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Lansing's Kingdom Farm sells, averting development concerns

By: Brian Crandall | March 13, 2015

Lansing, N.Y. — Lansing and Tompkins County residents concerned about suburban sprawl can cross one potential problem off their list. Lansing's Kingdom Farm property has been sold to a Cayuga County dairy farmer.

The Kingdom Farm property is a 528.1 acre parcel bordering Buck Road, Route 34/Auburn Road, and Peruville Road in Lansing town. The sale was completed Tuesday for a price of \$2.8 million, according to Tompkins County records, or about \$5,300/acre.

The Kingdom Farm property has been a source of interest and concern for Lansing residents. The property had been in the ownership of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, a branch of Jehovah's Witnesses, who have owned the farm since 1935 and have previously used the property as a self-supporting community and educational facility.

When the Kingdom Farm property went up for sale this past October, the asking price of \$3 million was largely believed to be out of reach of local farmers, who normally pay less than \$3,000/acre for land in Lansing. Concern was expressed that the property would be picked up by real estate developers for residential development, a premise that is nothing new to Kingdom Farm parcel.

In spring 2007, members of the Watchtower Society proposed a massive development of the site, consisting of 500 new residences, retail and other commercial space, and the Watchtower Society entered into an agreement with the town of Lansing to contribute \$1.5 million to a sewer project in exchange for a predetermined amount of sewer capacity to the property, if the sewer plan was approved by the town. When the sewer plan was shelved, the agreement was voided and no development occurred.

According to the Lansing Star, when the current property went up for sale with its high asking price, there was considerable debate as to whether the town of Lansing should step in to keep the property agricultural, either through helping a local farmer buy the property, working with the Finger Lakes Land Trust to develop an agricultural easement, or other means. While there has been recent discussion in the town planning board of an "Agriculture Protection Plan", there's no indication that the town was involved with the sale of the property.



The world headquarters of the Watchtower Bible & Tract Society (Courtesy of Wikimedia)

While the news will generally be accepted as good to those opposed to suburban sprawl, the Star article from last fall notes that some residents were frustrated that a Cayuga County farm, which tend to be larger and have more money to spend on land, may buy the property and take it out of local ownership. According to the records, the buyers of the Kingdom Farm property are Dale and Colleen Mattoon, dairy farmers from the southern Cayuga County town of Locke, which shares a border with Lansing.

As a positive benefit to Lansing town, the property was tax-exempt when under the ownership of the Watchtower Society. The sale of the property returns the farm to the tax rolls for the first time 80 years. The county most recently assessed the property at a value of \$2.2 million.
