



October 20, 2010

To: Narragansett Town Council

From: The Friends of Canonchet Farm Board of Trustees

About: Comments on the Executive Summary

The Friends of Canonchet Farm is pleased to present this response to the Executive Summary of the Canonchet Farm Master Plan presented by the Narragansett Planning Board to the Town Council on August 16, 2010. The plan contains many of the principles and actions that we have been advocating since the formation of our organization in 2007, and we look forward to discussing the details as the Council considers the plan, starting with the workshop on October 25.

Our response takes the form of comments inserted into the text of the Executive Summary (printed in green). In the following, the narrative of the Executive Summary has been reformatted, but we have made every effort to repeat the text verbatim. The maps are included for reference, but all of our comments are in the narrative.

**Canonchet Farm Master Plan
Executive Summary
Narragansett Planning Board
August 2010**

A. Background Information

The Canonchet Farm site is made up of 160 acres of former farm land, forest and wetlands located west of Boston Neck Road in the vicinity of Narragansett Town Beach. This property was formerly known as the Robinson Farm in the 19th century and later as the Sprague Mansion homestead. Located on a hill known as “Little Neck”, the property was acquired by the Town in 1974 with financial assistance from State and Federal sources. Soil qualities which were noted in a past plan indicate much of the site to be environmentally constrained for structural development. Roughly 40 – 45 acres of the site can be identified as soils appropriate for development. These soils are predominantly located in the area around the South County Museum, the upper and lower meadows and the area of the Anne Hoxsie Lane parking lot.

Two official plans have been drafted since 1974 targeted to management of this site. In 1978, the “Recreation Master Plan – Canonchet Farms” was drafted by Albert Veri Associates, a consultant firm. This plan was superseded by the Towns own “Canonchet Farm Master Plan” drafted by the Community Development Director Clark Collins in 1993.

Today's plan has been created using policies from these previous plans as a foundation and supplementing these with input from several sources. Integral to this process are the following documents:

- a. Report to the Town Council, March 2, 2009 – by the Canonchet Farm Master Plan Review Committee.
- b. A Master Plan For Canonchet Farm, October, 2009 – by the Narragansett Tree Society (as presented by Patrick Brady and William Bivona)
- c. Survey Results, 2010 – by the Narragansett Parks & Recreation Department.

The Friends of Canonchet Farm believes that the plan should begin with a statement of the appropriate uses of the property, and that each use should foster appreciation of the natural environment, beauty and historical significance of the property. All proposed improvements should be evaluated in light of the agreed upon uses.

B. Plan Process

Work on this plan began during the time that the Town Council was considering a proposal to allow for development of a polo field at Canonchet Farm. That proposal, submitted in 2006 by an individual, sought to make the necessary text amendments to the current plan that would open the door to a detailed development proposal for clearing approximately 20 acres in the center of the site, grading, seeding and adding accessory structures to serve a regulation sized polo field. The applicant asserted that his plan could provide significant competition for the site located in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, generate increased retail, hotel and restaurant activity, as well as expanding the tourist season, particularly in the spring and fall.

From the Town Council's rejection of that plan came a newfound interest in the current use and future utility of Canonchet Farm for the residents of Narragansett. The Planning Board expressed its desire to initiate a process to re-examine the current plan for the purpose of updating it in a manner that will serve the Town's 21st century needs for passive and active recreation, as well as open space preservation.

In 2007 the Town Council appointed a special committee (the Canonchet Farm Master Plan Review Committee) which provided a report in March 2009 of their own deliberations toward a vision for the Site. The results of that report concluded that there is a need to strike a balance between increasing use of Canonchet Farm and land preservation. A great deal of very useful information was generated through their process, including a comparison of previous recommendations from the 1978 and 1993 reports, a discussion of issues affecting development, dividing of the site into three planning areas and several items on which consensus could not be reached.

In May, 2009 the Council forwarded the report to the Planning Board for public hearings to review this and other documents and to make recommendations for an updated plan.

