



Ray Ewing

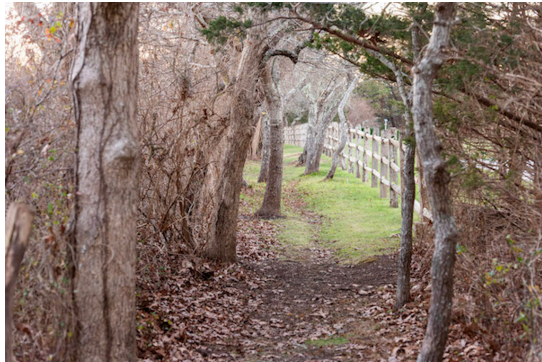
Land Bank Preserves Flat Point Farm With 100-Year Lease

Julia Wells *Thursday, December 21, 2023 - 11:50am*

A newly-cut trail winds around the northern field at Flat Point Farm in West Tisbury these days, providing walking access for the public and broad views across a pastoral landscape that has been synonymous with this working coastal farm for 85 years. Old locust fence posts dot the perimeter in places, weathered but sturdy reminders of three generations of farming that have taken place on the land.

The 34.9-acre field and surrounding woodlands are now held by the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank and will remain in permanent agricultural use following a transaction that took place in late September. That's when the land bank signed an agreement with Arnold Fischer Jr., his sister Eleanor Neubert and other family members to acquire a 100-year lease on the northerly portion of the 115-acre farm that runs along the Tisbury Great Pond.

The land bank paid \$2.53 million for the lease and has placed an agricultural preservation restriction (APR) on the land, limiting its use to farming. The Fischer family has an agreement with the land bank to continue farming the field. The land bank has an option to convert the lease to full ownership at any time.



Walking trails move through farmland. — Ray Ewing

The long-term lease expands the land bank’s holdings at the farm, which includes a large field and pondfront property on the southern side of the farm that were protected in 2013. And it completes a conservation initiative at the farm that has been in the works for going on five decades.

“It’s a family farm — we wanted it to stay that way,” said Mr. Fischer on a walk around the north

field with Ms. Neubert late last week. “And we’ve been talking to the land bank since its inception.”

While the transaction was never formally announced, the lease is a first in the history of the land bank, which typically purchases property outright, executive director James Lengyel confirmed in an interview this week. He said the arrangement provided a way for the land bank to take oversight of the field while details continue to be sorted out for a long-planned family subdivision for the remaining parts of the farm. First sketched out some 14 years ago, the subdivision plan has also been through various stages, and is now active again and pending before the Martha’s Vineyard Commission and West Tisbury planning board. Proceedings are set to resume in January.

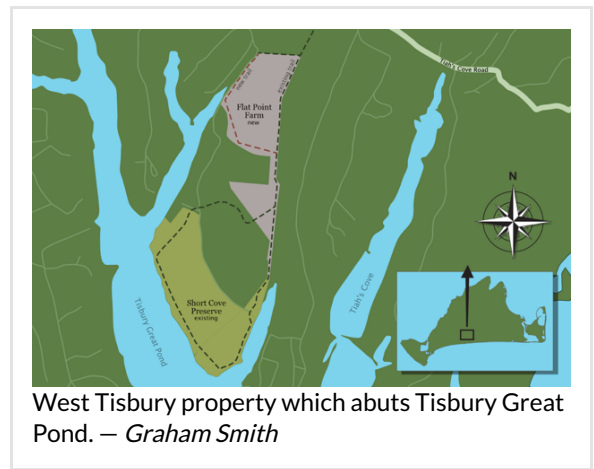
“The original intention was to buy,” Mr. Lengyel said, speaking about the land now under long-term lease. “But... it appeared that it was going to get entangled,” he said, referring to a series of correspondence sent to the land bank by attorneys for Steven Rattner, who owns an abutting property with a horse barn and equestrian facility.

“This allowed the land bank to conserve the property,” Mr. Lengyel said. “It suited the circumstances.”

He also noted that talks to conserve Flat Point Farm date to the earliest days of the land bank, which has long prioritized the preservation of farmland.

“The land bank has followed that goal since 1986,” Mr. Lengyel said. “And Flat Point Farm was, from 1986 on, a high priority for the land bank. What the land bank did was conserve it in stages that suited the family timeline,” he added.

Mr. Fischer’s father, Arnold Fischer Sr., bought the property in 1938 after he went rabbit hunting there and fell in love with the land. It began as a dairy farm, later changing over to sheep, beef and hay, eggs and vegetables, farming practices that continue today. Emily Fischer, a member of the third generation of family farmers, has a business raising goats and making soap from their milk that is sold around the Island.



West Tisbury property which abuts Tisbury Great Pond. — *Graham Smith*

In 2013, with the plan to conserve the farm possibly at risk, the land bank stepped in, putting an agricultural restriction on the southern field at the farm and buying up a waterfront lot that could have been developed. The new trail around the northern part of the farm will now connect with existing trails in the southern section.

There were other turns along the way. In March 2019 a fire destroyed the main barn at the farm, prompting an outpouring from the Island community and immediate fundraising effort. A year later a new post and beam barn was completed, signifying a new chapter for the historic farm.



Good for people and wildlife. — *Ray Ewing*

“We never would have built such a spectacular new barn without the generous support of the people of the Island,” Mr. Fischer said in a later text message to the Gazette. “The land bank deal also was completed to honor all of that love and support for Island agriculture.”

Mr. Lengyel underscored the intrinsic value of farmland on the Island.

“Farmland is part of what makes the Vineyard the Vineyard,” he said. “If these farms across the Island were not protected, the character of the Island would be irretrievably different. There is the practical benefit of crops and meat and all these farms are producing for the Island — and it’s also delightful to have the privilege of walking past a farm field. All these trails are allowing the public to get up close.”

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