

EDITORIAL

## Combined police force seems to make sense

A preliminary study of the Dallas Borough and Dallas Township police forces indicates that a combined department may offer advantages neither can provide separately. That prediction is not surprising.

The two municipalities have shared the services of a common volunteer fire and ambulance company for many years, an arrangement that has allowed for the purchase of modern equipment and a new station. Combining two police departments that are headquartered about a mile apart, and which share patrol and support duties already, is a logical step. The study, conducted by the Governor's Center for Local Government Services, found that a combined department might not save an enormous amount of money in its early years, but could provide more consistent, professional police services. One way it could do that is by offering more opportunities for professional training and advancement to officers.

There has been talk over the years about forming a true "regional" police department to serve the entire Back Mountain area. That may be too ambitious an idea, at least all at once. If the Dallas departments can merge successfully - in both budget and service terms - it may make sense to take another look at an overall department, but for now, it's best to take one step at a time.

## Sharing America's good fortune

Russian orphan children come to Northeastern Pennsylvania with little more than the clothes they're wearing, but they will leave with much more than material goods. Again this year, host families are accepting dozens of the children into their homes and hearts for a few weeks, with both the guests and hosts anticipating more than a summer vacation. If things work out well - and they have past years - the children will return soon to become members of their American families.

In a more perfect world these children would remain with the families who brought them to life. But the Russian economy and society are extraordinarily distressed in 2001, to the point that many children are placed in orphanages by parents who cannot afford to care for them in even the most fundamental manner. Organizations and individuals have stepped into this breach to offer a safe, welcoming home for the helpless victims of their nation's collapse.

The adoption process that lies ahead is cumbersome, frustrating, costly and demanding. Yet, most of these host families will persevere, and we offer them our encouragement.

## Publisher's Notebook

Ron Bartizek



I once had a boss who said his favored lawn was green-painted concrete. At the time I couldn't understand his disdain for neat yards of rye, or the aroma of newly clipped bluegrass. Now I do, and while pavement may be a little too far from the natural world, I am developing a new appreciation for rocks and mulch.

I've observed that other suburban homeowners don't share my enthusiasm for easy-to-care-for landscaping. They seem to think it's actually fun to spend countless weekend hours trimming, fertilizing, planting and mowing in an endless quest for that elusive Home and Garden look. I wish them all the luck in the world, and must confess to sometimes admiring their handiwork, but never to the extent of wanting to emulate it.

Over the years, I've come to appreciate the "natural" look, which is the highest expression of earthly stewardship. To my mind it's audacious to think we lowly humans can improve on Mother Nature, and we should just get out of her way before we are squashed like a June bug on a concrete sidewalk. Live and let live has become my motto, and the forsythia bush that is rapidly taking over the backyard is clear evidence of my adherence to that principle.

Fortunately for the neighbors, we have a young son who wants to earn pocket money by mowing the grass, so things aren't yet out of hand on all fronts. But that doesn't mean the entire lawn has succumbed to bourgeois ideals - there's still a stand of hay that I describe as a haven for butterflies and birds, not a neglected patch of weeds.

If my commitment was total, of course, I'd let the front yard go wild too, but that would be asking too much of the rest of you, who suffer from the misconception that a neat yard will earn respect, love and forgiveness in the afterlife. Ha! Won't you be surprised when you learn that God only intended for fairways, tees and greens to be treated like your firstborn.



Tranquil fields, like this one off Hildebrandt Rd. in Dallas Township, can be preserved under a state program. Photo by Ron Bartizek.

### What's on the Horizon?



Nancy Snee

We are all familiar with the children's song "Old McDonald Had A Farm." Now, put the emphasis on the word "had" in that song and substitute numerous Pennsylvania farmers' names for "McDonald." What do you get? A description of the declining farming business in the Commonwealth before Act 149, the Farmland Protection Program, became effective in 1989. Between 1950 and 1989, the state lost 46 percent of its farmland to development. It was this devastating loss that prompted the passage of Act 149.

A similar phenomenon has been occurring in Luzerne County. Luzerne Conservation District records indicate that over 3,200 acres of farmland have gone from agricultural uses to urban uses since 1996. This trend was one of several factors that impelled area farmers and other interested parties to form a task force in 1997. The mission of this task force was to establish a farmland preservation program in Luzerne County. Their efforts finally bore fruit when the county commissioners approved an agricultural preservation program in July of 1999. The program is implemented via a seven-member board and a county-appointed program administrator.

## Luzerne County farms to be preserved

The program officially began January 1, 2000. The board received four applications that year, one of which did not meet all of the required state criteria. Fifteen months later, two of those original applicants have received approval for conservation easements on their farms by the State Farmland Preservation Board.

