

Permanent Memorial Commission Suspends Consideration Of High Meadow

May 13, 2016



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Frustration was apparent in the voices of Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission (SHPMC) members Thursday evening, as the commission's May 12 meeting took a turn from a months-long focus on High Meadow at Fairfield Hills as a site for a permanent memorial to 12/14 to that of reconsidering other options.

Following approval of the minutes from last month's meeting, SHPMC Chairman Kyle Lyddy first presented to the full commission a recommendation by the SHPMC Design Subcommittee to pursue "Option G" as the most desirable means of accessing property in the High Meadow.

The subcommittee had heard details of the seventh option, conceived by Newtown Parks and Recreation Assistant Director of Parks Carl Samuelson, and presented by Stantec Consulting Services of New Haven at [a special subcommittee meeting held May 3](#).

[Stantec had previously offered other six other options](#) at the SHPMC April 14 meeting. Option G seems "most desirable" as a pathway to the proposed High Meadow site, said subcommittee member Alan Martin.

Mr Lyddy then asked commission members for thoughts on the recommendation should they continue to consider the High Meadow site.

Commission member Alan Martin made a motion to suspend and table consideration of High Meadow as a site for the permanent memorial, with the intent to explore other locations. The motion was seconded and opened for discussion. Mr Martin clarified that the SHPMC reserved the right to reconsider the High Meadow proposal.

Mr Martin later expressed disappointment at having to offer the motion, saying he felt compelled to do so.

"I have been in communication with the town regarding other options available," Mr Lyddy explained, and said he had received a letter, with its information shared with commissioners, from First Selectman Pat Llodra advising that the commission consider other options for other locations.

"I am writing to you as a friend and colleague, but also as First Selectman," Mrs Llodra began her letter to Mr Lyddy, a copy of which she provided to *The Newtown Bee*. Her letter praises the work of the commission, but expresses concerns about "where we find ourselves on this journey toward a permanent memorial." Here, she noted, she spoke for herself.

"I see many hurdles and a growing conflict that will significantly interrupt and impede the likelihood of success of the current location choice," she wrote, and noted that it was very uncertain if the High Meadow location would be approved by town government, and cautioned that efforts to raise more funds might be derailed by opposition.

In that reality dictates compromise and accepting of less than perfect outcomes, “I am not seeing the path toward comfortable co-existence,” wrote Mrs Llodra.

“My thinking right now is that to be best helpful is to advise a reset on the process and reopen consideration of other alternatives,” the first selectman advised, and said that the selectmen needs to hear more from the commission to fully understand circumstances that made other locations unacceptable. The letter draws parallels between her decision to withdraw the initial community center proposal last year and any decision the SHPMC would have to make concerning the permanent memorial.

In a later e-mail communication to Mr Lyddy, Mrs Llodra stressed that the SHPMC does not have to accept her advice, and encouraged the commission to discuss the options from their own perspective.

“If the PMC decides to stay with the High Meadow location, then we will proceed as planned. If the PMC decides to consider other locations,” wrote Mrs Llodra, “then we will fully commit Land Use and consultants to that task.”

Commissioners Respond

Commissioner Agni Pavlidou Kyprianou spoke at length Thursday evening, agreeing with commissioner Sarah Mideleer that the suggestion of a memorial at High Meadow had resulted in negativity within the community, rather than the sense of healing a permanent memorial was intended to create. While stating that she understood Mrs Llodra’s feelings, Ms Kyprianou went on to say that she believes it is only a small group of citizens opposed to any disturbance of High Meadow.

“People did not want to meet compromise at all,” she said, referring to those who had spoken out at previous meetings and had addressed the issue through informal surveys and letters to *The Newtown Bee*.

“The High Meadow is a very serene and quiet place. We checked every item on the list,” said Ms Kyprianou. “We listened ... and it reflects the utmost respect for the meadow. There has to be some sensibility to the subject, and there has not been,” she said.

The commission has determined criteria for a memorial site based on community surveys and input from families affected by the tragedy of 12/14 and first responders.

Ms Kyprianou expressed disappointment that the commission has been accused by opponents to the High Meadow proposal as having not done due diligence, and not having kept the public informed, allegations that she deemed “ridiculous.”

Commissioner Donna Van Waalwijk pointed out that the town had offered the High Meadow to the commission for consideration.

“We walked over it, and it was perfect,” she said. She questioned the number of people actually against the High Meadow site, noting that she and other commissioners have heard from residents that they are in favor of that site.

“But this has put a damper on it. When we start to look at other sites, what opposition will be there?” she asked.

Tricia Pinto, whose son Jack Pinto was killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and who — along with Joanne Bacon, mother of victim Charlotte Bacon, and Brian Engel, father of victim Olivia Engel — serves on the commission said, “We are never going to please everybody. Are we going to continue to do this?” The commission has been brought to a standstill, and “we have had to listen to rude, uncaring comments by people,” she said, echoing an earlier comment by Ms Bacon of being saddened by callous comments.

