

Deadline looms on land debt

New Suffolk group plans season packed with events to help pay off waterfront purchase

BY BETH YOUNG | STAFF WRITER

It's been a year of firsts for the New Suffolk Waterfront Fund.

It's the first year they've owned a large chunk of New Suffolk's waterfront. It's the first year many new events will be held to raise money to keep the land in the community's hands.

And it's the first year that they're faced with the reality of the enormous burden of owning a \$2.4 million piece of prime real estate.

With one year left to pay off a \$1 million loan and about \$100,000 in annual operating costs, the New Suffolk Waterfront Fund is now on a mad dash to raise money to cover its costs and finish paying off the purchase.

Those who attended last weekend's third annual New Suffolk Chowder Fest certainly noticed another first — a \$20 charge for the all-you-can-eat buffet that used to be free.

"We have very high operating costs, and we're soon going to be embarking on a new fundraising campaign so that our carrying costs are lower and we can start making improvements to the property," said fund president Barbara Schnitzler.

The group is now rolling out a whole year's worth of activities — including a summer solstice scavenger hunt, barbecue and bonfire on June 18; a tour



KATHARINE SCHROEDER PHOTO

Settling into the reality that the New Suffolk waterfront now belongs to the community and won't be developed for commercial use, members of the New Suffolk Waterfront Fund hosted their third annual Chowder Fest last Saturday.

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of six waterfront houses on Jackson Street on July 16; and the first-ever New Suffolk Funky, Artsy-Craftsy Festival on the first weekend in October — designed to raise awareness and funds for the property.

The group will also hold several Saturday evening events in the old Galley Ho restaurant building on the bay throughout August in conjunction with an exhibit of paintings by local artists entitled “Northfork by Northfork.” And the annual New Suffolk Waterfront 5K race will be held on Aug. 13.

“Our goal is to start using the waterfront as we’d originally planned to do it,” said Ms. Schnitzler. “It’s in part for fundraising, but it’s in part to get an idea of what things people like and what kinds of activities they’d like to see going on there.”

Group members hope these events will cover the waterfront fund’s ongoing operating costs, but the real nut, the \$1 million remaining on a loan from the Conservation Fund, a national non-profit that provides money for conservation projects, is due next June. The fund is about to embark on a campaign to target large donors who can help pay off that loan.

Earlier this spring, group members entertained the idea of subdividing the property and selling a portion to a government agency that would serve as a partner in preservation. But needing a variance from the town, they’ve temporarily tabled that idea.

“Our goal is to keep the property intact so we can control what goes on there and what doesn’t go on there,” said Ms. Schnitzler. “That is still our preference to do that. That’s the plan we’re going with at the moment.”

Doing so will require donors with very deep pockets.

“It is formidable, but we’re two-thirds of the way there,” she said. The waterfront fund has already raised \$2 million, which was used to pay a portion of the purchase price, legal fees, insurance and other carrying costs.

“When we first began, people were saying, ‘You’re never going to be able to do this,’” Ms. Schnitzler said. But so far, 500 individual donors and 68 percent of New Suffolk’s population have contributed to the cause.

“We’re looking for new donors who are conservation-minded,” she said. “It took us a long time to develop a presence, but now we can say we own

it. We know what will never be developed here.”

Though Ms. Schnitzler said the Conservation Fund seems amenable to extending the loan repayment window, the waterfront fund hopes to own the property outright by next June. The group has not yet looked into a long-term mortgage-type scenario for paying for the property.

The group continues to offer boat storage space on a beach on the property and is leasing out slips for the season at the dock behind the old Galley Ho, though Ms. Schnitzler said it’s far more likely that transient boaters will use the slips when they tie up for the evening to visit Legends

restaurant and the Summer Girl boutique next door. The waterfront fund is asking transient boaters to deposit \$10, on the honor system, in a lock box on the dock to help support the cause.

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Barbara Schnitzler

As the group’s financial goals get closer in sight, they have also begun planning other ongoing uses of the property. A community garden is now in its second

year and group members are working with the Group for the East End to become a stopover on a “Blueways” trail, a state-sponsored network of kayak routes. They are also speaking with a consortium of North Fork historical organizations about creating an exhibit on New Suffolk history in a barn on the property.

“We had oysters, scallops, submarines. The Cutchogue-New Suffolk Historical Council tells the agrarian history, but it doesn’t tell our story, the maritime story,” said Ms. Schnitzler.

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