

American Horticultural Society board rift could complicate proposed sale of historic River Farm

Five dissenting members say sale is ‘morally and ethically wrong’ and legally problematic

By **Fredrick Kunkle**



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A split in the American Horticultural Society’s leadership could complicate the nonprofit organization’s plan to sell George Washington’s historic River Farm property.

Five members of the nonprofit’s board of directors on Friday issued a statement stating their opposition to the sale. They also called on other AHS members, donors, government officials and members of the public to take action to preserve the 27.6-acre site and its public access.

“There is growing evidence that the decision to sell River Farm is not only morally and ethically wrong, but is fraught with serious legal issues,” the statement says.

Board members Skip Calvert, Tim Conlon, Laura Dowling, Holly Shimizu and Marcia Zech said they could no longer remain silent about their opposition as they had been directed to do by fellow board members.

None of the five could be reached for comment. But Virginia state Sen. Scott A. Surovell (D-Fairfax), who successfully sponsored legislation to protect the historical resources at the property and ensure public access, confirmed the statement’s authenticity.

“The wheels are coming off,” Surovell said in an interview, citing the mounting opposition to AHS’s putting the site up for sale and what now appears to be a 50-50 split on the organization’s 10-member board.

The development comes as state and local officials have entered negotiations to acquire the land as a park and preserve its historic value and public access. Earlier this month, Fairfax County modified the zoning regulations of the property to protect its historic resources by creating a “historic overlay district” around River Farm. The regulations cannot stop development, but it gives local officials more say in how the property can be used.

The foundation that made AHS's purchase possible nearly 50 years ago also has voiced opposition to the sale. And attorneys general in Virginia and the District of Columbia have opened an investigation into its legality in light of AHS's nonprofit status and because the granting of the land called for the preservation of River Farm as green space for public use. Meanwhile, a coalition of conservationists, led by the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust and the NOVA Parks, has been in talks with AHS about buying the land.

AHS stunned neighbors last year by putting River Farm on the market for \$32.9 million, saying the proceeds would help create an endowment that would allow the gardening society to widen its mission. The society was able to purchase the historic manor and gardens in 1973 only with the help of a \$1 million gift from Enid Annenberg Haupt, a philanthropist who gave widely to public botanical gardens.

AHS board chair Terry Hayes and other members of the board may have been expecting the rift among members to become public. Days before the dissenters' statement, Hayes issued a statement saying that only she or the public relations consultant recently hired by the board were authorized to speak on the organization's behalf.

"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," Hayes's email said.

Neither Hayes nor an AHS spokeswoman immediately responded to an email seeking comment about the statement from the five members of the board.
