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Development a threat to nature preserve?



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

Dunlap Lake, located on Darien Land Trust property, borders the proposed development at 3 Parklands Drive, currently an office space, in Darien. Neighbors say they are worried about potential runoff from the building into the lake.

Darien residents say housing complex would harm woodlands — but its caretakers disagree

By Raga Justin

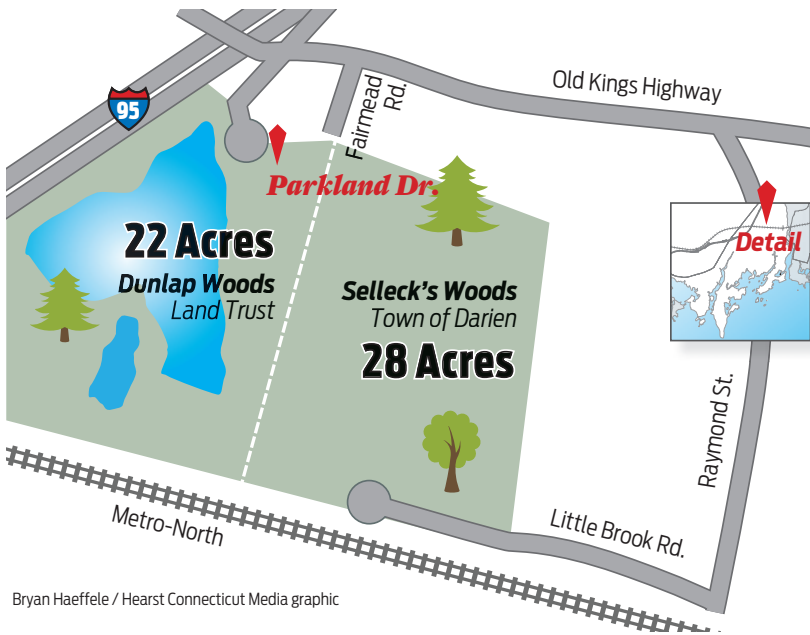
DARIEN — The open woods that border a proposed housing development in Darien are still and serene, the silence broken by an occasional bird call or wind whistling through trees.

Now the integrity of the 50-acre preserve, which abuts an office building owned by Parklands LLC, has become a rallying cry for neighbors who oppose the conversion of that building into a 60-unit housing complex.

Nearby residents have appeared in droves at recent public hearings hosted by the Planning and Zoning Commission to argue against the planned redevelopment of 3 Parklands Drive. Critics have expressed varied concerns — like increased traffic congestion, the proposed building's height and density and that the town does not require an environmental impact statement — but much of the criticism has fo-

Proposed project abuts nature preserve

This 50-acre nature preserve is central to a fierce debate between developers and nearby residents who oppose the conversion of the 3 Parklands office building into a 60-unit housing complex. Neighbors have cited potential environmental impacts as a reason to stop the redevelopment — but the preserve's caretakers have signed off on the project.



Bryan Haeffele / Hearst Connecticut Media graphic

cused on how the development could harm the nature preserve.

"I know people right now are saying, 'Well, nothing bad has been

shown to me about the impact of this building on our nature preserve," said resident Natalie Tallis at

See Complex on A6

A 'MULTIFACETED DIAMOND'

Fran Dorf remembered as prolific writer, understanding therapist

By Brianna Gurciullo

STAMFORD — The moment when family and friends of Fran Dorf said their final farewell to the wife, mother, grandmother, writer, therapist and long-time Stamford resident could have been a scene from one of her books or plays.

The sun was setting, said Bob Dorf, her husband of more than four decades, and a fog hung over the cemetery.

"The only way people



Contributed photo

Fran Dorf and husband, Bob Dorf, on their wedding day.

could pay their respects at the cemetery was lighted by the headlights of a pickup truck. It's as if she wrote it

herself," Dorf said days after the funeral. "It was a Fran Dorf production in a very weird way — very

weird but appropriate."

Fran Dorf died last month after a battle with leukemia. She would have turned 68 on Dec. 27.

