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## NEWS

### How To Save Takanassee? Area officials host forum on preserving former beach club, lifesaving station

By Matt Lynch

LONG BRANCH - Assembly-man Sean Kean (R-Monmouth) and Long Branch Councilman Brian Unger hosted a forum on the future of the Lake Takanassee Beach Club in the City Council chambers last Tuesday.

The forum featured an assemblage of environmentalists, conservationists, policy wonks, historians and elected officials united in a desire to preserve a rare slice of oceanfront open space.

But those who are interested in preserving the space face several formidable challenges.

Takanassee Beach Club, which is privately owned, is presently under contract for sale to a developer.

Should that sale not go through for any reasons, those wishing to preserve Takanassee would still face the challenge of raising millions of dollars to pay for its purchase from the current owners.

"To me Takanassee represents such a priceless time capsule of the 19th century," said Frank Esposito, Ph.D., a Kean University historian. "To lose that, to me, is going to be a tragedy if that were to occur."

Once known as U.S. Life Saving Station #5, Takanassee was just one of many stations located between Cape May and Sandy Hook at the turn of 20th century. Few of these Coast Guard precursors still exist.

Three significant structures remain at the beach club including one dating back to 1878. Preservation New Jersey listed the beach club as one of the state's "10 Most Endangered" historical sites in its 2006 survey.

The state Department of Environmental Protection is reviewing a Coastal Area Facility Review Act (CAFRA) permit application filed by members of the Peters family and Takanassee Developers, LLC seeking approval for 21 residential units at the beach club. The managing partner of the LLC has been identified as Isaac Cheri of Allenhurst. A lawyer for one of the longtime owners of the property indicated that the contract with Cheri currently sets the sale price at \$16 million and that figure increases to \$17 million shortly. The property is currently assessed at nearly \$10 million according to statements made Tuesday evening. The wife of one of the owners said that the property contributed \$80,000 in property taxes to the city last year.

CAFRA approval of the proposed development would essentially halt efforts to preserve the property.

However, if the CAFRA application were denied, the city could have an opportunity to purchase the property provided it could come up with the substantial funding necessary. In an earlier press release, Kean had said that he would introduce legislation seeking \$14 million in state funding to help with the purchase.

Kean, who is running for the State Senate in the 11th District, has not introduced the legislation he proposed.

Mayor Adam Schneider called Kean's actions "political grandstanding," while Kean called it an easily correctible "oversight" within the earlier press release.

Kean, Unger and others have now turned their focus towards securing funds through the state's Green Acres program. Kean said that DEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson indicated to him that in an urban setting such as Long Branch, a project of this type could receive up to 75 percent funding through Green Acres. Unger said that he was told that the beach club would become the number one project if an application were submitted to Green Acres.

While the Green Acres program is currently unfunded, Kean said, it is a "foregone conclusion" that state legislators will appropriate funds for the program in the current budget.

Some two hours into the meeting, a lawyer representing Virginia "Ginger" Peters, one of the property owners, engaged in a tense exchange with Unger and Kean over this very issue.

"I don't understand," Unger told Peters' lawyer, Harry V. Osborne II, at one point about Osborne's client's reluctance to see

the city potentially purchase the property, "if the money is the same money you would get otherwise or very close to it. What's the difference?" Osborne countered: "If the money was there and was something other than pie in the sky we would have something to talk about."

Reached for comment on Monday, Schneider expressed serious reservations about the handling of the situation. "I've done it this way too long to think this is appropriate," Schneider said. "To tell people what they want to hear is a philosophy that has to fail. The reality is that land acquisition is very, very difficult."

Earlier in the meeting, Peters approached the council herself. Peters uses a wheelchair, and cerebral palsy and spinal stenosis made each word an effort. Though at times her words were difficult to decipher, her passion was obvious.

"It's our property, not your property," she said at one point. Later she added, "People need to see the whole picture."

Three family members own the property. Two support the sale, while a third only agreed after a legal ruling. Tensions remain, as was evident by exchanges amongst family members during Tuesday's forum.

"We are committed to giving you a fair price," Unger told Peters. "We just don't want to see another luxury condominium development. We just don't feel it serves the public and we feel that strongly."

Though the details remain uncertain, proponents of preserving the site appear to be leaning towards continuing to operate the property as a beach club with increased access for fisherman, surfers and others.

By the close of the forum, those attending agreed to meet again in three weeks.

Attendees at the forum were repeatedly urged to contact the mayor and let them know of their interest in preserving the beach club. As Unger pointed out, eventually, the city council will need to support the preservation of the beach club for preservationists to have a chance to succeed.

Schneider is not opposed to preserving the property. Rather, he expresses a healthy dose of skepticism that the funding could be put in place to make this a reality.

"I've got real doubts about it," he said in a telephone interview Monday. "I'd love to see the property preserved, but where is the money going to come from because the city does not have it."

Right now I have virtually no money. When I have \$14 million I get a seat at the table."

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