

St. Agnes neighbors look for 'win-win'

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Both the Diocese of Bridgeport and neighbors of St. Agnes Church said they want to find a "win-win" solution for plans to sell 25 acres of woods that surround the church on Stanwich Road. But should negotiations fail and Catholic officials follow through on plans to sell to a developer, some neighbors said they will prepare to do battle. "We started out with the idea and we maintain the idea that we want to go for the win-win," said Tek Nickerson, one of the organizers of last night's Town Hall meeting among about 50 neighbors. "If we cannot find the win-win, we are certainly prepared to hire the meanest, biggest attorney and the consultant to tie them up." The diocese wants to sell the eastern Greenwich property for \$15 million to cover part of the \$21 million settlement reached with victims of sexual abuse announced last October. The rest is expected to come through insurance payments. The initial plans were to sell to a developer who would construct up to 10 homes at the property at 247 Stanwich Road. Residents, many of whom are worried about the impact new homes would have on their well water systems, would rather see more of the land set aside for open space. Before any construction could begin, the diocese and the developer must go through a public hearing process in which neighborhood opposition could influence the outcome. The diocese last week offered to delay signing any sales contract for 30 days so that neighbors could explore the possibility of purchasing the property themselves. This wouldn't be the first time Greenwich residents have considered raising enough money to buy private property for use as open space. In 2001, a partnership of government and private groups bought Treetops, the 110-acre former estate of torch singer Libby Holman. But that effort took several years and netted \$5 million in private donations during 100 days of fund-raising. State and local governments also chipped in to cover the rest of the \$11.5 million price tag. Neighbors and town officials said that the effort to buy the Stanwich Road property would be more difficult because the state and town government would unlikely contribute any money for the purchase. "The economics are not the same," said Denise Savageau, the town's Conservation Director. The Treetops property was near the Stamford border, convincing officials there to participate in the purchase. Treetops also was part of a watershed area, making it valuable to officials who want to protect the public drinking water supply, Savageau said. St. Agnes Church neighbors decided at last night's meeting to organize into five committees. One would work with Stanwich School on plans to purchase the property for its campus. The private coeducational school currently leases space nearby. Neighbors may be willing to help the school raise some of the money needed to purchase the property in return for officials promising to limit the number of buildings and leave as much of the land undeveloped as possible. "The Stanwich School has been a good neighbor," said Andy Healy, one of last night's organizers. A second committee would organize St. Agnes Church parishioners so as to bring their concerns to the bishop. The other three committees would be charged with raising money, working with government groups and doing public relations work. This isn't the first time the diocese is selling off part of what once was known as Wildwood Farm, a 43-acre parcel featured in the book, "The Great Estates, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1880-1930." In 1992, the diocese sold 11.5 acres to Greenwich Reform Synagogue for \$2.5 million. The diocese paid \$225,000 for the property in 1963, buying it from the sons of Alexander and Clara Dommerich shortly after the couple's death, according to land records. Some neighbors at the meeting said that residents must recognize the fact that the homes may eventually be built. "There's a lot of money to be made here," said Rick Kral, a Representative Town Meeting delegate representing District 8/Cos Cob. "Fifteen million is not a ridiculous number for a developer to go out and buy this property. They know it. They've done the research."