

## Berks County Looks For Easement Applications

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Leesport (Berks Co.) — The Berks County Agricultural Land Preservation Board is looking for more land owners interested in selling their conservation easements. According to land preservation specialist Bernard Riley, farmers still have plenty of opportunity to have their easements purchased by the board.

"We had seven applications in our first round and we are working to process them now. The next round of applications must be in my office by January 31."

There is still plenty of money left to purchase developmental rights on appropriate pieces of property. "We have nearly three million dollars available for purchasing easements this year. Either we spend it this year or we lose it," Riley explained.

Riley and Extension Agent Clyde Myers explained the application process at a recent public meeting. "The process is a little complicated, but Bernie is available to help landowners fill out their applications," Myers stated.

Actually the preliminary application due on the 31st could be filled out while standing at the counter of the cooperative extension office. The only information that may give farmers difficulty involves agriculture security areas. "The primary criteria to be considered for purchase of conservation easements is being in an officially recorded agricultural security area," Riley stated.

There are 16 officially recorded ag security areas in Berks County including Bethel, Colebrookdale, Douglas, Greenwich, Jefferson, Longswamp, Maiden creek, Maxatawny, Oley, Penn Richmond, Tulpehocken, Upper Bern, Washington, Heidelberg, and Windsor. "There are five other areas that have been approved by the township supervisor but haven't been officially recorded including Perry, Hereford Amity, Tilden and Upper Tulpehocken with close to 13,000 acres involved in these areas," Riley added. There is over 48,000 acres already in ag security areas in Berks County Riley stressed that while a farmer's township may have an ag security area the farmer must be signed up in the area and it must be officially recorded in order to be considered for the program.

Riley will be available to help farmers with the second part of the application, the Farmland Evaluation and Site Assessment. The FLESA will take approximately an hour and a half for the land owner to complete with Riley's help. "Much of the application is work I have to do and the farmer doesn't need to be present," Riley explained.

According to application the Land Evaluation portion is based on the soil, survey of Berks County USDA Soil Conservation service, which was completed in September 6, 1970. The score on this portion of the application is based on the soils corn producing capacity.

The site assessment involves 19 factors related to the value of the farm for preservation. It evaluates the chances that the land is ripe for development with such questions as the distance from public water, sewer, and boroughs. It favors larger portions of agricultural land in areas zoned for agricultural preservation. It also considers the amount of money being generated on the parcel.

"The purpose of the site evaluation is to identify three aspects of the property. We need to know the character of the area. We want to know what is around you. If there is development on three sides of your farm we can't save off the fourth side. It's very attractive to have your property close to other land in ag security areas. We also need to know the developmental pressure within a few miles of where you are. Finally we want to know the character of your farm. What you are producing and how much is important to determining which property should be purchased," Dr. Robert Ziegenfus, a professor of geography at Kutztown University, explained.

Farmers interested in the conservation easement program have

a simple set of steps to follow to get involved in the process. "Start by calling Bernie Riley at 378-1327 then stop into the office and fill out the preliminary application. Then arrange with Bernie to complete the application. He's happy to help you; in fact, that's one of the reasons we hired him. After that it's up to Bernie and the board to evaluate the property," Myers said.

"First, Bernie will check to see that the property meets the minimum criteria set down by the state board. It must be in an ag security area. It must be part of a farm operation capable of generating \$25,000 in income and product sales must be more than \$10,000. Finally more than 50% of the land must be in crop, grazing or pasture

area. The production yield has to be at least equal to the county average. Fifty percent of the soils have to be in classes I through IV. Finally the parcel must meet the standards addressed by the county ranking system."

Riley comes up with a point value for each application based one-third on the land evaluation and two-third's on site assessment. If a piece of property ranks highly in the evaluation process, the next step is an appraisal. Dr. Ziegenfus, explained the appraisal process. "If your property is selected, you will be asked to pay \$500 for an appraisal. This money will be refunded if your property is selected for conservation easement purchase and you elect to sell your easements to us. If the

board decides that they don't wish to purchase the easements, we will also refund your money. If we offer to purchase your easements, but you decide not to participate in the program then the money will not be refunded. Regardless of what happens you have an appraisal worth some where between \$1,200 and \$1,500 for \$500. After the appraisal we will enter the final selection process," Ziegenfus said.

The final selection will involve six assumptions. "The higher the FLESA, the higher the ranking. The smaller number of dollars required to purchase the conservation easements the higher the ranking. The larger the number of acres with ag restrictions the high-

