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A Victory for Green in Montco

\$1 million in open-space funds, nearly lost in the Pa. budget fight, will go to buy an Erdenheim tract.

By Diane Mastrull
Inquirer Staff Writer

As the rancorous state budget debate played out last week in Harrisburg, memories of pastures with grazing sheep, cattle and horses kept State Rep. Kate Harper fighting a Senate proposal to raid a land-protection fund.

Her inspiration was one of the signature properties of the region: the 450-acre Erdenheim Farm in Whitemarsh Township, a site Harper relished as a teenager strolling its fields.

Today, the permanent protection of nearly 100 of its acres is \$1 million closer to reality thanks to efforts by the Montgomery County Republican and others to keep the Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund whole.

A \$1 million Keystone grant will be awarded today for the preservation of Erdenheim's Angus Tract, currently the only portion of the late philanthropist F. Eugene "Fitz" Dixon's \$70 million pastoral retreat that is up for sale.

"This is why we need Keystone to remain intact," Harper said yesterday. "Thank God it's still there."

With the grant, a seven-year effort to raise the \$14 million believed needed to buy the Angus Tract and another \$6 million to improve the site for public access and possible continued farming is "two-thirds of the way there," Kim Sheppard, executive director of the Whitemarsh Foundation, said yesterday.

The nonprofit group is working with the Media-based Natural Lands Trust to acquire the tract. The original purchase option on the land was to expire Aug. 2 but has recently been extended to the end of the year, Sheppard said yesterday. She said the foundation is "so thankful for the state coming forward with a million dollars."

It is an appropriation the state "would have had to reconsider" had the Senate proposal - to draw \$40 million a year from Keystone and reroute it to the Hazardous Sites Cleanup Fund - been adopted as part of the new budget, said Michael DiBerardinis, secretary of the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

DCNR administers the Keystone fund, a source of \$86 million in grants a year used by communities, counties and nonprofit groups. About 35 percent goes to libraries, museums and higher-education projects, the rest to land acquisition, creating trails and greenways and maintaining infrastructure in state parks and forests. The 14-year-old fund, known as "Key '93," is supported by 15 percent of the realty-transfer tax.



BARBARA L. JOHNSTON / Inquirer Staff Photographer

The verdant open space of Erdenheim Farm is evident in this aerial photograph, which shows the Angus Tract in the upper right, near the intersection of Flourtown and Thomas Roads.

The Senate proposal to help bail out the 20-year-old Hazardous Sites Cleanup Fund, known as HSCA, with Keystone money threatened to block passage of the state's entire \$27.2 billion spending plan. Now that the legislature has put off until September finding a permanent funding source for HSCA, DiBerardinis said he had no hesitation about providing \$1 million from Keystone for Erdenheim.

Citing its location in the heart of a 2,000-acre swath of green space stretching from Fairmount Park in Philadelphia to Fort Washington State Park in Montgomery County, DiBerardinis said the Dixon estate "has great emotional value . . . historical value [and] ecological value."

He said this morning's grant presentation at the farm was not deliberately timed to underscore the importance of preserving "Key '93." Nevertheless, DiBerardinis took advantage of an interview opportunity yesterday to make a pitch for its continued protection.

"It's reliable, it's steady, it's a dedicated funding source which is so essential" for land preservation, DiBerardinis said. "It's the money you can count on."

Or at least it has been.

It's what Montgomery County officials counted on when, in March, they pledged up to \$4 million for Erdenheim's permanent protection, said Commissioners Chairman Tom Ellis. He said today's state contribution leaves him "very optimistic that we'll have an agreement of sale very shortly."

Then efforts will get under way to acquire another portion of the farm expected to come on the market: the adjacent \$16 million 108-acre Sheep Tract.

The Equestrian Tract, yet another 100-plus-acre spread that hosts a horse barn and riding track, remains in private ownership by Dixon's daughter, Ellin Dixon Miller, who has not expressed an interest in developing or selling it. Dixon's widow, Edith, lives on a 23-acre tract that adjoins 117 acres already owned by Natural Lands Trust.

It all lies within State Rep. Michael Gerber's district. Like Harper, the Democratic Gerber fought efforts to diminish Keystone's funding in the last budget go-round. His opposition also was inspired by a personal connection to Erdenheim. His grandfather, the late Morris Gerber, a county judge, was close friends with Fitz Dixon.

"Erdenheim Farm is a community gem," Gerber said yesterday.

While lauding the state's \$1 million commitment to protecting it from development as "exciting," Gerber added: "We still have a lot of work to do."



RON CORTES / Inquirer Staff Photographer
State Rep. Kate Harper on the Angus Tract. She and State Rep. Michael Gerber fought to preserve the "Key '93" fund.

Contact staff writer Diane Mastrull at 610-313-8095 or dmastrull@phillynews.com.

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