



Mayor Joshua Garcia

Conservation Commission

City of Holyoke

Yoni Glogower, Director of Conservation & Sustainability

12/17/2021

Todd McGee
City Council President
Holyoke City Hall
536 Dwight St, Room 10
Holyoke, MA 01040

Re: Notice of Intent to Sell Lot 1 and Lot 2 on Mountain Road, Holyoke, MA (MBP 206-00-065)

Dear President McGee and members of the City Council,

The Holyoke Conservation Commission met on 12/3/2021 to discuss Holyoke's interest in exercising its right of first refusal on these parcels. As the Council is aware, these parcels are currently enrolled in the Massachusetts Chapter 61A program for farmland protection. The transfer of such land to a different use, in this case residential, triggers the option for the municipality to match a bona fide offer to purchase the land, or assign the right of first refusal to an accredited land conservation organization.

The four acres in question contain prime farmland soils as defined by the MA Department of Natural resources. They are also part of one of the last tillable tracts of significant size left in Rock Valley, called Holyoke's "Fruit Bowl" in reference to its agricultural origins. Protecting quality farmland in this area is also called out as a major priority in Holyoke's 2019-2025 Open Space and Recreation Plan, citing concern over continued land conversion by survey respondents. Page 106 of the plan reads: "the rarity of valuable agricultural soils and farmlands of importance in Holyoke and its historic quality suggests that the City consider opportunities to protect the few remaining agricultural areas in the city".

However, based on conversations with the property owner and several local land conservation organizations, it seems there are no good options at this time for Holyoke to act on its right of first refusal for these two lots. Given the sum total price of \$350,000 for both parcels, neither the City nor any local or regional land conservation partners are in a position to act on a sale within the allotted time period.

It is unfortunate that the owner was unwilling to discuss financing options for protecting and continuing to own the entire 34 acres. For example, placing farmland in an agricultural easement can help offset some of the costs needed to continue a farming operation, help farmers with succession planning, and provide liquidity that can ultimately save a farm from going out of business. Farmland protection also has a variety of ecological benefits including but not limited to promoting biodiversity and ensuring that critical wildlife habitats are protected in combination with agricultural resources. As Holyoke looks towards increasing healthy food options for low-income residents, identifying and protecting agricultural land for food cultivation might be a key part of the City's strategy.



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At this time, the Conservation Commission recommends that the City waive its right of first refusal and allow the property sales to proceed, with the hope that there may be future opportunities to protect priority farmland and natural areas in this part of Holyoke.

Sincerely,

Michael Dodge, Chairperson

CC: City Clerk
Office of the Mayor
City Council Administrative Assistant