

Kids go to battle for a bit of history

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Want county to buy junkyard site

Eric Dolan had a message Tuesday for government officials who have been trying to buy and preserve land at the site where in 1776 Gen. George Washington's troops crossed the Hackensack River and saved the American Revolution.

"George Washington saved our nation. Now it's your turn to be a hero and to save this very, very special and important part of history," Dolan, a fifth-grader at Dumont's Grant School, read from a letter during a meeting with Bergen County Executive Dennis McNerney.

Dolan's classmate Beatriz Cruz had a similar plea for the land, a former junkyard that some fear could be developed instead of becoming part of a historic park.

"If you do not buy the junkyard, you won't only disappoint the children of Dumont, but you'll disappoint the people throughout the United States and the people who come from all around the world to

see the New Bridge Landing," Cruz said.

McNerney's Hackensack offices were the first stop for Dolan, Cruz, and about two dozen other classmates who are on a mission to see that the 1.7-acre site in River Edge is reclaimed.

The former Bergenfield Auto Parts Co. property is a key piece of a historic park New Jersey officials want to create to commemorate Washington's famous crossing.

While preservationists have been awarded a \$1.1 million federal grant to help buy the property, state officials and the owners of the land have not reached a deal.

Concerns over contamination on the property have been one sticking point. And the widow of the land's longtime owner said in an interview last year that while her husband's desire was always to sell the land to the state, private developers have made offers.

"We're confident we can acquire that piece of land," Fred

Mumford, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection, said Tuesday. "We recognize the historic importance of the property."

The widow of Leonard Lehr, who owned the land before his death in October 2002, could not be reached Tuesday.

County officials also tried to assure the Dumont schoolchildren that the property will be preserved.

But the students in Grant School teacher Carol Banicki's fifth-grade class said they won't stop lobbying until the deal is done.

They planned to take their letters to the Dumont Borough Council on Tuesday night and were trying to set up a meeting with state officials in Trenton.

"We are here today because we really believe it is more important to visit a site than read about it in a textbook," Banicki told McNerney before several students read their letters.

Some students expressed frustration that state officials haven't purchased the land yet.

"That junkyard could have been a historical park by now," student Jennifer Navatto read from her letter. "If I was a politician, I would have fought harder to have that junkyard turned into a historical park."

The site, said Christina Citakian, "deserves to become a historic park for future generations to see, not to become someone else's bedroom."

"That bridge saved the nation," said Jillian LeTizia. "If you put a parking lot or a supermarket there, you will be destroying history."

McNerney, who showed the students drawings of a plan for the historic park once all of the land is acquired, praised them for speaking so passionately.

"You're being heard," McNerney said. "That's how government works. By people like you — by your voice making a difference to say, 'Look, we want to save this.'"

Students of Banicki have been



DON SMITH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

County Executive Dennis McNerney meeting Tuesday with Dumont students who want to preserve 1.7 acres at New Bridge Landing.

speaking out about preserving the property around New Bridge Landing since 1992.

"We believe that kids at any age can make a difference," Banicki said.

Historians say the fighting done at the New Bridge Landing site

was a pivotal moment in the Revolutionary War. Had Washington's troops not fended off the British at New Bridge, historians have said, the war could have been over.

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