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Greenbelt Gets Equestrian Request

Owners of Cobblestone Farms apply for greenbelt program

By MARY MORGAN

Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commission meeting (Jan. 12, 2011): The owners of Cobblestone Farms in Webster Township – Jim and Darlyn Daratony – have applied to the greenbelt program for a parcel adjacent to their business.



Jim Daratony, owner of Cobblestone Farms in Webster Township, made a presentation at the Jan. 12 meeting of the Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commission. To the right is Jennifer Merrick-Brooks, an equestrian trainer and coach. (Photos by the writer.)

It's the first equestrian-related property to be considered for the greenbelt, so they came to commissioners to make their case for including it. The land is used for a sport called "eventing," which

includes a cross-country component. Jim Daratony said the eventing competitions that they've held so far on the property have drawn people from as far away as Texas – he stated that it's having a positive economic impact on this area.

Commissioners also heard from John Satarino, one of the original advocates of the greenbelt program, who spoke during public commentary. He urged them to consider making more outright acquisitions of property, which could then be open to the public. Much of the land protected by the greenbelt is done through the purchase of development rights, with the land remaining private property.

In her staff update, Ginny Trocchio reported that in 2010, the greenbelt program had protected just over 1,000 acres of land, bringing the total of greenbelt land to nearly 3,000 acres.

Equestrian Uses for the Greenbelt?

Jim and Darlyn Daratony, who own Cobblestone Farms in Webster Township, are applying to the greenbelt program for a 53-acre parcel they own next to Cobblestone. [Their business is not connected to the city-owned

Cobblestone Farm, located on Packard Road in Ann Arbor.]

Jim Daratony gave a presentation to commissioners, noting that preserving land for equestrian purposes is a little different than what the greenbelt program is accustomed to doing. He described the land – located at Zeeb and Gregory roads – as a beautiful parcel, with open spaces, a pond, wetlands, a stream that feeds into Arms Creek, active wildlife and forest areas. Several acres of the land are in hay production, he said, and are used by people for walking, riding their horses and cross-country skiing.

Specifically, they'd like to preserve that land for "eventing," a sport that Daratony described as an equestrian triathlon. The land is currently used for that purpose just two or three weekends during the year. The reason for applying to the greenbelt is to preserve the land, he said, but also to preserve the sport of eventing.

Eventing competitions have been held there for three years and are growing, Daratony said – at their last one in 2010, nearly 200 horses participated. Overall, the events have attracted more than 800 participants from multiple states, with 700 spectators annually. The competitions are supported by the U.S. Equestrian Federation and the Fédération Équestre Internationale, he said. "We hope that we continue to grow that," he said.

Jennifer Merrick-Brooks, who organizes eventing competitions in the U.S. and Canada, spoke about the sport itself, which she said is quickly disappearing because of the lack of preserved land. To

run these competitions, a lot of undeveloped acreage is required, with different types of terrain. It's a three-phase event: (1) dressage, (2) stadium jumping, and (3) cross country.

Merrick-Brooks said they've seen a growth in the number of participants and spectators at the local events over the past three years. People are coming from out of state – as far away as Texas – and many are being introduced to Michigan for the first time, she said. It's creating an economic impact, she added, for local hotels, restaurants, and businesses that sell on-site concessions. In addition, local stores get business, she said – wood is needed to build the jumps, for example, and veterinarians are hired to be at the events.

Daratony then described Cobblestone Farms – about 100 acres that's adjacent and to the west of the land that they're requesting to be part of the greenbelt. He characterized it as a state-of-the-art equestrian development and training facility, housing over 40 horses. Cobblestone includes about 50 acres of paddocks, pastures and riding areas, and an area that grows hay for horses and livestock.

The combination of Cobblestone Farms plus the acreage they hope to protect via the greenbelt will create a large parcel of preserved land in that area for equestrian use, Daratony said. "We're excited about it, and we hope you are too."

Equestrian Uses: Commissioner Questions, Comments

Peter Allen began the discussion by asking what kind of access, legally, the public would have to the property.

Daratony replied that he isn't a lawyer, but that the goal is to keep it open for their neighbors. Some people walk their dogs on the property, he said, and some people who board their horses at Cobblestone ride on the land. He noted that the property is completely insured.



Four members of the Ann Arbor greenbelt advisory commission, from right: Carsten Hohnke, Mike Garfield, Dan Ezekiel, Peter Allen.

Dan Ezekiel said the proposal has given the commissioners a lot to think about. Access is a big issue, and he wasn't expecting to hear that the Daratons would be willing to have people walk through the property. Ezekiel asked if they'd be amenable to having a certain guarantee of public access written into an easement agreement. "That would be a real positive factor in our consideration," he said.

Daratony replied that they'd been talking about that issue – they're aware of other places that open up the land to other equestrian uses, like pony clubs and 4-H. "We're not opposed to that," he said.

