

# TOWN NEWS

## Town Treasures Its Stone Walls

### As Some Sell Stones For Cash, Somers Officials Work To Save Chunk Of New England's History

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**SOMERS** — Word had gotten out that the stone walls criss-crossing a sprawling piece of property near the Shenspit State Forest were in jeopardy. The heirs of the former owner were reportedly planning to dismantle

would protect stone walls from being torn down. "It's the town's heritage," Jackson reiterated in an interview last week. "Somers is its stone walls."

But codifying rules to protect stone walls seems to be a slow, deliberate process, perhaps befitting of the years it took farmers to build up the layers of walls in the first place. The issue has received recent attention in light of the publication of University of Connecticut Professor Robert M. Thorson's book, "Stone by Stone: The Magnificent History in New England's Stone Walls," on the disappearing connections to the area's agricultural heritage.

Over the decades, stone walls have been quietly taken apart, little by little, through theft and by those seeking to reap thousands from the sale of the stones.

Town Attorney Carl T. Landolina does not yet have a draft to submit to selectmen, but said he may by early

erty rights, but feels a closer look at stone walls would not be any different from the level of scrutiny currently applied to property owners in town who want to cut down timber.

"We have a logging ordinance," Jackson said. "Why not stone walls?"

Ironically, the stone walls that prompted Jackson's concern may never have been seriously threatened at all.

The property was purchased in 1966 by landowner Howard Whitaker Jr., a force in town who was, among many things, president of a shade tobacco farm and the co-developer of the Cedar Knob Golf Course. Whitaker died Nov. 6, 2001.

One of Howard Whitaker's

next month. "We're researching the legalities," he said. One problem is that there does not seem to be an easy precedent. Landolina said a review conducted by the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities at his office's request turned up only one set of specific regulations — in the town of Mansfield.

Mansfield's regulations deal specifically with subdivisions and require developers to identify existing stone walls and preserve them if possible — but if not, to rebuild or relocate the stones.

"There still is a legitimate issue of how . . . you deal with the stone walls that are on individual property," Gregory Padick, the Mansfield town planner, said. "But that raises a number of legal issues tied to property rights and we don't currently address those in our regu-

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possible — and preserving historic landmarks. Boet-Whitaker said he would like the property to be known as the "Whitaker Family Woods."

"My father himself was a connoisseur of old things," Boet-Whitaker said. "The last thing I'd think he would want to have happen would be to have the stone walls carted away."

Even if the Whitaker property's stone walls remain untouched, Jackson said, he will continue to press this issue — and hopes other towns will examine ways to do the same.

"It's incumbent upon people like myself to try and protect stone walls," Jackson said. "I would hope other communities would follow suit."

vestigation even included looking into selling the land for Christmas tree farming. "It was a query to the town if there was any restriction to taking the stone."

"This is really the last of the Whitaker legacy in Somers, and we'd like to see it preserved," Boet-Whitaker said. "The stone walls are part of that."

Boet-Whitaker said there are about 600 yards of stone wall, averaging four to five feet tall, on the property that stretches south from Wells Road. He acknowledged that alone, these stone walls would net a good sum of money. "We've had quotes of over \$150,000 for the wall," he said.

But Boet-Whitaker said Friday there is an agreement in the family to sell the property to the North-