



A new national park in Delaware?

More than 1,100 acres of woods and rolling pastures just three miles north of Wilmington will soon be sold to a national preservation group that hopes it becomes Delaware's first national park.

The land, purchased more than a century ago by Woodlawn Trustees, includes the Ramsey Farm, Upland Forest, scenic rock outcrops and wetlands along the banks of the Brandywine. It borders landscapes that inspired artists Andrew and Jamie Wyeth.

The sale to the Conservation Fund would permanently protect the land from development, which has been a goal of area residents who have long hiked and biked on the trails and fished in the river.

The deal, quietly cultivated for more than a year, is being hailed by civic leaders, elected officials and preservationists as one of the most important land transactions in Delaware in decades.

"Making sure this land received permanent protection has always been the greatest land-use issue in Brandywine Hundred," said Bob Valihura, president of the Council of Civic Organizations of Brandywine Hundred. "We're thankful to all the organizations involved who have taken this first step to ensuring that the future generations will have this outdoor recreation area available to them forever."

Blain Phillips Jr., the Conservation Fund's Mid-Atlantic director, thinks the land is worthy of national park status. The group would donate the land to the federal government. If that effort fails, the land will be offered to Delaware as a state park, Phillips said.

About 880 acres are in Delaware, and 220 are in Birmingham Township in Delaware County, Pa. The land's western border is the Brandywine and abuts other Woodlawn Trustees property along Concord Pike to the east. The northern edge is Smith Bridge Road in Pennsylvania, and the southernmost land is along Garden of Eden Road next to Brandywine Creek State Park.

No price announced

Woodlawn Trustees transferred the land earlier this year to the Rockford Woodlawn Fund, another local nonprofit with a similar mission to Woodlawn's goal of preserving land near Wilmington. The Conservation Fund would be the owner, but the Mt. Cuba

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Foundation is buying the land on the national group's behalf.

Mt. Cuba Foundation officials won't say how much they were paying for the land, because the deal isn't done, said Ann Rose, president of the foundation's board of managers.

"This beautiful and important property has been off the market for more than 100 years," Rose said. "Opportunities like this don't come around very often, so it wasn't a hard decision to make."

The Conservation Fund has the land under contract until November, Phillips said. He sees no obstacles to keep the deal from going through. "It's imminent," he said.

While Woodlawn Trustees bought the land to keep it unspoiled and unscathed from developers, the nonprofit has more than one mission. In addition to land preservation, it is a benevolent developer that uses money from land sales to provide affordable housing in Wilmington. "It was never the intent of Woodlawn to continue to hold those properties," Woodlawn's Chief Operating Officer Vernon Green said.

County Councilman Bob Weiner said officials have brainstormed for decades about how to get the Woodlawn land preserved forever. "But it's never been in our grasp until now, when this golden opportunity presented itself," Weiner said. "We take it for granted, but we're so fortunate to have this treasure, unlike so many urbanized counties in the region."

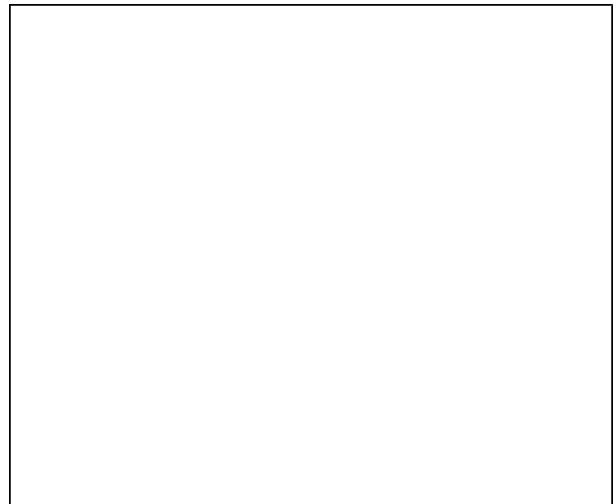
Woodlawn still owns 771 acres in the area, mostly along Concord Pike. One of the properties Woodlawn kept is the cornfield at Concord Pike and Beaver Valley Road. Stoltz Real Estate Partners has a development agreement with Woodlawn for a possible mixed-use development at that site.

