

Salem looks to make housing affordable one farm at time



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Salem — One prominent local conservationist's crisis of conscience has led to a merger of environmental and housing interests on almost 200 acres of farmland and forests along Route 85.

David Bingham, a retired OB-GYN from one of the town's most lauded families, purchased 131 acres on Hartford Road and 66 acres accessible at the top of Cackle Hill Road for \$800,000 in a transaction recorded at Town Hall earlier this month.

Bingham said he purchased the property with his wife, Annie, to ensure the largely forested swath doesn't get turned into a subdivision of McMansions. Instead, he is hopeful the existing farmhouse on the property can be used to provide farm workers with a place to live at an affordable cost.

His plan is to sell a 16-acre chunk of the property – including the farmhouse and outbuildings – to the Southeastern Connecticut Community Land Trust to be maintained as affordable housing in perpetuity. He will need to secure funding from other local, state and federal partners to preserve the rest of the land and pay off the the loan.

Bingham, who founded the Salem Land Trust in 1996, estimated in an interview this spring that he's had a hand in preserving thousands of acres of open space in his lifetime. He said he's come to realize one of his biggest sources of pride is actually a problem.

"When we create every one of our preserves, every house that is adjacent to it or nearby has gone up in value," he said. "And that makes it less affordable. So I feel some guilt that I never had even imagined."

Conversations on conservation need to be expanded, according to the environmentalist-turned-housing-advocate.

"We talk a lot about biodiversity, but I'm talking about human diversity," he said.

The call for affordable housing has grown louder in the state as advocates rally for laws to promote more types of housing in more places. Currently, many of the lowest earners are segregated in cities. The state's affordable housing statute includes provisions to motivate towns to make sure at least 10% of their housing units are affordable, but only 31 municipalities in the state meet that threshold. In New London County, that list consists of Groton, New London and Norwich.

"The fact is that the people that have lower incomes are more likely to be Black or brown, and these people are being more and more excluded from our town and it's not what I want for my grandchildren to inherit," Bingham said.

He sees the partnership as a way to start reversing the loss of affordable housing and farmland in Salem, ultimately avoiding the need for large apartment complexes to meet housing goals.

The 1,408-square-foot, 4-bedroom farmhouse on the Hartford Road property was built in 1909 and has been in the Hominick family for generations. The property abuts a portion of the Salem Land Trust's Zemko Sawmill Preserve, which Bingham said could provide the opportunity for an extension of the trail system.

Bingham and Joanne Sheehan of the Southeastern Connecticut Community Land Trust are working with local farmer Hannah Tripp on the possible expansion of her operations. Tripp runs Provider Farm from a Woodbridge Road property owned by the Bingham family.

Tripp in a statement said the farm provides the opportunity to add seven acres to the 15 acres of cropland and 11 acres of pasture that she leases. She said the extra land could potentially allow her to offer perennial crops and to invest in more permanent infrastructure, like covered tunnels that would make it possible to produce more crops in the colder months.

“We are hopeful this collaboration could serve as an inspiring model for farm land access and affordability in Connecticut moving forward,” Tripp said.

It’s a partnership between one traditional type of land trust focused on preserving open space in perpetuity and a less established type of land trust focused on preserving affordable housing in perpetuity.

Organized over several years before it was recognized as tax exempt in 2020, the community land trust’s portfolio so far includes a two-family house on Prest Street in New London.

The model for the house on Prest Street goes like this: The community land trust owns the land, while a 99-year, renewable ground lease allows the owner of the house to live there, make improvements, build equity and turn a limited profit when it comes time to sell the house. According to the lease, the homeowner gets 25% of the appreciation while the community land trust uses its share to keep the price down for the next buyer.

It’s a model with roots in farming. The concept was first used in the late 1960s in Albany, Georgia, to provide housing and livelihood for Black sharecroppers who had lost their homes and jobs for registering to vote.

Sheehan said her group is preparing the paperwork for a bridge loan through the Southeastern Connecticut Fund for Land Equity to purchase the 16-acre share of the property and hopefully cover some of the renovations. The \$150,000 purchase price is based on the appraised value of the buildings, according to Sheehan.

The innovative convergence of interests revolving around the environment, housing and food production is about “preserving something that could have been lost really easily,” according to Sheehan: a sustainable place to live and work locally.

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