In addition to writing novels and stage plays, Fran Dorf penned screenplays, poems and essays. In the past year, she also tried her hand at oil painting.

After the death of their son, Michael, in the 1990s, Fran Dorf earned a Master of Social Work degree and became a licensed clinical social worker with a focus on grief counseling. She had previously earned a master's degree in psychology.

"I'd say all my major works (novels, plays and screenplays) are about the same thing: Human beings

See Fran Dorf on A6

COVID-19 hospitalizations on the rise

Number of patients hospitalized with COVID-19

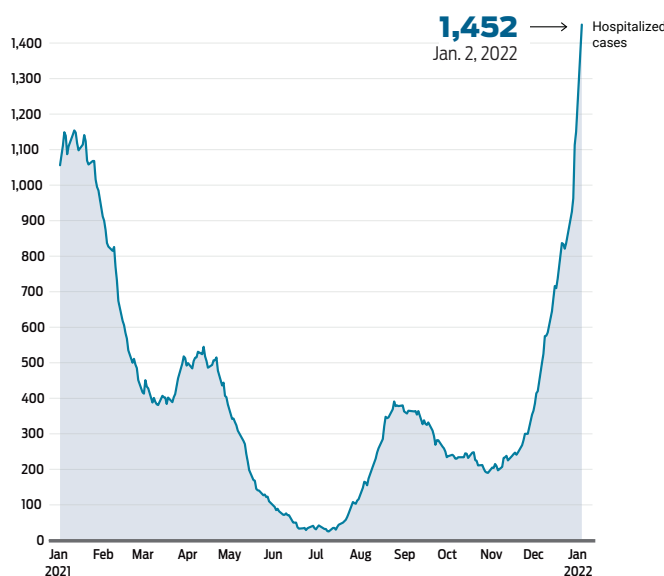


Chart: Hearst Connecticut Media Source: CT DPH

State's COVID hospitalizations most since last May, data shows

Lamont not reinstating mask mandate — even as cases climb

By Nicholas Rondinone and John Moritz

The latest surge in new COVID cases appeared to show little sign of slowing through the New Year's holiday as 301 more people were hospitalized over the weekend, driving the total number well above what was seen during last winter's wave of infections.

According to the state's data, Connecticut COVID hospitalizations on Monday reached 1,452 patients, about 180 more than the peak seen in December 2020. The last time it was

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this high was May 4, 2020, when 1,500 patients were in the hospital with COVID-19.

The number of those who are fully vaccinated in Connecticut hospitals has been rapidly rising to more than 450 patients as of Monday. For the first time since the state started reporting the

See COVID on A5

After rush for at-home COVID tests, mayor pushes drive-thru sites

By John Moritz

STAMFORD — Mayor Caroline Simmons on Monday urged residents seeking a COVID-19 test to use one of the city's pop-up sites, a day after the city's distribution of 20,000 at-home tests led to gridlocked streets and exhausted supplies.

"We're encouraging everyone, the Rippowam site and the Cove Island site, they're definitely less frantic

See Testing on A5



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

Mayor Caroline Simmons gives an update on the city's COVID efforts at Stamford Hospital on Monday.

All of Gov. Lamont's New Year's Eve rapid tests came from CVS



COMMENTARY

It finally came clear to Gov. Ned Lamont late Wednesday night that Connecticut's shipment of 3 million rapid, at-home COVID tests wasn't coming despite his

public promises including on CNN. Faced with a dire crisis on the eve of an election year, he decided to ask CEOs for help.

High on his list for the next morning's calls: Karen S. Lynch, for former Aetna head in Hartford who was promoted last winter to CEO of CVS Health, the Rhode Island-based parent company of CVS and Aetna.

Lamont talked with Lynch, then returned early

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COMPLEX

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a Nov. 30 public hearing. “But that doesn’t mean that if an appropriate third party environmental impact study was done, that there wouldn’t be problems.”

The preserve is actually two parcels of land — the 28-acre Selleck’s Woods, owned by the town, and the 22-acre Dunlap Woods, owned by the Darien Land Trust. A small group of preservationists are tasked with the land’s upkeep.

