

Thursday, March 22, 2007

## SAVING ERDENHEIM'S LAND

### Editorial | Preservation, a slice at a time

With less than five months to go to a preservation deadline, the Montgomery County commissioners have made a smart move by pledging \$4 million toward saving a 98-acre slice of Erdenheim Farm outside Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill.

Once home to philanthropist F. Eugene "Fitz" Dixon Jr., the farm's meadows, streams and cornfields are at greater risk of being lost to development after Dixon's death last summer.

Fortunately, there's a concerted effort to preserve as much of the pastoral farm - with 117 acres already under the protection of the Natural Lands Trust.

Facing an Aug. 2 deadline to purchase a second large tract along Flourtown Road in Whitemarsh Township, the county commissioners and preservation groups will need to scramble. What a terrible loss it would be if they missed the deadline and trustees for the Dixon estate decided to sell the land for development.

The commissioners view their allocation of open-space funds as a challenge grant. That is, they hope it will prime the pump for the private donations needed to complete the purchase: an additional \$10 million to close the deal between

Dixon heirs and the nonprofit Whitemarsh Foundation, created to preserve much of the farm.

Not surprisingly, the plan to save Erdenheim Farm is being called the open-space equivalent of saving Thomas Eakins' famous painting, *The Gross Clinic*. The question is whether preservation-minded donors in the region can match the arts community's enthusiasm for the Eakins work.

At far less cost than the \$37 million raised for the painting, saving the Dixon land ought to be well within reach. It's also a project that holds out an enormous public benefit for generations to come, particularly as areas of the farm are opened for hiking and similar recreational uses.

In Chester County, the just-announced decision of a generous land owner - philanthropist H.F. "Gerry" Lenfest - to donate 568 acres near Embreeville makes it look easy to preserve vast swaths of open space. The reality in most instances is that preservation efforts must rely on broad-based input from numerous donors. That's certainly the challenge in saving another piece of the Fitz Dixon's Erdenheim Farm.

It's a challenge worth meeting.

**Montco has ponied up \$4 million in seed money for the 98-acre parcel. More is needed.**