



**TOWN OF WEST NEWBURY, MA**  
**PROCEDURE FOR CHAPTER 61, 61A, 61B RIGHT OF FIRST REFUSALS**  
**APPROVED ON FEBRUARY 22, 2016, AMENDED SEPTEMBER 7, 2021**

## **PURPOSE**

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M.G.L. Chapters 61, 61A, and 61B provide tax relief for owners of forestland, farmland, and recreational land respectively. (Chapter 61A is most commonly applicable in the Town of West Newbury.) When a landowner intends to convert such land to other uses, the Town has a Right of First Refusal. This document is intended to provide a procedure which promotes consistency, transparency, and fairness when a landowner intends to convert such land. The procedure is intended to ensure that potentially interested town entities become aware of the potential conversion, to allow them to provide input to the Select Board, and to ensure that the Select Board has the ability to make a fully informed decision on behalf of the Town.

Note that it is incumbent upon all entities using this procedure to review the applicable laws and consult legal counsel. Details on how to carry out steps in this procedure are detailed in the law and, of course, such steps must comply with the law. After the steps in this procedure are executed, additional steps may be necessary according to the law. The entire law in all its details are not included herein.

MGL 61A, §14, is given in Appendix A and parts of the law that are directly addressed in this procedure are highlighted in yellow.

## **OVERVIEW**

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Land currently taxed under MGL Chapters 61, 61A, or 61B cannot be sold for, or converted to, residential, industrial, or commercial use unless the city or town in which the land is located has been notified of that intent.<sup>1</sup> A Notice of Intent shall be sent by the landowner by Certified Mail or hand delivered to the Select Board, the Assessor, the Planning Board, the Conservation Commission, and the State Forester.<sup>2</sup> An electronic copy shall also be submitted for transmittal to other town departments as noted below. Receipt of a complete and proper Notice of Intent triggers a period of 120 days during which the Town shall have a Right of First Refusal to match a bona fide offer to purchase the land or to assign this right to another entity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 35-38.

<sup>3</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 51-53 and Lines 81-82.

## PROCEDURE FOR HANDLING NOTIFICATIONS OF INTENT TO CONVERT CHAPTER 61, 61A, OR 61B LAND

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When the Select Board receives a Notice of Intent to sell Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B land for, or convert such land to, residential, industrial, or commercial use, the following procedure will be followed:

1. Town Counsel will review the Notice of Intent to make sure the notice is proper and complete and shall notify the Select Board of their findings within 2 business days of receipt.
2. If the Notice of Intent is determined to be insufficient, within 30 days of receipt of the Notice, the Town Counsel will notify the landowner in writing that the Notice is insufficient, does not comply, and that no 120 day period has begun.<sup>4</sup> If the Notice is proper and complete, Town Counsel will notify the landowner of such. In the case of sufficient notice, the start of the 120 day period for the Town to exercise its Right of First Refusal has begun.<sup>5</sup>
3. The Planning Board, Assessor, Conservation Commission, Finance Committee, Historical Commission, Open Space Committee, Park and Recreation Commission, and Water Department are hereafter referred to as the Town Entities. On behalf of the Select Board, the Town Manager or designee will also provide copies of a bonified Notice by e-mail to the Town Entities. The Town Manager will ascertain that the Notice was received by the Town Entities.
4. The Town Entities will promptly review the Notice and decide whether to make a written recommendation to the Select Board. Such recommendations will state whether the land in question is viewed by that entity as valuable to the Town and, if so, why.
5. The Select Board will set an agenda item at the next available meeting that will still allow the Town Entities, in the opinion of the Select Board Chair, a reasonable opportunity to prepare recommendations. The Town Entities and abutters of the subject property will be notified of the time and date of this meeting. Town Entities not providing feedback, or providing notice of their intent to provide feedback, within 7 days of being notified or at the Select Board's meeting will be assumed as not wishing to offer a recommendation. Town Entities that provide notice to the Select Board of their intent to provide feedback shall be afforded a reasonable amount of time, in the opinion of the Select Board Chair, to consider the request; but in no instance shall the deadline to provide feedback be longer than 28 days from the initial date of notice.
6. Only after consideration of the recommendations of the Town Entities, the responses of other interested parties, and discussion at the Select Board's meeting, the Select Board may determine that it will not exercise the Town's Right of First Refusal and, in such cases, the Select Board will promptly send written notice of non-exercise to the landowner.<sup>6</sup> If, however, the Select Board deems that further investigation into exercising the Right of First Refusal is warranted, the board shall arrange for a Public Meeting and provide proper notice of such to the public per Section 20 of Chapter 30A.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the Board at its option may also promptly arrange for an impartial appraisal, performed by a certified appraiser.<sup>8</sup> A

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<sup>4</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 48-50.

