

Letter to the Editor: Will Schultheis Farm Become a Private Estate At the Expense of Taxpayers?

Did you know at the January 19, 2010 Clifton City Council Meeting the Council agreed to once again re-bid the lease agreement for Schultheis Farm with a very significant change? The City of Clifton will reimburse the lessee for the estimated \$7,500 to \$8,000 in taxes which in the prior bid was stated to be the responsibility of the tenant. Let me explain.

As you may know, the City of Clifton purchased Schultheis Farm in 2005 for \$4.25 million. The City has received a \$1.9 million from Green Acres Funds and \$.5 million from the Passaic County Open Space Preservation Fund. In applications to both entities the City stated the possible use of the farm would be community gardening. The City Council created the Schultheis Farm Committee which consisted of Gloria Kolodziej, Joe Cupoli and Peter Eagler with the aim of the committee to find a suitable use of this farm. Approximately two years ago, the Committee suggested building a fire house on the Farm to store the emergency fire equipment. Thankfully, this was not done due to the outrage of Clifton residents and due-diligence of Green Acres and the County Open Space Fund who declared this was not possible under their grant programs and if the City did construct this fire house the City would be required to return the grant money. The committee then decided to seek bids to lease the farm and farmhouse to someone to would farm the land. There were no bidders in the first round of bidding. As reported in an October 28, 2009 Herald News article there were two people that showed interest in leasing this property one was a company called Garden State Property Maintenance Inc (owned by Robert Konowich) and the Passaic County Agricultural Extension Service who would develop the farm as a community garden with the help their master gardeners. The article stated Mr. Konowich was a hydrangea grower and wanted to grow hydrangea shrubs for sale at the farm. However, it is my understanding Garden State Property Maintenance did not bid in this round of bidding.

In December 2009, the City placed notice to potential bidders for a “5 year lease with options for 4 additional 5 year terms” (in other words this would be a 25 year lease). The monthly rental fee for the first year would be \$2,500 but for the first 18 months the City would rebate to the tenant up to \$1,000 per month in exchange for repair work that the tenant would do. Additionally, the bid agreement stipulated that “all taxes shall be the responsibility of the tenant with taxes estimated at \$7,500 to \$8,000 for 2010 and after two years of active cultivation, the tenant could apply for farmland assessment and if successful the land assessment would be reduced accordingly. However taxes for the improvements and the reduced land assessment shall continue to be the responsibility of the tenant.” Lastly, the bid stated “consistent with Green Acres requirements, limited public access to the farm shall be provided by the successful bidder.”

It is my understanding that the only bidder was Garden State Property Maintenance but the bid was rejected since Garden State Property Maintenance stated that they would NOT agree to pay the taxes of \$7,500 to \$8,000 on the property. It is also my understanding that after this bid was rejected, the Schultheis Farm Committee did NOT hold any meeting to discuss the next possible course of action. Yet, at the Jan 19, 2010 City Council Meeting agenda item #A14 was for the Council to vote to reduce the bid and provide tax abatement to the next round of bidding.

Unfortunately, this entire process has created much doubt in my mind and left me with many, many unanswered questions (you may remember back in November I spoke at Council meeting before the Dec re-bid and tried to warn the Council that this property could become a private estate of this tenant at the expense of the Clifton taxpayers). I must now also ask why the Council is acting in such an obvious way to tailor fit this lease to Garden State Property Maintenance. If successful, this bidder for the next 25 years will have this property as its private estate with only “limited public access to the farm”. Does this sound like it would be consistent with the NJ Green Acres Program or the Passaic County Open Space Preservation Fund? Exactly who is Garden State Property Maintenance?

Here’s what I found out, so I’ll leave up to you to figure out what is going on. From the Herald News article, I was able to Google Garden State Property Maintenance (www.gspmaintenance.com). Their website clearly states their business as “exterior property maintenance for large and small property management companies” showing a list of services that include “sweeper service, snow plowing, line striping, masonry walls, sidewalks, Belgium block curbs, retaining wall systems, tree removal and stump removal, pressure washing, demolition (including emergency demolition), salting, seal coating, painting and roll off services”. Back in November, their website also included the following contact information (which has since been removed) – “office phone (973)812-2816; fax (973)785-4244; gardenstatepm@aol.com; Robert Konowich President; Nannette Irizarry Office and account manager; Vita Konowich Sales”. Back in November, I attempted to call this phone number and left several messages for them to return my calls which they never did. Recently, a friend did also try to call them and their call was returned and Ms. Konowich stated that their only business was property maintenance.

Here’s what Green Acres told me. The NJ Green Acres Program is very specific does require the following: first, the City of Clifton would have to be sufficiently compensated if they rent this property. Second, public access to the property is required – not limited public access as the bid stated. Third, leasing this property out to a farmer for a period of 25 years is not an option. Green Acres would only allow the lease to be for a maximum of 5 years. Green Acres allows this for this period to allow cities to develop a plan for a park or passive open area like a community garden.

I also called the Hydrangea Society of America which I understand from several hydrangea growers is the leading nationwide organization for hydrangea growers. They had no record of Robert Konowich or Garden State Property Maintenance as being members of this organization.

What happened to the idea of community gardening? The American Community Gardening Association of America states the benefits of community gardens as: improving the quality of life for people in the garden; provides a catalyst for neighborhood and community development; stimulates social interaction; encourages self-reliance, beautifies neighborhoods, produces nutritious food, reduces family food budgets, conserves resources, creates opportunity for recreation, exercise, therapy, and education, reduces crime, preserves green space and provides opportunities for intergenerational and cross-cultural connections.

As a Clifton taxpayer, I will not fund a private entity's for profit business on this precious land which we call Schulteis Farm! This should be the peoples' farm not some private estate with no trespassing signs posted!

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