

# River Farm listed for \$32.9 million

## AHS is no longer pursuing a merger with American Public Gardens Association

BY CODY MELLO-KLEIN

River Farm, the 27-acre property once owned by George Washington that now serves as the headquarters for the American Horticultural Society, was officially listed on the open real estate market at \$32.9 million on Nov. 13.

The same week, on Nov. 10, AHS announced that it would be closing River Farm to the public in light of a recent spike in COVID-19 cases. It had also closed for a period of time in the spring.

“We’ll keep it closed until we feel that it’s safe again, and then, like we did before, we’ll open back up,” AHS’ Interim Executive Director Bob Brackman said. “It’s just a cautious approach to be responsible for our staff and for our volunteers.”

While River Farm is not open to the public at this time, AHS’ volunteers are still able to work in the gardens, and the property is still open for events by appointment only, Brackman said.

Some community members said they believe the closure of River Farm was more of a calculated decision than just a response to COVID-19.

“I found it kind of ironic that during this COVID-19 pandemic that they would close an open public space just when you need close-to-home places like River Farm to be able to get outside and get fresh air,” Anne Fafara, an AHS volunteer, said. “For people’s wellbeing during COVID-19, if anything, that’s the one place that should be open.”

The recent announcements are the latest developments in a process that has drawn criticism from community members who continue to question AHS’ motives and

lack of transparency.

In September, when the community first caught wind of the fact that AHS would be putting River Farm up for sale, several community members expressed frustration and disappointment over the decision. AHS said it was considering selling the property and merging with the American Public Gardens Association due to ongoing financial struggles.

The property at 7931 E. Boulevard Drive, which includes gardens, a historic house and views of the Potomac River, has been open to the public since AHS acquired the property in 1973.

The community outrage around the announcement was compounded by a perceived lack of communication on the board of directors’ part. When the board did communicate, it was about decisions that had been made long before the community got involved.

“Their seemingly surreptitious and reactive communication has not garnered them any friends in the community,” Laura Francis, co-chair of the Hunting Creek Garden Club, said.

AHS announced on Oct. 20 that it would not be pursuing a merger with APGA and would instead remain independent with an independent board and staff. However, the news meant that the nonprofit would be moving forward with its sale of River Farm.

### The original property buyer

Community members said they feel that, even if a public entity is able to purchase the property, AHS has betrayed the original vision of River Farm.

In 1971, Enid Haupt, a philanthropist, public garden supporter and AHS board member, learned that the So-



PHOTO/CODY MELLO-KLEIN

The American Horticultural Society closed River Farm to the public on Nov. 9, citing COVID-19 and the safety of staff and visitors as the reason. Community members and volunteers have questioned the motivation behind this decision.

viet Union was considering purchasing the River Farm property to use as a retreat for its staff. The news shocked Haupt, and she ultimately ended up donating \$1 million to AHS to allow it to purchase and maintain the property. The acquisition was made with Haupt’s stipulation that the property would remain open to the public.

Keister Evans, who served as AHS’ executive director during the acquisition of River Farm, remembered how adamant Haupt was that the property remain publicly accessible. Evans, who met with Haupt in her New York City apartment to discuss the acquisition, called Haupt “a pretty strong-willed woman.”

“There’s no question that she would have never expected to give that money to an organization that would turn around and sell it and take the money,” Evans said. “She said that property needs to be open and available to the public. I know that was her intent.”

Evans acknowledged that

there is no legal restriction in the deed that would prevent AHS from selling the property to a private developer.

For Fafara, the news that River Farm is now on the open market calls into question AHS’ commitment to Haupt’s wishes.

“They were really given a golden egg on a silver platter, and now they’re going to cash in the golden egg with no responsibility for what they were given,” Fafara said.

Despite the pushback from community members, AHS maintains that selling River Farm is the only way it can effectively carry out its national mission of “connecting people with plants and to help all Americans learn about sustainable gardening,” AHS Board Chair Terry Hayes said.

Without an endowment, the organization has struggled to balance maintaining River Farm and achieving its national mission. The funds from the sale will go toward creating an endowment that

will allow AHS to pursue that mission for the next century, according to Hayes.

“Over those 100 years, yes, endowments have been considered, and the funding has always been problematic, especially since we took on the burden of River Farm, which is expensive to maintain,” Hayes said.

“The expenses of River Farm have not allowed our national mission to thrive and, honestly, we think that River Farm could be better stewarded by somebody who would be dedicated solely to that purpose,” Hayes continued.

Although financial issues are not new to AHS, the idea that the organization would sell River Farm was a shock to Evans and a sign that the current AHS board members did not feel the same way about the property as past generations.

“I’m not surprised that it’s difficult to maintain without an endowment, but I was sur-



PHOTO/CODY MELLO-KLEIN

The asking price for the 27-acre River Farm property is currently \$32.9 million.

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prised that they were selling,” Evans said.

**Public action**

Since the initial announcement in September, government agencies, local elected officials and the community have started mobilizing in an effort to keep River Farm in public hands.

The Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, otherwise known as Nova Parks, contacted AHS almost immediately after the sale was announced to determine whether it could acquire the property, Nova Parks Executive Director Paul Gilbert said.

