Princeton, NJ

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**Princeton Reaches Agreement to Protect 153-acre Tract for Conservation**

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The Municipality of Princeton has reached agreement with Bryce Thompson and Lanwin Development, LLC, to acquire the largest remaining tract of undeveloped land in Princeton for conservation and passive recreational use. The agreement in principle, subject to due diligence, would result in the preservation of a 153-acre parcel, with frontage on Province Line and Cherry Valley Roads, located in the northwest corner of Princeton. A development consisting of large homes had been approved and would have resulted in significant deforestation – the loss of approximately 4,000 trees that form part of an old-growth forest on this site. The $8.775 million cost of acquisition will be paid for with $3 million in private donations, including a leadership gift from the George H. and Estelle M. Sands Foundation, grants to the municipality and non-profit partners from the State Green Acres program and Mercer County’s Open Space program, and monies from the municipal open space tax trust fund.

The agreement is the product of an active collaboration between the Municipality and various area non-profits to secure necessary funding. A group spearheaded by Council members Mia Sacks and Eve Niedergang, along with Municipal Administrator, Bernie Hvozdovic, has been meeting weekly with representatives from The Watershed Institute, a regional conservation organization with headquarters in Pennington; the Friends of Princeton Open Space (FOPOS) and the Ridgeview Conservancy, both based in Princeton; and the statewide land trust, New Jersey Conservation Foundation. The acquisition is part of an initiative called “Princeton’s Emerald Necklace” that aims to connect open spaces throughout the town and provide greater access to a more diverse group of community members. The Lanwin tract has long been listed in Princeton’s Master Plan as a property that should be acquired because of its environmental significance.

According to Sacks and Niedergang, “The acquisition represents a model public-private partnership to support the goals of Princeton’s Climate Action Plan. We are deeply grateful to the County, and to our community partners, for stepping up so quickly to ensure the future sustainability of our town. We are excited to preserve an important ecological resource in a way that is consistent with the smart growth principles guiding our development decisions.”

Mercer County Executive Brian M. Hughes, whose support was instrumental in securing generous county funding, commented, “The County is pleased to participate in the purchase of this environmentally sensitive property along the Princeton Ridge, ensuring its permanent preservation, a primary goal of the county’s open space trust fund."

Princeton Municipal Administrator Bernie Hvozdovic thanked the Thompson Family “for making the conscious choice to work with the town and our open space partners to ensure that this unique parcel is protected.” Hvozdovic also expressed appreciation to Wade Martin and to D & R Greenway, “who were instrumental in bringing the parties together.”

The Watershed Institute, which is accepting private donations secured by the project partners, sees protecting this land as part of its core mission: “This beautiful and important tract of undeveloped land will be an outstanding, permanent natural asset for the town of Princeton and a critical link in a regional complex of preserved open space,” said Jim Waltman, executive director of The Watershed Institute. “Preserving this property will have many benefits, from protecting fragile wetlands and streams, to conserving habitats for imperiled wildlife, to sustaining mature forests that help soak up precipitation and mitigate flooding.”

Dr. Patricia Shanley, an internationally renowned forest ecologist and Ridgeview Conservancy board member, was an early promoter of the Emerald Necklace initiative. “This property is an important local reservoir for biodiversity and the trees store an estimated 340 megatons of carbon annually. I look forward to using the new park as an ‘outdoor classroom’ with my students.”

Wendy Mager, President of Friends of Princeton Open Space, stressed that “the more we learn about forests, the more we realize that fragmenting them even for ‘limited development’ is extremely harmful to populations of birds and animals. On the other hand, as we’ve seen during the pandemic, access to open space is essential for the health and wellbeing of our community.”

Technical support for the Lanwin acquisition is being provided by the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, which has protected 130,000 acres of conservation and farmland throughout New Jersey. “This tract offers so much more than its obvious beauty," Michele Byers, Executive Director of NJCF points out. "It provides a home to endangered and threatened species like the Red shouldered hawk and Barred owl, connects vital habitats, and has the potential to link neighboring communities through walking and biking trails. The benefits to Princeton and Mercer County are irreplaceable and New Jersey Conservation Foundation is thrilled to support this amazing preservation partnership."

An ordinance will be introduced at the Princeton Council meeting on Monday, October 25th, to enable the town to take financing steps necessary so that the full purchase price is available at closing. All municipal costs, including debt service, related to the acquisition, will be covered by Princeton’s open space tax trust fund, a dedicated fund approved by Princeton’s voters on two separate occasions.