

Quaker School in Wilton Plans to Buy Theater Site

By MARGARET FARLEY STEELE

NORWALK, Conn.

THE White Barn Theater on the border of Westport and Norwalk has a long and rich history. Under Lucille Lortel, who founded the theater in 1947, it was the setting for the premiere of many works, including plays by Edward Albee and Samuel Beckett. Ms. Lortel died in 1999 and the theater closed in 2002.

It never reopened, and in May the 18.4-acre property was bought by a housing developer. But now there is a plan to build a Quaker school on the site, a proposal that would turn the theater into a school performance center and preserve much of the land as open space. In late September, the developer agreed to sell the land to the Connecticut Friends School in Wilton if it could raise the \$6 million purchase price by next summer.

"This is our best avenue for a first-class campus and a place that will ultimately speak to the ethos of the school, echoing our commitment to theater, performing arts and the habitat," said Mark Dansereau, co-head of the Wilton school, which would move to the theater property.

The group would renovate the theater, which was a horse barn on Ms. Lortel's estate, and build a \$4 million school, Mr. Dansereau said.

School officials have made a



Thomas McDonald for The New York Times

ON SITE Kim Tsocanos and Mark Dansereau of the Connecticut Friends School are trying to raise money to buy the White Barn Theater land.

\$500,000 deposit on the property, and, in an agreement with the developer, they must get the money and zoning approvals by June 30.

"With the shrinking amount of open space in Fairfield County, this is a gem," said Kim Tsocanos, the other co-head of the school. "It is a long shot, but it is possible and worth the challenge."

State and local open space funds of about \$700,000 are a critical portion of the fund-raising effort. The Norwalk Land Trust has hired a

lawyer to see if it can redirect a \$450,000 grant awarded by the State Department of Environmental Protection to the purchase of the property, said Marny Smith, president of the trust.

Norwalk also may tap its roughly \$250,000 open space fund for the project, but Mayor Richard A. Moccia said on Oct. 11 that he could not ask the Common Council to release money without more information about financing and development. He speculated that more than half

the property would have to be deeded as open space to qualify for the funds.

The developer, 78 Cranbury L.L.C., bought the property for about \$4.8 million. The theater was previously owned by the Lucille Lortel Foundation, which inherited it after Ms. Lortel's death. Before the sale, the foundation reached an agreement with the Westport Country Playhouse, giving the playhouse \$2.5 million to preserve the White Barn legacy at the playhouse, which is just a few miles away. The playhouse then named its rehearsal hall the Lucille Lortel White Barn Center.

School officials will try to raise money from individuals and foundations. About \$1 million has been raised so far, including \$40,000 from Newman's Own.

Ms. Tsocanos said the developer was willing to sell off a lot on the Westport side of the property for about \$1 million, reducing the purchase price for the school by that amount. James Fieber, manager of 78 Cranbury L.L.C., would not confirm that agreement.

"It would be wonderful if the legacy could be preserved," said JoAnne Jackson, president of the Save Cranbury Association, a land preservation group from the theater's Cranbury neighborhood. "We hope this could be a win-win for the school, the neighborhood and the land trust."