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JAMAICA PLAIN

## College: Conserving Hellenic Hill in Jamaica Plain an option

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 28, 2011 12:19 AM

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(George Rizer/Globe file/2006)

Hellenic Hill, in the distance overlooking Jamaica Pond.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

With the future of Hellenic Hill in limbo for the fourth time in two decades, residents met Wednesday evening to brainstorm for a way to permanently preserve the large undeveloped, heavily forested Jamaica Plain space.

A spokesman for Hellenic College, which owns the property, told the packed crowd at the First Church that while the school is not “beating the bushes looking for buyers,” its 50-member trustee board has been considering “a few” offers. He said he was not at liberty to discuss those offers further at this time.

“The land is for sale in the sense that if anyone approaches the school with an offer, they can do that,” said spokesman John Papson, who is a longtime JP resident. “The college is willing to discuss and listen to any offer.”

“Conservation is an option being considered,” he added. School officials are “waiting and interested to hear what the conservation groups have in mind.”

Julie Crockford, head of the Emerald Necklace Conservancy, said the organization has met with the college once about finding a way to conserve the school’s property on Hellenic Hill and has another meeting scheduled with campus officials.

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She feels that maintaining the land overlooking Jamaica Pond in its undeveloped state will likely require significant fund-raising, in order to purchase the property from Hellenic College.

Hellenic Hill's current city zoning as a "conservation protection subdistrict" forbids certain development; but it allows for other development types, both on a conditional and as-of-right basis. Due to overlapping rules based on the size of development in the subdistrict, nearly any proposal for Hellenic Hill would be subject to a city review and approval process.

(see \* below for more zoning-related details)

The school's spokesman said that a real estate listing posted in January for 12.5 acres along Prince Street, with an \$18-million asking price, "did not officially represent the school."

"It was unfortunate. It shouldn't have been posted," Papson said of the listing in an interview after the community forum, adding that the idea of selling college property on Hellenic Hill is in the early stages. "No price has been established."

During the forum, he also explained: "While the initial indication was 12 acres, there have obviously been some indicators of interest more than 12 acres, ... [but, 12 acres] is more or less what we're talking about."

He said the college's property comprises around 52 acres, about two-thirds of which, including all of the land currently considered for sale, is in Boston. The rest extends into Brookline.

The spokesman said the scope of what the college may sell, when that could happen and the price the school would ask for are matters the trustee board would need to discuss and decide on. He said he was not aware of whether the board had decided on any timeline, acreage, or property value figures, nor was he aware of whether the trustees would only consider the highest offer it receives.

Papson said the college will not develop the land, but did not rule out the possibility that it could be sold to someone who intends to develop there. He also said selling some of the school's Hellenic Hill property "would help [the school financially], but it's not a total and absolute necessity."

When urged for more details by audience members, Papson said he would relay questions – including that the college provide an estimated acreage and asking price for the land, release recent trustee meeting minutes and disclose the school's financial standing – to the trustees.

"At this stage, at this point, we don't have anything more to say, because there isn't anything more to say," he said.

The crowd was overwhelmingly, if not entirely, there to show support for preserving Hellenic Hill, including residents who took the microphone declaring the woodlands a "sacred space" and "a miracle that we have it."

"This is not a matter of compromise," declared one JP man. "This is a matter of no development under any circumstances."

At-large City Councilor Felix Arroyo called the effort "a citywide fight," while At-large Councilor Ayanna Pressley and District 6 Councilor Matt O'Malley pledged to do everything in their power to keep the land undeveloped.

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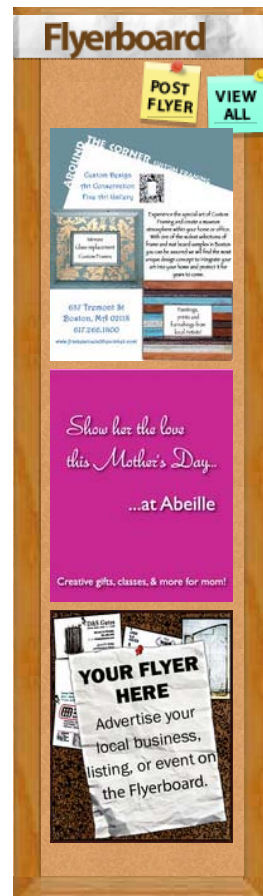


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Another resident said that, if needed, the group should be willing to partake in non-violent, "civil disobedience" to protect the land from development.

The crowd discussed next steps needed in the effort to permanently preserve Hellenic Hill, including: organizing a group, committee or task force-like structure to lead the effort; form a list of individuals and entities the group should communicate and otherwise display a show of support for their cause to; and – the most-discussed measure – continue [petitioning online](#) and moving toward the idea of pooling all available state, city, private organization and community funds in order to make an offer to purchase the property from the college.

The evening began with a reading of [two response letters](#) from prominent leaders of the religion Hellenic College was founded and remains centered upon – Greek Orthodox Christianity.

One letter of support for preserving the Hellenic Hill was addressed from the worldwide head of the Greek Orthodox Christian Church, who lives in Istanbul, Turkey. The second letter, acknowledging the community members' concerns over the property, came from the church's Archbishop of America, Demetrios, who is also the college's trustee board chair.

To see the letter from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, [click here](#). To see the letter from the archbishop and trustee board chair, [click here](#). To see the letter the religious leaders were responding to, [click here](#).

**\*Footnote:**

The city's definition of the subdistrict classification, along with a comprehensive list of allowed, conditional and forbidden uses, is [explained in detail here](#) by the redevelopment authority.

Also, [according to the city](#), constructing any structure with a gross floor area of 50,000 square feet or more would be subject to a "large project" city review approval process, and because of its conservation protection subdistrict status, the city would require review and approval through a "small project" process for any development that adds 2,500 or more square feet of gross floor area; or moves 100 or more cubic yards of earth; or increases the impervious surface of the site by 400 or more square feet; or is located on a lot containing less than one acre of land.

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