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Group nears goal of preserving tract Whitemarsh Twp. has pledged \$1.9 million to help purchase part of the Erdenheim Farm.

With a \$1.9 million contribution expected today from Whitemarsh Township, preservationists say they are nearing success in their seven-year quest to buy a portion of Erdenheim Farm, the 450-acre estate of the late philanthropist F. Eugene "Fitz" Dixon Jr.

"We feel that we will be able to close by year's end," said Kimberly Sheppard, executive director of the Whitemarsh Foundation, formed in 2001 to save as much of the eastern Montgomery County manor as possible from development.

The nonprofit group is working with Media-based Natural Lands Trust to buy the 98-acre Angus Tract, which is on the market for \$14.5 million. The Dixon family gave the foundation first dibs on the land, but that purchase option expires Dec. 31. Afterward, the tract could be offered to other potential buyers, including developers.

Today's contribution brings the total raised to \$10.5 million. With pledges for additional donations, Sheppard said: "We're confident our funders are going to get us where we need to be to make this purchase."

Township supervisors were unanimous in their vote to give \$1.9 million because "this is far and away the most important and well-known piece of open space" in Whitemarsh, said chairman Joseph P. Corcoran III, who remembers childhood outings in the family Rambler to watch the Erdenheim sheep being herded across Flourtown Road.

The gift, to be announced at a news conference this morning at the farm, could have been as large as \$4 million, Corcoran said. The township had been prepared to offer as much. But according to Sheppard, the foundation did not want to dip more deeply than necessary into the taxpayer trough and concluded that \$1.9 million would suffice.

The Angus Tract is the only part of the pastoral estate, estimated to be worth \$70 million, that is currently for sale. Preservationists' campaign to buy the parcel, bordered by Flourtown and Thomas Roads, began in earnest upon Dixon's death in August 2006. But as early as 2000, even before the Whitemarsh Foundation was formalized, efforts were being made to secure a purchase option.

The foundation set a fund-raising goal of \$20 million - enough to not only buy the Angus Tract but also provide an endowment to improve the land for public access and possibly to keep farming it.

Long a draw to those wanting a time-out from suburban congestion, to daydream among the grazing sheep and Angus cattle, Erdenheim Farm has proven in the past year to be a strong magnet for both public and private preservation dollars.

The foundation's first major fund-raiser, a golf tournament last fall, netted \$80,000. In March, the Montgomery County commissioners pledged up to \$4 million - \$2 million for the Angus Tract plus \$2 million for the 108-acre Sheep Tract should the Dixon estate ever offer it for sale. The state followed four months later with a \$1 million grant from the Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund. The foundation also expects \$5.5 million from special local property tax arrangements.

This year's golf outing, with a dinner and silent auction on Tuesday at the Philadelphia Cricket Club in Flourtown, brought in \$90,000.

Individual donors - typically locals who include Erdenheim in their commute for its enchanting views - also have rallied to the cause with checks as small as \$15 and as large as \$100,000, Sheppard said.

Bisected by the Wissahickon Creek, Erdenheim Farm is widely considered to be the highlight of a 2,000-acre stretch of green running from Fairmount Park in Philadelphia to Fort Washington State Park in Montgomery County.

Natural Lands Trust already owns a piece of the farm: 117 acres bequeathed in the early 1970s by Dixon's uncle, George H. Widener, who had raised prize-winning racehorses there. Still in the hands of the Dixon estate are not only the Angus and Sheep Tracts but also a 23-acre parcel where Dixon's widow, Edith, lives. Their daughter, Ellin Dixon Miller, owns the 100-acre Equestrian Tract.

"People in Whitmarsh Township can't imagine what their lives would be like without Erdenheim Farm as open space and farmland," said Molly Morrison, president of Natural Lands Trust. "The township's financial commitment is the ultimate expression of this - the community's need to protect this incredible scenic landscape."

To learn about Erdenheim Farm and how you can make a donation to preserve it, visit the Whitmarsh Foundation's Web site via <http://go.philly.com/angus>

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