

Robbinsville to acquire property

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ROBBINSVILLE -- With support coming from both sides of the township's border, the Robbinsville Council has approved a \$1.6 million bond ordinance to help acquire the 52-acre Van Cleef farm property at Robbinsville-Allentown Road and Circle Drive.

Township Administrator Mary Caffrey said the vote last Thursday was unanimous, and followed appeals by Allentown residents, as the Van Cleef parcel adjoins an existing open space tract near the town and will form a contiguous buffer against future development.

"There were several speakers from Allentown who were very supportive," Caffrey said.

The Van Cleef tract is entirely in Robbinsville and was one of three large open space parcels the township has been anxious to acquire to build up its preserved expanses of greenery.

"I truly appreciate that Robbinsville and the council have come forth to conserve this property," Allentown resident Wayne Smith said. "To maintain a buffer between towns, first of all, is extraordinary; to maintain a greenbelt is outstanding."

The Van Cleef property will be purchased for a total of more than \$2.2 million at roughly \$42,300 per acre. Mercer County and other entities would help chip in on the land purchase.

In addition to the \$1.6 million in bond money, the township is expecting \$846,000 in grant money from the state Department of Environmental Protection's Green Acres program.

Robbinsville currently owns 500 acres of open space, according to township zoning officials, while Mercer County owns 250 acres.

The dilapidated Van Cleef property was one of three properties in Robbinsville going through condemnation proceedings. The township has hopes that the condemnations would help spur negotiations so the properties could be acquired for open space. However, in the case of the Van Cleef tract, the owner was cooperative and the purchase has moved forward, Caffrey said. "The land owner was very willing to work with us."

Upper Freehold and Allentown have already purchased and preserved land nearby the Van Cleef tract.

"I've worked very hard on many of the commissions and committees to keep this area free of development," Smith added. "I'm elated."

The farm estate is named after owner Neil Van Cleef, an engineer from Belle Mead in Somerset County.

Staff Writer Tony Hagen contributed to this report.