

Federal money earmarked to purchase land in Foster

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FOSTER — State and local officials are hoping to use \$1 million of a federal highway bill to secure public access and purchase hundreds of acres of land surrounding Jerimoth Hill, the state's highest point.

U.S. Sen. Lincoln D. Chafee, along with representatives from the state Department of Environmental Management, Brown University, and the federal Trust for Public Land, said yesterday that plans are in the works to use federal money to purchase land off Route 101/Hartford Pike to serve as a gateway to the hilltop and potentially to purchase all or part of a 138-acre parcel on the hill that is in private hands.

Republican Chafee secured \$12 million for environmental preservation projects for the state through the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2005, a bill that authorizes federal spending of \$286.5 billion over the next five years for highway, mass transit, and safety programs.

One of the projects proposed by the bill is the "acquisition of

fee or easement, construction of a trail, and site improvements in Foster," for \$1 million.

Chafee said he had included the proposal in the bill specifically with Jerimoth Hill, off Route 101 about 1.5 miles from Route 94, in mind.

Brown University owns a 5-acre clearing atop the 812-foot hill where its Astronomy Department has a storage shed and fixtures for portable telescopes, but no permanent observatory.

But public access to the university-owned land was for years restricted by a resident who refused to let hikers and nature-lovers cut through his property to visit the site.

Today, it is accessible via a trail — improved by the new property owners, Jeffrey and Deborah Mosley — leading up from the house at 212A Hartford Pike.

Chafee and others yesterday said it is important to purchase the development rights to the trail on the Mosley property to ensure that the public will forever have legal access to the hilltop.

"This is a really important place for the people of Rhode

Island," said Craig MacDonnell, regional director for the Trust for Public Land, a branch of the federal government that is currently appraising the land that one day may provide a public trail to the hilltop.

The remainder of the \$1 million could go toward purchase of all or part of 138 undeveloped acres to the south and east of the hilltop that is privately owned or to secure land for a small parking lot.

"While the money was originally intended to buy the Mosley property, it can now go to enhance the site and incorporate something broader," said Timothy Mooney, assistant state office director.

David Targan, Brown University associate dean for science programs, said that a public path would allow the university to sponsor public stargazing nights.

"This hill has some of the darkest night skies in the state, which allows us to see the faintest objects" in the heavens, Targan said.

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