

Town And Developer Strike Deal

Move will preserve Shinnecock parcel

By Ambrose Clancy

The Town of Southampton has come to terms with a Nassau County developer to purchase 4.8 acres in the Shinnecock Hills for preservation, an area considered sacred by the Shinnecock Indian Nation.

Supervisor Patrick Heaney announced the news at the Town Board meeting Tuesday evening but refused to disclose any details of the agreement, including the purchase price, until after a public hearing is held on the matter. That hearing is scheduled to take place at Town Hall on September 26, Mr. Heaney said.

The supervisor did say Community Preservation Fund money would be used to buy the land, which is divided into two lots rising off Montauk Highway and Peconic Road to a steep hill. The property descends to the waterfront, providing long views of Shinnecock Bay.

In June, owner/developer Robert Romeo of Merrick said his asking price for the lots was \$5.8 million.

After Tuesday's announcement, Mr. Romeo also refused to discuss the terms of the pending sale. Asked if a solid agreement was in place, Mr. Romeo said it was just a matter of finalizing minor details.

Several members of the Shinnecock Nation expressed gratitude Tuesday that the land will be preserved, a move they had been pursuing for five years. During the meeting, Rebecca Genia of the Inter-Tribal Historic Preservation Task Force, publicly thanked Mr. Romeo for "being such a gentleman and being so honorable" in his dealings with the tribe.

"We've been here for five years trying with all our might to express what this land means to us because our ancestors are buried in the land," she said. "We respectfully beg you to preserve as much as you can."

Mr. Heaney, who had a series of meetings with representatives of the Shinnecock Nation regarding the fate of the land, said their efforts made an impression on him.

"I understand passion when I see it," he said. "This property is rich and steeped in Shinnecock culture."

The supervisor said the driving force behind the town's campaign



Activist Hope Sandrow on the Shinnecock Hills property that Southampton Town is slated to purchase and preserve.

AMBROSE CLANCY

to preserve the property has been the possibility it was once used by the tribe as a sacred burial ground, though an archaeological study done four years ago was unable to prove it.

"We don't want another Shelter Island on our hands," he said, referring to a Native American burial site uncovered in October 2003 during an excavation for a horse barn on Shelter Island. Last year, another ancient cemetery was discovered at Indian Island Park in Riverhead when a bluff collapsed.

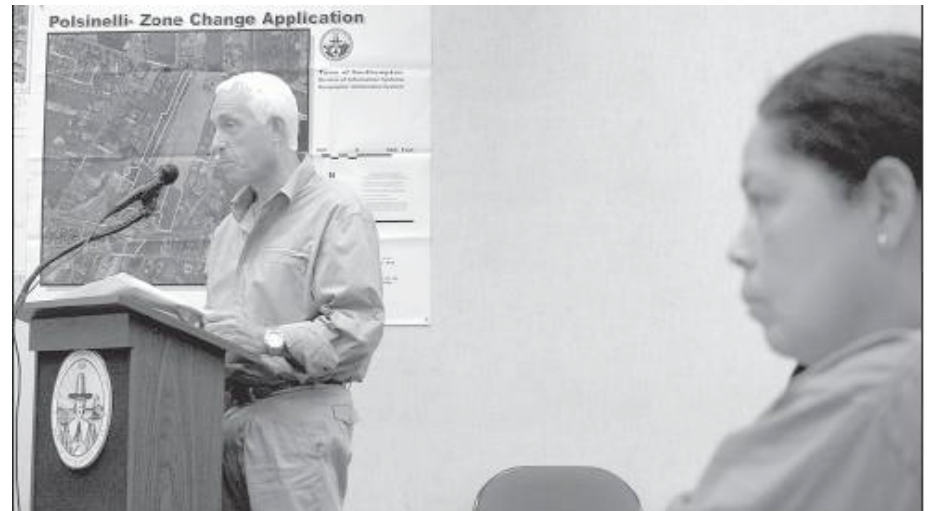
In 2001, Mr. Romeo met with representatives of the Shinnecock Nation and, with the tribe's cooperation, hired Dr. David Bernstein, director of the Institute for Long Island Archaeology, to do a survey of the site. After conducting a two-month dig there, Dr. Bernstein concluded that "no evidence [of] human burials or other subsurface features was encountered..."

Still, Dr. Bernstein recommended an archaeologist be present at any future excavation of the site and, if any human remains were found,

that work be stopped immediately for reevaluation—a condition Mr. Romeo agreed to.

In the future, Mr. Heaney said, the town will change its policies regarding similar situations. "We will require the town to undertake the [archaeological] study and the developer pay for it," he said. "If we're in control, the perception is the study is in the town's interest rather than the applicant's interest."

Mr. Romeo owns two additional lots adjacent to the property in



Property owner Robert Romeo addresses the Southampton Town Board at its meeting Tuesday while Shinnecock Rebecca Genia looks on.

NICHOLAS MOREHEAD

question and facing the Montauk Highway, which he plans to develop, he said. The Shinnecocks and other activists have been pushing to have the these lots—totaling about 9 acres—preserved as well.

The Suffolk County Legislature recently adopted a resolution sponsored by Legislator Jay Schneiderman to begin taking "planning steps" to appraise the Romeo property and negotiate the purchase of it.

One of the remaining Romeo parcels, facing the Montauk Highway, contains a Swedish hunting lodge believed to have been imported and reassembled at the site in the 1920s. Several people who attended Tuesday's meeting called for preservation of the structure, dubbed "the Parrish lodge" for its original owner, Samuel L. Parrish.

Gall Levin, a professor of art history at The City University of New York, wrote a letter to the board saying

"the lodge is a marvelous example of Swedish vernacular architecture. I know of no other such examples in New York State."

Hope Sandrow, an artist who lives near the property, is one of those advocating preservation of the lodge. Ms. Sandrow told the board vandals and thieves have accessed the home and said she worried if no security was put in place there wouldn't be much left to preserve.

"The house was there yesterday, it's there today and it will be there tomorrow," Mr. Heaney. "We have time to lovingly restore it."

The supervisor then called on the county to get involved in the preservation effort.

After the meeting, Mr. Romeo said if he is unable to sell the lot he will remove timber, carvings, tiles, ceramics and other features from the lodge and incorporate them into a house he plans to build.