

Group forms to protect open land in Franklin County

[By JIM HOOK Senior writer](#)

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Community leaders are assembling a nonprofit group dedicated to preserving green space in Franklin County.

The group, however, is unlikely to make a dent in the backlog of farmers who hope to get money for development rights to their farms.

"Our primary focus is going to be on stream corridor and wetlands areas," said G. Warren Elliott, one of the organizers of the Franklin Conservancy and a former Franklin County commissioner. "It has more of an environmental bent than preserving farms. We're not going to be buying development rights for a number of years."

The Franklin Conservancy should be incorporated early next year, he said. Landowners already have contacted conservancy members about the possibility of receiving tax credits for donating woodlands and agricultural land.

Meanwhile, the county, state and local government programs have purchased the development easements to more than 15,000 acres on 116 farms in Franklin County. The county has another 85 to 90 applications on file, according to county planning chief Phil Tarquino.

"There's still a tremendous amount of interest in the program," Tarquino said.

Farmers receive a payment and in return promise to keep their land in agriculture forever. The purchase price for easements in the county has averaged \$1,864 an acre.

The most recent purchase was 108 acres of Arlin Hege's crop fields in Southampton Township. The program, funded by the county and state, bought the easement to 195 acres of Hege's farm in 2007.

The county is continuing its modest effort to save farmland from development during hard economic times.

Franklin County commissioners have included \$135,000 in the 2012 budget, the same amount as in 2011, to leverage state money for the program. Counties won't know how much state money is available to them for farm preservation until February, according to Tarquino.

"It's important that we're never too far from our own source of food," Commissioner David Keller said. "The importance of recharging the water aquifer, habitat for wildlife, benefits in

terms of open space and containing sprawl and the importance of agriculture to our local economy -- those are still compelling for county government to continue to pursue, regardless of how the economy is doing. They have an economic benefit as well. All the reasons for farmland preservation are relevant, regardless of the state of the economy."

"Heaven forbid that we become as reliant on foreign countries for food as we do for oil," Elliott said.

Tough times, with its lower real estate prices, might be a good time to obtain additional preservation easements, he said.

"The worst times economically are the best times to make something happen," Elliott said.

One county is considering raising its "pillow tax" from 3 percent to 5 percent with the additional revenue funding land preservation for open space and trails, according to Elliott. Visitors staying the night in motels pay a pillow tax, or room tax.

Keller and Commissioner Robert Thomas said they do not think the current state law would allow using revenue from the room tax for farmland preservation. The law does allow Adams County to spend its tax revenue on historic preservation, Keller said.

Nationally, efforts by state governments to protect farmland through agricultural conservation easement programs has stalled, according to the American Farmland Trust's Farmland Information Center. State-level programs protected 21 percent less land in 2010 than in the prior year -- excluding Colorado, which concluded several large purchases.

Only three states -- Delaware, Maryland and Vermont -- saved more farmland than was lost to development during the year. Pennsylvania was among five additional states (New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Colorado) to protect at least a half acre for each acre lost.

Agriculture preservation easement programs do not stop development but ensure that there will be a supply of agricultural land in the future, according to Dr. Katherine Smith, chief economist with the American Farmland Trust.

Cuts in state-level farmland protection funding are particularly ill-timed because program activity had started to gain momentum, encouraged by federal funding, according to Smith. From 2001 to 2011, there was a 32 percent increase in the number of active state-level programs and a 127 percent spike in independent local programs. Protected acres skyrocketed by 171 percent.

Franklin County fit into that picture with \$5 million from a bond issue dedicated to buying development rights on farms. The program peaked in 2008 with \$5.8 million spent from county and state funds.

The county, the No. 2 dairy county in Pennsylvania, has improved its ranking from 23rd in 1996 to eighth among the state's top counties for farmland preservation.

Elliott set a goal of 50,000 acres to preserve the county's agricultural industry.

"It's certainly true that land is not being developed at the pace as in the past," Elliott said.
"Agriculture continues to be the No. 1 economic generator in Franklin County and Pennsylvania.
One of every seven jobs in Franklin County and Pennsylvania is related to agriculture."

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The Franklin Conservancy

Board members: G. Warren Elliott, Bryan Salzmann, John Van Horn, Sam Small, Tim Stricker.

Focus: Preserving stream land and wetlands.

Salzmann Hughes has agreed to draft articles of incorporation for the group pro bono, Elliott said. The nonprofit is to be established early in 2012