<sup>5</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 51-53. The 120 day period begins running on the day following the latest date of deposit of the notice in the United States mail or when the notice has been hand delivered to the Select Board.

<sup>6</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 118-120.

<sup>7</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 68, 70-71, and 84-85 refer to a "Public Hearing" saying that "the board will arrange for a Public Hearing and provide proper notice of such to the public per Section 23B of Chapter 39. Section 23B of Chapter 39 has been repealed, however, and, therefore, by the recommendation of Michael McCarron, this procedure instead makes reference to Section M.G.L. c. 30A, §§ 18-25 by substituting the phrase "Public Meeting" wherever "Public Hearing" had been used.

<sup>8</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 54-58. The law requires an appraisal if no purchase and sale agreement has been received but the law does not require such if there is a purchase and sale agreement. Requiring it here, even if a purchase and sale agreement has been received, seems necessary and prudent.

decision at this time to further investigate the Right of First Refusal does not constitute any obligation on the Town to eventually exercise that right.

7. There may or may not be a purchase and sale agreement received with the Notice of Intent. If a purchase and sale agreement was received, the Select Board will compare the Town's appraisal with that agreement and take any discrepancies into consideration. If no purchase and sale agreement was received, the Town's appraisal shall be completed and delivered to the landowner within 30 days of the properly submitted Notice of Intent. If the landowner is dissatisfied with the appraisal, the landowner, at the landowner's expense, may contract for a second appraisal to be completed within the first 60 days of the 120 day period. If after the completion of this second appraisal, the municipality and the landowner cannot agree on a price, both parties must contract for a third appraisal with a mutually agreed upon Appraiser, splitting the cost evenly. The third appraisal is the final determination of price, and must be delivered to the parties within the first 90 days of the 120 day period.<sup>9</sup>
8. The Public Meeting shall take place in time to consider the additional input from the Town, have more discussions, and allow for the process to be complete before the end of the 120 day period. The date for the Public Meeting shall be as soon as possible and preferably not greater than 104 days from the start of the 120 day period, thus assuring the appraisal process is complete and the appraisal value is known.
9. Only after the Public Meeting<sup>10</sup> and after the appraisal process is complete and before 120 day period has ended<sup>11</sup>, the Select Board has the sole authority to decide whether to exercise the Right of First Refusal either by exercising the option directly or by assigning the right to a non-profit conservation organization, the Commonwealth, or any of the Commonwealth's political subdivisions.<sup>12</sup> Whichever the decision, the Select Board shall notify the landowner by certified mail and record a notice of exercise or non-exercise at the Registry Deeds.<sup>13</sup>
10. If the Town fails to act within the 120 day period, the Town is deemed to have failed to exercise the Right of First Refusal and the conversion of the sale of the land may proceed, but only on the same terms as contained in the purchase agreement.<sup>14</sup>
11. If the Select Board decides to exercise its option, the board shall (not necessarily in this order):
  - Promptly record the notice of the Town's exercise of the option at the Registry of Deeds as part of an affidavit of a notary public.
  - Promptly notify the landowner by certified mail, at the address specified in the landowner's notice, of the Town's intent to exercise its option.
  - Schedule a Town Meeting to be held during the 120-day period, for the purpose of appropriating funds to purchase the property, place a warrant article on the town warrant for this purpose, and schedule an override vote (if necessary) for the purpose of authorizing expenditure of funds. The Town Meeting and override vote must occur within Town's 120-day period, unless an extension of this deadline is agreed to in writing between the Town of West Newbury and the seller.

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<sup>9</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 54-65.

<sup>10</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 68.

<sup>11</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 54-66.

<sup>12</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 81-82 and Lines 86-92. If the Select Board decide to assign the Right of First Refusal to a qualifying entity, the assignment shall be for the purpose of maintaining no less than 70% of the land as land that would qualify for Chapter 61A or Chapter 61B protection and in no case shall the assignee develop a greater proportion of the land than was proposed by the developer whose offer gave rise to the assignment. All land other than land that is to be developed shall then be bound by a permanent deed restriction that meets the requirements of chapter 184.

<sup>13</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 68-69, 72, 93-95, 118-120, and 122-125.

<sup>14</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 99-100.

