

# Efforts to preserve River Farm as a public park are gaining steam. But its owners won't budge yet.



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Efforts to buy [historic River Farm](#) and preserve it as a public park have gained a crucial infusion of state funds, but the property's owners aren't budging on a sale just yet.

Virginia lawmakers agreed to send \$2 million to Nova Parks, the region's park authority, as part of the new state budget passed last weekend. The agency paired that money with another \$1 million in grants and private donations secured by the nonprofit [Northern Virginia Conservation Trust](#), submitting an offer to the 27-acre property's owner, the [American Horticultural Society](#).

But the [AHS said Monday](#) it was declining that offer, opting to push ahead with plans to offer the property on the private market. The nonprofit has listed River Farm with the real estate brokerage firm Compass, [marketing it](#) for a whopping \$32.9 million price tag in a bid to shore up the organization's financial resources.

However, AHS Board Chair [Terry Hayes](#) said in a statement that the nonprofit "welcomes further dialogue" with the Nova Parks-NVCT team, and would entertain another proposal from the pair. [Alan Rowsome](#), the NVCT's executive director, said he's continuing negotiations with the AHS about a potential sale, and is cautiously optimistic the two sides can ultimately strike a deal.

Yet Rowsome tempers that optimism with skepticism about the property owner's motives. Opponents of the River Farm sale have worried for months now that the AHS will sell the site to a private buyer, perhaps to be redeveloped as single-family homes. The organization has said frequently it hopes to preserve the property as publicly accessible open space with a sale, matching the [demands of neighbors](#), but the AHS's handling of the sale has deepened local suspicions.

"We're, theoretically, not far off," Rowsome said in an interview. "But I think it remains to be seen whether they're really committed to negotiating and working with us to keep this in public hands, or whether they're trying to extract the most money possible out of this sale."

A spokesperson for the AHS declined to comment on the matter.

Rowsome conceded the combined offer of \$3 million is far short of the lofty asking price for the property, but he does believe it's "certainly enough to make an initial down payment to the AHS" as an "expression of good will." He envisions making payments to the nonprofit over a period of several years in order to make the sale work, and hopes Nova Parks would take over its management. The parks authority would likely use a portion of the site as a wedding and events venue, similar to some of the [other parks in its portfolio](#), which presents a revenue-generating opportunity for the future. The property already is a popular wedding venue.

If the nonprofit's goal truly is to use the proceeds of a River Farm to fund its operations, then Rowsome can't understand why the AHS would leave an offer guaranteeing it millions annually on the table. If the terms of the deal are an issue, he suggested the nonprofit could "take the property off the market and announce it's working with us toward a solution, so we can work together while building trust."

But, for now, he said that trust is still in short supply, noting the attorneys general in both Virginia and D.C. have told lawmakers they're [investigating the sale](#).

That being said, Rowsome added that his group will keep up its fundraising. He believes the \$3 million it has already raised should “credential our efforts” and he’s holding out hope for more public money.

Del. Mark Sickles, D-Fairfax, said the \$2 million from the state is about as much as lawmakers thought the state could manage in a Covid-constrained budget year, noting “there is going to have to be resources from other places to make this happen.” Rowsome hopes Fairfax County could also contribute some cash down the line, though it is facing [similar budget pressures](#).

In the meantime, the county is pursuing efforts to establish a [historic district on the property](#) to limit development there, with a vote from the Board of Supervisors expected sometime this spring. Sen. [Scott Surovell](#), a Democrat who represents the area that includes River Farm, also managed to [pass a bill this year](#) that would strengthen the protections of a historic district and guarantee some public access to a portion of the site as a backup plan of sorts if a private sale advances. That legislation is headed to Gov. Ralph Northam, who has also expressed opposition to the farm’s sale, who must act on it before the end of March.

“If someone were to come in seeing big dollar signs, thinking this could be divided into single-family home lots, that would make it a lot more complicated,” Rowsome said. “River Farm is too important for us to let go.”



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