

Plans for Town of Niagara nature preserve in jeopardy

BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO

Interim Tribune Editor

After three long years of developing and reshaping its plans, last month the Town of Niagara Farmland Conservancy, was awarded a grant of \$146,000 in Niagara Greenway Commission funding to purchase a parcel of former farmland it intends to convert to a nature preserve.

It should have been a jubilant moment for the group. However, not long before the funds were awarded, the conservancy learned that despite an initial contingency agreement to purchase the plot of land, another buyer submitted a bid for the same property and the seller is looking to accept that second offer.

Now the entire project is in jeopardy and the conservancy is urging the second buyer to withdraw their bid.

"It's just crazy," said Joan Johnson, the conservancy's president. "After all the work to have them kind of come out of nowhere like this. Why are they doing this?"

Founded in 2017 by Johnson and Terry Lasher Winslow, the group's vice president, the conservancy began the process of purchasing the land in question in 2019. The 26.3-acre plot formerly known as the Joseph Sutherland Farm is located on the east side of Miller Road and north of Colonial Drive. In addition to restoring native flora, Johnson said additional plans for the reserve include homestead-style

walking trails, a large meadow for pollinators and an area for community organic gardens.

"(Johnson and I) grew up around this area ... and everyone who grew up here, we all have the same experiences from when we were growing up. We all climbed in the same trees, we all played in the same fields. And we want that to continue for the next generation who live there. We don't want housing developments," Lasher Winslow said of the group's plans.

At that time, things were looking good for the conservancy. In 2018, the group had just been gifted 38 acres of land located around the eastern end of the Town of Niagara Veteran's Memorial Park by members of Johnson's family.

In January 2019, the group entered a contingency agreement with the farm's sellers where the conservancy would purchase the land for \$90,000, on the condition that payments would be made after the conservancy received grant funding from the Niagara Greenway.

However, neither side anticipated the process to drag on for as long as it did. In September 2019, the Greenway Commission tabled the conservancy's presentation until certain parts of the plan were better defined and the Town of Niagara Board could officially sign off on it. While Greenway eventually approved the project's funding this past March, somewhere during the procedure the sellers, who reside in

Canada, lost faith in the project and put the land back on the market. In June, a second bidder (who's name has not been made public) went on to submit a lower cash offer of \$80,000, which the sellers indicated they would accept despite the earlier agreement.

When the group found out, members approached the seller and said they were told if they could have the cash in hand in two weeks, they could purchase the property. With the Greenway funds still a few weeks away from being delivered, the group scrambled to raise funds from family members and neighborhood residents.

"You should have seen the dash to get the money: People were taking out cash advances on their Visas ... but everyone wanted to help," Lasher Winslow said.

The group quickly raised \$95,000. However, when it approached the sellers again, the sellers couldn't agree amongst themselves which agreement to honor. Now the conservancy's attorney, Jason Cafarella, said they're waiting to hear what the seller's decision will be. The hope is that the sellers honor the initial contract.

"We're in a holding pattern, waiting for the sellers' attorney and the sellers to make a determination who the contract will be awarded to. We're hoping to know this week but it is a very complicated matter so I wouldn't hold my breath," Cafarella said. "We feel the conservatory did everything correct for the

application, but obviously it's a long and timely process (to get Greenway funds). They worked on it diligently. They were awarded the contract so now they are able to finalize the deal. So we're hopeful the seller will honor the original contract."

Lasher Winslow said the group has heard different stories about what the second buyer is hoping to do with the land, with rumors ranging from a single home to a residential subdivision. She said that should the conservancy be awarded the deed, the group would be willing to offer the second buyer up to two acres.

With that said, Johnson and Lasher Winslow say their group, as well as neighborhood residents are ready to fight for their project, particularly if the end-result is a large development. She noted that in recent years, area residents fought tooth and nail to stop the development known as Bri Estates.

"We can't let this go, because it's too big of a project; too much has gone into it, this whole neighborhood; we can't let this go," Johnson said. "They certainly don't want development, and they will fight it tooth and nail. We will hold them up for a long time. But we don't want it to get to that," Johnson said. "It's always been farmland and that's why people love it out here. It's the historic feel of it; the nature. Look at the people who fought off the Bri Estates. They said we moved out here because we love the country; we don't want all our

trees cut down and have a big development put in. Developments are so sterile and they're such a negative for the planet. Housing developments don't have to be out in nature. There're plenty of towns with housing."

