

CHRONICLE

Dartmouth's 115-acre Ocean View Farm is largest protected property in Buzzards Bay

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DARTMOUTH — At the end of a path covered in clam shell fragments, Brendan Annett led the way past rows of verdant corn stalks, through a thicket of high-tide bushes to a clearing with a breathtaking and — until now — rarely seen view of Allens Pond.

"This is one of the biggest and most intact salt marsh systems on Buzzards Bay," he said.

Annett, vice president of watershed protection for Buzzards Bay Coalition, was standing at the southernmost point of Ocean View Farm, an expanse of well-tended land stretching 115 acres from Allens Neck Road to the pond.

He pointed to the fragile ecosystem at his feet, noting the vegetation forms the base of the food web for various fish moving back and forth from the pond and the Atlantic Ocean, and coastal birds including sandpipers, herons and ospreys. The marsh is both a buffet and a buffer. In addition to nourishing wildlife, it filters pollution — especially nitrogen, one of the most dominant shore pollutants — before it hits the water.

"It's tremendously important," Annett said.

Conservationists believe the 128-year-old Ocean View Farm is so important that they recently raised \$8.1 million to permanently protect it from development, the largest land preservation project in the history of Buzzards Bay, according to the coalition.

Dartmouth, Westport and other SouthCoast communities are poised to benefit.

Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust, a partner on the project, plans to create public access on part of the property, complete with a clam-shell parking lot, walking trail, boardwalk and observation platform by the pond.

"We want to make this an enjoyable, inspiring place for people to visit," said Dexter Mead, the trust's executive director. "It's important that people come out and enjoy so that they can become advocates of conservation."

Round the Bend Farm, the nonprofit "living lab" of sustainability next to Ocean View, will expand from 55 to 94 acres, allowing more space and opportunity for "a new generation of farmers" to learn how to live off the land and share their bounty and skills with others, according to executive director Desa Van Laarhoven.

"The coming years will yield a transformation we can only begin to imagine," Van Laarhoven said. "From this land will come large quantities of wholesome food that will feed our future."

Farmers should be pleased. Christine Clarke, state conservationist for Massachusetts, said 70 percent of the land is "prime soil," thanks in part to being expertly nurtured for more than a century. "The soil we're standing on is some of the best soil around," Clarke said.

The project partners celebrated the conservation Sept. 29 with community members and officials from the local and state levels. They gathered, appropriately, at Ocean View, which had been one of the last undeveloped and unprotected areas of coastal farmland along the bay.

Buzzards Bay Coalition President Mark Rasmussen said the property "narrowly missed" being devoured by new homes, roads and septic systems several times in recent years.

"Special places like this are preserved not by preventing development, but by the people who connect with these places," Rasmussen said.

Many people, it turns out, connect with Ocean View, perhaps none more than longtime landowner Roberta Hobart. Ocean View had been in her family since 1889 and, while the decision to let go was "difficult" for her, she was interested in making sure the land continued to serve its purpose, Rasmussen said.

Last fall, Dartmouth residents voted to funnel \$600,000 in Community Preservation Act funding to the protection of 60 acres at Ocean View. The state Department of Conservation and Recreation supplied a \$400,000 grant. Roughly \$2.92 million in private donations poured in from 365 individuals and families.

Also in the last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture gave nearly \$2 million, Bromley Charitable Trust gave \$2 million and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service gave \$1.1 million. Mark

Cookson, the service's Northeast Coastal Program director, said after a walk around the farm last year, he "pretty much knew it was a winner right away."

The coalition and DNRT still need \$70,000 in private donations to complete the project, according to Rasmussen.

The coalition holds a permanent conservation restriction on the northern portion of the farm and co-holds a conservation restriction on the southern portion along with the Dartmouth Conservation Commission, ensuring that the land will never be developed.

"I'm very glad that Ocean View Farm will receive permanent protection so that it will be there for our kids and for our grandkids," Sen. Elizabeth Warren said in a statement. "It's great news for the SouthCoast and for the Commonwealth, and I thank the Buzzards Bay Coalition, the town of Dartmouth, local residents and community partners for their efforts to make this a reality."

Completed this summer, the protection is part of a larger land conservation initiative on Allens Pond, a rich coastal habitat. The larger Allens Pond Conservation Completion Project is expected to protect an additional 100 neighboring acres of forests, wetlands and active farmland, according to the coalition.

THE ISSUE: The Buzzards Bay Coalition, along with numerous community partners and private donations, has preserved the 115-acre Ocean View Farm property in South Dartmouth, a scenic, historically significant and ecologically important chunk of land.

LOCAL IMPACT: The move ensures the lush farmland at this site can never be used for commercial or residential development, including septic systems. Dartmouth Natural Resources Trust's involvement also opens part of the previously private farm to the public for recreation and will secure the fragile marshland on the farm's coast.