Yet these caretakers say they do not have outstanding objections to the conversion of the neighboring property. Both the Darien Land Trust and the nonprofit organization Friends of Selleck’s Woods have submitted statements in support of the proposed housing development.

In the past few months, the Planning and Zoning Commission has conducted three public hearings on the matter. They will likely make a decision in late January on whether the redevelopment can move forward.

“This is an inflection point. Is it a perfect situation? No, it rarely ever will be,” said Den Frelinghuysen, who is on both the Darien Land Trust and Friends of Selleck’s Woods boards. “Now we have this point where we think there’s going to be a net benefit to not only the community but also to the environmental asset, the land.”

Frelinghuysen and other trustees say they understand and can sympathize with the neighbors’ concerns. But as the land’s stewards, their primary job is to care for the preserve only, they said. Since the developer, Bob Gillon, first proposed the property’s conversion, trustees have worked with him to ensure the surrounding open space will be protected — and in some cases, augmented.

Environmental worries

Residents who shared their environmental worries have spoken about runoff entering Dunlap Lake, potential disturbance of wildlife, tree removal and over-use of the property.

But the preserve’s stewards said Gillon has set forth mitigation plans for the potential environmental impacts in question. Gillon has also collaborated with the



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

Dunlap Lake, located on Darien Land Trust property, borders the proposed development at 3 Parklands Drive, currently an office space, in Darien on Nov. 23. Neighbors say they are worried about potential runoff from the office into the lake.

Darien Land Trust on structural improvements to the property, like adding parking spots so more visitors can gain entrance into the woods from the Parklands parking lot.

A major concern is the existing runoff from the building — and a recently-built senior care facility, the Residences at Selleck’s Woods — that already drains into Dunlap Lake. The asphalt that is currently in place causes much of that runoff.

Trustees said that Gillon came to them with a proposed stormwater management plan to mitigate runoff and improve runoff quality. The developer has promised that the entire access way to the property will be permeable, “almost better than dirt” for water collection, said longtime Selleck’s Woods preservationist Chris Filmer.

History of neglect

Residents have also said that increased foot traffic could hurt the preserve.

But for Filmer, who has devoted decades to restoring the preserve, the woods are

meant for public benefit, not solely for a few residents, he said.

He said that before people became aware of the land’s potential, the preserve was in disrepair, trashed by vandals and ridden with garbage. The lake was filled with oil slicks traced to bordering Interstate 95 and the Exit 13 rest stop.

Beginning in the 1990s, Filmer and a small band of preservationists formed Friends of Selleck’s Woods, conducting site evaluations and learning about habitat conservation. Filmer formed relationships with the Department of Transportation and the rest stop developers, jockeying for better protections for the land. They cleaned the woods and began managing its extensive trail system.

Now, Filmer actively encourages more people to visit this “diamond in the rough” he was largely responsible for. He said he would even welcome 60 new people watching over and caring for the woods in their backyard.

“This becomes a matter of human behavior. Not what kind of building is built

next door,” Frelinghuysen said.

Protecting existing resources

Other issues involving garbage and tree removal are also addressed in the site plan, Gillon said. He has promised the land trust that the new building will store garbage inside. Additionally, there are nine mature trees slated for removal at the 3 Parklands site, but Gillon said he plans on adding 109 new trees, 700 shrubs and 700 perennials along the edge of the parking lot extending into the woods.

The developers are also replacing the commercial lights that shine into the woods in order to minimize disruption to wildlife, Darien Land Trust trustees said.

Gillon said he has a monetary stake in preserving the woods as best he can.

“That nature preserve — and keeping it pristine and enhancing it — is a benefit for my potential renters,” he said.

Construction process

The construction process is a point of concern, the environmentalists acknowledge. Residents have said they felt blindsided by construction issues, including faulty drainage, for the senior care facility, also developed by Gillon.

Gillon said he did not build that building and “was not happy” with the construction company that did.

“It adversely impacted Selleck’s Woods, people being able to come down and enjoy it,” Gillon said. “It affected my tenants. So I’m really motivated to do this construction project the right way.”