The Planning Board immediately sought input from the various departments of Town government that may be affected by policies in the Plan. Department heads from Police, Fire, Parks & Recreation, Engineering and Public Works offered comments and recommendations at several special meetings. Several meetings were devoted to input by Town boards and commissions. The Economic Development Committee weighed in as did the Narragansett Chamber of Commerce, the Tree Board and the Conservation Commission. Specific organizations directly involved in the site added their thoughts including the South County Museum, the Friends of Canonchet, the Narragansett Tree Society, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Narrow River Preservation Association. The Tree Society and the Friends of Canonchet Farm each provided a presentation of their proposals at a special workshop in May 2010.

Shortly after the Planning Board initiated their public input process a privately funded proposal and plan was drafted by the Narragansett Tree Society (Brady-Bivona). This Plan was presented to the Board in May 2010 and has been the subject of great debate and discussion. An alternative plan submitted by the Friends of Canonchet

Farm which agrees in part with the Tree Society Plan has also been submitted and debated. Both plans are extensive in their respective coverage of issues. The plan presented by the Tree Society promotes more active use, as well as more development and disturbance of the natural topography of the land. The plan presented by the Friends of Canonchet favors a more passive use of the land. Both plans however have some elements which are common to one another, such as the preservation of beech tree groves, opening fields that have been overgrown and removal and clearing of noxious invasive species of plant life from ponds and waterways. The Board has not adopted one plan or the other in its entirety. The Board, however, has recognized certain aspects of each plan and has incorporated from those plans what it believes is in the best interests of the Town into this recommendation and report.

The Planning Board has held seventeen (17) meetings in total to develop this plan with public comment solicited at each meeting. In all, over 100 people have commented, questioned, and/or offered ideas for development of this site.

C. Elements of the Plan

The following elements are derived from a combination of the current Master Plan and proposals submitted by the Canonchet Farm Master Plan Committee and the Narragansett Tree Society (Brady-Bivona). The items listed are those the Planning Board deemed of significant importance to be the subject of a Town policy within the Master Plan for this site. In the final document other topics may be addressed in a supportive or ancillary role.

1. ***Farm & Museum Development*** – The Planning Board acknowledges that a museum (currently South County Museum), adds cultural diversity to the Farm and the Town should plan to accommodate some level of expansion. This plan should coordinate museum expansion with the extension of Strathmore Street through the site (see item 9 below). The existing museum site is retained on the map and allows sufficient area for expansion. In the near future this action may necessitate refinements in text of our plan and/or revisions to the South County Museum master landscape plan. The remnant parking lot and the south meadow could serve as expansion areas. Final planning should be conducted in concert with the museum board and staff.

The town should develop, in conjunction with South County Museum, a visitors center, picnic area and rest rooms in the museum cluster.

2. ***Nature Trails*** – Hiking trails are a major component of the Farm’s recreational program. In addition to serving as a highlight of the Farm, the trails also serve to provide a primary access corridor between activity areas. Safety enhancements, including widening and maintenance, have been determined to be of great importance if they are to be used by the general public. The Board promotes the addition of directional and identification signage. The Town should continue its relationship with volunteer groups to carry out this task.
 - a. The Planning Board has concluded that the existing trails should be retained and 3 or 4 significant additions be incorporated over time. This action was promoted by both the Friends of Canonchet Farm and the Tree Society (Brady-Bivona). It was also a favorable activity gleaned from the informal survey commissioned by the Town of Narragansett Parks & Recreation Department. The Board has accepted the alignments of primary and secondary trails as shown on Figure 21 of the Tree Society Plan as appropriate extensions in the future. The trails noted on Figure 21 (identified as hiking paths) will add a connection to the Sprague Park playground, as well as provide a wider area of coverage on the west and east sides of the site. An elevated boardwalk over the salt marsh on the northwest perimeter of the site will provide an educational and an aesthetically prominent addition to the Farm’s trail inventory.
3. ***Habitat Clearing/Vista Enhancement*** –The Board has reached consensus that the majority of the two meadows should be “cleared” to expose the stone walls and create significant open spaces that will provide

the vistas envisioned in the current plan. The following priorities have been mapped:

If the two meadows are cleared, they should be designated as “conservation meadows” and be managed to increase the biodiversity of the property.

- a. Cutting/clearing of one or more significant spaces to create meadows that were envisioned in the 1993 plan. This will also provide multipurpose spaces for special activities and events.

