

La Prairie family donates easement

By ANN MARIE AMES

Tuesday, Dec. 30, 2008

Jean Kutz has taken steps to ensure that her Town of LaPrairie farmland on Lone Lane Road will never be developed.

LA PRAIRIE TOWNSHIP — No houses, apartment complexes or gas stations allowed. The only “construction” on this property will be nests built by indigo buntings.

La Prairie Township landowner Jean Kutz and her family have donated a conservation easement for their 168-acre parcel on Lone Lane to the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County.

The land still may be farmed, but the easement prevents future development on the property.

Kutz was inspired to call the network after she read about a 600-acre easement donation in Clinton Township earlier this year.

She hopes other Rock County farm families will look into the program and consider ways to keep farmland from being developed.

“Some of them are afraid to relinquish to a land trust,” Kutz said. “When I read all the literature, I saw you still have control over the farming. It will always be farmland. That’s important.”

The Kutz family rents the land they’ve farmed for 50 years to a producer who grows corn, soybeans and wheat. The fields must be farmed carefully and would not be well suited for development, Kutz said.

“We’re right up on the first ridge off the prairie,” Kutz said. “It’s limestone. It washes very readily.”

To prevent washouts, the rental contract includes a no-till clause, Kutz said. And grass waterways help slow water as it drains from the hills.

Kutz didn’t have to spend any money to donate the easement, and the donation makes for a nice tax break for the family.

But it’s not about the money, she said.

She likes the row of maple trees along Lone Lane. The trees came to Wisconsin from Missouri in an ox cart and are some of the oldest in the state, she said. They make a good home for songbirds such as cardinals and goldfinches.

You can almost set your watch to the pair of indigo buntings that nest in the grapevines in an old wire fence along the tree line, Kutz said.

Kutz and her daughter have joked that Janesville could someday spread out as far as their farm. Now it will have to spread around, Kutz said.

“I was looking at the land and what was best for it,” Kutz said. “We’re only caregivers here. I hope some of these farmers will read this and think, at least, ‘I want to look into it and maybe that will work for me.’”

County keeps talking about farmland preservation

A conservation easement is forever.

So Rock County doesn’t want to rush into things.

An ad hoc committee is pushing forward its discussion on options for a formal program that would limit or prevent development in some parts of the county.

Meanwhile, a nonprofit group, the Land Trust Network of Jefferson County, has tucked more than 820 Rock County acres into conservation easements in the last year. Rock County has no formal means to do so.

In February, the ad hoc group will host an educational session with the Rock County Agri-business Council and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

Rock County Board Supervisor Alan Sweeney, a member of the county conservation committee and the ad hoc committee, said it’s important Rock County move quickly but not recklessly.

“We feel we basically have one chance,” Sweeney said. “If this issue is defeated, I don’t think you and I would see it come up again. If it did, unfortunately, it would come up after it’s too late. The sense is not of urgency. It’s a sense of being complete.”

The subject of development rights for months has been a discussion item on the agenda of the agriculture and conservation committee. The discussion got a second wind when the Janesville Sustainability Committee brought farmland preservation to the forefront of the city’s Smart Growth plan conversation.

Sweeney wants to see a program in place that would protect the county’s farmland, but he doesn’t know what it would look like.

A program could make use of a combination of tools, including transfers, sales or donations of development rights, Sweeney said.

In addition to preserving farmland, preventing scattered development could preserve the county’s aesthetics and drinking water, Sweeney said.

Published at: <http://www.GazetteXtra.com/news/2008/dec/30/la-prairie-family-donates-easement/>