Gillon said there will be a pathway for temporary access into the woods. There will also be a temporary retention basin to catch stormwater runoff over the length of construction.

Members from the Darien Land Trust and Friends of Selleck’s Woods will be monitoring construction if the project moves forward, Frelinghuysen said.

“If we see something, I’m confident that they’ll address it,” Frelinghuysen said.

“It’s a very visible property that a lot of people are taking interest in, which I think is wonderful,” he added. “Something that’s come out of this is how many voices have been speaking with great concern about our land, and this particular resource. That’s a good thing.”

FRAN DORF

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in psychological conflict with their inner demons,” she wrote on one of her personal websites.

Her published novels include “A Reasonable Madness,” “Flight” and “Saving Elijah” — the last of which she had started writing when Michael died at age 3. After their loss, Bob Dorf said his wife helped establish a program for toddlers with special needs at the Stamford JCC.

In his eulogy, Bob Dorf said he referred to his late wife as a “multifaceted diamond.”

That was confirmed at the funeral, he said, as people Fran had known from the Center for Hope in Darien learned about her prolific writing. Meanwhile, people from her theater group learned for the first time about her work as a grief therapist, which was “part of how she healed herself” after losing Michael, Bob Dorf said.

The moment when family and friends said their final farewell to the novelist, therapist and longtime Stamford resident could have been a scene from one of her books or plays.

Her small practice was “as much for her as it was for the people she helped,” Dorf said.

Also among Fran’s eulogists was screenwriter Christopher Carlson, with whom she wrote a screenplay for a potential German film based on her first novel, “A Reasonable Madness.”

“My hope is it will go forward, and about a year from now, we’ll be able to have a memorial for Fran and ... a showing of her film,” Dorf said.

Fran Dorf had begun writing a memoir before her death, and Bob said that their daughter, Rachel Dorf Gotler, plans to finish it.

Rachel, who is a psychologist, and her husband, Ross Gotler, have two children: Maya, 11, and Jacob, 7. Maya has inherited Fran’s love for writing, said Bob Dorf, a writer himself. He is the co-author of “The Startup Owner’s Manual: The Step-By-Step Guide for Building a Great Company.”

Fran, a Philadelphia native, and Bob first met in a bar in New York City. Both were in their 20s,



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

Bob Dorf, husband of the late Fran Dorf, is reflected in the mirror beside a collection of Fran’s books published in several languages at his home in Stamford on Dec. 30. Fran Dorf, a grief counselor and published author, recently died of leukemia.



Contributed photo

An article about Fran Dorf is published in The Advocate after the release of her first novel “A Reasonable Madness” in 1990.

working in public relations at the time, he recalled.

For one of their first dates, they went to “Great Adventure” in New Jersey. He had just gotten a new car — with a vinyl roof on



Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

Bob Dorf, husband of the late Fran Dorf, shows a photo of him with Fran dressed as clowns at the 1980 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade at his home in Stamford on Dec. 30.

the back and a glass roof on the front. As they were driving through the safari park area toward a section with baboons, they were warned that the animals might eat vinyl tops. Dorf,

thinking the new vinyl would be fine, signed a release to continue on into the baboon section.

Moments later, his car was covered with baboons. He turned left and right; sped up and

braked, trying to shake the animals off the car.

“Fran, meanwhile, is worried that there is no steel between the vinyl top and the inside of the car and that the baboons are going to be sitting next to us and tearing us apart in moments,” Dorf said.

After assuring Fran that there was steel protecting them, her worry became that the animals were damaging the car. Dorf insisted they weren’t. Fran insisted they were.

“How do you know?” he asked her. She told him to look up. Lo and behold, there was a baboon with a chunk of vinyl in its mouth.

Fran used to lay out the tale at storytelling events, Dorf said.

“Do you think I ever saw that guy again?” she would ask the audience. Bob Dorf would then stand up, and Fran would tell the crowd how long they had been married.

“It was sort of symptomatic of our life together,” Dorf said about the baboon story. “We’re always doing crazy stuff.”