wood Creek," which feed the town's aquifer and provide critical habitat to native brook trout.

The trust voted at its December meeting to pursue the purchase of the property, a move that has been endorsed by both the Northwest Conservation District in Torrington and the Pomperaug River Watershed Coalition.

The trust recently negotiated an option to purchase the property with the parcel's owner, John Brown, a former Bethlehem resident who currently resides in Montana.

According to Jack Nelson, the president of the trust's board of directors, Mr. Brown has agreed to sell the parcel to the trust for \$220,000, a price that is \$100,000 less than its recent listing price of \$320,000.

However, he cautioned that the trust only has until May 15 to raise the funds necessary for the purchase, or the property will go back on the market at its previous price.

"It probably has close to 1,000 feet of road frontage, so it would be very attractive to developers ... and some areas just shouldn't be developed," he commented.

To ensure that the land is preserved forever, Mr. Nelson said that the trust is soliciting donations from community members, as its modest coffers were drained last year when it contributed to the town's purchase of the 123-acre Swendsen Farm property.

"We had a fund that consisted of some small donations we had received from the community called Seeds for Growth," Mr. Nelson explained. "At one point, we probably had about \$10,000 in it which we contributed to the purchase of the Swendsen Farm last year."

Mr. Nelson said the trust still has some money available in various funds, but will have to rely on donations for "the lion's share" of the purchase.

If the purchase goes through, however, Mr. Nelson said it will signal the start of a new chapter in the trust's quarter-century long history.

Up until this point, the trust has acquired its holdings exclusively through donations. With 20 parcels totaling 235 acres throughout the town, the trust holds considerably less land than preservation groups in neighboring towns such as Roxbury, Woodbury and Washington, which hold thousands of acres each.

Mr. Nelson said that is about to change, however.

"We've felt for a long time that we should actively lead in the community in terms of protecting open space and wildlife habitat," he commented.

He said the trust was in the process of creating an overall plan for preservation in the town when the opportunity for acquiring this parcel presented itself.

"It fit the criteria we were developing for selecting open space purchases perfectly," he said.

"I think [this purchase] will put us on the map in terms of being an entity or a group that is going to take an active role in protecting the environment around here," he continued, adding, "[The trust] is hoping potential donors will think of us in those terms as a serious movement that is actively locally."

For more information on how to make a tax-deductible donation to the Bethlehem Land Trust, contact Tom Keilty at 203-266-7817.