History is nearby

The land to be sold is a rare natural treasure because it's so close to a city and a major interstate highway, Phillips said. More than 5 million people live within 25 miles from it.

Phillips' preference is that the land should be used to remove Delaware's status as the only state without a national park. "I think it should be," he said. "The transaction is transformative and I think the sky's the limit in terms of the potential uses for this land as a park."

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The land is near the Battle of the Brandywine, was once home to Lenape Indians, includes landscapes painted by the Wyeths and is near the home of the old DuPont powder mills, which represent the birth of American industry.

“This land is the bull’s-eye of an incredibly historic corridor,” Phillips said. “I call the Brandywine a founding river of our nation, and think it’s the story of the founding of the country.”

Within the site are remnants of buildings from an old mill town near Beaver Valley and Beaver Dam roads. There are documented Indian sites there, and there are rumors of troop movement on the land during the American Revolution.

Weiner said the land makes more sense for a national park than having different historic sites from all three counties, which is what Carper is currently proposing for Delaware’s first national park. “Sen. Carper should take this and declare victory,” Weiner said.

Carper's thoughts

Carper has been trying to get a national park for Delaware for years. His latest proposal would link six landmarks across the state and designate them as a national park that would tell the story of Dutch and Swedish settlers in the 1600s and the state’s role as the first to ratify the Constitution in 1787.

Carper’s office was contacted by the Conservation Fund several weeks ago

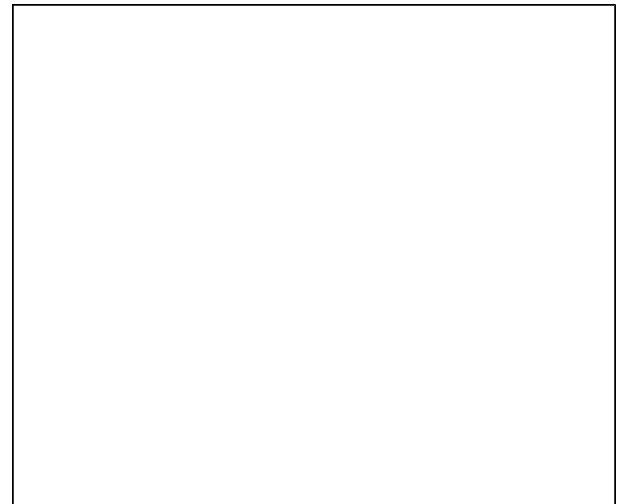
about the idea for the Brandywine Valley land as a possible national park.

In a statement, Carper didn’t oppose the idea of a national park in the Brandywine Valley. Instead he focused on the good news that it will be preserved forever, no matter which government winds up owning and managing it.

“Currently, I am working with Gov. [Jack] Markell and our congressional delegation to review all state and federal options available to ensure that this property is protected and can continue to be enjoyed by visitors from Delaware and from well beyond our borders for years to come,” Carper said.

Carper spokeswoman Emily Spain said the Conservation Group’s idea is still in the early stages and won’t compete with Carper’s proposal for a six-site national park. More research is needed on the Brandywine Valley proposal, she said.

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“Depending on what the results of this research yield, it may be that this preservation effort could be combined with the current effort to establish Delaware’s national park, or it could be pursued on a parallel track as either a state or federal government property if that is determined to be the best course of action.”

Carper said the Conservation Fund also offered money to the federal or state governments to maintain the land they want to donate.

Either way, the group won’t hold onto the property. “We’re not in a position to own and manage the land,” Phillips said. “It will be protected as a park of some sort.”

It hasn’t been determined how management of the Pennsylvania portion of the parkland would work, Phillips said.

