

# American Horticultural Society to pursue talks with NOVA Parks on sale of River Farm

Nonprofit gardening organization said it wanted to explore 'possible partnership opportunities' with preservationists

By [Fredrick Kunkle](#)

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The American Horticultural Society said Saturday that its board has agreed to move forward on negotiations with the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority about its state-backed bid for the purchase of George Washington's historic River Farm.

AHS board Chair Terry Hayes said in a statement that the nonprofit gardening organization also wanted to explore "possible partnership opportunities" with NOVA Parks and its coalition of preservationists.

The "national nonprofit intends to advance conversations in earnest with NOVA Parks next week," Hayes said, following a meeting of the board on Friday.

The AHS's brief announcement appears to signal a change from the organization's plan to sell the 27.6-acre property. The organization had said that a sale was financially necessary because pandemic-related closures had hurt its revenue, and a sale would allow the nonprofit organization to build an endowment to support its horticultural programs on a national scale.

Hayes could not immediately be reached for comment Saturday.

The announcement comes days after Virginia Attorney General Mark R. Herring (D) said his office would take legal action if necessary to ensure that the land was used in accordance with the wishes of the late Enid Annenberg Haupt, whose \$1 million donation allowed the AHS to purchase the property nearly 50 years ago.

At a news conference Wednesday, Herring said that Haupt, a longtime champion of public botanical gardens, had made clear that her gift was intended to provide a new headquarters for the AHS and preserve River Farm's historic manor and gardens for the American people.

Since the AHS put the property on the market last year for \$32.9 million, conservationists, historians and members of the community, including Virginia lawmakers at the state, local and federal levels, have hastened to protect River Farm. Despite the AHS's assurances that the organization hoped to find a new steward for the site, critics feared the property could wind up in the hands of a private owner who might develop the site, damage its historical resources or restrict public access to it.

A coalition of preservationists, led by NOVA Parks and the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, made an offer to buy the property. Alan Rowsome, NVCT's executive director, said their most recent offer was about \$16 million for the property, which is about \$1 million below its current assessed value.

State Sen. Scott A. Surovell (D-Fairfax), who helped push legislation through the General Assembly to protect the property, said Saturday that the AHS's announcement left him feeling cautiously optimistic that a deal could be reached allowing the AHS to remain at River Farm while the site itself becomes public property.

"I've negotiated enough deals to know it's not a deal until the ink's dry," Surovell said. "But I think AHS has figured out you can't fight three governments and an entire community."

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