

NEWS

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Contact: Deborah Zabel

COOPERATION PRESERVES FARMLAND IN SOMERSET COUNTY

New Jersey Agriculture Secretary Arthur R. Brown, Jr. presented a \$300,000 ceremonial check to Somerset County officials today in a farmland preservation ribbon-cutting.

The ceremony celebrated the county's first permanent preservation of farmland through the state's Farmland Preservation Program.

"This is another landmark of success in a program aimed at keeping New Jersey green well into the future," said Brown. The event also marks the state's eleventh development easement purchase through the Farmland Preservation Program.

State and county funds each paid half the costs for a "development easement" on farmer Stanley Baron's 85-acre sheep farm. By selling his easement, Baron permanently dedicated the land to farm uses through a state program designed to preserve New Jersey's agricultural land base.

Somerset County officials presented Baron with a check for the county's share of development easement costs.

"Somerset County's contribution shows what can be accomplished when different levels of government cooperate to achieve a common goal," commented Brown.

Baron's agreement to accept agricultural deed restrictions adds him to a list of New Jersey farmland owners who have collectively preserved nearly 1,300 acres statewide to help ensure the future of New Jersey's agriculture.

"The Farmland Preservation Program is essential for providing farmland owners with a viable alternative to development," explained Brown.

(more)

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ARTHUR R. BROWN, JR., SECRETARY
HEALTH & AGRICULTURE BUILDING
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Add One

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"In the last two years, nearly ten percent of New Jersey's farmland has yielded to development, leaving just 850,000 acres for agriculture," he added. "Balance is essential if agriculture is to coexist with -- and not be erased by -- development."

Brown also pointed out that question four on the Nov. 3 general election ballot is a referendum on changes designed to stimulate increased preservation of farmland.

"A yes vote on the farmland question will increase the flexibility of the original \$50 million fund approved by voters in 1981," he explained. "The time for farmland preservation in New Jersey is now."

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For more information on this event, the Nov. 3 farmland preservation ballot question or the Farmland Preservation Program, please contact:

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Otto Kaufman, *County Planning Board*
Clare Liptak, *County Agricultural Agent*
Ernest Thurlow, *County Soil Conservation District*

THE BARON FARM EASEMENT AND SOMERSET COUNTY'S AGRICULTURE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

October 19, 1987

The first easement purchase of Somerset County farmland involves an 86-acre property in Branchburg, owned by Stanley and Nancy Baron. The county Board of Freeholders voted in May 1987 to buy the sheep farm for \$630,000, with the purchase price to be shared equally by the county and state as provided by the 1983 Agriculture Retention and Development Act.

The Barons, in turn, have agreed to a deed restriction that will permit only agricultural use of their land, in perpetuity. The money they have received represents the difference between the agricultural and development values of their property.

In 1985, the freeholders appropriated \$2.5-million to use as county matching funds in the easement purchase program, one of three farm-retention programs administered by the Somerset County Agriculture Development Board. The other two types of applications available to farmers in the county are an 8-year farmland preservation program and a similar 8-year program requiring municipal, as well as county and state, approval. The 8-year programs both provide soil and water conservation funds; the municipally approved version offers several other benefits as well (see attached sheet).

To date, three farm owners in the county have expressed an interest in the easement-purchase program. They are the Barons; John and Miriam Summerskill of Montgomery; and Larry Totten, who owns 29 acres in Branchburg near the Barons'. A major 8-year program applicant is the Duke Estate in Hillsborough, which is awaiting the township's approval of its request to put 2,704 acres into the program.

The county Agriculture Development Board is currently looking at five more informal applications of interest from farmland owners in the county. These nonbinding applications are a mixed group of inquiries about all three programs.

Interest in the agriculture retention programs has been growing steadily, encouraged in part by early applicants such as the Barons. Despite the active development climate, there is still interest in preserving farmland in the county. As an additional incentive, a public question on next month's ballot will ask voters to approve a change in the matching-fund ratio, from 50 to 20 percent for the counties' share, which will allow county preservation funds to be spread even further.

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Easement purchase of sheep farm land completed

By **LONNIE MACK**
Home News staff writer

10/20/87

State and county officials celebrated the first easement purchase under the state's farmlands preservation program with a ribbon-cutting ceremony yesterday afternoon at the Branchburg farm of Stanley and Nancy Baron.

The Somerset County Board of Freeholders in May voted to purchase the sheep farm for \$630,000, with the purchase price to be shared equally by the county and state under the terms of the 1983 Agriculture Retention

and Development Act.

The \$630,000 represents the difference between the value of the property as farmland and its value if sold for development.

