

## Entertainment News

# Imagine

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**The future of central New Jersey can include either a 337-acre land preserve, or a housing development with more than 1,000 homes, garages, cars and roadways.**

**An exhibit at the D&R Greenway's Johnson**

**Education Center examines the impact of these choices.**



[Photo Gallery](#)

**An old postcard shows the St. Michael's Orphan Home.**

Cruising the region, those of us who have lived here a generation or more see shopping malls, superhighways and developments where farms once stood. Where corn and pumpkins once grew and children delighted in wagon rides, a condo community has spread its concrete wings; where once we breathed the aroma of hay and manure and bees pollinated a field of wildflowers, office parks are now "landscaped" with non-native invasives that play havoc on the ecosystem; where water ran pure, a parking lot fills with exhaust.

One can only imagine what it must be like for Jack Koeppel, the fourth generation of his family to have lived in Hopewell. His grandfather left Brooklyn more than 100

years ago to begin life as a farmer in Hopewell Valley, where the soil was rich and the conditions conducive to growth.

Mr. Koepfel, a former gallery owner, art handler and president of the Hopewell Valley Historical Society, has curated *Save St. Michael's — Save Hopewell: The History & Future of St. Michael's Land*, on view at the D&R Greenway Land Trust's Marie L. Matthews Gallery in the Johnson Education Center, Princeton, through March 14.

With photos, maps, informative historical text and a video, the exhibit is dedicated to supporting the 337-acre parcel of land in Hopewell Borough owned by the Diocese of Trenton since the 1890s. The D&R Greenway is spearheading the effort to keep the land — largely undisturbed since the valley was settled more than 300 years ago — out of the hands of developers.

D&R Greenway has raised \$8 million toward the \$11 million purchase price, working with the following public partners: the New Jersey State Agricultural Development Committee, Mercer County, Hopewell Borough and Township and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Green Acres Program. An additional \$2.5 million has been raised privately (\$1 million of this is contingent on raising the balance), and \$500,000 more needs to be secured by March 15, when the contract between the Greenway and the Diocese expires.

But this is not a story about Hopewell Borough; what happens to this parcel of land will affect all of central New Jersey: water resources, wildlife habitat, sustainable agriculture, a healthier environment and quality of life. Century-old trees on the property keep oxygen in the air and help water absorb into the aquifer. Now that

global warming has been confirmed to be worse than predicted, every effort on this scale is critical.

"Imagine if homes and roads and parking lots covered the property," says Linda Mead, executive director of the D&R Greenway. "The impervious surface would reflect back the sunlight and contribute to global warming. People don't think about the connection between land preservation and survival. But it's happening in our lifetime. Look at how the zones are changing for gardeners."

Of all the projects she's worked on with the D&R Greenway over the past 10 years, Ms. Mead says this has been the most community-led. "The St. Michael's Preservation Committee has been tireless in its efforts to make the community aware and care."

The committee had a booth at the Hopewell Harvest Fair in the fall and has led six public walking tours of the property to date. In mid January, a banner was hung across Broad Street in the borough, and neighborhood parties have been held to raise awareness and funds.

A Kate Taylor benefit concert was performed at the Off-Broadstreet Theater Feb. 1, selling out 192 tickets at \$100 each before it was even publicized; local restaurants donated desserts, and businesses underwrote concert expenses. And Callie Considine, a 10-year-old, has raised more than \$1,000, beginning by going door-to-door on Halloween. Failte Coffee on Broad Street has a till for collections initiated by Callie, and the shop displays brochures, maps and a list of donors.

In addition to the exhibit at the Johnson Education Center, future events include a wine tasting dinner at The Brothers Moon restaurant March 5, with a silent auction of

local artwork to support the effort; and the Save St. Mike's Barn Dance at Hopewell Elementary School March 9.

Mr. Koeppel's history of the land goes back to 1898, when St. Michael's Orphanage and Industrial School opened its doors. Large institutions like these were considered the best alternative for homeless children. Some were orphans, some were from families that couldn't afford to feed them, and some were assigned by the courts. Four stories high with a tower, it was flanked by two three-story wings and run by the Sisters of St. Francis.

Nestled in a fertile valley in a rural setting, the institution was, in some ways, idyllic. In order to keep it self-supporting, a 150-acre parcel of farmland was added, where cows, sheep and chicken were raised. At capacity, the facility held 450 children, and everyone pitched in, helping with food and meals, cleaning, laundry and yard work. According to Mr. Koeppel, nuns would roll up their sleeves and milk cows, make butter and slaughter and butcher the animals. Nuns from the outside who heard about St. Michael's may have been frightened off by the stories, but at least one claimed to have loved being there and cried when she had to leave.

