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Bennett Sandler's Statement on Otsego Land Trust's RFP for Brookwood Point

The town board has been asked by town citizens to submit a proposal to the Otsego Land Trust to acquire half or all of the 22 acre parcel known as Brookwood Point. The rationale has been stated that the town should do this to keep Brookwood open to the public by making it a town park. Ideas have been presented to the Town Board which would help offset costs of a park through long term leases to concessioners who would build infrastructure, pay for insurance, and maintain the property, negating the heavy lift of starting from scratch the process of building a Town Parks Department. To me, all of this sounds doable, albeit complicated if, in fact, Brookwood Point were eminently going to fall out of the hands of a owner who was not dedicated to protecting the natural and historical environment, to maintaining public access to the site, and to promoting a quiet and serene place to experience the lake.

Is Brookwood threatened? The RFP does solicit proposals to sell the northern half of the property! So, one could say that yes, the integrity of the property is in jeopardy. However, the dilapidated house has been in disrepair for many years and has forced both the Cook Foundation and the OLT to keep visitors away from the house and away from the north end of the property. In effect, this portion of the property has been off limits for years and its sale to a private owner may not represent a significant alteration of what is currently available to the public right now. If this portion of the property is sold to a private buyer, local land use laws limit what can be built within 500 feet of the lake. The Army Corps of Engineers, the New York State Departments of Environmental Conservation and Transportation all have jurisdiction over forests, streams, wetlands, and lake bottoms on or adjacent to this parcel. And, most significantly, the Otsego Land Trust, expects to further constrain development on the parcel by installing a conservation easement on the land. As for the possibility that the Land Trust will eventually sell the southern half as well, all I can say is that the federal grant monies recently awarded would need to be repaid plus a 20% penalty should the land change hands in the next ten years which is a partial disincentive. Additionally, I would think the Land Trust would create a serious credibility problem for itself if it did sell the southern half at a later time. Certainly, those concerns could be alleviated if the Land Trust were to implement a conservation easement on the southern half of the property as well limiting development to it current state.

Is the Land Trust capable of managing the property? I believe so. I believe the OLT has the staff, the knowledge, and the mission to be the best steward of Brookwood. Some examples of the level of detail they bring to managing Brookwood include contracting detailed wetland surveys, the installation of ADA compliant walking trails, and the successful application for grant monies to install a kayak rental kiosk and improve driveway access to the property. These improvements have happened on top of their ongoing maintenance of the garden and grounds which remain open to the public. The Otsego Land Trust is one of the most significant forces preserving land in Otsego County, so why shouldn't they be trusted to find the right owner for such a sensitive parcel. Yes, part of Bob Cook's legacy will be reduced if the north half gets sold but, hopefully, in a way that maintains the best of what's left for all to enjoy!

At this time, I am disinclined to submit a proposal on behalf of the town for any portion of Brookwood Point, not because I don't think the property should be a town park but because I believe the OLT is the most qualified and capable organization to steward Brookwood Point into the future.

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I have expressly communicated to Mr. Levine and others on the Otsego Land Trust board, that the town would welcome the opportunity to carefully explore how to partner with the Land Trust on Brookwood Point should the RFP prove unsuccessful or if, at any point in the future, the Land Trust decides the southern property becomes too onerous to maintain. This process will take time and require ample public participation, perhaps even a referendum, before committing public funding but the Town recognizes and values Mr. Cook's gift to the community.