

East Vincent gets grants to buy part of farm for park

By ANNE PICKERING *Special to Tri County*

EAST VINCENT – The Township has been awarded \$1.2 million in grants to purchase a 30.5 acre portion of the Reiff Farm to be used for a new township park.

State Senator Andrew Dinniman, D-19, was scheduled to visit the farm last Tuesday to make the announcement but had to postpone it because of the government shut down. The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has approved \$800,000 for the project and Chester County is providing another \$425,000.

The farm has been the subject of litigation between the township and the David Cutler Group since 2003 and a settlement agreement is still pending.

Township Manager Mary Flagg said in an interview last Monday that "the board of supervisors has not made a decision" regarding the park since it is part of the settlement agreement. But the supervisors did give the French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust the go ahead to apply for the grants.

The controversy over development of the Reiff Farm spawned the formation of the Concerned Citizens of East Vincent, a 100-member local advocacy group that sought to restrict the development.

According to Chris McNeil, a former township supervisor, who has worked closely with Concerned Citizens of East Vincent, "the efforts of the group have resulted in not only a development with significantly fewer homes but also a new township park."

Current Supervisors' Vice Chairman Walter C. Zaremba Jr., said in an interview last Monday that the supervisors are working diligently toward a settlement agreement. In an effort to save the taxpayers money, Zaremba said that he requested a second appraisal on the Reiff property which came in lower.

McNeil resigned her supervisor position in 2004 because of illness but wants to regain a spot on the board. She is vying with Zaremba in the November election for a seat. Zaremba is endeavoring to hold onto his seat.

The Reiff Farm which is in the agricultural preservation and rural conservation zoning districts would allow 17 homes to be built in a by right plan.

But through the township's open space zoning ordinance, the developer could build 72 homes on the same 154-acre tract through a clustered plan that allows higher density to promote open space.

The David Cutler Group approached the township in 2002 with a plan to build 72 homes on the 154-acre farm.

The township rejected the plan after it was presented through the conditional use hearing citing a variety of reasons. The developer appealed the decision to the Court of Common Pleas. The Court of Common Pleas sided with the township but the Commonwealth Court reviewed the township's decision and upheld some decisions and rejected others. After the Supreme Court declined to hear the case, the township entered into talks toward a settlement agreement.

Elaine Milito, president of Concerned Citizens of East Vincent, said that the Reiff Farm was not a good candidate for development. The only access to the farm was through a wetland of the exceptional value French Creek watershed. The Green Valleys Association worked with Concerned Citizens in raising concerns about the impact of the proposed development on the watershed.

Eventually, the French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust got involved and worked out a proposal for the developer to build six homes, renovate two existing homes and sell the land to the township for the park. David Cutler would also get a certain number of transferable development rights as a result of the reduced development on the Reiff tract that he can use to offset other subdivisions with greater density.

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