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Editorial

Bravo to all behind theater, land deal

It's a familiar and unfortunate scenario, particularly in communities where real estate comes at a premium. An institution, like a working farm or a private school shuts its doors, and the developers come out.

Environmentalists and open-space advocates are seldom serious contenders in the competition for real estate because the prices in Southern Connecticut have approached the realm of fantasy. In the end, condos show a greater return on an investment than open space, which is a precious and dwindling commodity in our area.

So it was a tremendous relief recently to hear the announcement that the historic White Barn Theatre property, which has been on the market, would be preserved through the indefatigable efforts of many people after five years of hand-wringing.

The 15.5-acre site was purchased for \$6.1 million by the Connecticut Friends School, which currently holds classes for 125 students at the Friends Meeting House in Wilton.

Founded more than 60 years ago by arts patron and producer, Lucille Lortel, the theater has an illustrious past, having staged plays by such renowned authors as Edward Albee, Terrence McNally and Tennessee Williams. Ms. Lortel died in 1999 and three years later, the theater was closed.

The Issue:

White Barn sale is a victory for culture, history and open space.

Shortly afterward, the trustees of the Lortel Foundation attempted to sell the tract, on the border of Norwalk and Westport, to a developer who planned to build houses. At that point, residents and preservationists took up the cause against overdevelopment, relying on the efforts of the Save Cranbury neighborhood association and the Norwalk Land Trust.

Two years ago, the Lortel Foundation sold the property for \$4.8 million to the Feiber Group in New Canaan, which sold two acres in Westport last year.

The recent deal with the Friends School is the best possible outcome for everyone. Under the agreement, there will be a conservation easement of 5.2 acres — including a brook and a pond — that will be preserved for open space the public can use. In addition, the historic building that housed the theater will be renovated, and the Friends plan to build an ecologically sensitive school.

The conservation easement, which will be maintained by the city and the land trust, was made possible by a \$450,000 state grant and \$250,000 contributed by Nor-

walk's open space fund.

Commenting on this fortunate convergence of efforts to save the property, Marny Smith, president of the Norwalk Land Trust, said, "If there hadn't been so many people involved and so many politicians hoping for it and working on it, it may have never happened."

If anyone thinks this is just a victory for Norwalk, however, they should delve into Fairfield County's history. Our part of Connecticut has a long, rich and very important theater tradition. The Westport Country Playhouse, probably the best known, is one of many theaters from our area that from the mid-20th century on served not as mere workshops for New York, but important places of their own, where major writers, actors and other artists collaborated on inventive work.

Live theater is a very tough game, especially in these times of tight budgets, bottom-line thinking and YouTube sensibilities. Echoes of the glory days remain — Steve Karp's Stamford Theatre Works, for one, is one of the best small theaters in the country — but it's crucial that we don't lose ties to this very important part of our past.

And that's on top of the urgent need for open space.

This purchase by the Connecticut Friends School was the perfect outcome and well worth the wait.