

Land Should Be Landmarked

Editorial

December 12, 2024

A call to give landmark status to about 30 acres in Wainscott recently bought by East Hampton Town should be heeded. The one-time Osborn farmland extends from Wainscott Main Street to Wainscott Pond, contains rare coastal grassland, and has been described as one of the town's most iconic vistas. The deal is the most expensive land buy since the community preservation fund was established more than 20 years ago. Ronald Lauder, its former owner, sold it to the town at a loss, \$10 million less than he paid in 2021. The tax advantage to Mr. Lauder may be sweet as a result, but preserving the land is sweeter.

In a plea to help assure the property's preservation over the long haul, members of the Wainscott Heritage Project, a private group, have asked the town board to designate the entire parcel as an important historical site. Their concern is warranted — East Hampton Town officials have gotten in the shortsighted habit of removing park status from various sites in order for their development for ostensibly public benefits.

While unthinkable today, a future town government might set greedy eyes on the Wainscott land for some purpose other than open space and a nod to the town's history. A local designation as a landmark could ease the way for the former Lauder property to gain a spot on the State Register of Historic Places — a valuable distinction. The register is a list of "properties significant in history, architecture, engineering, landscape design, archeology, and culture."

As a largely undisturbed site, the area around Wainscott Pond could well contain evidence of the area's original human occupants, as documented at nearby Georgica Pond and Mecox Bay. The land likely was also farmed by some of the area's enslaved people of African heritage. As a monument to them and the people who were here before the Europeans, honoring the land, too, would seem essential.

For the time being, the town board intends to designate an old farmhouse and adjacent structure as historic landmarks. We see no reason not to extend this to the entire property.