

Holding down developments

By ANN MARIE AMES

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP — He admits his motives weren't purely altruistic.

Even so, Gary Sommers has made it so 600 acres of farmland in Clinton Township will stay farmland forever.

Sommers, 8829 E. County P, Clinton, will donate the right to develop his farmland to the Jefferson County Land Trust Network, putting it into a permanent conservation easement.

Sommers still will own the property. But when he sells it, the easement will stay with the deed, permanently preventing development.

The trust will oversee the property to make sure future owners follow the rules.

For now, the land will be farmed as normal, Sommers said.

"I don't see any change at all in day-to-day operation of the farm," Sommers said. "That's the way it should be. That's why you're doing it ... to preserve it."

Sommers acknowledged that a permanent easement could make his farmland harder to sell when he's ready.

"I did consider that," Sommers said. "I guess in the end, that wasn't the deciding factor. I guess it would be two things: the preservation of land for agricultural use and also a tax advantage."

The network works with property owners all around Wisconsin and offers a variety of programs to reward landowners for their donations. Owners can donate or sell the land itself or sell or donate the right to develop it, as Sommers did.

Farmers often are tempted to sell to developers, who often pay more for fields than other farmers do.

Someday, Rock County could provide a program that gives farmers an option when they want to sell. The county's land conservation committee is in preliminary discussion about whether a purchase of development rights program would work here.

A PDR program has been in effect in Dane County's town of Dunn for 10 years. The town helps bring together interested parties—such as land trusts, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources or Dane County—to pay a farmer for the right to develop the land.

The land is put in a permanent easement and still can be farmed.

To learn more

The Land Trust Network of Jefferson County will help landowners anywhere in Wisconsin protect their property from development.

If you want to learn more about easements, visit www.landtrustnetwork.org or contact the trust at LTN, P.O. Box 142, Watertown, WI 53094.

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