

Hearing Today on Scouts' Pine-Barrens Land Sale

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The Nassau chapter of the Boy Scouts of America is trying to develop a parcel of environmentally sensitive land in the pine barrens — land currently used by scouts for hiking and training — into a golf course.

In an application submitted to the Pine Barrens Commission last month and to be discussed today, the Nassau Scouts asked that part of the property it owns in Wading River be exempt from a state law that controls construction in the pine barrens. It is the largest exemption from the law requested so far.

Pleading financial hardship, the Nassau troop said it wants to sell the 147-acre parcel for \$2 million because it "desperately needs the money for this clearly excess land," according to the application. The troop would continue to operate Camp Wauwepex for Boy Scouts on 403 adjacent acres it also owns.

If the commission grants permission, the Nassau Scouts could complete a contract with Roanoke Links, a Middle Island firm that helped excavate a Deer Park course in its only prior golf project.

The request is drawing strong opposition from the Long Island Pine Barrens Society, a key advocate for the state law that protects pine barrens land from development, which said it could threaten underground drinking water and ecological diversity.

Richard Amper, the society's executive director, said the Scouts' property should be bought by the state under provisions of the pine barrens legislation that allow for the public purchase of land the state wants to protect from development. He said the Scouts never filed formal requests with the county or state.

"The Boy Scouts shouldn't want someone to bulldoze the woods when somebody will pay to preserve it. It's a bad example for the boys," Amper said. "It would be like Smokey the Bear setting forest fires."

A lawyer for the Scouts, Andrew Cangemi, said he inquired with state environmental officials about whether they would be interested in the plot, but was

told it was a low priority because it was too remote.

He said he also had talked with officials from the Nature Conservancy, who have inquired about possibly purchasing the property. But he said the Scouts would continue to try to get an exemption in lieu of a firm alternative.

"We're a deeply concerned environmental organization with a long track record," said Trip McMillan, the scout executive for the Nassau troop, who added that local scout groups occasionally are compelled to sell land for financial reasons.

The commission that rules on exemption requests is set to hold a public hearing on the Scouts' application today, and could issue a ruling within two to four months, according to Ray Corwin, the commission's executive director.

The five-member commission is made up of Suffolk Executive Robert Gaffney and a representative of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, as well as the supervisors of the towns that contain the affected pine barrens land — Brookhaven, Riverhead and Southampton.

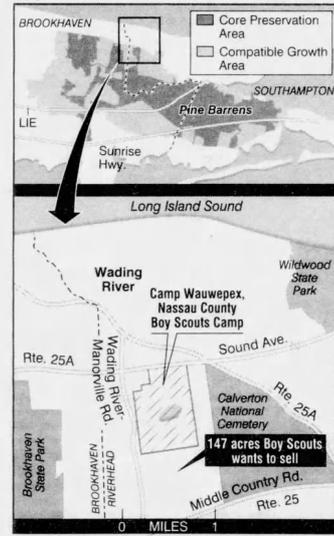
Since the pine barrens law was signed last summer, about 80 percent of the applications have been approved by the commission, according to Corwin. But most of those have been for homes on single lots.

The Nassau troop is basing its request in part on the approval it received from Riverhead in June, 1991.

"Final approval for the necessary permits was then close at hand," Cangemi wrote in the application. "Clearly the Riverhead community was fully in favor of this project."

The troop was then set to sell the land to Roanoke Links, but the drive for the pine barrens law sidetracked the deal. The parcel was included in the final map of the 52,500 acres that make up the pine barrens core, which is tightly protected from development.

John Barker, the president of Roanoke Links and its affiliate, Roanoke Sand & Gravel, said the golf



course would fit in with the environs in Wading River. "It's surrounded by both residential and industrial," he said.

And according to McMillan, the sale of the land is needed to help the Nassau troop — which is one of more than 300 groups that operate independently of the national Boy Scouts of America — thrive financially.

"We're not looking to spend this money in operating but to put it in endowment . . . and use what we can generate from it to help with our operating deficit," said McMillan, who said the troop has an annual deficit of about \$200,000.