Mr Martin’s motion was moved to vote, and passed, and discussion continued around the letter from Mrs Llodra.

“The letter we received was something potentially expected,” Mr Lyddy said, adding that he was “completely discouraged. A portion of land should never go before 26 souls.”

Fairfield Hills Options Offered

Newtown Director of Planning George Benson was invited to share new locations at Fairfield Hills for the commission to consider. A printout of three Fairfield Hills sites suggested by Mr Benson and Mrs Llodra, approximately two-thirds of an acre each, was passed out, with Mr Benson saying that there were not a lot of other choices.

Option 1 on the map is a section of Old Farm Road that runs from the end of the Keating Farm Road cul-de-sac to a semi-wooded area near Wasserman Way. Option 2 is a section of property at the south end of High Meadow. Option 3 is acreage within a wooded cluster between the cul-de-sac and Kent House.

“Number three, if you look at it, you might get a different opinion,” he told the commissioners, than from what the property appeared to be on the printout. “I want you to revisit some sites you dismissed. I thought High Meadow was a good idea at the time,” said Mr Benson, “but with the climate [of opposition within the community] we have, I’d like to find an alternative site. You might have to look further out from town.”

Option 1 would offer a view of the old farm from the end, he said, and would require a walk from the cul-de-sac. There may also be road noise with which to contend. Option 2 is situated “up higher,” and is shielded by a line of trees.

He encouraged commissioners to walk the three sites, and in response to Ms Middleleer’s concern that it “seems futile to consider anything in open space,” reminded them that the open space is not controlled by the Conservation Commission, and can be used for recreation.

“Let’s set up site visits, come back, and go from there,” suggested Mr Martin, adding that High Meadow had been selected based on established criteria.

Representatives of the SHPMC have been requested to attend the June 6 meeting of the Board of Selectman, Mr Lyddy said, to answer “Why High Meadow?”

“I’ll answer that question again. We’re going to listen, as disgusted and discouraged as I am that this motion had to pass,” he said. He reminded fellow commissioners that [the Board of Selectmen had failed at the May 2 meeting to approve the appropriation of \\$10,000](#) to pay Stantec for work done.

“We’ll relook at how this can work,” Mr Lyddy said.

To benefit members of the public present, Mr Lyddy explained that there is \$160,000 in a special account from contributions received after 12/14 and specific to funding a permanent memorial.

“There is still a process we need to follow. As a commission, we continue to provide accurate information,” he said.

Public Participation, Design Guidelines

Public participation was brief. Elizabeth Lincoln spoke, assuring commission members that those opposed to the High Meadow option are “not callous, not uncaring. We are not criticizing efforts of the commission ... but reservations we all had were across the board ... We wanted to have a voice not in agreement with a permanent memorial at High Meadow. I want to make it clear, we’re not nasty people. We have a right to opinion,” Ms Lincoln said.

Responding to Ms Lincoln’s concern that the criteria for location and scope of project was not easily available, Mr Lyddy assured her he would send the information directly to her, though minutes and other information are posted at the town website.

“It’s very hard for everybody,” said resident Dottie Evans. She is humbled by the work done by the commission, she said, and finds it “tragic we had to come this far before you’d talk to us. We have things to say, and try to be courteous,” said Ms Evans. “Let’s work together. Let’s hope for that,” she urged.

In an e-mail to *The Newtown Bee* on May 13, Holly Kocet, one of several residents who has actively opposed any disturbance to High Meadow, said, "It has been extremely difficult for us to stand up for our belief that the High Meadow should be protected as open space, as originally intended for the benefit of all Newtown residents, and having to oppose placement there of a memorial dedicated to those lost on 12/14. We have always maintained that we do not oppose a memorial and I believe we have always conducted ourselves in a respectful manner."

The commission briefly addressed a time line draft for memorial design submissions. The design selection guidelines will hopefully be presented to the full commission by the next meeting, Mr Lyddy informed the group, despite the uncertainty of the site.

"Key sections [of the guidelines] still apply to any site," said Ms Middleleer.

"I want other groups to have eyes on it," Mr Lyddy said, referring to the many parties involved in the working document for the guidelines. Mr Benson, Newtown Parks and Recreation, Newtown Police Commission, Fairfield Hills Authority, Jim Ryan of the Conservation Commission, and others, are among the parties being sought for feedback.

"We will go through the process, and will update the Board of Selectmen on June 6 [on the High Meadow selection]. George Benson is committed to this. Let's make sure we do due diligence," Mr Lyddy told the commission.

Final comments of the evening included Mr Engel noting that public participation had indicated that a better conversation was underway. He also picked up, he said, "That a lot of people out there 'don't want it.' Don't want a memorial, or don't want it at High Meadow?" he asked.