

Large protection deal would save nearly 2,000 acres in Mercer, Burlington, Monmouth counties

Published: Tuesday, April 19, 2011, 7:00 AM



By Erin Duffy/The Times



Martin Griff/The Times Members of the Flemer family stand to be acknowledged during a ceremony on their Princeton Nurseries land in Upper Freehold Township yesterday. The family's property is part of a \$27.8 million deal to preserve nearly three square miles of farmland.

UPPER FREEHOLD TOWNSHIP — Surrounded by blooming magnolias and dogwoods, more than two dozen local and state officials gathered in Upper Freehold yesterday to announce the \$27.8 million preservation of nearly 2,000 acres straddling three counties including Mercer.

Cheered by news of the open space deal, environmentalist Linda Mead couldn't help but break out in song.

"This land is your land, this land is my land, this land is preserved for you and me," the D&R Greenway president and CEO sang, riffing on Woody Guthrie's folk classic.

Billed as the largest farmland and open space protection deal in the state's history, the agreement will allow for the preservation of the huge Princeton Nurseries tract, which spreads across Upper Freehold in Monmouth County, Hamilton in Mercer and North Hanover in Burlington. The land area encompasses nearly three square miles.

One thousand acres will be set aside for open space, with plans for a 512-acre wildlife management area and another 500-acre addition to the Monmouth and Mercer county park systems.

The remaining 900 acres will be preserved through farmland easements, which allow land to be used only for farming and agriculture, protecting it from future development.

The purchase was forged with the cooperation of the Flemer family, who own and until now operated Princeton Nurseries.

Once one of the largest commercial nurseries in the country, the family ran its wholesale tree and shrub business first in Kingston before expanding to Upper Freehold more than 50 years ago.

The family's Kingston land was sold to Princeton University in 1985. During the ceremony, family member Bill Flemer remembered visiting what was once a stand of maples and finding instead an intersection.

Protecting this land was the only responsible thing to do, he said.

"Every shopping center, every intersection, every housing development built, it was somebody's farm before that," he said. "The beautiful thing is, this will still be a farm. After we're long gone, it will still look like this."

The nurseries' existing trees and shrubs have been sold to a Buffalo, N.Y., company.

Plans for the preserved land are still in the works, as the land agreement is still pending. State officials hope to close on the deal by early 2012.

The majority of the tract lies in Upper Freehold, and nursery roads are expected to be turned into trail systems for hiking, bicycling and horseback riding, while the wildlife area will continue to provide a home for birds such as pheasants and blue herons.

Of the 1,900 acres, 106 lie in Hamilton, where roughly 19 acres will be protected as a greenway bordering Crosswicks Creek, and another 87 acres sold as deed-restricted farmland.

Bob Martin, the commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) called the land acquisition a fitting way to kick off the start of Earth Week.

"This is a truly beautiful landscape with scenic views and is a remarkable preservation opportunity right in the heart of the most densely populated state in the nation," said Martin. "I commend the Flemer family and all of the partners for having the foresight to recognize its importance and then working together toward its preservation."

Like Martin, numerous officials noted the spirit of cooperation that helped transform the preservation of the Princeton Nurseries land from an idea four years ago to reality today.

The \$27.8 million deal uses more than \$16.4 million in state, local and nonprofit open-space funding sources for the purchase of land for the wildlife management area and the parkland additions, including \$7.2 million pledged by the DEP, \$7 million from Monmouth County and \$1.7 million of Mercer County open space funds. The State Agriculture Development Committee and its partners are providing an additional \$11.4 million to purchase farmland easements.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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