

How a Bergen Community Preserved a Bit of Wetlands

By SHAYNA PANZER

THE Celery Farm is 60 acres of unspoiled wetland astride Allendale Brook in this suburban Bergen County community.

The town, according to knowledgeable local officials, probably will be completely developed within five years; however, the Celery Farm will remain wild, thanks to a happy combination of efforts by a farsighted Mayor, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation and the state's Green Acres program.

A freshwater marsh adorned with phragmites and cattails and edged with trees, the farm is a home or stopping-off point for nearly 200 species of birds, including the bald eagle and peregrine falcon, as well as geese, ducks, swans, herons and pheasants. Foxes, raccoons, opossum and deer are among the resident mammals.

But the farm is more than a wildlife refuge. In an area often plagued with floods, it acts as a giant sponge, retaining water from the Allendale Brook as it soaks into the underlying sands and gravels and releasing it very slowly downstream.

As the towns nearby become increasingly developed, and other natural floodwater storage areas are built upon or paved, preservation of this marsh becomes ever more vital to the protection of people and property downstream.

"If it weren't for Mayor Ed Fitzpatrick, the preserve would never have got off the ground and would have faltered along the way," said Stiles Thomas, an Allendale resident who was born across the street from the property when it was a working farm and who often goes there to watch birds.

And Mayor Fitzpatrick says, in turn: "Nothing would have been accomplished without the New Jersey Conservation Foundation."

The foundation, a private nonprofit corporation supported by its members, specializes in acquiring ecologically valuable land for preservation.

"Darryl Caputo of the foundation was an outstanding help," the Mayor said. "The foundation has a lot of credibility with the Green Acres program — the extra teeth and knowledge of the processing of applications. We would not be in the condition we are now in without the foundation."

W. Peter McBride, whose family sold the property, also said that Mr. Caputo "deserves most of the credit."

"We're in the real-estate business



The New York Times / Jeffrey D. Smith

A frozen area of the Celery Farm, a freshwater marsh in Allendale that is to remain wild

and, ideally, we would have liked to develop part of the Celery Farm," Mr. McBride observed. "But Darryl did the legwork and put together a package that we're reasonably happy with, and it's good for the town."

The price was \$170,000. Allendale will pay \$80,000, and the rest, it is hoped,

will come from a matching-funds grant from Green Acres. To protect the stream's corridor, a four-acre conservation easement extending along the banks of Allendale Brook has been purchased from Grassy Forks Fisheries Inc. for an additional \$4,000.

The story began in 1964, when David

Moore, now head of the Conservation Foundation, was chief of the state's Division of Natural Areas.

"Even back then, the Celery Farm was being considered for designation as a natural area of statewide significance," Mr. Moore said. However, there was little interest on the part of

either sellers or buyers, and no urgency for acquisition.

"From time to time, I'd hear about plans for riding paths, houses, this and that for the Celery Farm," said Mayor Fitzpatrick. "Besides flooding, we are concerned about water supply. We've investigated the possibility of getting

potable water from wells around the perimeter, and we've been told we can."

As development proceeded in the area, pressure for acquisition of the Celery Farm grew. The town approved a Master Plan in 1976 that designated the site as one to be acquired for public open space and conservation. The Mayor, thinking it might be eligible for a matching-funds Green Acres grant, spoke to Mr. Thomas, and, on his advice, went to see Mr. Moore at the Conservation Foundation.

Acting on the request of public agencies, the foundation buys, or receives through donations, land threatened by development. It then passes such acreage on to public ownership without profit.

Its first acquisition was the Great Swamp. It bought it when that area was being considered as the site for a jet-port. Eventually, the Great Swamp was acquired by the Federal Government. Recently the foundation has been active in buying and holding parcels of Pine Barrens land that the state will eventually buy.

Such is the foundation's reputation for integrity that it has borrowing power of up to 90 percent through cooperating banks. The money it receives from government agencies on the eventual sale of the properties it holds is recycled through its revolving land fund to make future purchases.

The Conservation Foundation agreed to buy the Celery Farm and hold it while Allendale went through the lengthy and tortuous process of applying for a Green Acres grant.

"Allendale gave us a 'letter of intent' — a morally binding pledge to acquire the land from us," Mr. Moore explained.

"Many times, we are able to buy land at a reasonable price by working with the seller to maximize his tax benefits. We pass on the savings of the lower price to the town because we operate on a cost-plus basis. If we feel the community can do it itself, we encourage them to.

"But in the case of the Celery Farm, we were needed because the owners wanted to move ahead fast. So we were able to make a deal."

Mayor Fitzpatrick has no plans for the Celery Farm.

"The idea is not to build anything on it," he said. "We're not trying to keep people out, and accessibility is fairly good. But this is not a park, it's a natural area. Our kids will be able to come here and see it as it always was." ■