- Complete purchase of the property within 90 days of West Newbury's notice of its decision to exercise its right of first refusal, unless otherwise agreed to in writing by the landowner.
12. If the Select Board desires to assign its right of first refusal to a qualified land trust/conservation agency, the board shall:
- At a public meeting during the 120-day period, vote to assign its right of first refusal to the organization, setting forth any terms and conditions of the assignment. [Note: the conservation organization or the Commonwealth or any of its political subdivisions must conserve at least 70% of the property in a use consistent with one of the three Chapters, or no less a percentage conserved than proposed by the developer whose offer gave rise to the assignment, whichever is greater, but may be permitted to undertake a limited development on the balance of the property. The Select Board may place conditions on this use; for example the number of lots in the limited development can be specified.]
  - Record the notice to assign its right of first refusal at the Registry of Deeds as part of an affidavit of a notary public during the 120-day period.
  - Notify the landowner by certified mail during the 120-day period, at the address specified in the landowner's notice, of Town's intent to assign its option to a non-profit conservation organization, or governmental agency stating the name and address of the assignee and the terms and conditions of the assignment.
  - Assignee must complete the purchase of the property within 90 days of West Newbury's notification to the landowner that it has assigned its right of first refusal, unless otherwise agreed to in writing by the landowner.
13. If the Select Board decides to forgo its right of first refusal, the board should:
- Record a limited waiver of its rights of first refusal under Chapter 61, at the Registry of Deeds. Any waiver of West Newbury's rights should be specific to the proposed purchase terms so that if new terms are negotiated or if the sale falls through and a new proposal comes forth, the right of first refusal is triggered anew and the 120-day clock will begin again.
  - The Town of West Newbury shall use as much of the 120-day period as is necessary to properly evaluate the property and the potential of exercising or assigning the right of first refusal. It is possible that the Town may decide that it cannot afford to purchase the property, but any such choice should be thoroughly discussed and researched before making such a determination. Where there is consensus on the absence of conservation value or where the Town has negotiated a signed agreement with the landowner and/or developer that meets the municipal needs with regard to the property, the Town may choose not to exercise its right. Any such negotiations, however, should occur in consultation with the Town Entities.

At any time during this process, the landowner has the right to revoke the Notice of Intent with no recourse to either party.<sup>15</sup> In such cases, the land cannot be sold for or converted to other purposes.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR THE NOTICE OF INTENT

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It is the responsibility of the landowner to prepare and deliver a complete and proper Notice of Intent. The notice must include the following items:

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<sup>15</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 66-67.

1. The name, address, and telephone of the landowner and the landowner's attorney, if any.<sup>16</sup>
2. A statement of intent to sell Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B land for, or convert such land to, residential, industrial, or commercial use.<sup>17</sup>
3. A statement of proposed use of the land.<sup>18</sup>
4. The location and acreage of the land as shown on the Assessors' Map.<sup>19</sup>
5. In the case of an intent to sell, a certified copy of an executed Purchase and Sale agreement specifying the purchase price and all terms and conditions of the proposed sale, which is limited only to the property classified under the Chapter, and which shall be a bona fide offer.<sup>20</sup> A bona fide offer is a good faith offer not dependent upon potential changes to current zoning or conditions or contingencies relating to the potential for, or the potential extent of, subdivision of the property for residential use or the potential for, or the potential extent of, development of the property for industrial or commercial use.<sup>21</sup>
6. Any additional agreements or a statement of any additional consideration for any contiguous land under the same ownership, and not classified under the Chapter, but sold or to be sold contemporaneously with the proposed sale.<sup>22</sup>
7. In the case of an intent to convert the land to another use, the landowner must also notify the Town of the landowner's attorney, if any.<sup>23</sup>

## REFERENCES

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MGL Part I, Title IX, Chapter 61A, Section 14.

*Conservation and Land Use Planning under Massachusetts' Chapter 61 Laws: A Primer for Cities, Towns, & Conservation Organizations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., November 2007.

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<sup>16</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Line 15 and 33-34.

<sup>17</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 1-2 and 12.

<sup>18</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 12-13 and 301-32.

<sup>19</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 13-14.

<sup>20</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 16-19.

<sup>21</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 24-28.

<sup>22</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 20-23.

<sup>23</sup> MGL 61A, §14, Appendix A, Lines 33-34.

APPENDIX A

MGL CHAPTER 61A "ASSESSMENT AND TAXATION OF AGRICULTURAL AND HORTICULTURAL LAND"

SECTION 14 "SALE FOR OR CONVERSION TO RESIDENTIAL OR COMMERCIAL USE; NOTICE OF INTENT TO CITY OR TOWN; OPTION TO PURCHASE; ASSIGNMENT OF OPTION"

Section 14. Land taxed under this chapter shall not be sold for, or converted to, residential, industrial or commercial use while so taxed or within 1 year after that time unless the city or town in which the land is located has been notified of the intent to sell for, or to convert to, that other use.

