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Controversial effort to sell River Farm just got a lot more complicated

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Half of the American Horticultural Society's board of directors has come out in opposition to the nonprofit's controversial decision to sell River Farm, a historic property near Mount Vernon.



COMPASS

In a statement released Friday to the Washington Business Journal, five board members call the decision to sell the 26-acre property “not only morally and ethically wrong,” but also “fraught with serious legal issues.” They say that the other five members of the board — all of whom are officers — have asked them to be “silent while they proceed to sell the property against our objections.”

The move to put River Farm on the market, currently listed with an eye-popping \$32.9 million price tag, has attracted plenty of pushback from neighbors and local elected officials, who fear the site could be redeveloped into single-family homes or otherwise cut off from public use. But this is one of the first signs of internal dissent within AHS itself, which maintains the property and uses it as the organization's headquarters.

“We call on our donors, supporters, volunteers and governmental authorities to speak out on this issue, and join us in our effort to reverse the unfortunate decision by the controlling members of the board to sell River Farm,” the board members Tim Conlon, Skipp

Calvert, Laura Dowling, Holly Shimizu and Marcia Zech wrote in their joint statement.

They added that they believe “AHS can and should continue to steward the property in accordance with the public promises made by the society for nearly 50 years, and we will continue to do all in our power to accomplish that purpose.”

A spokeswoman for the society did not immediately respond to a request for comment. In an email to reporters Monday, Board Chair Terry Hayes warned “should you or your outlet receive communications of any kind from other parties purporting to represent AHS and its official positions and policies, please note this information is NOT approved by the board and does not represent the official position of our national nonprofit.”

Without a majority on the board opposing the sale, it is unclear what this development means for the group’s effort to sell the property, which was once owned by George Washington. Hayes and other AHS representatives have long pledged to find a buyer that would preserve it for public use in some fashion, though many neighbors have been suspicious of their intentions.

The society has even engaged in discussions with the nonprofit Northern Virginia Conservation Trust and Nova Parks, the region’s park authority. The AHS had publicly rejected that team's offer to buy the site back in March, but NVCT Executive Director Alan Rowsome said in an interview that negotiations are still ongoing. He said his team even recently resubmitted an offer that would “take years off the payment plan” necessary to manage the purchase.

“We’re hopeful the process has built and the timing has built in such a way that they’re starting to feel like this is the best offer they’re going to get,” Rowsome said. “The conversations have been productive, and we just need to keep working.”

Another factor complicating any potential sale: Both Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring and D.C. Attorney General Karl Racine are said to be investigating the matter. Critics of the proposed sale believe the nonprofit may be violating the intent of the donor who helped the AHS purchase the property, Enid Annenberg Haupt.

Fairfax County officials also recently elected to designate the property as a historic overlay district, which would severely limit

the amount of any new development possible there. Rowsome said the Board of Supervisors will be hashing out additional details of that process in the coming weeks.

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