"Her whole life was St. Michael's," says Mr. Koeppel.

By the mid-20th century, foster homes became the new solution, and large institutions like St. Michael's were shut down. That day came for St. Michael's in 1973, when the Diocese could no longer afford the cost for temporary repairs to stabilize the gothic structure, estimated at several million dollars back then.

Since 1973, parts of the land have been farmed by tenants. The fallow fields and

floodplains provide grassland habitat for birds including bobolinks, meadow larks and upland sandpipers. The Bedens Brook and four tributaries flow into the D&R Canal, from where the region's water supply comes.

If the D&R Greenway is unable to save St. Michael's Land, under current zoning regulations, 150 houses could be built. Or if the site is developed as a hamlet, up to 1,020 homes could be built. This would more than double the population of Hopewell Borough, where at last Census there were 813 households.

In preserving the land, the Greenway hopes to create a model that can be used elsewhere in the region. It would call for a portion of land to be left as open space, a portion for agriculture (organic farming and raising grass-fed cows have been suggested), recreation (including a six-mile trail network that would connect to the system of "greenways" established by the D&R) and "quality of life" — conserving natural resources, protecting a viewscape and keeping roadways from becoming congested.

"There will be something for everyone," says Ms. Mead. "History, agriculture, conservation, birds, recreation... and it's at the Crossroads of the American Revolution."

The house where Gen. Washington met with his generals to plan the Battle of Monmouth is near the edge of this property, as is the spot where the Lindbergh baby was found, points out Mr. Koepfel.

Once the land has been preserved, says Ms. Mead, further funds will need to be raised for stewardship. There are several old buildings that will need to be removed,

and a century-old barn needs to be restored — not to be used as an education center, as the barn at the D&R Greenway's headquarters off Rosedale Road, but as an actual working barn. Working with the Northeast Organic Farming Association, Ms. Mead envisions growing organic produce that could be sold at a farmer's market.

Crops will be rotated and organic farming practices employed to build up the soil.

"The history of the Hopewell Valley is rich with farming," says Mr. Koeppel.

"This will be a model for future sustainable agriculture," says Bill Rawlyk, director of land preservation for the Greenway. "Low-impact farming can co-exist with grassland bird habitat. We can also work with conventional farmers to create something with low-tillage and (minimize) pesticides and chemical fertilizers to protect the water quality in the Bedens Brook."

"Ten years from now," says Jo-Ann Munoz, director of communications for the D&R Greenway, "you'll be able to walk from Princeton to Hopewell to the Sourlands." Ms. Munoz talks about the "big sky" over St. Michael's land. "It's like Vermont or Montana, with its wide views," she says.

Mr. Koeppel and Ms. Mead lead an excursion to the property on a day in which the weather seems to defy global warming. An inventory of the land's trees is underway, and we pass a shaggy bark hickory and a cardinal fluttering about on Aunt Molly Road, one of the last unpaved roads in the area.

Once at the top, we reach that "wow" moment, where everyone Ms. Mead brings up here is astounded by the view. Even though it had been described vividly, seeing it, covered with snow, is a singular experience.

From this vantage point we see the steeple of St. Alphonse, near the elementary school on Princeton Avenue. There is a cell phone tower disguised as a silo and the beginning of the Sourlands is on the horizon.

"It gives you a sense you're in another world, yet so close to the Princeton Corridor," says Ms. Mead. "Here we are in development-rampant suburbia and there's a place where we can demonstrate community involvement, agriculture and preservation."

"If we don't do something to preserve it now," says Ms. Munoz, "the opportunity will be lost forever."

"Imagine driving around 50 years from now," says Mr. Koepfel, "and seeing this land and saying, 'I contributed to that.'"

Save Hopewell — Save St. Michael's Land: An Exhibition on the History & Future of the St. Michael's Property *is on view at the D&R Greenway Land Trust, Johnson Education Center, 1 Preservation Place, Princeton, through March 14. Gallery hours: Mon.-Fri. 1-4 p.m. On the Web: [www.drgreenway.org](http://www.drgreenway.org). For information about The Brothers Moon fundraising dinner and art auction March 5, \$75/person, call (609) 333-1330. The Save St. Mike's Family Barn Dance will be held at the Hopewell Elementary School, Princeton Avenue, March 9, 7 p.m., \$10 donation. For information, call (609) 924-4646.*