

February 8, 2022

Dear Dr. Holden and Board of Education members,

Citizens to Preserve Mills Lawn Greenspace is writing this letter to outline our preservation vision and put forward two actionable, near-term preservation opportunities we have identified and stand ready to pursue. In recent weeks, representatives of our group have had informal and separate exploratory conversations on this topic with school board members Dorothee Bouquet and Judith Hempfling. We have also consulted with Tecumseh Land Trust to gain a clearer sense of relevant conservation issues.

We believe now is the time to bring our goals and specific preservation opportunities to school district leadership as a whole.

The opportunities we've identified would bring significant revenue into the school district through the sale of a conservation easement on the Mills Lawn greenspace funded by state grant monies and private donations. Through this combination of funding sources, the district would realize the full fair market value of a conservation easement on a historical, park-like piece of land. We see this as a powerful win-win for the schools and community: sale proceeds would materially benefit local schools, and the greenspace would be preserved as green and open land for community use, now and in the future.

Preservation vision

Our citizen group seeks to formally preserve the majority of the western portion of the Mills Lawn property, an area referred to as the Mills Lawn greenspace. We do so with an eye on several interlocking factors: the land is owned by the school district; the land is a potential financial asset to the district; there is broad and deep citizen support for preserving the land for future generations; and the land has a unique claim to preservation, given its history, natural features, central location, and cherished role in village life.

All of these factors are important. And we believe we can work together to carry out a preservation strategy that will benefit the schools, the community, and the land itself.

The case for preserving the Mills Lawn greenspace is compelling. It is an open space in the heart of Yellow Springs with a rich history, many beautiful trees (including 33 mature tribute trees), and ongoing recreational, civic, and cultural uses. Many villagers consider the greenspace our "central park," as it enriches Yellow Springs' sense of place and enhances residents' physical and mental health and well-being.

While the entire Mills Lawn property is owned by the school district, in a broader sense the land is a shared community asset. The land's history speaks eloquently to this. The original owner, William Mills, made the grounds of his estate available to the public. Generations of villagers have learned, gathered, and played on the land. When Antioch College gave the property to the school district in 1949, it did so as a gift, and in the spirit of a gift. In various ways over many years, the Mills Lawn land has been recognized and treated as a community space, uniquely reflective of Yellow Springs.

Given these considerations, we believe formal preservation of the Mills Lawn greenspace is warranted and needed to protect the land for future generations. Many villagers support such a step, as reflected in our preservation petition, signed by more than 520 local residents, and last year's pro-preservation resolution from Village Council. We further believe that securing the fate of the Mills Lawn greenspace would allow any future school facilities proposals to be evaluated on their own merits, with the potential impact on the greenspace no longer impinging on the facilities issue.

Path to preservation

We recognize that the school district's land holdings are a valuable district asset. For this and other reasons, we support preservation of the Mills Lawn greenspace through the sale of a conservation easement funded by a combination of state monies and private donations. Such an easement could be held by Tecumseh Land Trust, which has indicated potential interest in this project.

Conservation easements are the "gold standard" of preservation because they protect the land in perpetuity. Under such easements, the land owner is compensated for preserving the land while still retaining ownership. In the case of the Mills Lawn greenspace, we believe a conservation easement would be worth the majority of the land's total market value. Preserving the Mills Lawn greenspace through the sale of a conservation easement would thus bring needed revenue into the district, while carrying out an important preservation project of benefit to the community and local ecology.

As we understand it, the conserved greenspace would function much as it does now: serving as the western portion of the Mills Lawn schoolyard during school hours, while continuing to be used as a publicly accessible greenspace when school is not in session. And the land, with its majestic trees and palpable sense of history, would remain open and green for future generations.

Specific opportunities

To enable a potential sale of a conservation easement, our group has identified two specific, near-term state funding opportunities. Both have a deadline of March 18. If the school district is interested in these programs, the members of Citizens to Preserve Mills Lawn Greenspace stand ready to assist in multiple ways, including through writing grant proposals and raising matching funds.

Capital Budget program: The first opportunity is Ohio's Capital Budget program, which funds local community projects in the arts, infrastructure, recreation, and other areas. Funding amounts range up from \$100,000 to \$5 million. Data show that park-related projects have had good success in this program in recent years. The capital budget process takes place every two years. In view of the biennial nature of this opportunity, our group has crafted a draft proposal that could serve as the basis for a quick-turnaround application for the current funding cycle.

Clean Ohio program: The second opportunity is the Clean Ohio program, which funds environmental conservation projects, including greenspace acquisition. Locally, the preservation of eight acres at Glass Farm in 2016 is one example of a successful Clean Ohio project. The Clean Ohio program typically funds projects on an annual cycle. Our group is poised to facilitate an application for the current cycle.

A successful application to either program would result in 100% of the full fair market value of the conservation easement paid to the school district. Seventy-five percent would be grant money, and the remaining 25% local match would be raised via a fundraising campaign. Our citizen group, in its

second full year of building local support for the greenspace, is willing and well-positioned to lead such a campaign.

To move forward with applying to either program, the sole step the school board would need to take is to sign a letter of intent to sell a conservation easement to Tecumseh Land Trust, contingent on grant funding and a local match. Note that a letter of intent is not an option to sell.

As stated previously, the school district would benefit from the full fair market value of the conservation easement. An appraisal by a state-certified appraiser would be required to determine fair market value, and our group is prepared to raise funds to cover the cost of an appraisal by an appraiser of the school district's choice.

Finally, it is important to note that funding through either of these state programs could be realized as early as the fall of 2022. We believe that moving forward with both applications could bring needed revenue to the schools in relatively short order, while also carrying out a vital preservation project broadly supported by villagers.

Next steps

In our view, both programs are feasible, actionable opportunities that fit the Mills Lawn greenspace preservation situation. To maximize the opportunity for funding, the school board would need to send a letter of intent authorizing TLT to move forward with the two applications by the March 18 deadlines. Applying to both programs would put the school district in the potential position to choose the one funded first. The letter of intent to sell a conservation easement at full fair market value to Tecumseh Land Trust would be needed no later than your March 10 board meeting. Both TLT and Citizens to Preserve Mills Lawn Greenspace would then work together to prepare and submit applications for funding a Mills Lawn greenspace preservation project.

We recognize the many demands on school district leadership at this time, especially regarding facilities decisions. Our group appreciates any prompt attention you can give toward preserving a greenspace that's unique and beloved in Yellow Springs.

Sincerely,

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Mary Eby
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