River Farm seemed like a perfect match for the agency’s portfolio of parks. Nova Parks is a government agency that oversees a system of 34 regional parks that adds up to more than 12,000 acres and includes 15 miles of frontage on the Potomac River and a number of botanical gardens.

“[We have] a big focus on lands on river, gardens, reception sites, so it kind of

fits very well with what River Farm has,” Gilbert said.

Nova Parks has assembled a team, including Mount Vernon District Supervisor Dan Storck, state senators Scott Surovell (D-Fairfax) and Adam Ebbin (D-Alexandria), staff from Fairfax County and Fairfax County Park Authority, to purchase the property.

In order to give this group of elected officials and government agencies time to collect funding, AHS is not considering any offers on River Farm until Jan. 1, 2021, Hayes said.

However, the \$32.9 million asking price already presents a challenge for public entities. What Hayes described as a “reasonable price,” Gilbert argues is inflated due to the value of adjacent properties that aren’t comparable to River Farm. One property next door, a large private residence, was recently listed for \$60 million.

“That seems like a completely unrealistic number, but it certainly will make entities like AHS question how much this land is actually worth,” Gilbert said.

The tax assessed value of the River Farm property is closer to \$17 million, so Nova Parks is currently raising funds for a second appraisal, according to Gilbert.

“The \$32.9 million asking price is not supported by anything,” Gilbert wrote in an email.

Although AHS and Nova Parks have different ideas about the assessed value of the property, Hayes said AHS shares a desire to keep the property in public hands. The financial value of an offer is not the only aspect that AHS will take into consideration when making a decision next year.

“In looking at offers, we will be presenting to the board as many options as we possibly can, but we will look past what the offer price is to who is purchasing it but, most importantly, what their motivation for purchasing the property is,” Hayes said.

AHS is looking for an owner who will not only maintain the property without subdividing it but will “continue

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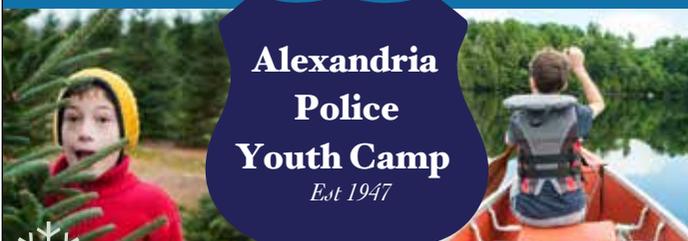


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According to AHS, River Farm will reopen when health and safety concerns are no longer an issue.

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opportunities for public enjoyment,” Brackman said.

However, Gilbert said AHS has not taken any meaningful steps to make those two things requirements.

“I think they would like to see it in a condition like it is today as a garden and they’d like to see it open to the public, but I think they are perhaps not willing to take steps that would reduce the value or put off any potential buyers,” Gilbert said.

**Public property**

With a steep asking price set, Gilbert acknowledges that it’s going to require every dollar to keep River Farm open to the public. That means nonprofits and private citizens are playing an equally important role in the River Farm acquisition.

The Northern Virginia Conservation Trust, a nonprofit that has participated in land conservation efforts throughout the region, has taken an active role in the process.

In late August, NVCT started thinking about ways to ensure River Farm could remain open the public. The organization kicked off its Save River Farm campaign this week with the intent of col-

lecting private donations and serving as a centralized hub to drive energy and engagement among the community.

“It’s likely going to take a lot of different avenues in order to purchase and acquire River Farm, and there is a lot of interest from Northern Virginia residents in donating funds to buy River Farm,” Alan Rowsome, executive director of NVCT, said.

Donations can be made to the campaign at [www.saveriverfarm.com](http://www.saveriverfarm.com).

Getting NVCT involved was important for a community movement that lacked a central driving force other than the need to protect River Farm.

Community members are eager to get involved and take action, Francis said.

“It’s fair to say that area garden clubs are ready to take whatever action we can, whether that’s donating money to a cause, whether that’s picketing, whether that’s doing a second letter writing campaign,” Francis said.

As a project, the Save River Farm campaign presents some challenges, Rowsome said. One of these is the site’s current owner, which unlike some landowners, is a business entity with a board, members and its own priorities.

However, even with all the

work ahead, Rowsome said NVCT is optimistic about the situation, especially given the level of engagement the community has already shown.

“We would not be running this campaign and building the support from the public if we did not think that there is a success story to tell down the road,” Rowsome said.

The level of interest in this sale expressed by both public and private stakeholders speaks to River Farm’s value as a site. According to Gilbert, not only is it valuable as one of the few pieces of publicly accessible riverside property but it has significant environmental benefits as well.

However, everyone involved in the movement to “save River Farm” agrees that the site is more than just a piece of property. Community members have decades of memories attached to the historic property. Gilbert said he remembers taking his children to River Farm, and although it’s been more than 10 years since they went, his children still have fond memories of it.

“Memories like that come from special places,” Gilbert said. “That’s what [Nova Parks] is about: acquiring and creating and preserving special places. And that’s what River Farm is, a special place.”

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