

## Commentary - What's this about more playing fields?

The facts are pretty clear. First, the Amherst Recreation Department currently uses the fields known as Cemetery Fields for a variety of athletic programs. Second, the Recreation Commission was informed by the Cemetery Trustees that, pursuant to the terms of their lease, the Trustees were ending the lease in 2014. Third, the Cemetery Trustees also indicated that they may need the property prior to the 2014 date, specifically as early as 2012. And, fourth, if Amherst is to continue to offer the recreation program we currently have - much less expand them - we need to replace those fields. During a six-month period in 2009, 1,600 children played soccer, lacrosse, and baseball on Cemetery Fields for a total of approximately 1900 hours. Where will they go?

Last year, the Open Space Advisory Commission (OSAC) spent considerable time trying to negotiate for the purchase of land from Ben Brewster. That parcel, the same parcel being proposed for purchase at this time, was presented to the Board of Selectmen who declined to move forward on its purchase for much the same reason that some townspeople are against the purchase now - they felt it was overpriced. And, if what we were buying was just 57 acres of land that floods, they might be right. But, what this purchase gets the town is more than that. We get 57 acres of land, with 4 developed playing fields, a fully productive community garden, and extensive river frontage.

After the Selectmen ruled against the OSAC's recommendation, the Recreation Commission approached them and requested that they reconsider their vote. We provided them with information about the cost of identifying, purchasing, and developing a new parcel. And still the Selectmen stood against the purchase. That's when we decided to bring the question directly to you.

To judge whether or not Brewster Fields is overpriced requires that you look at a number of factors - the cost of the land and the cost of the renovations. Article 24 requests authority for the Selectmen to enter into a \$625,000 bond to purchase the land with its improvements. For comparison, we offered information on the cost of purchasing and developing the Bean Fields. That 9.07 acre parcel cost the Town \$300,000 to purchase and an additional \$450,000 to develop two and a half flat fields and a 60-foot baseball diamond. For less money, we propose to acquire a parcel more than 6 times larger, with 4 playing fields already there, with the Garden, and with the potential for developing more fields in the future, should they be necessary. Brewster Fields also gives us considerable room to replace the 60-foot diamond and playground we'll lose when Cemetery Fields reverts to the Trustees.

The four fields currently on the property are game-ready. As soon as the snow melts, they can be played on. We will need to develop areas for the playground and the baseball diamond. We have not asked for additional funds to do this because we're committed to completing those jobs with monies raised through user fees, through fundraising, through grant applications, and through the sweat equity of recreation participants. We will pursue the suggestion made at the Deliberative Session that we look at LUCT fund monies that may be available from current use transfers. We have been successful using this combination of funding sources in the past.

A great deal of misinformation has been spreading through town related to Article 24. I'd like to try and address some of the questions raised. First, does the land flood? Yes, it does. So does the land at Cemetery Fields. And, the fields at Upper Wilkins and in front of Souhegan become so wet

during springtime that athletes are required to stay off them for a period of time. All these fields flood or become water-soaked - every year - and they are all used as playing fields. It's actually a perfect use for the land. You can't build on it, but you can play on it. Flooding allows the fields time to rest and provides them with nutrients. Do we need to make sure we stay off the fields when they are excessively wet? Sure we do; just like we do on every other field in town. But does flooding wreck the property? No, not at all.

Second, the Board of Selectmen hadn't seen the purchase and sales agreement we referenced at the Deliberative Session. That is correct. They did not see the current agreement, but they were told about it on the afternoon it was signed by Mr. Brewster. And, they did see the one prior to that - the one for the same amount of money and asking for more concessions. We did not state, nor did we mean to imply, that because there's a purchase and sales agreement on the property, it's a done deal. The Agreement in place clearly relates back to the upcoming vote and nullifies any deal should the Article not pass. In addition, the Agreement acknowledges that the Selectmen have the ultimate decision about signing the Agreement - whether or not the Article passes. The purchase and sales agreement merely ties the seller to a price and a single concession - that the Garden remain for at least three years.

Third, Article 24 didn't name the property being purchased as Brewster Fields because we were trying to "put something over" on the voters or because we jumped at this parcel at the last minute without a great deal of thought. Neither is farther from the truth. The Article didn't mention Brewster Fields because at the deadline for submitting petition articles, the Purchase and Sales Agreement hadn't been signed. In order for the Article to be placed on the ballot, we had a deadline. If a signed Purchase and Sales Agreement hadn't been obtained on this property, the Article's petitioners would have requested that the Article be zeroed out, in effect killing it.

Amherst has a strong tradition of providing a hearty New England lifestyle. We encourage our residents to stay active and stay healthy. We start our children out with a deep commitment to movement and activity and we reinforce this commitment by providing strong athletic and recreation programs in our schools and in our town. Whether you have children participating in field or gym sports, whether you run or cross-country ski over our roads and through our forests, or whether you're just seeking a place to walk quietly with nature, the land at Brewster Fields offers places to do all those things.

We encourage you to learn more about Article 24 and the proposed land purchase. Please visit <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Brewster-Fields-Land-Purchase/321839666819> and view the materials that have been posted. We're sure that after your questions are answered, you'll vote Yes on Article 24 and support the purchase of this property.

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