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Developers, grow away: Bucks to save 100th farm

Couple hounded by builders signs \$2.3 million deal to sell rights to 127-acre property under preservation program.

By Brian Callaway Of The Morning Call

She'd get letters from them regularly, sometimes even phone calls.

They were from developers, she said, hungry to buy the farm she's lived on since she was a girl and smother its cornfields with townhouses or condos or McMansions.

Dana Stott Cohen knows things will be different now, however.

"I won't get letters from developers anymore," she said.

Bucks County commissioners met at her farm Wednesday night, where they unanimously voted to buy the development rights to Cohen's 127 acres, making it the 100th farm saved under the county's program to preserve agricultural land.

Cohen and her husband will get \$2.3 million from county, state and local governments, and they'll continue to live there and own the land itself. In exchange, they and any future owners must keep the Wrightstown Township farm in its current rural state.

While Cohen enjoyed the fact that developers no longer have a reason to pester her, county officials celebrated the purchase as a landmark for a preservation program that's entering a period of flux.

"I think it's a real important milestone," county Commissioner Charley Martin said.

Bucks County government began preserving farmland in 1989 and then saw the program expand in 1997, when voters passed a referendum telling county leaders to borrow \$59 million to conserve farms and other types of undeveloped land.

That money's set to run out next year, though, and officials still haven't laid out a plan for what they'll do when it's gone.

County leaders have said they'll hold a second referendum seeking voters' permission to spend more money on land conservation. It's unclear how much money they'll ask for, however, or whether some of that money will be used for purposes other than land acquisition.

A task force of officials and volunteers was formed last month and will hold its first meeting later in September. Martin said that group should report back to the commissioners in about six months with a strategy for a new phase of the open-space program.

Richard Harvey, who heads up the county's farmland-preservation program, said he has plenty of farms still to go if more money is raised.

Despite steady development, there are still about 77,000 acres of farmland in Bucks, he said, about 20 percent of the county's total area.

With 100 farms down, the preservation program has conserved nearly 9,200 acres of farmland. Harvey said he has more than 60 applicants waiting to finish deals, though.

He said those farms represent about 4,000 acres — and probably much more money than the conservation program has to spend right now.

Cohen, meanwhile, said she probably could have made more money if she'd sold her farm to developers.

The land's been in her family since her father purchased it in 1963, though, and while other people actually farm it, she said she still couldn't stand to see it bulldozed.

"We want to stay here," she said. "We will be able to keep it as a farm, and that's what I wanted to do."

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