Many cheers

People who live near the area or work to protect its natural beauty were thrilled by the news.

Lorraine Fleming, a board member of the Delaware Nature Society, said she has been hoping for years that the land would be secured as open space because there was always the uncertainty that one day the land could be put in play.

“Developers will grind their teeth,” said Fleming.

Markell, who lives near the land, said it’s too early to tell if the land would be better

suited as a state or national park. He was focused on the transaction itself, which he said would bring tourism dollars and keep the land open for hiking, biking and other activities.

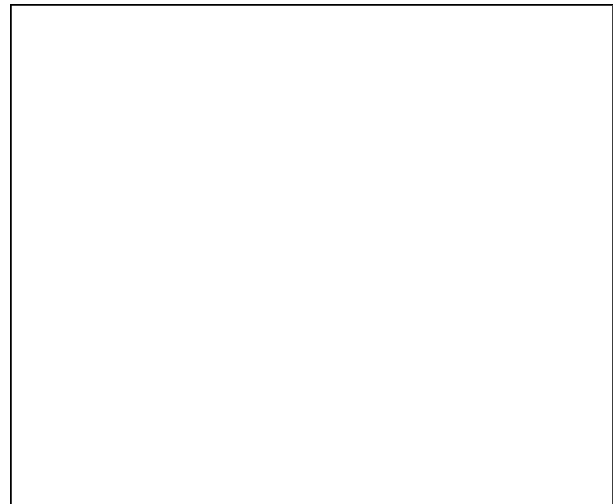
“It’s a triple win for Delaware’s quality of life, the economy and the people’s health,” he said.

Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control Secretary Collin O’Mara added: “Goal one was protecting this land in perpetuity and has been accomplished. Now we’re looking at how best to manage it and maintain public access to hiking trails, biking trails and water access.”

Delaware Greenways, a group that specializes in the protection of natural and scenic resources and sustainable land use that promotes healthy and active lifestyles, recently conducted a viewshed analysis that included the Woodland Trustees’ land.

“A number of viewsheds on that land were

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identified for their scenic beauty and character,” Managing Director Andrea Trabelsi said. “We’re thrilled to see the protection is on its way to being formalized.”

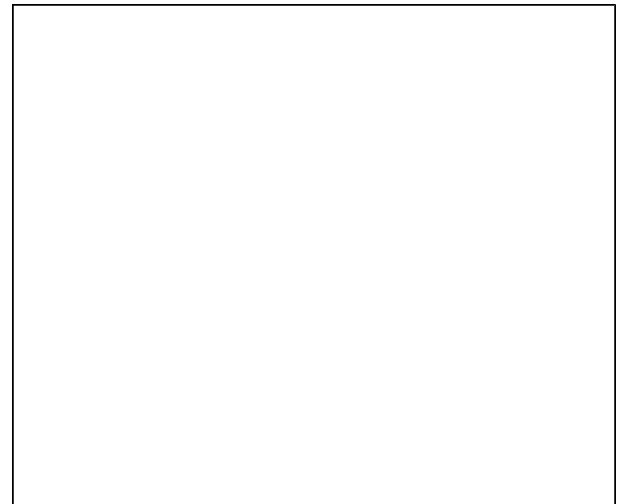
Virginia Logan, executive director of the Brandywine Conservancy in Chadds Ford, Pa., applauded the Conservation Fund and Mt. Cuba Foundation for getting the job done. “This land has been a priority for protection since the Brandywine Conservancy was formed in 1967,” Logan said. “We’re delighted.”

Kennett Pike Association President John Danzeisen said he would like to see the land become a national park, but said some residents would rather not deal with the extra traffic and congestion it could bring. “I think it would be a boon to the economy and a nice thing to have,” Danzeisen said. “Most of the traffic would be on weekends and off-rush hours.”



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While Woodlawn Trustees bought the land to keep it unspoiled and unscathed from developers, the nonprofit is a benevolent developer that uses money from land sales to provide affordable housing in Wilmington. / The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG

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