

Land trust considers options for Ives Farm in Cheshire



Winter day at Ives Farm along Cheshire Street.

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By Peter Prohaska, Special to the Record-Journal



CHESHIRE — When the state Department of Agriculture offered to purchase the development rights to Cheshire Land Trust's Ives Farm property earlier this year, it seemed like a clear win-win.

The land trust would receive money from the Farmland Preservation Program and the state would keep some of the nation's best soils for agricultural purposes in production. With the purchase process moving forward, the the land trust has been exploring a wide range of agricultural and educational possibilities for the property.

As part of the planning, the public is invited to attend a presentation about the project's Master Plan on Thursday, Nov. 30, to be held at the Cheshire Public Library at 7 p.m.

Land Trust President Bill Stanley explained how a team was assembled to help bring the vision of Mrs. Ives, the longtime owner of the property, into 2023 and beyond.

One key resource has been Will O'Meara, a farmer based in the town of Morris and an advocate for increasing access to farming opportunities in the state.

O'Meara works as the Connecticut Field Agent for Land For Good, a non-profit that focuses on providing "caring support and expert guidance to help farmers, landowners and communities navigate the complex challenges of land access, tenure, and transfer" per its website. That can mean connecting landowners, sometimes with only a few acres of farmland, with farmers, in order to keep land working.

O'Meara introduced the land trust to Caitlin Taylor, a critic at Yale's School of Architecture, who has taught courses such as "The Architecture of the Food System" and "Mixed-Use Regeneration: Old Oak London" to architecture students. She is also personally involved in farming through Four Root Farm in East Haddam.

As it turned out, Taylor was able to suggest one of her master's degree students, Zach Felder, to begin a thorough study on the prospects for the Ives Farm project.

Felder is now an architectural designer at Connecticut-based Centerbrook Architects. The firm, founded in 1975, has a wide-ranging portfolio of work that spans sacred spaces such as churches and synagogues to educational buildings and commercial venues. Per his firm's bio, Felder's interests include traditional craft such as Japanese furniture, as well as rural architecture.

Stanley says the master plan "was sort of a collaboration between Zach and Caitlin – with Caitlin in the role of resource and mentor – Zach appears to have done most of the heavy lifting on the project – and has done a wonderful job."

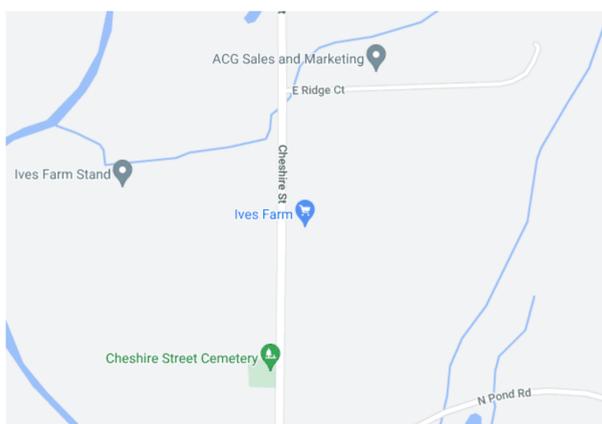
The document provides an overview of the Ives Farm property that includes background on Cheshire, its open spaces, demographics, geography, as well as a look at comparable agricultural properties in the town and vicinity.

A "vision" statement summarizes the idea for Ives Farm:

"As a productive, active, and innovative working farm, Ives Farm will produce both crops and a greater awareness of agricultural processes for community members. Through agricultural, educational, workforce, recreational, and retail opportunities, the farm will be integral to promoting local vitality, healthy lifestyles, and ecological sustainability."

As for the site itself, there are existing buildings, including a farmhouse, but only the barn — reconstructed by the land trust in 2013 — is in excellent condition. Other facilities are in need of work, though usable in their current states.

As the plan notes, Ives Farm is one of a few farms — though growing in number — in the country to be directly owned by a land trust. It's an arrangement that gives the property a special kind of flexibility.



"This uniqueness is something for Ives Farm to celebrate, articulate, and leverage in planning for the future. While most farms have become mechanized sites of production detached from everyday life, Ives Farm will be directly integrated into the lives of community members, a place of working, growing, harvesting, purchasing, learning, meeting, and recreating," per the plan.

"The preferred operating model for Ives Farm will involve a for-profit, 'mission-aligned' tenant farmer who lives in the farmhouse. Ideally, this farmer will manage and grow on all 57 agricultural acres, while also participating in educational and community-based components, which will be coordinated by the Cheshire Land Trust," suggests the plan, which makes allowance for other options as well.

As for those "educational components," possible partners include Cheshire Public Schools as well as others in the area. Stanley mentions the possibility of adding greenhouses similar to one recently installed at Humiston High School, which could be used for science projects for advanced students.

"We are also actively talking with Growers Inc. in New Haven — an organization that helps developmentally challenged adults by teaching them horticultural skills. They currently are based out of Edgerton Park but would love to have a satellite facility at Ives Farm. Some of the new buildings would make that possible — and we would really love to make that happen," said Stanley.

The plan acknowledges funding challenges associated with modernizing the buildings, but offers a wide range of state and federal grant opportunities. Of course, a working farm can also provide its own varied revenue streams, and part of the plan discusses those models as well.

"The importance of local agriculture is becoming increasingly apparent, and Ives Farm can play an important role in filling that need," stated Stanley. "We believe that with the proposed improvements at the farm, and the potential for a broad spectrum of educational opportunities and community involvement, Ives Farm will be a vital part of life in Cheshire for decades to come."

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