The group is now publicly asking the second buyer to withdraw the bid so the project can finally come to fruition.

"I don't want to hurt or embarrass (the other buyer). I would just like them to kindly withdraw their bid and just let us all go in peace," Johnson said.

Cafarella said the group is looking to avoid a lengthy legal battle and is hopeful a mutual solution can be agreed upon.

"There's always the possibility that we can resolve this matter amicably, so everyone is happy, and I'm hoping that we are still able to do so," Cafarella said. "We don't want this to get to a point where everyone has to fight needlessly and I'm still hopeful we can find a resolution that all parties will be equally pleased with - with Niagara County seeing the benefit of the new conservancy, and the other party is still satisfied. So we're hopeful."

The seller's attorney, Christopher Mikienis, did not return a call for comment before the newspaper went to press.

For more information on the Town of Niagara Farmland Conservancy, visit www.preserveruralniagara.org.

Lewiston-Porter students return to school next week

BY JODEE RIORDAN

Board of Education President

This week, Lewiston-Porter will welcome students back to school. Students are returning both in person and 100% remotely, and we are committed to providing them the very best educational experience in both models. The first week of school (Sept. 8-11) will be dedicated to welcoming back all students and giving them a chance to get acclimated and feel at home in this new year.

The first day of school for 100% remote learners will be Tuesday, Sept. 8.

The first day for students on the green team is also Tuesday, Sept. 8. This will be a day of in-person learning. The first day for students on the white team is Thursday, Sept. 10. Again, this will be a day of in-person learning. Pre-K and kin-

dergarten meet and greets will be set by appointment.

This "Orientation Week" approach will allow everyone to ease into the new school year. Teachers will be meeting with our green team students and white team students in the hybrid model to establish procedures and protocols, and Lew-Port teacher liaisons will be bringing the district's 100% remote learners up to speed over the course of those first four days.

Monday, Sept. 14, will be the first full day of graded instruction for the 2020-21 school year.

To review our models: Students in the hybrid model will be on campus two days a week and virtual the other three. Students returning in-person are assigned to two teams: the green team (last names A-L) and white team (last names M-Z). Students on the green team

will be on campus on Tuesday and Wednesday; Students on the white team will be on campus Thursday and Friday. Students who are enrolled in the 100% remote model will not attend in-person. They will be virtual five days per week.

Families should now have received all information needed to begin the year. Welcome packets, student schedules and classroom placement letters, and bus schedules were all delivered late last week. This was later than anticipated, but necessary as students continued to move into the different learning models.

Lewiston-Porter now has more than 400 students in the 100% remote learning model. Remote students should have picked up the 100% remote model learning packet and all technology during the technology distribution days this

past week. Any families of remote learners who did not do so should with contact their school's main office immediately.

For those returning in-person, a reminder that masks are required by all students and staff at all times (except during designated break times). Each student and staff member will receive five reusable cloth masks this week, and are also welcome to provide their own.

With so many families opting to drive their children to school this year, there will be considerably higher-than-normal traffic volume at drop-off and pick-up. Please take the time to review new pick-up and drop-off procedures at each building (found on the L-P website, www.lew-port.com) and carefully follow the new established traffic patterns. We ask that you anticipate delays, especially in the first few

days and weeks, and plan accordingly. Start times are being relaxed to allow for anticipated delays, so please do not worry about your child being "late" as you drop off in the morning.

On behalf of the Board of Education, I want to sincerely thank our faculty, staff and administrators for their dedication, professionalism and creativity in preparing to receive our students back to school. Lewiston-Porter is the excellent district we are because we have excellent, innovative educators dedicated to providing the very best for every child, every day. The pandemic has only made this clearer. Thank you for the love and care you give to our students, our families and to each other every day. We are very proud of the dedicated professionals who are our teachers, administrators and staff.

We also thank each of our families for your patience and support as we navigate this crisis. This week, like you, I will take the traditional first day of school photo to begin what will be an untraditional school year. I send my own child back with confidence that he is in good hands, that every possible precaution has been taken for his health and safety, and to provide for his education and his well being.

This is all a very new and different and challenging, and we know things will continue to evolve as we go forward. Guidance on everything from food service to public health continues to change as I write this and, just as we've done since March, Lewiston-Porter will meet each change head-on and adapt. There is not a single issue that cannot be resolved.

We are all in this together and we will continue to get through this together.