

Thursday, June 18, 2009

VERMONT STANDARD—WOODSTOCK VERMONT

Editorial

The King Farm

Most of us think of the King Farm in West Woodstock as a beautifully conserved corner of the world that houses some valuable land use functions. Most recently it has become the site of some flourishing community gardens.

Some changes in the stewardship of The King Farm have appeared on the horizon, but don't appear to be a major cause for concern.

Francisca King Thomas left the 154-acre property overlooking West Woodstock to the Vermont Land Trust 23 years ago. She specified in her will that the property be dedicated to forestry, agriculture, conservation and education. Since that time the Land Trust has leased portions of the land to farmers and carefully managed the forest. The building became the headquarters of the Two Rivers-Ottawa-Quechee Regional Planning Commission, (which oversees the interests of 30 towns) the land trust and a youth conservation corps.

As the VLT's scope widened, it relocated its headquarters to Montpelier. Over the years, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the Woodstock property from 45 miles distant. Also the property—listed on the National Register for Historic Sites as an outstanding example of a 19th-century Vermont hill farm—now requires some costly maintenance.

As a solution, the VLT started exploring the conveyance of the King Farm property to the adjoining Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historic Park. The two entities aren't exactly strangers. The national park uses a portion of the King Farm land to support youth service programs. And the trail systems on the two parcels have been tied together for many years.

The land trust people want to pursue this transaction. But they want to make sure that the local people are okay with it. They have scheduled an open house at the King Farm on Tuesday, June 30 from 4-6:30 pm. This will be followed by a "community conversation" at the town hall at 7 pm. Locals will be asked to attend and weigh in with any suggestions or concerns they might have with the pending transfer.

It's not a done deal. It literally takes an act of Congress to allow a national park to expand. Money must be appropriated to purchase the adjacent property.

But Darby Bradley of the VLT believes this transaction is the best possible way to keep this jewel polished in a manner that would please Mrs. Thomas. And national park superintendent Rolf Diamant told us, "This could be a very positive outcome for the community." Both men see it as a natural extension of the park's role in preserving history and espousing conservation.

But does the community feel the same way? We tried to think of negatives associated with this proposed deal and couldn't really come up with any. But that doesn't mean some shrewd public watchdog might recognize some very legitimate concerns about this transfer.

That's the purpose of the public meeting, to learn about the plan and possibly troubleshoot it. We hope the Sustainable Woodstock people, currently enmeshed in several projects affecting the town's future, become heavily involved in this process.

We believe it's a good plan, a smart use of tax dollars and something that will solidify Woodstock's reputation as a special place that has been spared the ravages of unfettered development.

And we applaud the people at the land trust and national park for keeping this process transparent and public-oriented. We hope that a lot of local people will attend the open house and the community conversation. **KMF**