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Partnership preserves Middletown's Coe estate

25-acre property will become parkland, center for autistic adults
BY NICOLE ANTONUCCI
 Staff Writer



The Coe estate on Sleepy Hollow Road will become Middletown parkland, with a portion of the 25-acre property to be used as a learning center for individuals with autism.
ERIC SUCAR staff

A bucolic 25-acre estate in Middletown will be preserved as open space and a learning center for adults with autism, the township and partners in the acquisition announced on Aug. 18. The Coe estate tucked away on Sleepy Hollow Road has been acquired through a partnership of Impact OASIS, Middletown Township, the Monmouth Conservation Foundation and the NY/NJ Baykeeper.

"We are so thrilled to have this partnership," Pamela Brightbill, deputy mayor of Middletown, said at the Coe property on Aug. 18. "It's a beautiful piece of property to add to our parks."

The circa-1871 estate was purchased for \$2.9 million, with Impact OASIS contributing \$1 million raised through donations and Middletown contributing \$900,000. The remainder of the funding came through \$1 million in state Green Acres funds, of which \$650,000 was allocated to the township, \$100,000 to the Monmouth Conservation

Foundation, and \$250,000 to the NY/NJ Baykeeper.

"The Green Acres funds were essential to this project," Adele Keller, executive director of the Monmouth Conservation Foundation, said at the celebration.

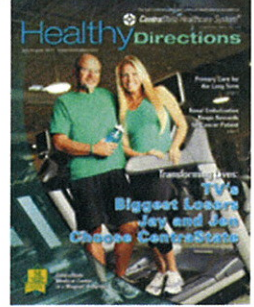
Of the 25 acres, 18 acres are a mix of wetlands and forested natural areas.

"This acquisition will result in over 18 acres of woodland and wetlands along the McClees Creek corridor being preserved in its natural state," Debbie Mans, executive director of Baykeeper, said.

Impact OASIS is a nonprofit formed to acquire properties for sustainable local farm centers used to provide education, recreation, work and housing for autistic individuals. The nonprofit plans to transform a portion of the 25 acres into a Transitional Residential/Adult Independent Learning (TRAIL) Center.

Parents of children with autism who attended the press conference announcing the acquisition noted that the incidence of autism continues to rise and they struggle to find available resources that will teach the necessary skills their children will need after high school.

"The main problem is more children are being diagnosed every year and no one is meeting these needs," Marta Petrocelli, of Middletown, said.



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Through the partnership, OASIS was able to secure the Coe property and on Aug 18 celebrated its closing on the property.

"It is our highest aspiration to have centers such as this one open nationwide," Mai Cleary, president of Impact OASIS, said.

According to the partnership agreement, the township will retain ownership of the 18 acres of open space, which will be a park and will be used for passive recreation with walking paths and sitting areas.

OASIS will own the large home and the 7 surrounding acres, which will be used for a farm/educational center.

According to Cleary, the center will house eight students while another eight students will attend the center during the day .

The program will focus around a farmlike environment that includes a daily routine.

"Autistic children like a set routine that they can follow continuously," Cleary said.

The farm setting will include long, scheduled days with breaks in between and lots of activity and outdoor work.

"Children with autism have a lot of energy and have trouble sleeping," Cleary said. "This environment will help them with these issues."

Skill building will include daily living skills such as grooming and preparation; healthy eating and living choices; housekeeping skills; self-awareness and advocacy strengthening; money management, and other skills.

The idea for the center resulted from discussions with parents of autistic children. Using her own son as inspiration, Cleary began to do some research and talked to various government agencies and officials who could offer help.

"I looked at my son and thought about what I wanted for him," Cleary said. "The closest centers such the one we are trying to do are in New York or Pennsylvania."

It's important to set up locally so parents can be nearby and can be a part of their learning, she said.

"It gives everyone a sense of belonging and it gives the kids a sense of purpose," said Barbara D'Augusta, a board member of OASIS and parent of a 22-year-old autistic child.

D'Augusta and other parents of autistic children who were at the celebration said the biggest challenge their children face is what they can do after high school.

"Young adults like to keep a strict routine and keep busy, but there are no activities for them," said Sue Koenigsberg, parent of a 22-year-old.

Trying to find a job is difficult because employers are hesitant to hire young adults with autism, not realizing that they are dependable and that once they start a task, they don't stop until it's completed, she said.

"It's about giving them a chance," Koenigsberg said.

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