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BENSON RESERVE PUBLIC HEARING DEMONSTRATES BROAD ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

November 22, 2023, Montauk, NY – The November 16th Benson Reserve public hearing held at East Hampton Town Hall to consider the proposed draft Management Plan for the Benson Reserve provided broad support for the plan from environmental organizations, civic groups, and the community. Oral testimony was provided, in-person and by teleconference by 29 speakers with 33% more speaking in support of the plan than were either undecided or spoke in opposition.

Many local environmental groups with experience in habitat restoration and coastal resiliency provided their support (as quoted below) including Nature Conservancy*, Concerned Citizens of Montauk (CCOM), Peconic Baykeeper**, Surfrider-Eastern Long Island Chapter*** and Peconic Estuary Partnership****. In addition, First Coastal a well-known environmental consultancy company specializing in coastal geology, which for many years has been involved in the analysis of Montauk’s ocean-facing beaches, stated that the plan will *“improve both the coastal resiliency of this area as well as the environmental diversity.”*

The landscape ecologist Rusty Schmidt from the well-respected environmental planning firm Nelson, Pope and Voorhis and past President of the Long Island Native Plants Initiative and Adjunct Professor in the Horticulture Department at Farmingdale State College, NY advised that this plan meets the established scientific criteria associated with invasive species management. Mr. Schmidt determined this assessment through input provided by Bill Jacobs, Long Island Invasive Species Management Area (LIISMA), Program Manager, following a site visit with Rusty Schmidt on May 27, 2021 in addition to LIISMA management recommendation to the Town, in combination with expert opinion and research by the LIISMA staff, including a review of resources from iMapInvasives, iNaturalist, NPV’s research with the New York Natural Heritage Program (NYNHP); relevant scientific papers and other information; and the LIISMA and New York State Invasive Species Tier lists. This work includes utilizing the Invasive Plant Management Decision Analysis Tool (IPMDAT), and a combination of integrated management methods including *“Targeted goat grazing (that) can be a safe, cost-effective method of controlling invasive plants, as part of an integrated management approach that typically may include manual stump and root cutting...”*

Local civic groups supporting the plan including the Montauk Chamber of Commerce who has advised that *“the Montauk Chamber of Commerce and many fellow Chamber Members in the immediate vicinity of the Benson parcel stand ready to support CCOM and EH Town in advancing this essential project, which strengthens, primarily, our delicate coastal environment, but also our tourism economy by beautifying an important stretch of our beloved scenic highway.”*

In addition, the Montauk Historical Society stated *“The reasons for moving ahead with this project are compelling and are clearly and very convincingly laid out in the Invasive Species Adaptive Management Plan that was presented at the Montauk CAC in September. The Montauk Historical Society Board of Directors supports the Benson Reserve Project because:1) it is based on solid scientific reasoning and evidence; 2) it will be continuously monitored and evaluated as to its efficacy;3) it will address important environmental problems that the Town has identified; 4) it comes at no cost to the taxpayer.”*

Several local residents who live in the area provided their support via oral testimony. Andy Hammer indicated that 76% of the adjacent property owners support the plan stating, *“I can speak to the support that has been received from 13 of the 17 most affected adjacent properties to the Reservations- they emphatically support the plan and most plan to provide funding for the project.”*

Jaime LeDuc, Director of Environmental Advocacy at CCOM stated *“In support of this invasive species management plan we have collected over 560 signatures on a petition supporting this project. Furthermore, I participated in the Benson Habitat Restoration presentation given to the Montauk Citizens Advisory Committee on September 11, 2023. The committee voted 16:1 in favor of supporting this project.”*

In response to concerns that some may perceive the project as a “vista” project to protect adjacent property owners’ views Celine Keating previously a coop owner in the 56-unit Atlantic Bluffs coop on the Old Montauk Highway stated *“Some critics say that the goal of the Benson Reservation Habitat project is merely to protect the views of those property owners who live across the way from the beach. However, most of those fortunate enough to have homes and co-ops along that stretch already have glorious views, because the land to the north of the OMH is elevated. As with the saving of the parcel itself, any enhanced views will have the most impact on all who walk or drive along the road.”*

CCOM is encouraging further public dialogue and input to ensure the plan and its implementation are reflective of the best science and broad community engagement. David Freudenthal, Board Chair stated, *“I would urge all those who want to see the best for the Benson Reserve to come together to discuss how best to take advantage of this unique opportunity.”*

** “...this plan will focus on the upland portions of the preserve, improving habitat and increasing its ability to stabilize sand in the future, while leaving today’s most critical bluff stabilizing vegetation undisturbed. I encourage the town board to adopt this management plan” Alison Branco, Ph.D. Climate Adaptation Director, The Nature Conservancy in New York*

*** “...invasive plant species pose a dire threat to our local coastal ecosystems in that they often outcompete native vegetation while providing few ecological benefits. Of critical importance to the East Hampton coastal community is the benefit of coastal stabilization provided by the deep root structures of our native species and implementation of the plan is an opportunity to work to protect and restore the integrity of this coastal ecosystem. I have reviewed the proposed Invasive Species Adaptive Management Plan and fully support its*

implementation as an opportunity to work to protect and restore the integrity of the coastal ecosystem that the Benson Preserve was created to protect” **Peter Topping, Baykeeper & Executive Director Peconic Baykeeper**

*** *“Coastal resiliency is another priority for the Surfrider Foundation. Deep-rooted native plants will promote healthier soils and better secure soil on the bluff, protecting it from larger storm events. By providing root systems that are more extensive deep and wide, the bluff will be more securely protected from erosion and erosive systems, protecting it more effectively from climate change, storm surge, and sea level rise. I would urge the Town Board to adopt this plan.”* **Jenna Schwerzmann, Eastern Long Island Chapter Coordinator, Surfrider Foundation**

**** *“...the plan that has been circulated is comprehensive, thoughtful, and thoroughly addresses the management needs of this important property. As a National Estuary Program, the Peconic Estuary Partnership is in support of invasive species removal. Invasive species often outcompete native plants and animals, threatening biodiversity and reducing habitat value. The use of goats in controlling invasive plant species has been successful both domestically and internationally. I would urge the Town Board to adopt this plan.”* **Joyce Novak, Executive Director, Peconic Estuary Partnership**

Background

http://easthamptontown.iqm2.com/citizens/Detail_LegalNotice.aspx?ID=3641

<https://firstcoastal.com/>

<https://nelsonpopevoorhis.com/about/>

CCOM’s MISSION is to preserve and protect the unique environment and ecology of Montauk through education, advocacy, and grassroots citizen action. Since 1970, CCOM has led the effort to protect Montauk’s precious environment, successfully preserving over 70% of Montauk’s land. Thanks in large part to the work of CCOM members and volunteers, we can all enjoy Montauk’s trails, beaches, scenic vistas, and rugged beauty. Today, however, there are new threats to Montauk’s environment. CCOM is focusing our efforts on addressing three urgent priorities: cleaning up Montauk’s water, protecting its beaches and coastline, and advocating for sustainable development. We need your help to succeed. The outcome of our joint efforts will determine what our town is going to look like for generations to come. CCOM is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. All donations are 100% tax deductible. For more information visit www.preservemontauk.org.

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