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A good deal

Brewster voters have opportunity to invest in town's future

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It does not seem like that long ago that paying \$1.8 million for just over 80 acres would have seemed ridiculous. For modern land values on the Cape, however, Brewster's opportunity to purchase two sizable tracts of land for conservation sounds like a very good deal indeed.

The real financial beauty behind the proposal to buy this land is that Brewster taxpayers can accomplish this conservation feat without raising taxes by a penny. Brewster Town Administrator Charles Sumner claims that, pending approval at the Oct. 29 town meeting, the purchase can be made through the use of grants, town water fees, and funds from the Community Preservation Act.

The only real question would be why the folks in Brewster would not make this purchase.

The property includes two separate parcels of 26.5 acres and 55.2 acres. Both are owned by the same person and both have been subdivided, with a combined total of 29 potential lots.

The smaller plot of land lies off Freemans Way, and happens to be on the edges of Brewster's public drinking well fields. Throw in the fact that the total assessed value of the land is \$1.94 million, and it quickly becomes apparent just how good a deal this really is for the people of Brewster.

Brewster has a long track record in terms of its willingness to support conservation. Taxpayers have willingly committed funds to protect land on numerous occasions. Brewster conservation advocates have also worked closely with private land owners to introduce deed restrictions. In 1999, two families in town agreed to place perpetual conservation restrictions on nearly 85 acres. In return, the town granted each family an 85 percent reduction in property taxes.

Brewster is certainly not alone in its efforts; many Cape communities have made similar efforts to preserve open space. In recent years, however, there have been an increasing number of voices suggesting that perhaps it is time to stop buying land; that moving more and more undeveloped parcels over into the conservation column will mean diminished long-term revenues in terms of property tax revenue. Others have argued that the cost of land has risen to the point that it no longer represents a worthwhile investment, especially during tight fiscal times.

Those who would have us turn our backs on conservation are actually the ones lacking long-term vision. The fact is that once land is developed, it is very seldom reclaimed as open space. If our green spaces are allowed to disappear, they will almost certainly disappear forever.

There is perhaps an even stronger argument beyond the aesthetic and environmental value of conservation; staying green can make good long-term financial sense as well. Properties that abut undeveloped land tend to be worth more than those surrounded by other structures. Then there are the ancillary costs associated with development.

Mark Robinson, executive director of the Compact of Cape Cod Conservation Trusts, recently noted that Brewster's diligent conservation ethic has reduced the need for costly sewer and septic treatment facilities. There's little question that those costs would add up to substantial annual expenditures.

When Brewster voters head to town meeting on Oct. 29, they will have an opportunity to save a lot of both types of green for future generations. Voting in favor of this purchase sends the message that preservation makes sense, both for today and tomorrow.