



Ideas Abound for A Plum Island Future in Conservationist Hands

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State Assemblymen Fred Thiele, Steve Englebright and Anthony Palumbo and State Senator Ken LaValle heard five hours of testimony Monday on the state's role in protecting Plum Island

Within the next five to seven years, all the animal disease research that is being done on Plum Island will be moved to a brand new laboratory in Manhattan, Kan., and by that time, we'll likely know a lot more about what the future of the mysterious island holds.

But right now, its future hangs like a giant question mark off the coast of Orient, awaiting a fate that could as easily be decided by New York State as by the federal government, which owns the island, or by a private, as-yet-undisclosed owner.

Conservationists and members of the State Assembly's Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation spent nearly five hours Monday, Sept. 28 at a marathon public hearing at Brookhaven Town Hall teasing out the many potential endgames for Plum Island's future.

Assemblyman Steve Englebright of East Setauket, a biologist and geologist by training, and the chairman of the committee, convened the hearing in an attempt to see “what steps can be taken to preserve Plum Island as open space in light of the pending sale.”

“To order it sold as if it was a piece of meat is something I was disappointed in,” he said at Monday’s hearing. “The state has a great interest in Plum Island.”

Mr. Englebright said the state Pine Barrens Maritime Reserve Act protects the island under state law, and the island is surrounded by state parkland at Montauk and Orient points.

Mr. Englebright, State Senator Ken LaValle and Southold Town Supervisor Scott Russell toured the island last week.

Mr. LaValle said at Monday’s hearing that he’d like to see the state “establish a battle plan” to ensure the island is protected.

“We have been very effective when we marshal our environmental advocates.”

Mr. LaValle added that Governor Andrew Cuomo has told him he would like to see the island preserved.

“The Town of Southold has taken a very aggressive position” by zoning the island for what’s there now. “They welcome the best way to preserve the island.”

Mr. Russell, who was one of the 19 speakers at the hearing, helped shepherd Southold’s first-ever zoning for Plum Island into effect two years ago, making a nature preserve, a research facility on the footprint of the existing lab, and alternative energy the only potential uses of the island.

“It’s a de facto preserve now. We’d like to see it remain that way,” he said. “Harebrained Ideas like the golf courses that you’ve been reading about certainly aren’t permitted.”

Mr. Russell added that a research facility on the island could preserve many of the 200 jobs for Southold residents who currently work on Plum Island.

The federal government ordered a public sale of the island in the 2008 bill that created the new lab in Kansas, ostensibly to pay for the cost of the new lab.

While there has been much speculation about future potential development of the island with condominiums and estates, and while Donald Trump had expressed interest in spending \$100 million to buy the island and turn it into a golf course, Southold’s zoning, enacted in 2013, was the first roadblock on the path to preserving the island.

Congressman Lee Zeldin introduced a bill this spring that would [remove the language requiring the sale of the island](#) from the original 2008 legislation. That bill was [referred](#) to the Subcommittee on Cybersecurity, Infrastructure Protection, and Security Technologies on April 29.

Mr. Zeldin’s legislative assistant, Kevin Dowling, told Monday’s panel that his office is also planning to introduce language to block the sale of the island into the next federal General Services Administration appropriations bill.

He added that, given the environmental contamination due to landfills, medical waste disposal and the former military base on the site, the cost of mitigation would likely be very high and it would be “crazy” for the federal government to attempt to sell the island without first cleaning it up.

Mr. Dowling added that the Governors Island in the East River serves as an example of an island that had been used by the federal government for military purposes and had then been repurposed as a park in a partnership between the National Park Service and New York City’s Trust for Governors Island.

This public sale of land is also out of character with the manner in which the federal government usually disposes of unwanted land, according to several speakers at Monday’s forum.

Usually, they said, the agency that is giving up the land first asks other federal agencies if they would like it before offering it for sale.

“The public wants this kind of preservation,” said Citizens Campaign for the Environment Executive Director Adrienne Esposito. “We don’t have to buy this island. We already own it.”

Kathleen Moser, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation’s Assistant Commissioner of Natural Resources, said that both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Fish and Wildlife Service have a keen interest in keeping the island in federal hands, and she’s in regular contact with both agencies regarding the status of Plum Island.

Ms. Moser said that the Department of Homeland Security, which owns Plum Island, has agreed to a conservation easement on 144 acres of the island in exchange for not having to pay the state a fine for improper disposal of medical waste.

She said a new deed for the island containing the conservation easement will soon be filed.

Mr. Englebright said he was concerned that a developer might point to that conservation easement as proof the sale of the island already involved preservation.

“I would hate to see this used against the preservation of the whole island,” he said. “But they say don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

Ms. Moser also said the island is currently on the state’s list of properties of interest to be purchased through the Environmental Protection Fund.

“If the governor told us to buy it, EPF money certainly could be used,” she said.

She added that the fund currently contains about \$20 million.

State Assemblyman Anthony Palumbo, of New Suffolk, also sat on the panel. He asked Ms. Moser if the GSA had ever responded to a 2013 letter from New York Governor Andrew Cuomo asking the GSA to acknowledge the contamination of the island.

Ms. Moser said they had not, but she is working closely with the Department of Homeland Security on continuing to study the contamination on the island.

Randy Parsons, The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Finance and Policy Advisor on Long Island, said he's been in talks with Greenport Village about providing ferry service to a park at Plum Island, because many North Fork residents in East Marion and Orient, where the current Plum Island ferry dock is located, are concerned about the traffic the island could bring.

"Greenport welcomes the economic development," he said.



Environmental Advocates Bill Toedter, John Turner and Bob DeLuca gave testimony Monday.

Mr. Parsons said the Nature Conservancy had an appraisal of the island done which "does support the notion that a federal windfall [from the sale] is not accurate."

Mr. Parsons offered to share the appraisal, in confidence, with the state assembly committee.

He added that The Ruins, an island that once contained a fort and a lighthouse but had been used as bombing practice range just off the north coast of Gardiners Island, was recently transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

He also pointed out that Camp Hero in Montauk, a former U.S. Air Force Station, is now a state park that the federal government swapped for land that it wanted on Fire Island.

Connecticut Fund for the Environment Program Director Leah Lopez Schmaltz said she sees a few ideal outcomes: The entire island is transferred to the National Fish and Wildlife Service, the portion with the lab on it is sold and the rest of the island is transferred to the Fish and Wildlife Service, or the island is transferred to New York State.

Group for the East End President Bob DeLuca said the lab is not a "crumbling and obsolete" research facility, but has many recent improvements that would make it attractive to a research organization.

John Turner of the Preserve Plum Island Coalition said there are several outcomes his group would also support.

“If it’s closed, the coalition supports the removal of the structures [from the lab]” and turning the island into a preserve, he said.

“We would also welcome the adaptive reuse” of the lab, he added.

The hearing will remain open for written comment for seven days.