

Harford County purchases nearly 350-acre Belle Vue Farm, which it plans to turn into public park

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By Aegis staff

The Aegis |

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Harford County has purchased a 347-acre farm, which includes one mile of Chesapeake Bay coastline, for \$6.27 million, which it will put into preservation and turn into a public park.

Belle Vue Farm, which has been privately owned and operated by the same family since before the American Revolution, is contiguous with public parkland at Swan Harbor Farm to the north and Tydings Park to the south. Collectively, the three parks will make up 1,250 acres of preserved land on the Oakington Peninsula, including 2.5 miles of coastline.

Harford County Executive Barry Glassman called the purchase one of the county's "most significant land purchases in three decades."

The county worked with the nonprofit Harford Land Trust, which has been trying to preserve Belle Vue Farm since the 1990s, as well as Aberdeen Proving Ground through its Army Compatible Use Buffer program, to purchase the land.

According to the Harford Land Trust, Belle Vue is one of several properties in Harford County continuously owned and farmed by the same family since well before the revolution. Garrett Rutton was granted the land in 1661, and his direct descendant Mary Garrettson later married Dr. Elijah Davis who took title to the land in 1794.

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Efforts to purchase the property began in 1994, around the time that the county bought Swan Harbor Farm from Johns Hopkins University. The land was transferred to Griffith Davis — the eldest son of E. Hollister Davis — after he bought it from his siblings. He lived there until his death in 2017.

Representatives from the Harford Land Trust began meeting with Griffith Davis's widow, Victoria "Vicky" Davis, to talk about purchasing and preserving the land in 2017. The family was open to the idea of selling the land, but decided to get a realtor to market the property and understand their options.

Numerous developers expressed interest in building an industrial park, business complex or high-end residential community on the site, according to the Land Trust.

Meanwhile, the Harford Land Trust contacted Aberdeen Proving Ground and expressed interest in purchasing the land as part of the Army Compatible Use Buffer program. The ACUB is a partnership between the Land Trust and APG meant to put a buffer between developments and the installation, which sometimes conducts loud training exercises.

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Vicky Davis ultimately decided to sell the property to Harford County, which was acting with the land trust and APG, in April to ensure its permanent preservation. The sale was officially completed Thursday.

Glassman said the family was as much to thank as the state, which provided grants through its Program Open Space to fund the purchase. Being waterfront property, the previous owners could have sold it to a private developer, he said, and perhaps made more money.

Executive Director of the Harford Land Trust Kristin Kirkwood said the property was worth nearly \$3 million in 1994.

"We have been working on this since the '90s," she said.



Kristin Kirkwood, right, Executive Director of Harford Land Trust and fellow Harford Land Trust member Ben Lloyd talk about a few of the unique aspects of the Belle Vue Farm, a 347-acre waterfront property that will become a Harford County park which includes one mile of Chesapeake Bay coastline. Harford County Executive Barry Glassman was joined by Kirkwood, Lloyd and a host of other officials to officially close the county's purchase of the land Thursday. (Matt Button / The Aegis/Baltimore Sun Media)

Belle Vue Farm is one of the few remaining active farms within the county's allocated growth area, otherwise called the development envelope of Harford County. About 200 acres of the property are currently cultivated for corn and soybeans, according to the Land Trust.

The county will continue to lease the cropland, as it does with Swan Harbor Farm.

The county is still working to determine the possible public recreational and educational opportunities for the land, and will continue environmental and historic research to determine the "most compatible uses" suitable for the property, according to the Land Trust.

Possibilities include an extension of the Lower Susquehanna Heritage Greenway from Havre de Grace south to Oakington Peninsula. The property might allow for active uses such as hiking and biking; access to the Bay for scenic views or recreational fishing; and picnic or tent camping areas. Glassman said that the county would like to see some kayaking opportunities as well.

“Even when budgets are tight and so forth, trails are not that expensive to build,” he said. “That is what we would like to see, but also this site is also a great bird habitat.”

Whatever the master plan turns out to be, Glassman said it would be “fairly passive” to preserve the site for education and light recreational purposes.

The property’s unique ecosystems could also provide a living classroom for visitors to learn about tidal and nontidal wetlands. On-farm demonstrations highlighting the area’s agrarian heritage and historical interpretation detailing the indigenous people of the upper Chesapeake and lower Susquehanna are also possibilities.

Director of Harford County’s Parks and Recreation Kathy Burley said the acquisition of Belle Vue lets the county be a bit more ambitious in its master plan for the entire 1,250-acre area, which has yet to be formed. The county’s parks and recreation department will handle management and planning on the property.

“Our first step is getting that master plan,” she said after the announcement. “We want to make sure we are doing this in a thoughtful way.”

The site does not yet have facilities like bathrooms, so it is best for the public to stay away for now, Burley said.

In accordance of the wishes of the Davis family, the property will continue to be called by its historic name of Belle Vue Farm.

One of Belle Vue’s American holly trees is listed as a Maryland’s Big Tree, a program sponsored by the state Department of Natural Resources Forest Service. The property also contains a boxwood that the Davis family estimates to be more than 300 years old.

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