

S. Lebanon farms preserved

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The Lebanon County Agricultural Preservation Board is nearing completion of deals to preserve two farms in South Lebanon Township that will bring the amount of preserved farmland in Lebanon County to more than 13,000 acres — the most of any Fifth Class County in the state.

Right-to-be-heard hearings were held at last week's county commissioners meeting on a nearly 40-acre farm owned by Steve and Bonnie Wenger and a 24.5-acre farm owned by Steve Wenger's parents, Glenn and Jean Wenger. No one opposed the proposal to purchase the development rights on either farm.

Because of its rich soil and commercially desirable location near Route 419 and State Drive, the conservation easement value of Steve and Bonnie Wenger's farm was placed at \$3,950 per acre, said Mark Chegwiddden, agricultural resource coordinator for the Lebanon County Conservation District. The Wengers were offered \$2,500 per acre, the maximum amount the preservation pays for land easements.

The total purchase cost of the land easement is \$100,722. The county will cover \$49,787, while \$49,788 will come from grant money obtained from the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said Chegwiddden. The state will pay for \$1,147 in incidental costs.

Glenn and Jean Wenger's land, which is off Rexmont Road, was appraised at an easement value of \$1,600, and that is the amount they were offered, said Chegwiddden. The total purchase cost of their

land is \$39,860 and will also be split almost equally between the county (\$19,712) and the USDA (\$19,600). The state will kick in \$548.

When the purchases are finalized, the county will have 13,018 acres of prime farmland that cannot be developed for residential or commercial purposes but can continue to be used agriculturally.

Negotiations are under way with 28 farm owners to preserve another 2,759 acres, Chegwiddden told the commissioners.

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