



The Advocate
Saturday, April 21, 2007

White Barn deal saves 3rd of land

Easement ensures it cannot be developed

By Lisa Chamoff
Staff Writer

NORWALK — More than a third of the White Barn Theatre property in Norwalk will be permanently preserved under a conservation easement.

State and local officials, neighbors, a developer and a Quaker school planning to relocate there announced the agreement yesterday. The Connecticut Friends School is planning to purchase the 15-acre wooded property in the Cranbury neighborhood from the Fieber Group, a luxury home development company, by the end of June.

If the sale goes through and the city approves the school's plans to put a new, environmentally friendly building on the property, Norwalk would contribute \$250,000 from its open-space fund toward purchasing the easement for 5.5 acres on the western side of the property, near Newtown Avenue. A \$450,000 grant from the state Department of Environmental Protection also would go toward the sale.

The easement would guarantee that the public would have access to the land and that it cannot be developed, even if the school one day sells the property.

Barn

■ Continued from Page A3

Officials from the Quaker school, currently located on Route 106 in Wilton, also agreed not to build within 50 feet of a pond. The school will place its own easement on 2 acres.

State Rep. Lawrence Cafero, R-Norwalk, said he met with the parties for four hours at the Dolce Center a few weeks ago to address preservation.

"We are 100 percent together with this project as something that's great for Norwalk," Cafero said.

The DEP and the Norwalk Common Council must approve the easement.

The school submitted plans to the city in February. The project includes a 24,000-square-foot building to accommodate 125 students from preschool through eighth grade. The building would be green, with a geothermal heating system; a roof covered in soil and grass to provide insulation and ecological stormwater management; and a solar panel to provide electricity.

The former White Barn Theatre, founded in 1947 by the late arts patron Lucille Lortel and closed in 2002, would be used as an arts building, with school performances staged there.

A public hearing before the Norwalk Conservation Commission is scheduled for Tuesday. The school is expected to

open in 2009.

Joanne Jackson, president of the Save Cranbury Association, which worked with the Norwalk Land Trust for almost four years to prevent the property from overdevelopment, said she was happy with the outcome.

"I think it just goes to show what can happen when people keep the dialogue open," Jackson said.

The Fieber Group purchased the entire 17.5-acre White Barn property, which straddles the Norwalk-Westport border, last year from the Lucille Lortel Foundation for \$4.8 million. The foundation had said up to 23 homes could be built there.

In October, the school announced it had entered into an agreement with Fieber to purchase the property. The \$5 million deal includes the portion in Norwalk, while about 2 acres in Westport were recently sold for \$915,000, according to the Westport town clerk's office.

Fieber did not attend yesterday's press conference and did not return a call seeking comment.

Kim Tsocanos, co-head of the school, said Fieber will help finance the purchase of the property, and the school also is raising funds.

Tsocanos said that although officials hope the school will be based at the property for a long time, "it's true that people do need to think: 'What if?'"