

Offer to Buy River Farm Inches Up, But Declined by Seller

NOVA Parks is still part of the future at River Farm.

By MIKE SALMON
THE CONNECTION

On Sunday evening, Sept. 26, the American Horticultural Society voted against an offer from NOVA Parks to purchase River Farm during a board meeting of the American Horticultural Society, but they are leaving it open for more offers.

"The negotiations with NOVA Parks have been a positive experience. The AHS board has not been able to reach an agreement on selling River Farm to NOVA Parks, so we must decline the current offer," said Board Chair Terry Hayes. "I would like to thank NOVA Parks Executive Director Paul Gilbert, Supervisor Dan Storck, and others who have been in conversations with us over the past year for their cooperative attitudes and support."

The exact amount of the latest NOVA Parks offer is still at large, and when it comes to money and real estate, there are a lot of tight lips. When asked about the offer, AHS did release a non-descriptive statement though: "AHS will continue to look for alternatives to provide for the appropriate steward for River Farm. As noted, we appreciate the cooperative spirit of NOVA Parks and their desire to help AHS in this endeavor," according to a statement by one half of the board.

Not so fast, said Senator Scott Surovell



PHOTO BY MIKE SALMON/CONNECTION

Last May, neighbors were out in full force in front of River Farm.

(D-36th). There are 10 members on the board and the other five have a different angle. "As you know, we five members of the AHS Board oppose the sale of River Farm," the other five said, citing that the AHS is not in need of the money as it has claimed. "Public examination of the published AHS financial statements has shown that AHS has no financial need to sell River Farm," the "don't-sell" members of the board said.

In the end, noted Surovell, there are easements and a historic overlay that would make development nearly impossible.

Private ownership "will never happen," Surovell said. Both the Virginia General Assembly and the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors have taken action aimed at making private development less likely.

AHS said their vision all along has been to find the "best steward that meets our goals of respecting the history of this beautiful property, conserving the greenspace, and ideally allowing a level of public access to the grounds."

This isn't something supported by local officials, neighbors or area historians, as seen with all the picketing outside the gate and public hearings in the past.

Board officials did acknowledge there is a prospective developer out there that is also looking at two adjacent parcels for a "massive residential and commercial complex on a proposed assemblage of 54 contiguous acres along the Potomac," they said.

"Against the backdrop of this real and present threat, we believe that the efforts to protect River Farm must accelerate," half of the board said, and that protection comes with a NOVA Parks deal.

Surovell agreed, "The board needs to start talking with each other and make a deal with NOVA Parks," he said.

NOVA Parks is a government entity, and any purchase is with tax money. Half would be from the state coffers and half would be local, said Surovell.

Farm Has History

The 25-acre River Farm has a long history, starting with Giles Brent Jr., and his wife, a princess of the Piscataway tribe, who owned

it in 1653 or 1654, the Goodhart Group real estate listing states. Then George Washington bought it and made it part of his plantation. Malcolm Matheson bought the property in 1919 and remodeled the home, and in 1973, American Horticultural Society (AHS) board member and philanthropist Enid Annenberg Haupt provided funds for the AHS to purchase the property, the listing states.

But Haupt gave the money under the condition that AHS maintain ownership and allow public access.

The farm is currently listed by The Goodhart Group for \$32,900,000 million. The property has six bedrooms, six full baths and four half baths, multiple garages, a cottage and carriage house. "The existing home is currently being used as offices for the American Horticultural Society, but as you step through the front door of the stately manor house, it's easy to envision its history as a private residence," the listing states.

In September 2020, preservation supporters submitted a 6,000 signature petition to save the property and a letter from Chairman Jeff McKay to Governor Northam, calling it "a local institution in the Mount Vernon District, full of history, heritage, and natural beauty."

In March 2021, the NOVA Parks, Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, and their partners made an offer to buy River Farm in Mount Vernon, but the American Horticultural Society board of directors has voted to decline their offer, looking for their original asking price of \$32,900,000 million that they need to keep the society in operation, AHS said at the time.