

Saving land would keep park in Clifton Park



Some in the town are hoping to save a 34-acre site in Clifton Park from development. The Shenendehowa school district is selling the land, which is between Moe Road and Maxwell Drive. Chris Churchill / Times Union



Clifton Park

The Capital Region's hipsters, all four of them, get a kick out of mocking Clifton Park. If you live in the suburb and are learning this for

the first time, I apologize. I hope I didn't just ruin your day. But there's something about your lifestyle that just drives the cool people nuts. *Look at them with their low taxes, great schools and violence-free streets! Hahaha. What fools!!* OK, there's some jealousy there. And let's be honest: In this region's long battle between suburbs and cities, suburbs are winning big. That's been true for decades and remains so, despite the hype over a boomlet of downtown apartments in our cities. But it's also true that, to outsiders, especially those from more urban precincts, the developed parts of Clifton Park can feel ... *what's the right word? ... this will require some sensitivity ...*

Soulless.

Before I'm denounced at the next Town Board meeting, I'll say that the still-rural parts of Clifton Park, such as Vischer Ferry, are darn charming. But I'll dare anyone to find even a nick of charm in the area around Route 146 and Clifton Country Road.

There's no *there* there, which is a way of saying that it could be anywhere. One Olive Garden-Staples-Panera-Taco Bell-Starbucks neighborhood pretty much looks like every other.

To its credit, Clifton Park seems to know the area needs improving and has therefore embarked on re-creating it as a "town center" — you know, the kind of place where somebody might elect to go for a walk without first upping their life insurance coverage.

Which brings me (belatedly, I admit) to the point of this column: The effort to save 34 acres of woodland that's hidden away near the chain-store tangle described above.

The land is owned by the Shenendehowa school district, and it's for sale. In fact, the district is accepting offers for the land through the end of October, with \$1.5 million set as the minimum bid.

Given the desirability of Clifton Park, despite the whole soullessness thing, it's likely that developers want the land like a Saint Bernard wants a steak. It's drool-worthy.

But when some others think about the land, they envision a park that would be right at the heart of an emerging town center. As Congress Park is to Saratoga Springs, this land could be to Clifton Park — but only if it's saved from development.

"Once it's gone, it's gone forever," said Susan Burton, a member of Friends of Clifton Park Open Space, which is campaigning to save the

property and arguing that it could help give the town the sense of place it lacks.

It really is lovely land. I know because I went for a long walk there last week on one of those sunny late-summer afternoons where you can almost smell the coming of fall.

The land, crisscrossed by trails, is actively used. Many people, it seems, follow the route I took, entering on Moe Road, crossing the site and exiting behind a bank branch on Maxwell Drive.

The land isn't wild or dramatic. This won't be mistaken for the fight to save ANWR.

But the acreage, with its towering pine trees, is a remarkable asset given its proximity to so much development.

Here's the good news: The town has decided it wants the land and is submitting a bid.

"When you think about the opportunities there, not only now but decades into the future, it's exciting," Supervisor Phil Barrett said.

End of column?

No, because there is also bad news: Barrett doesn't believe the town's bid will compete with those expected from deep-pocketed developers. (Barrett, no dummy, declined to say how much the town will offer, because doing so would tip its hand.)

It would be easy for me to opine that the school district should just accept less money for the good of the community. After all, I don't have to answer to its taxpayers, including those who live in neighboring Halfmoon.

But it does seem like a compromise is possible here, if smart people put their heads together.

That's especially true if it's remembered that existing land in the "town center" will eventually become more valuable — and produce more tax revenues for both the town and schools — if there is preserved parkland nearby.

For Clifton Park, there's something significant at stake.

It's not a fight over the soul of its town center. It's a decision that may determine whether it has a soul at all.

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