Larger events should foster appreciation of the natural environment, beauty and historical significance of the property. Larger groups should not infringe on the enjoyment of smaller groups.

- b. Selective cutting of trees and underbrush to create a semi-open setting of shaded parkland that will serve as a complement to the open meadows and a transition to the nature trails serving the perimeter of the site.

We advocate selective THINNING of the lower story of the forest of undesirable invasives and other species, weeds and brush to enhance ground level vistas through the trees from a limited number of specified vantage points. Primary vistas could be to Little Neck Pond, Pettaquamscutt Cove and the ocean.

- c. Complementary to the above tasks is the removal of invasive vegetation from a broader area of the forest. In addition, it was a consensus of the Board that the Town seeks application from RIDEM and the CRMC permitting the clearing of invasive species around Little Neck Pond and Lake Canonchet to improve the views of these resources and invite the public to the site. The Board accepted testimony at the public hearing that the clearing of invasive species would significantly improve the health of trees and water bodies, as well as create visibility through the uncut areas to the ponds, the Narrow River, and the beach.

A goal of this project should be to restore the coastal environment.

4. **Beech Grove** – This area is located adjacent to the parking lot off Anne Hoxsie Lane and is a portion of the area targeted for the clearing of invasive vegetation and modest hiking trail expansion. Clearly marked trails will enhance the protection of these trees by identifying places where people are welcomed and where they are not. An additional dock could provide access to Little Neck Pond from the area adjacent to this Beech Grove. A policy has been promoted to maintain this area as a low intensity use area with particular attention to the protection of the beech trees. The Board heard testimony at the public hearing from accepted experts which was not contested and supports the need to preserve area associated with the Beech Grove.

A management plan should be developed to protect and care for selected specimen trees and groves throughout the park. Some examples are the beech, sassafras, birch and tupelo groves, elm trees and very grand English oaks. The plan would include identification of key specimen trees and other plants with signage.

5. **Fishing Pier/Docks** – In conjunction with the extension of three small trails, the Board anticipates additional areas providing fishing or small boating access to the ponds and the Narrow River. The Plan includes three (3) such docks: one (1) off the northwest corner on the Narrow River primarily used for

fishing; one (1) on Little Neck Pond, and one (1) on Lake Canonchet which would serve as kayak/canoe launches. Should sufficient funding become available, the potential for replacement of the causeway at the Boston Neck Road entrance with a new bridge is to be considered for future action. Much of this component was advanced by the Friends of Canonchet Farm and the Tree Society.

6. **Linear Park** – The Board is unified in its support for the idea of a linear park along the Boston Neck Road frontage which extends around the corner at Narragansett Avenue to the pump station. This reuse of overgrown land promoted by the Tree Society will serve as a positive component that will open up the visibility of the site through removal of invasive vegetation. It will provide an opportunity to extend the identity of the park out to where the public travels daily. The Board specifically advances the removal of invasive vegetation, burial of overhead utilities, addition of site identification signs and construction of a sinuous pathway for the length of the roadway frontage to enhance its attractiveness and identity. Removal of the parking lot at the southern extremity of this site should be a priority. Much of this component was promoted by both the Friends of Canonchet Farm and the Tree Society.

Portions of this task will require approval from CRMC for cutting in near proximity to the ponds which should garner support if a revegetation plan is developed that improves the functions and values of the natural ecosystems associated with these coastal ponds. Some aspects of this element will require approval of RIDOT also.