The discontinuance of forest certification shall not, in itself, for the purposes of this section, be considered a conversion. Specific use of land for a residence for the owner, the owner's spouse or a parent, grandparent, child, grandchild, or brother or sister of the owner, or surviving husband or wife of any deceased such relative, or for living quarters for any persons actively employed full-time in the agricultural or horticultural use of such land, shall not be a conversion for the purposes of this section, and a certificate of the board of assessors, recorded with the registry of deeds, shall conclusively establish that particular use.

Any notice of intent to sell for other use shall be accompanied by a statement of intent to sell, a statement of proposed use of the land, the location and acreage of land as shown on a map drawn at the scale of the assessors map in the city or town in which the land is situated, and the name, address and telephone number of the landowner.

Any notice of intent to sell for other use shall be accompanied by a certified copy of an executed purchase and sale agreement specifying the purchase price and all terms and conditions of the proposed sale, which is limited to only the property classified under this chapter, and which shall be a bona fide offer as described below.

Any notice of intent to sell for other use shall also be accompanied by any additional agreements or a statement of any additional consideration for any contiguous land under the same ownership, and not classified under this chapter, but sold or to be sold contemporaneously with the proposed sale.

For the purposes of this chapter, a bona fide offer to purchase shall mean a good faith offer, not dependent upon potential changes to current zoning or conditions or contingencies relating to the potential for, or the potential extent of, subdivision of the property for residential use or the potential for, or the potential extent of development of the property for industrial or commercial use, made by a party unaffiliated with the landowner for a fixed consideration payable upon delivery of the deed.

Any notice of intent to convert to other use shall be accompanied by a statement of intent to convert, a statement of proposed use of the land, the location and acreage of land as shown on a map drawn at the scale of the assessors map in the city or town in which the land is situated, the name, address and telephone number of the landowner and the landowner's attorney, if any.

The notice of intent to sell or convert shall be sent by the landowner by certified mail or hand delivered to the mayor and city council of a city, or board of selectmen of a town, and in the case of either a city or a town, to its board of assessors, to its planning board and conservation commission, if any, and to the state forester.

A notarized affidavit that the landowner has mailed or delivered a notice of intent to sell or convert shall be conclusive evidence that the landowner has mailed the notice in the manner

40 and at the time specified. Each affidavit shall have attached to it a copy of the notice of intent  
41 to which it relates.

42 The notice of intent to sell or convert shall be considered to have been duly mailed if addressed  
43 to the mayor and city council or board of selectmen in care of the city or town clerk; to the  
44 planning board and conservation commission if addressed to them directly; to the state forester  
45 if addressed to the commissioner of the department of conservation and recreation; and to the  
46 assessors if addressed to them directly.

47 If the notice of intent to sell or convert does not contain all of the material described above, then  
48 the town or city, within 30 days after receipt, shall notify the landowner in writing that notice is  
49 insufficient and does not comply.

50 For a period of 120 days after the day following the latest date of deposit in the United States  
51 mail of any notice which complies with this section, the city or town shall have, in the case of  
52 intended sale, a first refusal option to meet a bona fide offer to purchase the land.

53 In the case of intended or determined conversion not involving sale, the municipality shall have  
54 an option to purchase the land at full and fair market value to be determined by an impartial  
55 appraisal performed by a certified appraiser hired at the expense of the municipality or its  
56 assignee, the original appraisal to be completed and delivered to the landowner within 30 days  
57 after the notice of conversion to the municipality. In the event that the landowner is dissatisfied  
58 with the original appraisal, the landowner may, at the landowner's expense, contract for a second  
59 appraisal, to be completed within 60 days after the delivery of the notice to convert. If, after  
60 completion of the second appraisal, the parties cannot agree on a consideration, the parties will  
61 contract with a mutually acceptable appraiser for a third appraisal whose cost will be borne  
62 equally by both parties. The third appraisal shall be delivered to both parties within 90 days after  
63 the notice of conversion to the municipality and shall be the final determination of consideration.  
64 Upon agreement of a consideration, the city or town shall then have 120 days to exercise its  
65 option. During the appraisal process, the landowner may revoke the intent to convert at any  
66 time and with no recourse to either party.

