

Major move by Montco to preserve Erdenheim Farm

By Diane Mastrull
Inquirer Staff Writer

Hoping to excite the sort of fund-raising frenzy that kept Thomas Eakins' masterpiece *The Gross Clinic* in Philadelphia, Montgomery County yesterday pledged \$4 million toward preserving part of Erdenheim Farm, philanthropist F. Eugene "Fitz" Dixon's pastoral jewel in Whitmarsh Township.

The county commissioners challenged other potential donors to pony up the remaining \$10 million needed to buy the 98-acre Angus Tract - the only portion of the 450-acre farm currently for sale.

The nonprofit Whitmarsh Foundation, created five years ago to protect the \$70 million Erdenheim Farm from development, has an option to purchase the land. But it expires on Aug. 2, the first anniversary of Dixon's death. If preservation forces cannot find money to acquire the tract, trustees for the Dixon estate could decide to give that opportunity to builders.

Citing Dixon's "spectacular stewardship" of the landmark farm for more than three decades, foundation chairman Hugh Moulton said it is now the public's "turn to step up and do what needs to be done to see that it is preserved."

Erdenheim is believed to be the last working farm of its size in the Wissahickon Valley. Located 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, it is considered an environmental asset, as well as an aesthetic one.

"This is to this part of Southeastern Pennsylvania what Central Park is to New York City," Moulton said.

With its rolling hills and grazing sheep, cattle and horses, "it's really reminiscent of a simpler time in our lives," he said. "It's really quite unusual, quite unique, quite spectacular - and we want to see that it stays that way."

County officials said they hope yesterday's pledge will help persuade the estate's trustees to extend the deadline on the purchase option for the Angus Tract, where Dixon bred prize Black Angus cattle.

"As long as we are making progress, I believe that the trustees for the estate will continue to work with us," said Thomas J. Ellis, chairman of the county commissioners.

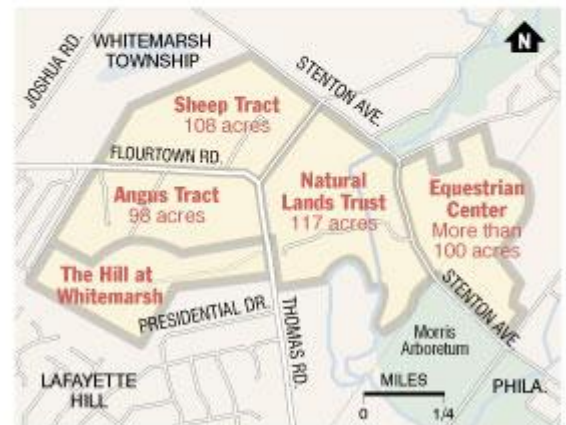
He noted that an impassioned plea by the arts community garnered more than \$37 million in private donations that kept Eakins' acclaimed 1875 painting, *The Gross Clinic*, from being sold to a museum in Arkansas.

"We're hoping to see the same outpouring," Ellis said.

Mark S. DePillis, Dixon's attorney and executor of his estate along with Dixon's wife, Edith, and daughter Ellin Dixon Miller, could not be reached for comment.

The Erdenheim Farm

The nonprofit Whitmarsh Foundation has an option to buy the Angus Tract and is trying to raise the money before Aug. 2, when the option expires. The Natural Lands Trust, another nonprofit, owns the adjacent 117 acres. The Hill at Whitmarsh is being developed as a retirement community. The Sheep Tract and Equestrian Center remain part of the Dixon estate.



SOURCES: ESRI; GDT; Inquirer research

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Yesterday's pledge was the second dedication of public money for Erdenheim. Two years ago, the county, Whitmarsh Township and the Colonial School District agreed to a complex financing deal committing a portion of future tax revenues to the farm's preservation. That is expected to generate an additional \$4 million for the Angus Tract eventually, said Steven L. Nelson, Montgomery County's deputy chief operating officer.

Yesterday, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources said that grants could be available "within weeks" for land acquisition.

"We recognize that this property is in an area that's really surrounded by development," said Christine Novak, "so it's important open space."

Meanwhile, the Whitmarsh Foundation is conducting its own fund drive, and the Montgomery County Lands Trust is looking for donors. So is the Media-based Natural Lands Trust, which currently owns 117 acres of Erdenheim Farm, bequeathed to it by former owner George H. Widener, Dixon's uncle.

Other portions of the farm are expected to come on the market. The estimated value of one particularly prized section called the Sheep Tract - 108 acres where Cheviot sheep graze - is \$16 million.

Another 100-plus-acre tract, boasting a horse barn and riding track and known as the Equestrian Center, is owned by Dixon's daughter, who has indicated no desire to develop or sell it, Moulton said.

Dixon's widow lives on a 23-acre parcel that adjoins the Natural Lands Trust property. She has plans to move, reportedly within six months, to a retirement community nearing completion on 100 acres nearby, a portion of which her husband had sold to the developer.

Her view from The Hill at Whitmarsh would be of Erdenheim Farm.

Erdenheim's History

Historical records trace the 450-acre Erdenheim Farm at Stenton Avenue and Flourtown Road in Whitmarsh Township back to the Lenni-Lenape (Delaware) Indians and to its first European owner, William Penn. Erdenheim was in his possession only briefly, from 1683 to 1685, when it was part of Penn's Manor of Springfield.

Since then, it has fallen into the hands of at least a dozen owners. President James Buchanan was said to have been a frequent visitor.

In 1912, the farm became the treasured estate of George Dunton Widener Jr., who lost his father and brother that year on the Titanic. For more than a half-century, he built a reputation for raising thoroughbred race horses, which shared its pastures with cattle and sheep.

His nephew, F. Eugene "Fitz" Dixon Jr., inherited most of the farm in 1971 after Widener died. Widener bequeathed 117 acres to the Natural Lands Trust, with the provision that Dixon retain full control of the land while he lived.

To acclaim from Whitmarsh residents, Dixon resisted numerous purchase offers for the farm. Upon his death last Aug. 2, the Whitmarsh Foundation was given a year to purchase 98 acres known as the Angus Tract.

Another 108 acres known as the Sheep Tract are not currently on the market. Also not for sale are about 100 acres, including horse stables and an exercise track, owned by Dixon's daughter, Ellin Dixon Miller.

Dixon's widow, Edith, lives on 23 acres.

SOURCE: The Whitmarsh Foundation and Lancaster Farming Magazine

Contact staff writer Diane Mastrull at 610-313-8095 or dmastrull@phillynews.com. Inquirer staff writer Stephan Salisbury contributed to this article.