

Outdoor Lab Boosters Looking to Augment Rural Acreage

Supporters of the Arlington Outdoor Education Association hope to purchase or protect open space around the group's 210-acre Phoebe Hall Knipling Outdoor Lab in Fauquier County, so it is not threatened with encroaching development.

"It's a good time to buy," said Michael Nardolilli, who heads the non-profit organization that owns the property, which for decades has been used to expose Arlington schoolchildren to natural surroundings.

But time may be ticking away.

"The current economic downturn will not last forever," Nardolilli said in an Oct. 6 presentation to School Board members. An improving economy will likely lead to higher land prices and increasing development pressures on the acreage around the Outdoor Lab.

"It's important to stay ahead" of the curve, said Nardolilli, who said options include outright purchase of property, or paying for conservation easements to protect, in perpetuity, adjacent land from development.

The organization is working to prioritize neighboring parcels by their importance for preservation, and already has offered to purchase one parcel that may come on the market, Nardolilli told School Board members.

Students in Arlington's public schools use the Fauquier County facility for a host of purposes; each year, fifth-graders get to spend an overnight session there.

"Our students are some of its best proponents," School Board member Libby Garvey said of the facility and its programs.

The annual open house at the Outdoor Lab is slated for Nov. 6, when supporters will celebrate with an old-fashioned "mortgage burning" ceremony. Two retired educators donated \$50,000 each to help retire the debt for the facility's new animal lab.

The Outdoor Lab's history dates back to 1967, when the Arlington Outdoor Education Association was founded by Phoebe Hall Knipling, then the science supervisor in the Arlington school system. It was later named in her honor.

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