

Byram has chance to preserve area's rural character

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Councilman Lou Esposito said people move to Byram to swap strip malls, available real estate and the conveniences of suburban and city life for forests, lakes and wild animals.

The council will vote Monday to preserve some of that country life-style by buying three vacant pieces of land in the Cranberry Lake section of town for \$150,000. The pur-

chases, which total about \$800,000 and will be partly funded by state and private grants, will mark the first time Byram dips into its open space fund since taxpayers started contributing to the pot.

"People like the fact that the town is not built up and overfilled," said Esposito, also a member of the Byram Open Space Committee. "They like the fact that when they drive from neighborhood to neighborhood, there are not houses and

strip malls. There's that country feel."

The council will decide whether to buy the 16-acre Burbach property near Allamuchy State Park, the 44-acre Arnell tract on Andover-Mohawk Road and the 47-acre Beckman land on CO Drive.

Byram will pay for the parcels with money from the Open Space Trust Fund, which taxes homeowners 2 cents for every \$100 of assessed property value. Voters ap-

proved the additional tax through a ballot question in 1999.

Though the fund's balance could cover the price tag, the township may borrow for the properties. The council also will decide Monday whether to raise \$1.2 million through a bond to be paid back over 40 years so it has more money to buy open space, Township Administrator Gregory Poff said.

If the deals go through as planned, Byram residents will have

new walking trails for strollers, serious hikers and bird watchers.

"We've got a lot of open space and we would like to have the various parcels, the various areas of open space, eventually linked so we could have hiking paths and bike paths literally link the entire township," Mayor Eskil "Skip" Danielson said.

Though Byram is nearly entirely in the Highlands preservation re-

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gion, Danielson said it must actively preserve land so developers can't propose plans first because even land in the core of the Highlands could be built on if the Highlands Council approves the blueprints.

Byram plans to sell the Burbach property to the state so it can be tacked onto the state park, Poff said. The state will fund half of the purchase up front, and reimburse Byram for the other half, he said.

Resident Scott Olson, who joined his neighbors in a fight against a developer to save other land slated for homes, is excited at the prospect of having more access to Byram's natural resources.

Olson lives near the Arnell property.

"There's some pretty nice, rocky, craggy outcroppings. There's a creek that flows through it. There's a lot of skunk cabbage and lowlands and wetlands that run through it," he said.

Olson said he moved out of his townhouse along Route 80 in Wharton seven years ago to embrace the wildlife, trails and open land in Byram.

He said land preservation saves money for taxpayers because fewer people can move into town and drive up the cost of the school system and public services.

"It comes down to why I'm willing to pay money in my taxes, too. It's a quality of life issue," he said. "When I came here there were turkeys walking down the road. I get up every morning and there are deer in my front yard. That's the reason I moved to Byram and I'd like to keep in that way."

FACT:

Hopatcong's Open Space Tax Referendum: of the \$462,500 total that will have been collected by the end of 2004 not one cent will have been spent on conservation...zero!