

York Water District adds former Highland Towing property to resource protection area



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YORK — Once considered a threat to York's water supply, the Highland Towing property has been cleaned up and sold to the York Water District, a possible hazard to a "crucial watershed" no more.

But the series of events that led to the sale proved poignant for the property's most recent owner, whose only — but significant — solace was that her decision to sell the property would benefit the town.

The water district bought the three-acre property at 210 Mountain Road for \$400,000 last week from Dawn Fernald, the daughter of Highland Towing's original owner, Domenic Grasso. The district spent \$60,000 of the purchase price to clean the property, through which one of three feeder brooks travels to Chases Pond, situated only three-quarters of a mile away.

Fernald, who grew up in a home on the property, collaborated with the water district, which had been eyeing the property for years. Water Superintendent Don Neumann said Monday that water district officials had witnessed a steady stream of towed vehicles going in and out of the property for 20 years. They feared that the vehicles, which included a tractor-trailer, a motor home, boats and cars, could have leaked oil, gasoline and anti-freeze into the stream and pollute Chases Pond.

Neumann broached the idea with Fernald about buying the property after the 2006 Mother's Day's storm, while they were cleaning up Short Sands Beach.

"One of these days I'd like to talk to your grumpy dad," Neumann had her.

But Grasso fell ill and died two months later.

"He was very willing to meet (with the water district)," Fernald, sitting in the water district conference room on Monday, said about her father.

The new owners of Highland Towing, Fernald and her brother, Jon Grasso, talked with Neumann that fall. Neumann was trying to ensure that the company employed "best management practices" to protect the water supply. A subsequent test of drilled wells in the area showed that it had.

"Everything came out well," Neumann said of the tests, and plans moved forward to buy the property.

But in February 2007, a few days before Fernald and her brother were supposed to meet with water district officials, Jon Grasso died.

"Highland Towing became my business," Fernald said. She closed it one month later.

Under the supervision of the state Department of Environmental Protection, the water district removed an underground tank and 300 gallons of fuel during a six-month cleanup.

"It was a heck of a cleanup," Fernald said.

Using revenue from renting space on a Mount Agamenticus telecommunications tower, the Water District leveraged \$150,000 into a \$250,000, 2 percent interest rate, 10-year loan to pay for the property, requiring no money from water ratepayers.

Neumann expressed his gratitude to Fernald on Monday, saying it was "refreshing" to deal with her and her family — especially when she could have sold the property to someone else for more money.

For Fernald, the sale was "bittersweet," she said. "That's the house I grew up in."

The home will be removed from the property, which will no longer be inhabited, but, in a way, Fernald will always be there.

"Knowing the water district purchased this property, and it will always be part of the town," Fernald said, "a part of me will always be there."

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