Merrick-Brooks noted that she and Darlyn Daratony are members of the Eventing Association of Michigan. That group has an easement to use another property in Washtenaw County, she said

– though she didn't identify its location. As a past president of the association, Merrick-Brooks said she was involved in getting that property insured. They haven't had anything happen, but they're covered, she said.

Jennifer S. Hall, the commission's chair, asked whether this other property in Washtenaw County includes a public access component written into the easement agreement? Merrick-Brooks said she didn't recall, but that people did use the property to walk their dogs and such.

Ezekiel noted that if the commission moved ahead with this proposal, they'd probably want to negotiate capping the number of events held on the property. They wouldn't want to see 50 events held there each year, for example. It would be counter to the purpose of preserving open space if it were constantly in use.

Daratony responded by saying it's a lot of work to hold these events, and he had no problem putting a limit on that.

Mike Garfield asked Daratony to talk about the land's history, how long they've owned it and how they got into this equestrian sport.

Daratony described himself as a "city boy," but their four daughters had fallen in love with horse riding. They've owned the land for four years. It was previously owned by a long-time local farmer whose family was selling off his property after he passed away. Daratony's family was just starting to get involved in the sport of eventing, he said, and they were interested in hosting

some competitions – the land seemed like a good fit for it.

Hall noted that Ginny Trocchio, a staff member who manages the greenbelt program, would have more information for commissioners during a closed session later in the meeting. [That closed session, for the purpose of discussing possible land acquisitions, lasted nearly an hour. Details of greenbelt negotiations aren't released until the proposals are forwarded to city council for approval.]

Public Commentary: Public Access

John Satarino was the only person to address the commission during time set aside for public commentary. He began by noting that he was proud to be one of the early founders of the greenbelt program, and he thanked commissioners for their efforts in what he described as a very successful purchase of development rights (PDR) program. At the same time, there has been a commitment to purchase land outright for users, he said, adding that now is a good time for that kind of purchase. It might be more expensive and problematic in some ways, he allowed, but could be accomplished by using partnerships and grants. There are many beautiful properties, Satarino said, especially west of Ann Arbor and near the city.

Satarino pointed out that a Washtenaw County-owned property, Scio Woods Preserve, is growing in popularity, which reflects that there's a need for this kind of property that's open to the public. Taxpayers would like to see something more tangible for their tax dollars, he said. He reported that some people voted against the county program

in November because they thought it was part of the greenbelt. [The 10-year renewal for a millage to fund the county's natural areas preservation program was approved by voters on Nov. 2. Most of the county's natural preserves are open to the public, while most property protected by the greenbelt program is not.] Satarino concluded by encouraging the commission to look at opportunities, knowing that in decades to come, it would help meet the program's goals of wildlife protection and providing places for the public to use.

Staff Update

Ginny Trocchio of The Conservation Fund, who serves as staff for the greenbelt program under a contract with the city, gave a brief report.

Before the meeting she had distributed a map to commissioners, showing all protected land in Washtenaw County through the end of 2010. In addition to land in the greenbelt, the map showed land protected through development rights and conservation easements held by other governmental entities and nonprofit groups – such as the Legacy Land Conservancy and the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy. It also indicated areas that are part of state, regional, county or local parks systems.

Trocchio reported that 2010 had been a very busy year for all land preservation efforts, including the greenbelt. The greenbelt alone had protected just over 1,000 acres in 2010, including year-end deals for the 146-acre Whitney Farm and the 33.7-acre Clark Farm – both in Webster Township – and the 96-acre Honke Farm in Northfield Township.

In total, nearly 3,000 acres are protected by the greenbelt, she said. That includes a 1,000-acre block in Webster Township, and a nearly 1,000-acre area in Ann Arbor Township. One of the greenbelt program's strategic goals is to build areas of protected land in 1,000-acre chunks. [.pdf file of city press release on year-end update of all land preservation in Washtenaw County, including the greenbelt. Trocchio gave a more detailed report on the greenbelt program's most recent fiscal-year activities, from July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010, at the commission's September 2010 meeting.]

\$1,339,442. Of that, the city expects to be reimbursed for \$611,030 through an FRPP grant. The 218-acre farm is located along Pontiac Trail and Five Mile Road.

Greenbelt Approvals on Council Agenda

Though these weren't mentioned during the greenbelt commission's Jan. 12 meeting, two items are on the Ann Arbor city council's Jan. 18 meeting agenda that relate to the greenbelt:

- A resolution to approve a purchase agreement for the purchase of development rights (PDR) on the Lee A. Maulbetsch Trust and Lori M. Maulbetsch Trust Property in Northfield Township, for \$804,392. The city expects to be reimbursed for \$282,750 of that amount through a grant from the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP). The roughly 128-acre farm is located along Northfield Church Road.
- A resolution to approve a purchase agreement for the purchase of development rights on the Nancy M. Geiger Revocable Living Trust and Rose Ann Geiger Contingent Trust Property in Salem Township, for