

Eco group objects to Mud Cove boat ramp

■ Salt Ponds Coalition says building a public ramp could harm Ninigret Pond.

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CHARLESTOWN — Citing concern about possible environmental damage to Ninigret Pond from the construction of a public boat launch at Mud Cove, the Salt Ponds Coalition has sent a letter of opposition to the project to members of the Town Council and Town Administrator William DiLibero.

The council recently gave DiLibero the go-ahead to apply for \$200,000 in grant funding to help buy a small parcel of land on Ninigret Pond in the Mud Cove vicinity, where the boat launch would be constructed. It also awarded a \$76,400 contract for a feasibility study to Gifford Design Group Inc. for the Mud Cove project, which includes creating walking trails and public viewing areas in the 32-acre Mud Cove site.

But at a council meeting earlier this month, Planning Commission chairwoman Ruth Platner, as well as residents

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who live near Mud Cove, questioned the wisdom of the project, citing a variety of concerns, including how much the project might cost the town. Now the Salt Ponds Coalition has come out against the project as well.

"Our concern is mainly an environmental one," said Mark Bullinger, executive director of the nonprofit group, which monitors the salt ponds and advocates for their preservation and restoration.

The parcel on Ninigret

Pond that the town is considering buying is "wooded and wet" and as such, should not be disturbed, since it acts as an excellent filter for run-off draining into the pond, said Bullinger.

Run-off is one of the sources of pollution that has led to the pond's degradation in recent decades.

In addition, the construction of a boat ramp would likely require dredging, which would be harmful to the eelgrass and oyster habitats in the pond, which other groups have been striving to restore in recent years, said Bullinger. Further, it is likely to attract more motor boats, which might churn up the pond's bottom and disturb the herons and other big shore birds who find a natural haven in Mud Cove, he said.

"We would much rather see more passive recreation in that area, such as kayaking or windsurfing," said Bullinger.

"There are already boat launch facilities in the immediate area and around the pond that can handle boater needs — there is no need to tear up land, salt marsh and pond bottom to make another," states the coalition's letter to council members and DiLibero, signed by the group's president, Art Ganz.

Lavin's Landing, a marina next to the half-acre parcel the town is considering buying, allows the public to launch for a fee, but perhaps a deal could be reached to allow even more public access for town residents, Ganz suggests. In addition, there is a new boat launch to accommodate kayaks and canoes at the Ninigret Wildlife Refuge, operated by the

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is just down the road from Mud Cove, the letter notes.

"The proposal currently circulating strikes us as an unnecessary and misplaced expenditure of taxpayer money that will degrade the health of the pond," the letter states.

"Money would be better spent on stormwater and wastewater management improvements that will help clean up the pond, as well as on resources for dredging and maintaining the breachway, which badly needs it," Ganz noted.

How much town money is at stake in the Mud Cove project is hard to determine. DiLibero has declined to disclose an appraisal of the land, citing negotiations between the town and seller and the state's open records act, which allows such talks to be conducted privately.

He repeated this position this week, when he declined to release the appraisal to someone who requested it at Town Hall, triggering the ire of the Charlestown Citizens Alliance, which almost immediately sent out an e-mail questioning the town administrator's action.

The CCA has pounded a steady drumbeat of criticism of the Mud Cove project in recent weeks, much of it expressed through anonymous e-mails.

DiLibero said Wednesday he doesn't know how much the town would pay for the land since negotiations are still taking place with the parcel's owner. The seller made an offer, which the town rejected as too high, essentially putting the ball back in the seller's court, he said.

The town administrator

noted that the boat launch project is separate from plans to create walking trails, observation areas and a small parking lot for the 32-acre Mud Cove property. In other words, the walking trails could happen without the boat launch, he said.

But the Salt Ponds Coal-

ition is opposed to both ideas. Noting the proximity of Ninigret Park and the Wildlife Refuge, Bullinger said, "We really don't see the need for additional trails."

A subscriber to the CCA's e-mail list went even further.

"I ... would like to know

what we, as taxpayers, can do to stop this atrocity," the person wrote.

"Ninigret Pond and its ecosystems are already delicate and I would think that the Charlestown Council would be aware of this."

The missive was signed "A very concerned taxpayer."