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City proposes Cates Farm preservation

By KAREN CARTER/Enterprise editor

The city invested \$2,300 Monday night into a process that could eventually lead to the Cates Farm property being maintained as a natural environment for perpetuity.

An idea brought by city council member Tim Bradley opens the door for Unique Places to do preliminary work collecting information that might put the Cates property before conservation investors. That process could deliver to Cates heirs their desired value for the property while giving them the ability to control the destiny of the property.

It all started when Bradley read an article in the August issue of Our State magazine that talked about how cities and towns are finding the best conservation-focused outcome for their landmark properties.

Bradley wrote to Unique Places, a conservation driven real estate company that specializes in taking property as it is and establishing a trust for perpetuity.

This development firm out of Durham matches investors with land conservation projects to produce shared goals and rewards. For example, Unique Places created a formal agreement with Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy to buy the contracts and facilitated the state's acquisition of Chimney Rock State Park. The Whitehursts, a family who owned 1,600 acres outside New Bern, hired Unique Places in 2007 to help them create a conservation plan that now offers Craven County a nature park with water access, a conservation easement through the N.C. Division of Forest Resources, a Duck Creek Natural Area as part of the Neuse River Game Lands, and an area of wetlands and forested uplands. Other conservation projects by Unique Places have included Bluff Mountain, the Harris Farm in Franklin County, and the Poole Farm in northern Durham County.

"The Cates property came to my mind," said Bradley at Monday evening's council meeting, "when I read the article. I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if we could leave the Cates Farm a natural area?"

Bradley did the research and he heard back from Unique Places, he put together a proposal and presented it before council for their consideration Monday evening. The first step of the process asks for funding of a feasibility assessment by Unique Places for \$2,300.

"It's a win-win for everyone," said Bradley. He said that the rights of individuals to sell their property would be protected. "The Cates estate would get what they've asked for, re-coup the value of their land, and at the same time promote conservation with investors."

Bradley said he was thinking about the quality of life for citizens for years to come when children might go out to the Cates Farm to learn how a farm operates.

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"For \$2,300 they (Unique Places) will do a map of the property and provide recommendations in conversation with conservatory groups," said Bradley.

"I'd like to pursue this," said Bradley.

"Money well spent," said council member Patty Philipps, who spoke of the trees, the wetlands, and preservation of open space. She also commented on the high qualifications of personnel in the company from the packet of information Bradley had given them.

Ken and John Walker, who represent the Cates heirs, said it has been the desire of the family to have a conservation setting. "I think they would be thrilled to explore this option," said John Walker, who, upon council's decision to proceed, would be taking this up with the Cates heirs.

Council member Ed Hooks said, "This is magnificent, a good point in Mebane's life."

Hooks also said that this does not preclude the city from getting involved. He noted the city's interest in expanded parks and more recreation facilities.

Bradley agreed. "It (Cates Farm) borders the city. It sits in the middle of the watershed. It sits in the beautiful Woodlawn community. I can't tell you how many times citizens have come and said to me, 'let's preserve the Cates Farm in its most natural setting.'"

Bradley made the motion and Hooks the second, and it carried unanimously for the mayor to sign a request to do the initial map overview with Unique Places for \$2,300 and explore the possibility of the city partnering with them for future conservation of the Cates Farm.

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