

Council votes to open negotiations for sale of Woodlands Trails

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A preliminary step in appraising the land and opening the bidding process, the Plaquemines Parish Council voted to approve a resolution "supporting the negotiations for the sale" of the Woodlands Conservancy Trail and Park to the non-profit that currently manages the 609 acres of parish-owned land.

District 2 Councilman Beau Black, who authored

the ordinance, emphasized it was "nonbinding," and just a step to enter negotiations.

The Woodlands Conservancy has maintained, enhanced, and rehabilitated the site since 2001, though their most recent Cooperative Endeavor Agreement (CEA) with the parish expired. An increasingly rare habitat of bottom-land hardwood forest, it has also been utilized for research by scientists

from across the country.

Now, "Woodlands has come up with a revenue source that may provide them with the capital to purchase the property," Black said.

The resolution passed with five affirmative votes and two abstentions. Councilmembers Kirk Lepine and Charlie Burt abstained. Councilmembers Jeff Edgecombe and Nicole

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Smith Williams were absent.

Last summer, the land generated debate when Wally Pontiff proposed building "Champion's Park," a 20-diamond youth travel team baseball facility on about 250 acres of the Conservancy. His proposal detailed the potentially large economic impact to the parish.

However there has been little forward movement on that proposal, and another nearby property – owned by the Batt family – came onto the market and caught Pontiff's eye.

Last week Pontiff said nothing has been finalized at this point. He said there has been a setback in losing one of his investors, sending him "back to the drawing board" somewhat in terms of investors. But he said is still very committed to and enthusiastic about building the world-class baseball complex in Plaquemines Parish.

At this point, Pontiff

said he is most interested in the Batt property along Woodland Highway near F. Edward Hebert Blvd., and "hopefully that will work out." However he said he hasn't ruled out pursuing other locations. But Pontiff said that he wants the location a good fit for the parish, and supported by residents.

One factor, in terms of any development that involves destroying wetlands, or forested wetlands, is the legally required cost to mitigate, which can significantly increase the price tag of the investment.

Woodlands Conservancy Executive Director Katie Brasted said a wetlands delineation (which must be approved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) has not been done on the entire Woodlands Conservancy property. However just building the existing trails required some mitigation, she said, and ultimately changed the location of where the trails were built.

Brasted confirmed after the meeting she had "three viable funding streams"



The Woodlands Conservancy regularly hosts guided walks on the some of the approximately seven miles of hiking trails through bottomland hardwood forest.

making it possible for the nonprofit to buy the land from the parish. No dollar amounts were discussed.

Asked about the legalities of the process, parish attorney Shane Landry said it would first have

to be determined whether it was "surplus property." Then it would go through the public bid process.

District 1 Councilman John Barthelemy asked why a long term lease was not an option.

"A lease would not allow us to seek funds to develop amenities, such as an interpretive center," Brasted responded. She said investors are wary if the terms of the lease could be subject to sudden changes, and it would make it more difficult to ask for donations and

apply for grants. Brasted mentioned the World War II ammunition magazines as another potential asset to draw more visitors.

Barthelemy also questioned what would happen if the Conservancy decided to sell it, and a discussion took place regarding whether a conservation easement should be part of the negotiation, as well as ensuring it be available for public use.

District 5 Councilman Benny Rousselle, who formerly served on the Conservancy's board,

spoke in support of a sale, calling it an "opportunity to protect this space." He also noted its value as a migratory bird sanctuary, and added that a long list of corporations had already recognized the value of its conservation through their monetary support.

Rev. Tyrone Edwards lauded the Conservancy's educational benefits for the children of the parish.

Brasted called it a "win – win" with "maximum benefit to the parish and the Conservancy."