The Barons have agreed to a deed restriction that will permit only agricultural use of their land forever. The land can be sold, but the buyer would also inherit the restrictions limiting the use of the land for agricultural purposes.

Among those participating in the ceremony at the Branchburg farm yesterday were state Secretary of Agriculture Arthur Brown, Freeholder Director Christine Todd Whitman, Dep-

uty Freeholder Director Michael Pappas and Thomas Everitt, chairman of the Somerset County Agriculture Development Board.

The county purchased the option in June of 1986 and ordered appraisals of the land's value.

The Freeholders authorized payment in May on Baron's asking price of \$7,000 an acre for the property between South Branch and Opie Roads.

In 1985, the freeholders appropriated \$2.5 million to use as county matching funds for the \$5 million easement purchase program.

Funding available to county groups

PP10-16-87

Somerset County human services agencies are invited to apply for state funds recently announced through the county Human Services Department.

The county has been allocated \$2,763 to enable local sponsoring organizations to assist in the registration and related activities pertaining to a new state law providing for voluntary registration of family day-care homes in New Jersey. The agency or agencies would work under contract with the Division of Youth and Family Services, beginning in January 1988, to register these day-care homes.

There is also \$31,556 available to Somerset County for the provision of respite services for persons with developmental disabilities. Contracts for this program are expected to be finalized in December of this year.

The deadline for applications for both the day-care registration and respite programs is Oct. 22. To receive an application, interested agencies should contact Kathleen O'Brien at the Somerset County Department of Human Services at (201) 725-4640.



State Secretary of Agriculture Arthur R. Brown Jr., left, presents a ceremonial check of \$300,500 to Somerset County Freeholder Director Christie Whitman, who in turn presents another check of \$60,150 to Stan and Nancy Baron, Branchburg landowners

Photo by Steve Andrascik

First farmland preservation deal for Somerset

By JOE TYRRELL

State and county officials yesterday marked the first purchase of a permanent easement to bar development of a Somerset County farm by promoting a referendum to change the farmland preservation program's financing.

Freeholder Director Christine Whitman said the \$601,160 deal to preserve almost 86 acres of farmland in Branchburg owned by Stanley and Nancy Baron is designed "not to prevent development but to provide the sort of balance we've all enjoyed living here."

Because of rapid development across north central New Jersey, "land prices are skyrocketing," which only increases the pressure on farmers to reap a profit by selling their land, Whitman said.

"Many people say it's an uphill battle, a losing struggle" to save agriculture, but "we believe it's a real and viable program. I also certainly hope the bond issue passes."

State Secretary of Agriculture Arthur Brown echoed Whitman's words, saying approval of the state ballot issue will increase the preservation effort's financial flexibility while reducing administrative delays.

If approved by voters on Nov. 3, the changes "are going to make your county monies go a lot

farther," Brown told a gathering of about 50 dignitaries at the Baron property off River Road in Branchburg.

To keep land in agricultural use, the preservation program allows farmers to agree voluntarily not to develop it for eight years in exchange for increased soil and water aid and right-to-farm protections.

It also has bought a dozen permanent easements, including one from the Barons, to bar future development of land. These purchases are financed from a \$50 million state bond referendum approved by voters in 1981, but require 50 percent matches from county funds.

The ballot question would increase the state funding to 80 percent of the purchase price, and allow it to pay 100 percent under emergency circumstances to retain farmland. It also would permit fee-simple purchases of land as an alternative to the easement process.

"The development easement is for the operating farmer, who wants to continue to farm his land," Brown said. In contrast, a straight sale to the state would be more attractive to someone "who is looking to get out."

"One of the biggest problems we've had is the amount of time it takes" to process and pay for the development easements, he added. The fee-simple purchase could speed this and allow

the state "to turn around and sell the land at auction to someone who is willing to keep it in agriculture," Brown said.

Increasing the state share of financing will be especially helpful in "some of the more rural counties...where they just don't have the tax bases to come up with the 50 percent match," Brown said.

In Somerset, county officials still have most of a \$2.5 million fund set aside by the freeholders for farmland preservation. County officials said yesterday they are hopeful completion of the Barons' deal will spark applications from other farmers.

"We're reaping the harvest of five years of hard work and yet I also feel this is like a seed in the spring," said Thomas Everett, chairman of the county agriculture development board. "There'll be many, many (applications) coming very rapidly, I envision."

The Barons will continue to use the farmland to grow alfalfa for hay in conjunction with their major agricultural operation, a sheep farm in neighboring Readington in Hunterdon County. Stanley Baron said he encourages other farmers to join the preservation program.

"I feel I want to take this check and go out and buy another farm and do exactly the same thing," he said.