In Perpetuity

Old Mill Road Farm: Anatomy of a Conservation “Deal”

Preserving an important conservation property often entails complex and protracted negotiations similar to those of real estate development. The five years of commitment, persistence, and creativity that D&R Greenway devoted to this project were as integral to preserving the property as the public funds dedicated to its purchase.

The gently sloping fields of Old Mill Road Farm are a familiar panorama from the Pennington-Rocky Hill Road and Elm Ridge Road. Three pointed cupolas of the unusual Pennsylvania Barn peek above trees at the edge of soybean, rye, and corn fields. The historic village of Pennington lies just beyond the farm that is so identified with its setting.

With little effort a passer-by can imagine the plowed and pastured fields transformed into a dense modern settlement of houses, cul-de-sacs, driveways and lawns. Recent history bears witness to this vision: New Jersey has lost hundreds of thousands of farm acres to development in the past 30 years, and Mercer County alone has lost over 10,000 acres. Concerned that it would soon be sold for development, D&R Greenway designated the farm as a critical preservation project in 1989.

The 127-acre farmland is a key element of the Stony Brook Greenway and the cornerstone property of the Greenway’s middle section which begins at the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association in Pennington and continues about 4 miles downstream to the Transco property in Lawrence Township. It ties into a network of nearly 3,000 acres of planned and protected open space.

D&R Greenway first approached the State Agricultural Development Committee (SADC) which purchases the development rights to important agricultural lands. The SADC was considering fee simple purchases—buying land outright—in South and North Jersey, as an opportunity to test the resale values of deed restricted land in the market. We suggested that the purchase of farmland in Hopewell Township would provide the agency with an opportunity to undertake a similar project in central New Jersey.

Next D&R Greenway approached the owners, Mill Road Associates, a group of speculative investors, who expressed an interest in selling the property. We conducted a preliminary appraisal, and then secured an option to purchase the land, or convey the right to buy it to the SADC or another agency.

The SADC, however, was not interested in purchasing wetlands. We then invited county officials to participate; Mercer County agreed to purchase 34 acres of wetlands and floodplain along the stream corridor adjoining Rosedale Park, using funds obtained from a Green Acres grants/loan package.

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It seemed the project would soon be stumped "completely!"

Instead, it took until March 1994 to finalize: the result of a complicated financial arrangement, multiple purchasers, sales price disagreements, an array of logistics and a declining market. Negotiations threatened to break down on several occasions. At those times D&R Greenway stepped in to encourage the owners, meeting with State Senators and Assemblymen, publicizing the project, making presentations to the SADCs, and smoothing out differences. This role as "catalyst" was critical to the ultimate success of the project.

The final months prompted a myriad of other obstacles: changes in SADC membership; loss of momentum when D&R Greenway's grassroots efforts were supplanted by those of the public agencies; higher priority SADC projects eclipsing the Old Mill Road Farm purchase. The SADC decided to omit the project from their 1992 appropriation package. This hurdle was politically gaining support for, and approval of, a single measure appropriations bill to purchase the property.

Recognition of the project's importance was bipartisan, and supporters included Senators Bill Schuette and Gerald Stockman, and Assemblymen Leonard Lance and John S. challenge.

When a last-minute, deal-threatening disagreement about the purchase price arose in November 1992 the SADC's commitment to the project deteriorated. D&R Greenway staff and trustees again convinced the agency that the importance of preserving the land outweighed the problems encountered. Once again negotiations were rejuvenated.

Finally, a $1,040,000 purchase price was negotiated. Mercer County purchased the wooded woods for $82,970 with a Green Acres grant/loan package, and also contributed $100,000. Open Space Preservation Trust Fund to the SADC, which paid $69,155 for the 92 acres of 4.6 valued agricultural lands.

The SADC placed a development restriction on the farmland, and scheduled a public auction for June 2, 1994. With a minimum bid price of $2,570 per acre, compared to the original purchase price, the farm became far too affordable to those who intended to farm it. At auction the land sold for $2,625 per acre. The SADC returned the land to private ownership for agricultural use—in perpetuity.

By working with county and state agencies to preserve the Old Mill Road Farm, D&R Greenway has successfully championed a piece of central New Jersey's rural history. Preserving this and other productive farmlands will help support a diminishing, but still important, agricultural resource base.

For now Old Mill Road Farm provides an opportunity for farming at the edge of suburbs. It will also endure as a vital landmark in our rural landscape.

Preserved lands and D&R Greenway project areas marked in gray:

- Stone Brook-Meadowlark
- Waterloo Association
- Driscoll Farmland
- 6 Mile
- Shadwin Lake Wildlife Management Area
- Stony Brook (Flemington)
- New Quiet Brook
- Rose alte Park
- Central Station Brook
- Trenchs
- Pennington (borough)

Old Mill Road Farm
Stony Brook Greenway
Hoppewell Township
Greenbe

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You can also encourage others to help preserve our quality of life by mentioning D&R Greenway to your friends and neighbors.

Volunteer for Open Space

Are you curious about how a land conservation organization works? Do you have talents you'd like to use in community service?

We invite you to join D&R Greenway's efforts to save land throughout New Jersey. Opportunities range from outdoor activities, such as preserve cleanup and trail maintenance, to public relations and development assistance (including developing materials and coordinating events), and that all-inclusive office support.

Call us today—we welcome your participation and your support!
Our thanks to...

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Delaware & Raritan Greenway, Inc., is a regional, 501(c)(3) nonprofit land conservancy dedicated to the preservation of a continuous open-space network enveloping central New Jersey's waterways and unified by the Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park.

D&R Greenway began in 1987 as an alliance of regional nonprofit groups, and was incorporated in 1989.

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