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Project Aims to Open Moshup Trail Vista

By IAN FEIN

The first time Carlos Montoya came to the Vineyard, he took a ride up-Island and turned onto Moshup Trail - the unmistakable three-mile length of road that hugs the western edge of the Island.

"Oh my god," Mr. Montoya said this month, recalling his impression from that 1970 visit. "It was unbelievable."

Now a 10-year resident of Moshup Trail, he characterizes it as the single most important stretch of land in Aquinnah. "It is simply one of the most magical places," Mr. Montoya said.

And from an ecological standpoint, it is also one of the most rare - home to one of the few remaining tracts of coastal heathland habitat left in the world. So Mr. Montoya, a landscape architect who specializes in native and seaside plantings, has proposed an ambitious restoration effort to remove stands of invasive trees that have sprung up along the western, water side of the road.

The project would aim to restore ocean vistas and protect the fragile habitat of a stretch of land that has been the focus of more than a decade and millions of dollars of conservation work.



The Aquinnah community preservation committee will hold an informal hearing on the proposal on Thursday at 7:30 p.m. in the town hall. Actual work on the project would not begin until Mr. Montoya received the necessary permits and secured town funding.

Since he first aired the idea this winter, however, Mr. Montoya has received endorsements from Island conservation organizations (including Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, Vineyard Conservation Society and The Nature Conservancy), the state Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program and the Aquinnah selectmen.

An environmental official with the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) this week also offered strong support.

"[Mr. Montoya] is obviously a great resource manager and certainly knows his species," said tribal natural resources director Bret Stearns. "I think it's a wonderful idea and a necessary action."

The Moshup Trail area is a relatively harsh landscape marked by salt, wind, sand and bogs. Mr. Montoya said the habitat historically kept all of the native plant species uniquely low and stunted.

"What's extraordinary about the conditions on Moshup Trail is that the process of succession is so slow," he said. "It holds everything down."

But when the road was built in the late 1950s, engineers filled in old bogs and raised the topography for the paved surface. This created a dry, artificial platform for plants and trees that otherwise would not have made it there, according to Mr. Montoya.

"The roadside became a completely foreign, exotic development," he said. "And things grow so slowly out there it didn't really become a problem until now, almost 50 years later, when the trees are 12 feet high and on their way toward completely screening out the view."

Of the invasive infestations along the roadside, Mr. Montoya listed bittersweet, Japanese black pine and Russian olives as the primary culprits. He said that native oak and cherry trees also have posed a problem, because they would not normally survive in the Moshup Trail area.



The trees and invasive plants outcompete other native species and block out sunlight from the low-lying areas. The state Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program has found at least eight protected plant and animal species in the nearby vicinity, including the threatened northern harrier and arethusa orchid.

The Moshup Trail area has long been identified as a place of special importance. It was designated by the Martha's Vineyard Commission as a district of critical planning concern (DCPC) in 1980, and in the mid-1990s a group of town boards and Island conservation groups joined forces to launch a cooperative effort dubbed the Moshup Trail Project.

Some 40 acres of globally rare habitat have since been preserved, and though the actual land purchases have slowed in recent years, the project was recognized from the outset as one of the most complex and expensive conservation initiatives on the Island. Early efforts included land taken by eminent domain, as well as assistance from the state Department of Environmental Affairs.

Sheriff's Meadow Foundation executive director Richard (Dick) Johnson, in a letter supporting the restoration proposal this spring, said it would enhance aspects of the conservation project - both from an ecological and aesthetic perspective.

"More and more trees are growing up along the roadside, blocking the very views that we worked so hard to protect," Mr. Johnson wrote in the letter.

Original language from the DCPC designation also captured the significance of the roadside views along Moshup Trail.

"This visual connection is felt to be of great importance, and Islanders and visitors alike derive great satisfaction from a trip along this nearly wild oceanfront," the commission document says. "The windblown, stunted vegetation and hummocky topography lend a further uniqueness to the area and make it an important asset to the valued diversity of Vineyard landscapes."

Because the road is considered a DCPC, Mr. Montoya will need to obtain permits from both the town planning board and conservation commission before he can take down any trees. According to Mr. Montoya, himself a former member of the town conservation commission, an official from the Department of Environmental Protection has visited the site and said the restoration would have no impact on nearby wetlands.

Mr. Montoya also noted that all of the work would be done within the right of way, and not on private property.

He has proposed to do the project in three stages, over the course of two or three seasons. As a rough estimate, Mr. Montoya has suggested that the first of the three phases would cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000.

He wants to pay for the project using money collected through the Community Preservation Act (CPA) - a program that combines property tax surcharges with matching state contributions to fund local projects for open space, affordable housing and historic preservation.

After receiving the necessary permits, Mr. Montoya would then bring the proposal back to the community preservation committee. If the committee endorsed the idea, it would still require a town meeting vote to release the funds.

A member of the town community preservation committee, Mr. Montoya said he believes the proposal could be a great use of open space CPA funds.

"It is just the most amazing area," he said. "Some of the green grass turns to a cinnamon color during the autumn. And in the winter, when the sun goes down behind the dunes there at about 5:30, the whole place is purple."

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