

Horse farm is county's 100th to be preserved

FARMS TOTALING 9,486 ACRES LAUDED AT CEREMONY

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BY [ANDREA ALEXANDER](#)
FREEHOLD BUREAU



Michele and Peter Blaso left the congestion of Bergen County more than seven years ago to buy a farm and raise horses in Upper Freehold.

As time passed, rising taxes and encroaching development made the Blaso family think about moving out of state to a more rural area. They put their 21-acre farm up for sale last year and searched for a buyer who would keep it pristine.

But the only offers the family received were from developers with plans to subdivide their land and build several houses in conjunction with a project planned across the street.

"It broke our hearts to see something this beautiful be put in another housing development," Michele Blaso said.

Instead of following the trend and selling to a builder, Blaso contacted the county and asked for help to save her property. Earlier this month, the Blasos' land became the 100th farm to be preserved in Monmouth County.

On Tuesday, Charles M. Kuperus, secretary of the state Department of Agriculture, visited the Blaso farm, where the family raises standardbred horses, to celebrate the milestone with county and local officials. The broodmare So Bright watched in the background as officials hailed the county's latest benchmark.

"This is a very special day," Kuperus said. "It sets the stage for the future of our Garden State."

The property will remain the Blasos', and on the tax rolls, but has a deed restriction that requires the land be used for agriculture, said Matthew Shipkey, Monmouth County's farmland preservation program coordinator.

The development rights were bought for \$454,080 through a partnership between the state,

county and township. The state contributed \$272,448, the county gave \$108,979 and the township contributed \$72,652.

The county's Farmland Preservation Program is overseen by the Monmouth County Agriculture Development Board and administered by staff of the Monmouth County Planning Board. The Monmouth Conservation Foundation also helped broker the deal to save the property.

"I am very proud to be here," said foundation president Judith Stanley Coleman. "We have a lot more work to do. . . . This is the 100th farm. I wish it had five more zeros after it."

Monmouth joins four other counties in the state to preserve 100 farms. The others are Hunterdon, Salem, Warren and Burlington, said Susan Craft, executive director of the State Agriculture Development Committee.

The county is working on preserving more farms than ever before, Shipkey said. County officials are working to preserve more than 70 farms totaling 3,000 acres, he said.

That would add to the 9,486 acres of farmland Freeholder Lillian G. Burry said have been preserved in Monmouth County to date.

"We recognize that the window of opportunity to preserve a significant portion of our remaining farmland is limited," Burry said. "We will continue to focus on increasing our preservation efforts."

The state is also working on efforts to encourage preservation, Craft said. The state plans to streamline the process to shave about six months off the time it takes to preserve land. The state agriculture board is also considering new protections for the equine industry, Craft said.

The Blaso family was proud of its role in the achievement.

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