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Chilmark land swap is a win, win, win

Land Bank deal with Hillmans means trail, preservation, housing

By Steve Myrick - September 27, 2007

A three-way land swap agreement completed Tuesday could result in four new affordable home lots, new conservation land and trails in Chilmark, and consolidate a private landowner's property holdings.

"This is one of those terrific negotiations where everyone wins," said Selectman Frank Fenner, who represented the town during three years of negotiation with the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank, and the Hillman family. "It's been a long time, with ups and downs. We thought we were very close a number of times. I'm really happy, I couldn't be happier."

The complex deal involves land off Middle Road, and land bordering South Road.

The Hillman family gave up land it owns on South Road. Part of that land, which is bisected by Ridge Hill Road, will be used to create four one-acre, perpetually affordable housing lots.

The lots would be leased by the town to four qualified applicants. Initially, the new homeowners may be chosen from the eligible field of applicants by the Hillman family.

"It sure looks exciting to me," said Zee Gamson, a founding member of the Chilmark Housing Committee. "For sure, it's a good beginning. Chilmark is way behind in affordable housing compared to the other towns. It hasn't been for lack of trying, it's just that the

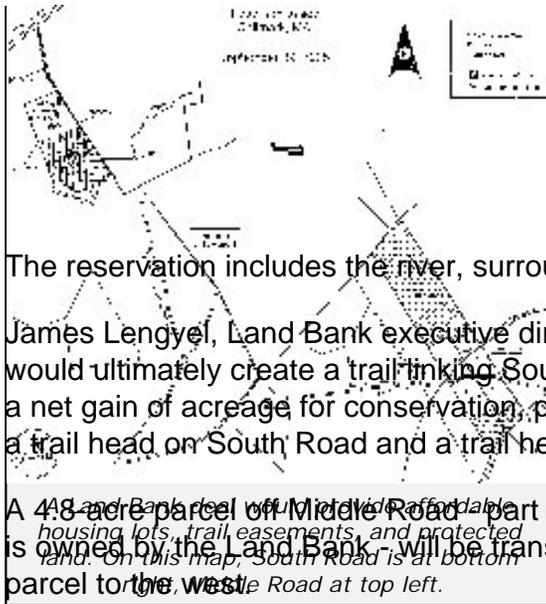
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land values are so high here. It looks like a triple win."

The remainder of the South Road parcel will be owned by the Land Bank, nearly tripling its current acreage in the area. Trail easements that will create better access to the Tiasquam River Reservation are also part of the deal.

The reservation includes the river, surrounding wetlands, and a ridge rising 175 above sea level.

James Lengyel, Land Bank executive director, described the agreement as a great accomplishment that would ultimately create a trail linking South Road and North Road and provide additional benefits. "There will be a net gain of acreage for conservation, plus a net gain for affordable housing," he said. "And the end result will be a trail head on South Road and a trail head on North Road."

A 48-acre parcel of Middle Road, part of which is now owned by The Town of Chilmark, and part of which is owned by the Land Bank - will be transferred to the Hillman family. The family currently owns an abutting parcel to the west.

Public passage over the Hillman property will be preserved by a trail easement. A trail will be moved from the middle to the edge of the family's land.

Like all Land Bank transactions, the protracted negotiations were conducted privately, which left many Chilmark residents wondering about how the land would be utilized. "It's been very difficult not to be able to tell them, because of the sensitivity of the negotiations," said Mr. Fenner.

The land swap still needs the approval of Chilmark voters at town meeting, the planning board, and an act of the state legislature, but local officials are confident those approvals will proceed smoothly.