7. **Access** – The Board is unified in its support of retaining Strathmore Street as a vehicular access point to the site in its entirety, not just the South County Museum. The Board was not unified regarding the roadway infrastructure through the park. Staff strongly recommended that, from a safety and planning perspective, the current roadway alignment through the Museum area requires two (2) 90 degree turns and would interfere with some aspects of the museum master landscape plan. The Staff further indicated that an alternate alignment which would circle the South County Museum would benefit the South County Museum in its continued need for National Certifications as the current alignment presented security issues. As a result of this concern Staff created an alternative roadway alignment. The Board had two factions on this issue. One faction believed that the current roadway alignment was satisfactory as is. The other faction believed that the Staff design was a better alternative. As a result, the Planning Board has recommended that both road alignment alternatives be considered within the Plan. The Board also recognized that any planned construction associated with an alternate infrastructure alignment would, in all probability, be a longer term consideration to be measured with such issues as utilities, funding, and the input from the Engineering and/or other Town departments.
 - a. Staff has mapped a new alignment for this roadway shown on Map 1 of the Plan which routes traffic around the museum site. Two (2) internal gates (G) will ensure that thru-traffic is controlled. The existing roadway from the corner at the old Carriage House to the Anne Hoxsie Lane parking lot would be removed. This alignment offers several advantages, such as creation of a distinct boundary differentiating the Museum from the remainder of the Farm. It also provides a smooth travel way reaching further into the site than currently exists and creates opportunities for special uses along its perimeter.
 - b. The existing roadway alignment is shown on Map 2 and Map 3. This alignment retains two points of access and egress, as well as the current system of internal gating (two within the beach parking lot and one at the corner near the old Carriage House).

NOTE: Due to the effect the roadway has on other elements of the Plan the Board has determined that both alignments be mapped and sent to the Town Council for deliberations.

In order to preserve the environment and protect the safety of visitors, allow no motorized vehicular traffic in the park except at the entrance parking lots. The Town should convert Anne Hoxsie Lane from the gate at the west side of the gravel parking lot to the South County Museum to a broad footpath restricted to pedestrians and emergency and park maintenance vehicles.

8. **Parking** – The Board has reached consensus that the overflow parking should be removed from Canonchet Farm but recognizes the constraints in regards to beach revenue. However, it is clear the Board supports more activity within the Farm site for the public to enjoy and, as such, would support the following:
- a. Retain the gravel lot for beach related use for the short term and only phase out as alternative facilities are made available.
 - b. Retain but reduce the size of the overflow lot in order to accommodate primarily those new facilities and activities chartered for the future of the site (*i.e.* bike path, thematic gardens, public functions, etc.)

We should eliminate parking in the lower meadow as use of this area for parking is environmentally unsound.

- c. Retain old South County Museum parking lot for museum use until new uses emerge from Carriage House redevelopment. Phase out as necessary.
- d. Add a small parking lot to the west side of the South County Museum site adjacent to the orchard to supplement the existing lot. Project expansion of this lot when/if old lot is discontinued.

We propose the following:

Eliminate the existing beach overflow parking lot in the lower meadow and beach employee parking lot, as both of these lots are environmentally unsound.

Redesign the gravel parking lot on Anne Hoxsie Lane in an environmentally sound manner.

Designate the Anne Hoxsie Lane gravel parking lot for park visitors only.

Develop alternative beach parking such as the parking lots at the three Narragansett schools and service the lots with a shuttle to and from the beach.

9. **Nature Center** – The Board supports this element which was originally noted in the Veri Plan and retains merit as a facility to enhance the educational experiences that might be had by school children and visitors to the Farm. The Plan illustrates two (2) preferred locations:
- a. Alongside the trail in proximity to the elementary school - In this location a nature center could serve as a “classroom annex” to the school throughout the year. Visibility and policing would be enhanced.
 - b. At a high point on the south meadow - This particular facility could also incorporate a tall viewing tower and public facilities as promoted in the Tree Society Plan (Brady-Bivona). All members of the Board favored the construction of a tall viewing tower in this area of the Park.

NOTE: Regardless of where the nature center is located, the Planning Board members favor the construction of a tall viewing tower in the Meadow area of the park.

We believe that a visitors/nature center should use existing facilities and be located either near the community center or the Museum. Also, the tower should be located near one of these facilities.

10. **Camping** – The consensus of the Board is to not provide a specific facility for camping. Organized scout

and/or military groups might be considered but only on individual case basis and by permit only.

11. **Site Management** – The Board has determined that the Town’s management of this site in the future should be supplemented by a commission similar in organizational framework, authority, and responsibilities to the Land Conservancy Trust or the Towers Committee, both of which manage their respective properties. They promote specific membership to such a commission; member of Town Council, member of the Planning Board, member of the Friends of Canonchet Farm and several at-large public members to be appointed by the Town Council.

