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Commission Votes to Approve Kennedy Family Property Plan

By IAN FEIN

Ensuring that Kennedy family members will remain stewards of their rare Aquinnah estate into the next generation, the Martha's Vineyard Commission last week approved a subdivision plan for the 366-acre property between Moshup Trail and Squibnocket Pond.

Owner Caroline B. Kennedy told commission members after a 10-2 vote last Thursday night that her family was committed to taking care of the unspoiled land, with its windswept dunes, freshwater ponds and coastal heathlands. And she reiterated that the purpose of the estate plan was not to develop the land, but to guarantee that it would be passed on to her three teenaged children.

"We put a lot of care and effort into this plan, and a lot of thought," Mrs. Kennedy told the commission. "I believe it is such a special property, and I know my children feel the same way. Obviously that sentiment is shared across the Island, so that's something that we're very conscious of."

The property was bought by her mother, the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, in 1978 from the Hornblower family for \$1.1 million. At present only three dwellings exist on the property.

The commission reviewed the family estate plan subdivision as a development of regional impact (DRI).

"We do feel that we are stewards of this property, and we hope to be very happy here for many generations. This plan is a really critical component in our ability to do that," Mrs. Kennedy said. "It is our hope to keep living there as we have been."

During two months of commission review and two hours of debate last week, the Kennedy family earned high marks for their stewardship of the land.

Commission member Douglas Sederholm of Chilmark reflected on the present undeveloped status of the property when he voted in favor of the subdivision plan. "This is not as good as the current situation, but we're not here because the current situation can stay as it is for rest of eternity," Mr. Sederholm said. "You have to plan for the future, and this is a lot better than what else could have been."

The subdivision plan is unusual because it will reduce the number of existing lots from more than 30 to seven, one of which will be designated as forever unbuildable. The new lots will range in size from 30 to 100 acres, and will wipe from the books former subdivision plans that existed for the property prior to the family's purchase. One plan set out 150 lots, and another more than 50.

The Kennedy-Scholssberg family in their plan also agreed to preserve more than 300 acres by

restricting potential development to less than 15 per cent of the entire property. Mr. Sederholm made note of those numbers in response to commission members who sought greater oversight of future development.

"Almost 90 per cent of land is guaranteed to never be developed, and I think we have to keep that in mind," Mr. Sederholm said. "They're huge lots and they're highly restrictive already."

Dissenters Megan Ottens-Sargent of Aquinnah and Andrew Woodruff of West Tisbury both argued that the commission should maintain greater control over any development on such a sensitive and strategic property. The subdivision plan identifies no new buildings at this time, and the property owners will not have to return to the commission until they build a fourth new dwelling on any single lot.

Ms. Ottens-Sargent noted the dozen protected species found throughout the property's diverse habitats, and said she hopes the town and landowners will work with state environmental agencies before planning any future development. The Massachusetts Endangered Species Program describes Red Gate Farm as one of the most important tracts of land in the commonwealth. "This area is a jewel - not only to the town of Aquinnah, but beyond the Island," Ms. Ottens-Sargent said.

Mr. Woodruff had specific concerns about two lots in the subdivision that are slated for possible sale outside the family. He said development of those two lots - one bounded by Herring Creek and State Road, the other by the Atlantic Ocean and Moshup Trail - posed the greatest potential for environmental and scenic impacts.

"While I've been on the commission, we've spent a lot of time talking about screening and landscaping," Mr. Woodruff said. "And in this case, with two of the most scenic view sheds in Aquinnah and perhaps on the Island, I feel we've abdicated our responsibility to do that."

Aquinnah town officials attended the meeting Thursday, and urged support of the plan, as they have throughout the commission review. They noted that town boards will have broad regulatory authority over any buildings eventually proposed for the property, which falls within as many as four districts of critical planning concern (DCPCs) and as state-designated priority habitat will trigger extensive environmental review and permitting.

Mr. Woodruff raised the possibility that the Aquinnah zoning regulations might be overturned in court, but other commission members expressed more faith in the power and the scope of the DCPC designations. Voters in Aquinnah agreed some years ago to designate the entire town as a DCPC.

"Aquinnah gives us a unique situation because they are the only town on the Island that has ever been so committed to planning that they asked the Martha's Vineyard Commission to declare the whole town a district of critical planning concern," said commission chairman Linda Sibley. "I feel that we need to respect the extraordinary efforts that the town has made by trusting them to do some of the things that we usually insist on doing ourselves," she continued.

"I want to complement the town, as well as the applicant for having the good taste to be in that town," Mrs. Sibley said.

The meeting ended with similar expressions of good will between the landowners and Aquinnah officials. During the commission review, the Kennedy-Schlossberg family offered to donate up to \$15,000 of the town's share to the Massachusetts Estuaries Project and \$100,000 toward the town affordable housing committee.

"In general, the feeling in town is that we love having this neighbor," said commission member Katherine Newman of Aquinnah. "The kind of development that is planned for this property really fits in with the community we have established."

Mrs. Kennedy said that the feeling was mutual. "Aquinnah been such a wonderful community for us, my mother, and my family," she said.

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