



The Times

Final push for land preservation effort in Hopewell Twp.

Advocates hope fundraisers save St. Michael's orphanage tract from development

Monday, March 05, 2007

BY LISA CORYELL

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP -- With less than two weeks left on a campaign to save the St. Michael's orphanage tract from development, advocates are scrambling to drum up \$202,000 more to meet their goal.

The D&R Greenway Land Trust has until March 13 to come up with the \$11 million asking price for the 337-acre parcel nestled at the foot of the Sourland Mountains just outside Hopewell Borough.

With \$8 million secured in state, county and local funds, the land trust has spent the past six months raising the remaining \$3 million in private donations.

Now, as the deadline looms, D&R officials are calling on open-space advocates to act fast.

"We're at a point now where we really have to push," said Linda Mead, executive director of the D&R Greenway Land Trust. "We're so close but aren't there yet. We're letting people know if they have an interest in preserving this property, now is the time to come forward."

Mead said there's no chance the landowners, the Diocese of Trenton, will extend the deadline.

"They will not waver," she said. "If we haven't raised all the money to the penny, our contract is null and void."

The land, located within the township borders, once held a looming stone orphanage that provided housing for homeless children and private schooling for children throughout the greater Hopewell Valley. In the 1970s, the diocese closed the orphanage and school and razed the building to make room for a seminary that was never built.

Since then the religious organization has been contemplating long-term uses for the valuable real estate now being rented to farmers.

The D&R Land Trust has made preserving the tract as farmland a top priority.

Mead said the land is an integral part of the Sourland range, which provides refuge to rare species of native plants and wildlife and 65 species of neotropical migratory birds.

The land is also valued as a key component in the greenbelt buffer of historic Hopewell Borough and the Bedens Brook watershed to the Raritan Bay, she said.

"The impact that development would have on this site would be devastating," Mead said.

Current zoning allows up to 150 houses on the land. Up to 1,020 homes could be build if developers are successful in getting "hamlet" zoning for the land.

Fear of development is likely to have driven many people to donate to one of the most comprehensive fund drives for the land trust, which has led the preservation of more than 4,884 acres of the Sour land region that spans three coun ties, five townships and three adja cent boroughs.

"This one by far has more do nors than others we've worked on and more donors at every level of funding, especially at the \$1,000 or less level," said Mead. "Everyone feels they're a part of this, and they are."

The effort was aided by a \$1 million commitment from the Willard T.C. Johnson Foundation, a \$100,000 commitment from the Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space and a \$50,000 commitment from the Stony Brook Millstone Watershed Association, as well as countless other donations, Mead said.

Under a land-use plan being designed by the land trust, once the land is acquired, most of it would remain in farming. An 80-acre par cel annexed from the larger tract by Aunt Molly Road would be used for passive and active recreation for Hopewell Valley residents. A 20-acre parcel to the west of the main tract, slated to be carved out before the sale, would be used to build a parish center for the nearby St. Alphonsus Church.

The group will hold several fundraisers between now and the March 13 deadline.

Today, a cocktail party, dinner and art auction will be held at Brother's Moon restaurant in the borough. The event is sold out.

A Save St. Michael's Barn Dance will be held at the Hopewell Elementary School from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Friday. The family-oriented event will feature live music and American country dances led by a professional caller. A \$10 donation will be collected at the door. Dur ing the evening, Save St. Michael's T-shirts will be sold and a silent auction will be held to raise money. The T-shirts will also be on sale at Failte Coffeeshouse on Broad Street in the borough.

On March 11, Music Together and the D&R Greenway will host two events at the music center's new headquarters at 225 Penning ton-Hopewell Road in the township.

The daytime event, held from 1:30 to 2:45 p.m., will feature a sing- along and storytelling for children. Tickets cost \$25 for adults and children may attend for free.

The second event, Musicians to Save St. Michael's, will be held at 4 p.m. It will feature a wine and cheese reception and musical performances. Tickets cost \$75 per person.

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