

DARROW POND SUBCOMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING
MAY 22, 2023

Present: Todd Donovan, Chairman
Charles Mebus
Richard Williams
Bruce Dassinger

Also Present: Jerry Lokken, Director of Parks and Recreation
Phil Barlow, Landscape Architect

Chairman Donovan called the Public Hearing to order at 7 p.m.

Mr. Lokken reported the Darrow Pond property is on the north end of town. He introduced Todd Donovan, Chairman of the Darrow Pond Subcommittee. Mr. Donovan has been a commissioner of the Parks and Recreation Commission since 2019 and was raised in East Lyme. The Darrow Pond Subcommittee was created to gather information from the public to redevelop the property. His goal is to preserve and enhance the property. The subcommittee brought its results to the Parks and Recreation Commission. It first met virtual due to COVID. Projects and ideas were received. The subcommittee was created and tried to meet every month. For the past five or six months we have been meeting once a month. We have done much preparation. In January 2021 we created an on-line survey. Six hundred individuals shared their opinions for the property. Sixty-eight percent of respondents pay taxes in East Lyme. All information we gathered from the 600+ participants were shared with the subcommittee and Landscape Architect. Mr. Putnam asked the town that control of Darrow Pond be given to the Parks and Recreation Department. In January 2022 the Parks and Recreation Commission was granted ARP funds and in June 2022 a Master Plan RFP was sent to five architects. FHI Studios was awarded the contract. On October 2022 a vote was taken that the Parks and Recreation Department have control of Darrow Pond. In April 2023 the subcommittee met and approved the final design. It has been almost three years and Mr. Donovan as Chairman felt the subcommittee did a thorough job.

Mr. Barlow discussed how decisions were made on the Master Plan. FHI Studios has offices in Hartford and New York. They designed the Miracle League Field. He had a Site Walk with a Biologist from DEEP and showed him the property. It is a great property surrounded by open space and wildlife. It has a lot of great features, wetlands and existing trails. It has a cleared area. The site has become popular. It was woodland, farm land, a proposed golf course and housing. Some of the trails have begun to erode. He showed wetlands and farm land soil. The DEEP biologist noted needlegrass and the New England cottontail on the property. The Goodwin Trail runs through the property. Many studies and work have been done on this property. The Connecticut DEEP Biologist had no concerns. The plan includes accessible trails, a natural playscape, mountain biking, hiking, disc golf, and a jump line for mountain biking. It will have a parking lot for thirty cars and adjacent to the parking lot there will be a playground area. He suggested a pollinator garden.

Richard Williams has a background in science and feels Darrow Pond is a great property and he wishes to see it used as an educational resource.

Kris Lambert, President of Oswegatchie Hills reported they have an easement on 200 acres of that property. Mr. Lokken stated most activities inside the area are not covered by the easement.

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Chuck Mebus has lived in East Lyme for over thirty years and has a background in science. He has worked for Pfizer and lives in Darrow Ridge.

Bruce Dassinger is a bird watcher. The Darrow Pond area was originally cut down, because it was going to be developed. Two birds that have decreased in numbers are the brown thrasher and whippoorwills are in Darrow Pond. He does not want anything done that will disturb the birds. There has been a decrease in cottontail rabbits that are also in the area.

Paul Parulis is a Friends of Oswegatchie Hills member and has walked Darrow Pond and asked if the pvc's will be removed? Mr. Lokken informed him Parks and Recreation has the management of 100 acres. It is town property and we should convince the town to remove hazards which conforms with the easement that is in place. The Friends of Oswegatchie Hills are concerned about what is left there in violation of the easement. At one of the previous meetings a Dog Park was suggested. Mr. Barlow reported that the Subcommittee members felt there are better places for a Dog Park.

A resident stated the pond is used to launch boats. He asked who owns the pond? Mr. Lokken informed him the pond is co-owned by the town. It's also owned by property owners surrounding the pond. The deeds do not allow public access for kayaks or boaters on Darrow Pond.

Ashley Walsh stated the road to access this area is very narrow. Some parts of the road you cannot pull over.

Greg Decker reported electric bikes are becoming more common. He asked that they not be allowed on trails.

Don Danila who is on the Board of the Friends of Oswegatchie Hills and a member of the Commission for the Conservation of Natural Resources stated an issue in the Hills dogs are required to be leashed. He hoped that issue is addressed. Dog owners should also clean up after their dogs. Mr. Barlow felt that is a tougher issue to policy and maintain. He suggested prohibiting dogs during nesting season.

Mr. Danila suggested portapotties. Mr. Barlow stated the Subcommittee considered permanent restrooms, but they are costly and need to be regularly cleaned. He agreed portapotties are needed.

Mr. Danila stated the pond will freeze. You might want to have skaters.

A resident proposes trails through the wetlands. Mr. Barlow showed the wetland area.

Mr. Danila stated there is a camping area on the Goodwin Trail.

Lisa Wahle reported she has had ten years of experience working on this property. There are a lot of pieces in a small area. She is happy to see New England cottontail rabbits. They are shy and rare. They have existed on this site. These rabbits forage in grasses. She was concerned about a bike jump nearby. Mr. Donovan stated these were ideas from the public. We have discussed them at length. The subcommittee will decide how to prioritize items. Mr. Barlow felt each item will take more time.

Ms. Dorrity complimented the subcommittee on their work. She felt there are invasives on this property and asked has anything been done to eliminate them? Mr. Barlow was unable to answer her.

Mr. Gordi reported the trail on Upper Pattagansett crosses through his property.

Mr. Lokken thanked everyone for their input. He added we will take all the information given into account and present it to the Parks and Recreation Commission and Board of Selectman.

The Public Hearing adjourned at 8 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Frances Gheri, Recording Secretary