

Millstone preserves more acreage by the Assunpink

BY JENNIFER KOHLHEPP
Staff Writer

MILLSTONE - Millstone Township has preserved the "Rising Sun" farm located next to the Assunpink Wildlife Refuge.

Township officials held a press conference at the 28-acre sheep and crop field farm on Rising Sun Tavern Road on Sept. 13 to publicly announce that the preservation took place in July.

According to township officials, the property owner received \$796,174, or \$28,750 per acre, for her property. Of that amount, the state paid \$477,704, the county paid \$191,082, and the township paid \$127,388.

Millstone Township Mayor Nancy Grbelja said permanent preservation projects are only possible with financial contributions from open space/farmland preservation funds at the municipal, county and state levels.

"To better compete for the extraordinary 84 percent cost-share grants we qualify for on projects such as these," Grbelja said, "we will be asking our residents whether they support increasing the local open space levy this November."

The township will ask voters on the Nov. 7 ballot whether or not they approve a 1-cent raise in the township's open space tax levy. Township taxpayers currently pay 5 cents per \$100 of assessed property value for the purchase of open space. Thus, someone whose home is assessed at the township's average of \$395,400 now pays approximately \$198 in open space taxes per year.

If voters decide to increase the tax by 1 cent in November, the average homeowner would pay just under \$40 more per year, which would total about \$237 yearly.

Grbelja said the next few years will represent the township's last opportunity to preserve its cherished rural character.

"Preservation moneys are not only a much better investment for the environmental future of our town, but also for its financial future," Grbelja said.

She continued, "A onetime preservation payment costs far less than the perpetual infrastructure and schooling obligations of additional residential development."

Over the years, Millstone has demonstrated a commitment to farmland preservation efforts. The township's Open Space and Farmland Preservation Council, led by Chairperson Pat Butch, has recently ramped up its outreach and preservation efforts, with more than 1,387 acres of farmland currently proceeding toward preservation, according to township officials.

Landowners who participate in the preservation program sell the development rights of their properties for a value based on the findings of two independent appraisers. The properties remain in private ownership on the tax rolls and can be used for any agricultural purpose, according to township officials.

The "Rising Sun" farm acquisition was a cooperative effort on the part of the Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders, the Monmouth County Planning Board, the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC), the township of Millstone, and the Delaware & Raritan (D&R) Greenway Land Trust.

Freeholder Lillian G. Burry, who attended the press conference at the preserved farm, commended those involved in the transaction for their team effort.

Burry said, "From outreach by tireless and dedicated volunteers at the local level to acquisition services from Delaware & Raritan Greenway Land Trust, professional services support by county staff and significant financial support from the state, this is a wonderful example of everyone working together for a common objective."

The Sinha Farm was preserved through the Planning Incentive Grant (PIG) program, a relatively new state farmland preservation funding initiative that provides state grants to eligible counties and municipalities to purchase agricultural easements on farms in designated project areas. This arrangement empowers local municipalities to take the lead in safeguarding their farmland resources, according to information provided by the freeholders.

Joseph McCarthy, chairman of the Monmouth County Agriculture Development Board, remarked on the strategic nature of the latest acquisition in Millstone.

"Besides the property being directly contiguous with the several-thousand-acre Assunpink Wildlife Refuge, this farm is located within a two-mile radius of four other preserved farms," he said.

According to McCarthy, an additional seven farms are being pursued for preservation within a two-mile radius of "Rising Sun" farm.

Monmouth County Freeholder Director William C. Barham said the county will continue its "fruitful preservation partnership with Millstone Township."

Barham said, "That relationship has resulted in the preservation of hundreds of acres to date, with 15 more farms currently in various stages of the preservation process."

At this time, the Monmouth County Board of Chosen Freeholders provides financial resources in support of farmland preservation efforts to 10 municipalities. Those municipalities make up most of the county's remaining farmland and its base.