Create a Commission/Committee with members appointed by the Town Council and composed of relevant representatives from Town departments and Town committees, relevant representatives from independent organizations, and individuals with relevant professional experience.

Alternatively, the Friends of Canonchet Farm is prepared to develop a plan with the Town of Narragansett to have the Friends of Canonchet Farm manage the property.

12. **Bike Path** – Four out of five members have expressed a preference for placing the bike path extension connecting to the Town Beach area within the Canonchet Farm site. The Board has determined to map all four (4) of the alternate onsite routings for this path on our proposed plan, including an approximation of the primary and alternate alignments proposed by the Tree Society (Brady-Bivona). The offsite alignment is not supported by the Board but has been allowed to remain as a last alternative if the RIDOT chooses to not fund any of the onsite alternatives.

The Friends of Canonchet Farm supports an off-site route for the bike path. We have serious environmental concerns that would have to be addressed if the bike path were to go through Canonchet Farm.

The Board acknowledges that any alignment going through the site will have to be located as to minimize the distance of wetland crossing that would be necessary. An in-depth site analysis by RIDOT or other expert will be required before the final alignment can be determined. All four onsite alignments would converge at the Strathmore Street extension just north of the South County Museums northernmost barn if the roadway extension noted in #7 above were to be approved. From this location to the Anne Hoxsie Lane Parking lot, the bike path could either remain a single separate facility running north of the roadway or be divided to parallel the internal roadway on separate east and west lanes.

In the alternative, this bike path will run through the south meadow to the Anne Hoxsie Lane parking lot.

13. **Utilities** –The policy of the current plan is to place any future utilities underground in compliance with conditions of the acquisition grant program.

Should a nature center, comfort station(s), or other structure be added to the site, the Town should make plans to run water and sewer lines to accommodate them. Location and construction of any such facilities will be affected by proximity to existing lines and phasing of the site implementation plan.

The following elements to the Canonchet Farm Master Plan were not the subject of a definitive policy decision by the Planning Board but were included in the discussion with other elements. They are included here for reference only.

14. **Reconstruction of Carriage House** –The Carriage House, while an extremely valuable onsite resource, will require significant funding to reclaim. This structure and its immediate surroundings should be promoted as a site for location of museum(s) or other heritage organizations that will ultimately complement the South County Museum.

- a. Staff suggests the Town should seek outside funding for its reconstruction.

Improvements to the Carriage House should be a discussion between the South County Museum and the Town of Narragansett.

15. **Garden Development** – The current plan anticipates extensive gardens associated with the museum cluster as a means of compliance with the recreational requirements of the Federal Bureau of Recreation (the source of most of the acquisition funds). In this update of the plan it is similarly proposed that several gardens and orchards of differing themes be utilized to blend and connect the various heritage sites. These would be largely focused in the area surrounding the Carriage House and along Anne Hoxsie Lane, just north of the northernmost properties on Canonchet Way.

- a. Staff suggests that this might be an appropriate task for the Friends of Canonchet Farm to undertake.

Garden development is not in the immediate scope of interest of Friends of Canonchet Farm.

16. **Other** – Signage was mentioned in the context of the linear park and in discussions regarding improving the identity of the Canonchet Farm site in general. Staff has mapped four (4) sites where informational signage could be located to aid in vehicular and pedestrian travel (see Map 1). It is anticipated that several smaller directional signs will be added at key locations throughout the site as development progresses.

Signage should be of a consistent style and high standard that shows that Canonchet Farm is a quality place, and be maintained in excellent condition. The signs should be both directional and interpretive to reflect the educational use to which Canonchet Farm can be put. We support locating informational kiosks at all entrances.

D. Conclusion

This Executive Summary expresses the Planning Board's vision for the Canonchet Farm site in text and maps for the purpose of providing the Town Council with a blueprint for future decision making on this property. After 14 months of research and discussion the Planning Board has crafted the enclosed conceptual framework on which a full plan will be written, should the policies and projects detailed within be adopted by the Town Council.

It is the Planning Board's intent to improve the attractiveness of Canonchet Farm and to promote a mixture of use and activities that will enhance its utility to the average Town resident.

The plan should include a statement of what are appropriate uses for the property. Each use should foster appreciation of the natural environment, beauty and historical significance of the property.
