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PRESERVATION

Land Trust Faces Deadline in \$11 Million Deal

Two years ago the Diocese of Trenton approached a conservation group based in Princeton Township with a land-use proposal that was both benevolent and self-serving. The diocese asked the D&R Greenway Land Trust if it could raise enough money to buy – and thus permanently preserve – 337 acres in Hopewell Township graced with open fields, dense woods, busy streams and a hilltop vista worthy of a Frederic Church canvas.

[Skip to next paragraph](#) The property is just a short stroll from Broad Street, the main drag in Hopewell Borough. In another time it was the site of St. Michael's Orphan Asylum and Industrial School, a four-story Gothic-style brick structure that served as a home for hundreds of children throughout most of the 20th century. But the orphanage, built in 1898, was torn down in 1973. So the diocese, no longer in need of the land but hoping to see it preserved, looked to unload a prime piece of central [New Jersey](#) real estate less than six miles from downtown Princeton. Of course, the deal came with a price: \$11 million. It also came with a March 15, 2007, deadline.

The price would be higher if the property were to be sold commercially. "There is a major developer who has made a backup offer on the property," said David Roskos, a Trenton lawyer for the diocese. That offer, he said, is for "millions of dollars" more than the price at which the diocese agreed to sell the property to the land trust.

The land trust set out to secure funding from as many private and public donors as possible. In less than two years the nonprofit group received assurances of \$8 million from municipal and county sources and, most notably, from the New Jersey Farmland Preservation and Green Acres Programs. Then, last fall, the land trust embarked on the second phase of its campaign, approaching private donors, which is when things got interesting.

More than 500 private donors have contributed to the St. Michael's Preservation Project, as the campaign has come to be known, from the drug maker Bristol-Myers Squibb, which operates research-and-development plants in Princeton and Hopewell, to 10-year-old Callie Considine, a Hopewell fourth grader who started going door-to-door on Halloween night and has since collected more than \$3,100.

Last month at Hopewell's Off-Broadstreet Theater, a benefit concert by Kate Taylor, sister of James, raised \$30,000. A wine-tasting and silent auction last Monday at the

Brothers Moon, a Hopewell restaurant, raised more than \$15,000. On Friday a Family Barn Dance, complete with square-dance caller, was scheduled at the Hopewell Elementary School, across the street from the St. Michael's property. On March 11, Music Together, the international early-childhood music program based in Hopewell, will present two fund-raisers.

Last Wednesday, with the March 15 deadline approaching, the land trust still had nearly \$100,000 to raise.

"It's the old 'you don't know what you got 'til it's gone' kind of thing," said Linda Mead, the land trust's executive director. "It's given the community a sense of ownership."

Among those who share an enthusiasm for the property is Robert H. Harris, an environmental consultant from Hopewell Township. Mr. Harris and his wife, Stephanie, who have lived for 18 years on an organic farm atop the Sourland Mountains overlooking the St. Michael's property, contributed \$50,000 to the preservation project. Mr. Harris holds a doctorate in environmental sciences from Harvard, worked for the Council on Environmental Quality during the Carter administration and later taught at Princeton. Today he serves on the land trust's board of trustees and the St. Michael's fund-raising committee.

"I've never experienced a collective volunteer community action like this anywhere I've ever been," he said.

Mr. Harris, who raises sheep and bees and grows fruits, vegetables, clover and Christmas trees on his farm, said the value of the St. Michael's property lies in its potential as both an agricultural site and a link to adjacent preserved properties. "If we don't preserve land for agricultural use today, there's no way we can preserve it 30 years from now," he said.

In addition, the land "has a tremendous open-space value to the community," Mr. Harris said. "It is an integral part of the greenbelt around Hopewell Borough."

At the land trust headquarters, just a few miles from the St. Michael's property, a display depicts not only the history of the land but also the "worst-case scenario" should the preservation effort fail and the property be developed. Hopewell Township's current zoning code would permit 150 homes to be built, according to the exhibition. But in language clearly designed to convey the urgency of the situation, the display suggests that a designation known as hamlet zoning would pave the way for the construction of more than 1,000 homes — more than exist in all of Hopewell Borough.

The exhibition runs through Wednesday, the day before the deal with the diocese expires.