

The St. Johnland Swap

The Park Advocate

What is the St. Johnland Swap?

It is a solution to two problems facing Kings Park in the future. The swap involves the construction of a "Continuing Care Retirement Community" (CCRC) on the former state hospital property instead of on 50 acres of adjacent woods. The St. Johnland nursing home is petitioning the Smithtown Town Board to amend the zoning laws to allow a CCRC on St. Johnland's wooded property between Old Dock Road and Sunken Meadow Road. The swap would involve some a trade of land between St. Johnland and the State.

Why would allowing a CCRC on St. Johnland's property be bad for the community?

Many reasons. Primarily, it would mean result in an unnecessary impact on our ecology that would affect future generations. The wooded land is ecologically significant. It is one of the last remaining natural open spaces in our community. We have lost over 90% of our natural environment, and this parcel is about 10% of what is left.

The parcel has a pond and diverse successional and climax vegetation, making it more important for wildlife habitat than most properties its size. It is strategically located from an ecological standpoint. It is between two other natural open spaces: Sunken Meadow State Park and Nissequogue River State Park. Wildlife biologists have found that linking open spaces is critical in supporting populations of wildlife. It is also near the junction of the Nissequogue River, Sunken Meadow Creek, and Long Island Sound. Ecotones, places where different habitats come together, are also important ecologically. Moreover, the 50 acres is largely untouched in recent times.

It is their property, why can't they build on it?

They can build on it, but nothing nearly as intense as the CCRC they propose. It is zoned for 1-acre residence. The CCRC is over 6 times denser than permitted.

What are they allowed to build on the property?

Full compliance with the town code would probably result in about 35 houses. This apparently low number is because of three reasons. First, the pond, wetlands, high groundwater, and steep slopes cannot be included in the required lot areas and cannot be disturbed. Second, the streets, a sump, and about .7 acres of required parkland are not included in the minimum lot areas. Third, 1 acre is the minimum requirement; some lots will end up being oversized.

In fact, one chapter of the town code requires the development to be clustered. Clustering is where the town takes the permitted density on a parcel, and requires it to be concentrated on part of the property in order to leave the rest of the property as open space.

The amount of open space to be preserved is up to the town planning board. The town code has vague guidelines on how much space the planning board should require. It is possible, but probably not desirable to cluster so much as to save 90% of the land. This would concentrate 35 dwellings onto less than 5 acres. It is probably realistic to expect the lots to be a minimum of one-third acre. This would preserve about 30 to 35 acres of open space.

What is a CCRC?

A CCRC is a hybrid kind of development. It is about 95% regular residences for senior citizens, and about 5% assisted living units. It is a special kind of development because it is like an insurance product, too. People who buy one of the units must be guaranteed an assisted living unit if they become frail enough to need it. The homebuyer must also be guaranteed a space in a nursing home if they need that.

CCRCs are heavily regulated by New York State to protect purchasers from fraud and the financial failure of the development.

CCRCs are designed to be attractive as possible for potential purchasers affluent enough to afford the homes. They may include detached homes, multi-story buildings, and typical 1 and 2 story multi-family buildings, depending on market studies. They are normally gated for security and prestige. They usually have amenities, and programs run by the site manager.

Is a CCRC good for the town?

Most people seem to think so. Studies show that overwhelmingly most people want to age in their own homes as part of their regular community. However, a significant number prefer to move to some kind of retirement development. This project would allow those local residents to do so without moving away. Of course, the majority of purchasers will not likely be Kings Park residents. They will probably be from western Long Island.

Why would St. Johnland want to swap land?

They would if that is what it takes to build a CCRC. They are not allowed to build one now.

Why don't they want to swap property?

They have not said why. If they can get the town board to amend the zoning ordinance

to permit a CCRC on their site, why bother trading land? It seems that they may be afraid of increased costs by using the state hospital property. Also, they have invested a fair amount of money and time in "soft" costs (legal, design, etc) on the speculation that they would eventually get approval to build a CCRC on their acreage.

Isn't increased cost a fair objection?

Absolutely. However, there are ways to make it cost roughly the same. The cost of renovation is about the same per square foot as building new. Therefore, the only potential extra cost would be the land. St. Johnland could pay for the land by selling its property to the State, and the money it gets to pay for land at the state hospital. There needs to be appraisals and public scrutiny to make sure that everything is legal and fair. The state is not allowed to pay more for property than what it is worth on the open market. And the state is not allowed to pay less, unless the owner voluntarily agrees.

Are there building or places on the former state hospital that are suitable for a CCRC?

Yes, at least 3 existing buildings are suitable for conversion. And if the buildings are not desired, their sites are well suited.

From St. Johnland's perspective are there any other negatives to using the state hospital?

There seem to be two. They would have to start the design over, but the buildings are similar in size to the main one they propose. Presumably, they have not advanced the design very far since the zoning does not permit what they want to do. Second, the CCRC would be further from their existing nursing home. This should not be significant in that their current proposal is separated from the nursing home by a public street. All parts of the hospital are less than a mile away. One part is as close as the 50 acres.

Are there any other benefits to the swap?

There are many. Being located closer to the center of town, there would be less traffic, less energy consumption, and less air pollution. It would reduce waste by reusing existing infrastructure. It would help reuse part of the hospital in a way that is beneficial to the community. There are always pressures to use it ways not beneficial to us. It would help preserve historic and attractive buildings. It would create a presence on the grounds, and deter any improper activities. It would set a good example, on any re-use that might occur.

