

Our Unique Outdoor Learning Space:

The Garrison Union Free School District owns a 185-acre School Forest, which is used as an environmental education laboratory for students. The School Forest is also open to the community. The Osborn, Sloan, and Gunther families gave the land to the School District beginning in 1956. The School Forest contains forested land, wetlands, public trails, and Revolutionary War-era fortifications.

Why Is This Important?

The School Forest is unique and significant. The Garrison School is one of very few New York State public schools that own a forest for students to use as an environmental education laboratory. This vital resource teaches children about the natural world and their relationship to our environment. Immersion in nature spurs creativity. As well, the School Forest is an important historical and cultural asset for the community and provides students the opportunity to experience locations where American history took place firsthand. The Garrison School Forest provides a site where children may explore art, dance, economics, history, geography, literature, mathematics, music, and the sciences. This resource must be retained to continue to enrich the lives of Garrison School students and members of the community.

The Opportunity:

The owner of The Garrison Golf Club, LLC has made an exceptional offer to the Garrison community. He is willing to donate 100-acres of land, comprised of two parcels, adjoining the School Forest, if the School District agrees to conserve the current School Forest in perpetuity with the sale of future development rights through a conservation agreement with the Hudson Highlands Land Trust (HHLT). This land, the former Townsend estate off Snake Hill Road, will provide direct entry to the School Forest off a public road, easier access than is currently available elsewhere. The flat land, accessible through the gate on Snake Hill Road, could be sufficiently cleared to allow school buses to park there. Additionally, an environmental education classroom with a restroom or other structures supporting education mission could be built on the land in the future. The land currently contains a large hoop house previously used for agricultural purposes.

Why Is This Important Now?

The original 1962 deed conveying Garrison School Forest land stipulates that after 2030, “the premises may be converted to other uses” provided that a court in Putnam County “shall approve such other uses as being in the public interest.” Thus, if some unforeseen circumstance arises after 2030, such as school district consolidation or any fiscal need, it could put at risk the School Forest’s intended purposes.

How May the School Forest be Preserved?

HHLT proposes a partnership with the Garrison Union Free School District to permanently safeguard the important ecological, historic and scenic values of the

Garrison School Forest, while further promoting nature-based education experiences for Garrison School students.

What is the Proposal?

Hudson Highlands Land Trust will purchase a conservation agreement (or deed of conservation easement) from the Garrison Union Free School District to permanently preserve the current 185-acre School Forest, using similar terms from the deeds that have preserved the Forest since its original donation by the families. The School District will continue to retain ownership of the land, with the same rights and responsibilities. At closing, the Garrison Golf Club will donate the 100-acres of adjoining land, also permanently preserved through the same conservation agreement, thus increasing the total size of the School Forest to 285 acres.

What is a Conservation Agreement/Easement?

Conservation agreements/easements are deeds transferred from a land owner to a land trust, government, county, or town. These tools protect land by limiting uses, such as development, to protect the conservation values of land. The land owner gives up development rights while retaining ownership of the land.

What Happens When a Land Trust Purchases a Conservation Agreement/Easement?

The land trust takes on perpetual obligation to monitor and enforce the restrictions on the land outlined in the deed of conservation easement.

What May Be Done with the 100 Acres of Land?

- A parking lot or bus circle may be installed to easily and safely transport students to a School Forest access point.
- A structure for nature-based education may be built, such as a barn, outdoor classroom, or pavilion.
- Other facilities for educational purposes or public benefit may be constructed, such as restrooms or a greenhouse.

How Will the Sale Price for the Conservation Agreement/Easement be Determined?

Purchase price will be the value of the development interest in the land as determined by a Fair Market Value Appraisal conducted by a qualified, licensed New York State appraiser.

What is the Value of the Land?

A preliminary appraisal by McGrath & Co. seven years ago determined the discounted present value of the development rights of the 185-acre Garrison School Forest to be approximately \$300,000. A new appraisal will need to be commissioned by the School District to establish the discounted present value of the 2030 development rights in 2016.

How Will Revenue from the Sale of the Conservation Agreement/Easement be Paid?

It could be paid in a lump sum, or in a stream of payments over time. The revenue could provide funding for something the School District needs and/or desires. For instance, funds from the sale could finance improvements like a bus circle, greenhouse, classroom space, etc. constructed on the donated land off Snake Hill Road.

How Will this Affect School Taxes?

The Garrison Golf Club, LLC currently pays property and school taxes on the 100 acres to be donated; the land would be taken off the tax rolls if it was donated to the School District.

How Will this Affect Access to the School Forest?

The public will continue to have access to the School Forest, in the same manner as currently offered. The Garrison School could institute temporary closures, if required, to support School educational activities. Gated access to the 100 acres off of Snake Road would be controlled by the School District, presumably with the gate continuing to be locked, unless school activities were taking place.

How Will this Affect Legal Responsibility?

HHLT will become a partner with the Garrison School in addressing legal issues relating to violations of the conservation agreement. HHLT's conservation defense fund will share the legal costs associated with disputes regarding encroachment on, or impeded access to, the School Forest by adjoining landowners, or where the conservation values protected by the Agreement are threatened. As the property owner, the Garrison School will jointly assume all liability for public access, as it does now on the current School Forest..

May the School District Sell the Land in the Future if there is a Conservation Agreement/Easement on the Property?

Yes; but, the conservation easement would remain in force for subsequent owners, so the land would continue to be protected.

Additional Information:

Andy Chmar, Executive Director of Hudson Highlands Land Trust, presented the proposal to the Garrison School Board at the School Board on May 20, 2015. Fred Osborn shared the intentions of the Osborn Family at the time that the School Forest was donated to the Garrison School. This began the formal discussion process on the proposal. The Board of Education is currently vetting the proposal. Materials presented to the board at the presentation are available to the public on the hhlt.org website.