By agreeing to place an easement on their farms, farm owners give up the right to develop those portions of their property covered by the easement for any use other than agriculture-related uses forever. (Both the state and the county programs require that all easements be perpetual.) The owners are reimbursed for this procedure. An appraisal of the property determines the fair market value of the land as well as the farm value. The difference between these two values is the easement value. The county board uses this easement value as a starting point to negotiate an offer with the applicant. The board can offer the applicant less than the easement value, but not more than the easement value.

Farmers do not have to submit all of their acreage for the conservation easement. A minimum of 50 contiguous acres is required by the state regulations. At least half of this acreage must be available for agriculture and consist of Capability Class Soils I-IV. In some cases, parcels less than 50 acres can be submitted if they are adjacent to a preserved farm. The Commonwealth is interested in preserving large clusters of farmland - hence, the 50 acre minimum require-

ment. Another state requirement related to clustering is that farms must be part of a 500-acre Agricultural Security Area (ASA).

Ten municipalities within the county have established ASAs. Belonging to an ASA provides farmers with a variety of protective measures. Local governments cannot enact ordinances that would unreasonably restrict normal farming practices or structures on farms that are part of the ASA. Hazardous waste and low-level radioactive waste sites cannot be located in ASAs. They also offer added levels of review in eminent domain cases. Being part of an ASA does not restrict farmers from changing the use of their land or selling it.

People interested in having ASAs established in their municipality should petition their borough council or township supervisors to get the process started. The county has assisted several municipalities with this procedure since the inception of the preservation program and will continue to do so upon request.

The county is currently working with four applicants in this second year of the program. Appraisals have been completed on all four of the farms. Surveys of the land being offered for easement purchase will be done next. Upon completion of the surveys, the county will submit the necessary material to the Bureau of Farmland Protection staff for review. Once the application has been given the thumbs up from the staff, the county submits the material to the State Farmland Preservation Board for approval.

As the program becomes more popular, we will receive increasing numbers of applications. All applications are objectively-evaluated based on three general criteria: soil quality, proximity to farms in the ASA and to preserved farms, and whether the land has characteristics that make it conducive to development. The end result of the evaluation is a numerical score. All of the applications for a particular round are ranked based on this score. Depending on the amount of available funds for that round, the board may be limited working with the top three, four or five applicants. The remaining applicants will be placed on a waiting list and ranked against the new applications the following year.

An historic event will take place in Luzerne County within the next few weeks when the first agricultural conservation easement will be placed on the Richard and Betty Thomas Farm in Butler Township. It will be a proud moment for all who have worked very hard to ensure that the farms in Luzerne County will continue to grow crops and livestock rather than housing developments. Then future generations of children will be able to sing, "Old McDonald has a farm ..."

For more information on the Luzerne County Agricultural Preservation Program, contact Nancy Snee, Program Administrator, at 825-1560.

Nancy Snee is the Luzerne County Agricultural Preservation Program Administrator. She works for the Luzerne County Planning Commission and resides in Wilkes-Barre Township.



Carol King

Librarian's report: Martha Butler and Dr. Wallace Stettler attended the Library Director and Trustee Workshop at East Mountain Inn last month. Guest speaker Dan Kane presented programs for directors and trustees.

This summer a new PHEEA student, George Sterbinsky, will be working at the library until

## Summer crafts program for kids July 16

the middle of August. There are also two new pages, Cheryl Kirkwood and Chase Susko.

Visitors to the library last month included 60 first-grade students from Lake-Noxen School; first- and second-grade students from Ross Elementary; and Little Meadows Day Care Center children, ages 6 to 12.

On June 25 a story, craft and puppet show hour was conducted in the children's library by two summer employees of the Family Literacy program. The program, "Endangered Animals", was attended by 48 children and their parents.

Statistics for June: total circulation, 8,190; books added,

233; new borrowers, 103; and active borrowers, 13,793.

Children's library: A busy place! The next program in the summer series, "Animal Odyssey ... make tracks to the Back Mountain Memorial Library!", will be held on Monday, July 16, from 1 to 2 p.m. The children will make and take home a craft, and create a snack, too. Registration will close tomorrow, July 12.

The regular story hour sessions filled quickly on the first day of registration. Four story ladies and one young man, a sophomore from Penn State, planned the programs for the opening days on June 26, 27, and 28.

The second in the series of "Donuts and Discussion" group meetings for 9 to 12-year-olds took place on July 9, when the group discussed "Jacob Have I Loved," by Katherine Paterson. On Monday, July 23, "Guests," by Michael Dorris, will be their topic of discussion. The series was planned and is conducted by Janet Bauman.

New display: An attractive display announces College Misericordia's "Under the Stars" summer programs. The events that are still to take place are: July 12-15, "Much Ado about Nothing," and on July 16, "Broadway Bound." Call the college for further details.

## The Dallas Post

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