

## French farm conservation project discussed

by Mary Grow

A dozen local residents listened as land trust representatives talked about keeping the former French farm, on Vassalboro Road in China, in agricultural use, despite development pressure.

At a July 8 meeting, John Piotti and Stacy Gambrel of Maine Farmland Trust explained their organization's buy/protect/sell program. Judd Thompson of Sebasticook Regional Land Trust (formerly Friends of Unity Wetlands) said his group is slated to play a role as overseer, if the project comes together.

Maine Farmland Trust has an option to buy the farm, valid through December. The plan is to buy it, place it under an easement that would forever restrict the use to agriculture and immediately sell it to someone looking for a place to start farming.

Gambrel said the French farm is a good candidate for three main reasons:

- The soils are excellent for agriculture, in both the cleared and wooded areas. The French family used to run cattle before they switched to market gardening; a current tenant has been growing squash, pumpkins and corn.

- China is under heavy development pressure, growing faster than other Kennebec County towns, and a level tract like the French farm is easy to turn into house lots.

- The farm has been commercially successful in the recent past and still has the store and barn in reasonable condition.

The location close to markets is yet another attractive feature, Gambrel said.

The disadvantage of letting the farm turn into a subdivision, Piotti said, is that residents demand more expensive services, like schools, than their taxes support. Farmland is more likely to pay its own way, even after an easement lowers its taxable value.

Piotti said the China project depends on meeting two objectives: getting local funds to help fill the gap between the price the trust will pay for the farm and the price it will sell for, and finding a farmer to buy it.

No figures were firm at the July 8 meeting. Estimates are that buying the farm will cost close to \$500,000, including all appraisals and legal and bank costs; its value with an agricultural easement will be in the \$300,000 to \$325,000 range; a federal grant will cover close to \$75,000 of the difference; and \$100,000 to \$125,000 will be needed from other sources, primarily local fundraising.

Enough people at the meeting expressed support to encourage Piotti to proceed with the next step, an appraisal that will determine the value of the farm's development rights, which will be surrendered, and therefore firm up the selling price.

However, no one volunteered to chair a local fundraising committee. Piotti said Maine Farmland Trust will provide staff support, but a local committee is essential. Its goal will be twofold: to publicize the project and attract hundreds of small donors, and to enlist a few large donors.

The easement limiting use of the property to agriculture will be as flexible as possible, Piotti said. If a potential buyer appears in time, he or she will be consulted; for example, the new owner might want approval to build one more house on the property for a family member.

The Sebasticook land trust will be the easement holder, responsible for managing the stewardship fund that helps support the easement and for making sure the owner complies with the terms.

The Unity-based land trust has expanded from a focus on Unity wetlands to encompass the entire Sebasticook River watershed, 43 towns in five counties, from Sangerville and Parkman in the north to Vassalboro and China in the south.

## Selectmen set tax rate at 12.1 mils

by Mary Grow

China selectmen set the 2010-2011 tax rate at 12.1 mils (\$12.10 for each \$1,000 of valuation), an increase of 0.6 mils (60 cents per \$1,000) over the 2009-2010 rate.

Town Manager Daniel L'Heureux explained at the board's July 7 meeting the increase is primarily due to three factors:

- Last year's rate was kept down by one-time savings and income associated with the school reorganization, like China's share of the proceeds from the sale of the former school union office.

- Kennebec County is changing from a calendar to a fiscal year, so the town's budget includes 18 months' county taxes.

- The state has reduced the homestead exemption for people owning their primary residences by \$3,000, an adjustment that is figured into the tax rate and will not be in addition to it.

Tax bills should be mailed out soon. By town meeting vote, the first half payment is due by Sept. 30.

Selectmen spent most of the July 7 meeting, held at 8 a.m., in yet another long discussion with representatives of the local youth football program and their out-of-town supporters. The upshot was that the Central Maine Football and Cheering League has approval to use town ball fields, scoreboard and storage room for a year, on probation, supervised by a "football czar" to be appointed by the selectmen.

The vote was 3-1. Paul MacDonald dissented, and Neil Farrington had left the meeting. Farrington indicated support for the program. MacDonald expressed concern about missed deadlines during the long negoti-

ations.

The league's local team is the Central Maine Eagles, high-school-age students from China, Jefferson, Palermo, Vassalboro, Whitefield and Windsor.

Supporters of the program said it has been reorganized with non-profit status and several new board members. Selectmen's concerns about use of funds and proper role modeling for players have been addressed, they said.

Ervin Morrison, president of the Winslow football league, said he has advised the China people, when asked, on things like making sure uniforms and equipment are properly fitted and maintained. A report that he refused to bring his teams to play in China is not true, Morrison said – last year he brought five teams and had no problems.

Rich Feero, from Hermon, a vice-president of the New England Youth Football League, told selectmen the rules and regulations governing the league are modeled on those adopted by the Maine Principals' Association for high-school football.

Feero praised the Central Maine Eagles under coach Andy Burgess for their skill and sportsmanship, "They're a model team for our league."

South China resident, Skip Baker, said he has watched two grandchildren, a football player and a cheerleader, and has seen no problems on the field.

Two specific issues were resolved to the satisfaction of a majority of the selectmen. There will be police and medical services, either first responders or an ambulance, at home games; and out-of-town players will be asked to contribute to the cost of the ball field lights, either through their towns or through family donations.

The group's annual meeting is scheduled for 11 a.m., Saturday, July 17, at China Primary School. Plans include a tour of the China school forest, a picnic potluck

lunch, making ice cream with local cream and milk and the business meeting. Reservations may be made by calling 948-3766.



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**SOUTH CHINA VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT'S 31TH ANNUAL AUCTION**  
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Download the registration form at [www.centralmainefootball.com](http://www.centralmainefootball.com) or register in person at the China School Fields, starting at **4:30pm on the first day of Camp, Monday, July 26**

[www.centralmainefootball.com](http://www.centralmainefootball.com)

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