

Local

Enrollment open for ag land preservation

By KYLIE HAWN Staff Writer

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For area farmers who may be interested in preserving their farm lands for generations to come, the Huntingdon County Agricultural Land Preservation Board wants people to know that enrollment is open again for the program.

Celina Seftas, executive director of the Huntingdon County Conservation District, said this program, which is part of the state's program, has preserved 10 farms since its inception in 2001, saving 1,169 acres of farm lands in the county.

Approximately 591,819 acres have been preserved through the state's program.

She explained a little bit of how the program works.

"The farmer still owns the land and makes management decisions," she said. "But, the land can never be subdivided into residential or nonagricultural uses, so the farm has to be left open as farm land."

Seftas said the land preservation board looks at certain qualities of farm land from those who decide they wish to preserve their land.

"This program looks at different rankings, like soil productivity," she said. "The goal is to preserve the best soils in our county from direct development. Once that land becomes a housing development, that can never again be used for agricultural development. This looks at addressing food security for generations to come. We want to see the lands best used for agricultural lands in the county to stay this way."

Before anyone contacts the conservation district to get started, Seftas gave some recommendations for farmers.

"The starting process for anyone who's potentially interested would be to consult with their families, their attorney or their estate planner to see if the program fits them," she said. "These easement that are offered are in perpetuity.

"The next step is to apply for an easement," she added. "Once an application is received, it's ranked according to the quality of soils and the development potential for that location and how close they are to other easements or other agricultural security areas. The board then would begin the process of working through the rankings in numerical order to preserve those rankings."

Seftas said this process, once it starts for a farmer, can take one to three years to complete.

"This is due to paperwork and to allocate enough funding to complete the easement purchase," said Seftas.

Though farmers have to put down a deposit initially to pay for an appraisal, that deposit is returned once the process is complete.

"The funding for this comes through the state's agriculture land preservation, Act 13 funds, municipality contributions and the county's clean and green tax interest," said Seftas.

Open enrollment in the program will run through May 281. Applicants are encouraged to contact Seftas to learn more about the program by calling 627-1626 or emailing manager@huntingdonconservation.org.

Applications are available by request and on the conservation district website at www.huntingdoncd.org/agricultural-programs/agricultural-land-preservation.