Carcieri drops plan for state police on reservoir site

Meanwhile, the governor doesn't disclose what other sites he's considering for a new headquarters.

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PROVIDENCE -- Governor Carcieri said last night that his administration will abandon plans to try to build a new state police headquarters on a piece of the protected Big River Reservoir property in West Greenwich.

"We're going to look at other options," the governor said.

Carcieri said he had been assured, when the site was proposed, that the environmental community "would be OK with it."

Instead, he said, he was surprised by the vehemence of their opposition -- "people feeling that we were using it for a purpose that wasn't intended."

"I'm the biggest environmentalist around," he said. "I don't want to see these things developed. I felt that, in that small piece, in that corner of that parcel, if everybody thought that that was reasonable, I was OK with it."

But, "In view, I think, of a lot of the reaction, we're going to find another alternative," he said.

The administration had turned to the West Greenwich site after first considering building the $48-million headquarters at the Pastore complex in Cranston. But the available land was deemed inadequate, and the traffic too congested.

No other state land provided the quick access to the highways that the state police wanted, according to Jerome Williams, executive director of the Department of Administration, except for the land just off Route 95 at Exit 7 in West Greenwich.

The land is on the edge of the 8,600-acre Big River area that was largely taken from private owners in the 1960s to use for a new reservoir. In the 1980s, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency turned down the reservoir plans. Now the state plans to locate large-volume drinking water wells on the site and some still believe it will be needed one day for a reservoir.

Meanwhile, the General Assembly protected all the property with an open-space designation.

The administration had submitted legislation exempting 18 acres for the state police headquarters. The Senate Finance Committee recently voted in support of the measure, despite strong objections from many of the state's environmental groups.

The groups said it would set a terrible precedent to take land earmarked for drinking water and open space and use it for a state office building. They also said locating the building in rural West Greenwich also amounted to state assisted sprawl.

The bill is now awaiting a floor vote in the Senate. But last night, Carcieri said he would ask legislative leaders not to move ahead with it.

Asked where the state would turn next, Carcieri said: "There's other possibilities . . . I've got some thoughts, but I'm not going to disclose them yet. . . . We've got other options; we'll find something."

House Minority Leader Robert Watson, R-East Greenwich, hailed the decision.

"I'm heartened to know that the land will be preserved as open space and will be protected in the future as a water source option," he said. "I'm very happy with the developments, and I'm very appreciative of our governor making that decision -- it's a responsible decision."

The governor's announcement came after the Conservation Law Foundation, an environmental advocacy group with offices in Providence and throughout New England, announced earlier in the day that it had filed a public-records request with the state Department of Administration seeking detailed information on the other locations that were examined.

"The state certainly should have done a thorough analysis of other options before trying to change the law to develop land that is dedicated to open space," said Cynthia Giles, director of the foundation's Rhode Island Advocacy Center.

The request seeks documents pertaining to the search of public and private properties along the Route 95 corridor done by the administration, including a list of sites that were considered, the criteria used to evaluate the sites and reasons for rejection.

Under the state's Access to Public Records Act, the administration has 10 days to respond.