67 The option may be exercised only after a public hearing followed by written notice signed by  
68 the mayor or board of selectmen, mailed to the landowner by certified mail at the address that  
69 is specified in the notice of intent. Notice of public hearing shall be given in accordance with  
70 section 23B of chapter 39.

71 The notice of exercise shall also be recorded at the registry of deeds and shall contain the  
72 name of the record owner of the land and description of the premises adequate for  
73 identification of them.

74 The notice to the landowner of the city or town's election to exercise its option shall be  
75 accompanied by a proposed purchase and sale contract or other agreement between the city  
76 or town and the landowner which, if executed, shall be fulfilled within a period of not more  
77 than 90 days after the date the contract or agreement, endorsed by the landowner, is returned  
78 by certified mail to the mayor or board of selectmen, or upon expiration of any extended  
79 period that the landowner has agreed to in writing, whichever is later.

80 At the public hearing or a further public hearing, the city or town may assign its option to a  
81 nonprofit conservation organization or to the commonwealth or any of its political subdivisions  
82 under the terms and conditions that the mayor or board of selectmen may consider

83 appropriate. Notice of public hearing shall be given in accordance with section 23B of chapter  
84 39.

85 The assignment shall be for the purpose of maintaining no less than 70 per cent of the land in  
86 use as forest land as defined in section 1, as agricultural and horticultural land as defined in  
87 sections 1 and 2 of chapter 61A or as recreation land as defined in section 1 of chapter 61B,  
88 and in no case shall the assignee develop a greater proportion of the land than was proposed  
89 by the developer whose offer gave rise to the assignment. All land other than land that is to be  
90 developed shall then be bound by a permanent deed restriction that meets the requirements of  
91 chapter 184.

92 If the first refusal option has been assigned to a nonprofit conservation organization or to the  
93 commonwealth or any of its political subdivisions as provided in this section, the mayor or  
94 board of selectmen shall provide written notice of assignment to the landowner.

95 The notice of assignment shall state the name and address of the organization or agency of the  
96 commonwealth which will exercise the option in addition to the terms and conditions of the  
97 assignment. The notice of assignment shall be recorded with the registry of deeds.

98 Failure to record either the notice of exercise or the notice of assignment within the 120 day  
99 period shall be conclusive evidence that the city or town has not exercised its option.

100 If the option has been assigned to a nonprofit conservation organization or to the  
101 commonwealth or any of its political subdivisions, the option may be exercised by the assignee  
102 only by written notice to the landowner signed by the assignee, mailed to the landowner by  
103 certified mail at the address that is specified in the notice of intent. The notice of exercise shall  
104 also be recorded with the registry of deeds and shall contain the name of the record owner of  
105 the land and description of the premises adequate for identification of them.

106 The notice of exercise to the landowner shall be accompanied by a proposed purchase and sale  
107 contract or other agreement between the assignee and landowner which, if executed, shall be  
108 fulfilled within a period of not more than 90 days, or upon expiration of any extended period  
109 the landowner has agreed to in writing, from the date the contract or agreement, endorsed by  
110 the landowner, is returned by certified mail to the assignee.

111 During the 120 day period, the city or town or its assignees, shall have the right, at reasonable  
112 times and upon reasonable notice, to enter upon the land for the purpose of surveying and  
113 inspecting the land, including, but not limited to, soil testing for purposes of Title V and the  
114 taking of water samples.

115 The city or town or its assignee shall have all rights assigned to the buyer in the purchase and  
116 sale agreement contained in the notice of intent.

117 If the city or town elects not to exercise the option, and not to assign its right to exercise the  
118 option, the city or town shall send written notice of nonexercise, signed by the mayor or board  
119 of selectmen, to the landowner by certified mail at the address that is specified in the notice of  
120 intent. The notice of nonexercise shall contain the name of the owner of record of the land and  
121 description of the premises adequate for identification of them and shall be recorded with the  
122 registry of deeds.



I23 No sale or conversion of the land shall be consummated until the option period has expired or  
I24 the notice of nonexercise has been recorded with the registry of deeds, and no sale of the land  
I25 shall be consummated if the terms of the sale differ in any material way from the terms of the  
I26 purchase and sale agreement which accompanied the bona fide offer to purchase as described  
I27 in the notice of intent to sell except as provided in this section.

I28 This section shall not apply to a mortgage foreclosure sale, but the holder of a mortgage shall,  
I29 at least 90 days before a foreclosure sale, send written notice of the time and place of the sale  
I30 to the parties in the manner described in this section for notice of intent to sell or convert, and  
I31 the giving of notice may be established by an affidavit as described in this section.