

ThisWeek DELAWARE

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60 acres in Liberty Township are off-limits to developers

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A 60-acre parcel, home to hundreds of plant and animal species, will remain untouched in the southern Delaware County area, thanks to a successful application to the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.

Preservation Parks of Delaware County will oversee 60 acres of biodiverse land northwest of Home Road and U.S. Route 23 in Liberty Township. The land will remain unavailable for development — forever — through the Ohio EPA's Water Resource Restoration Sponsorship Program.

Preservation Parks received \$3.9-million to buy the site. The City of

Columbus sponsored the park district's application in exchange for lowered interest rates on its sewer and water projects.

"The main thing we're after is some sort of water quality benefit," said Theresa Gordon, an environmental specialist with the Ohio EPA. "Even if all the land gets developed around there, there will always be this one enclave of biodiversity."

Tom Harcarik, an Ohio EPA environmental specialist who worked on the Big Run project, said the 60-acre parcel was viewed as desirable by the Ohio EPA for a variety of reasons.

"The key here is that southern Delaware County is exploding, and to preserve any areas would be seen as a plus," Harcarik said.

"The area at Big Run (includes) 40 species of birds and 160 species of plants ... it is one of the highest quality remaining woodlands," Harcarik added, quoting statistics from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, which he said "heavily supported" the acquisition of the property.

Harcarik explained that heavy vegetation near Big Run Creek provides shade which lowers water temperature, improving water quality, one of the chief goals of the water resource program. The property also includes habitat for salamanders and fish, further reasons it was deemed an ideal land area to protect.

The land is part of the Big Run watershed, which runs into the Olen-tangy River.

Kathy Remias of the group Friends of the Lower Olen-tangy Watershed (FLOW) said her group supported the preservation of land as a benefit for area residents.

"The area is heavily forested and there are beautiful shale cliffs and some waterfalls on the property," Remias said. "There are many glacial concretions sort of scattered around all over the place." Glacial concretions, she explained, are ancient, spherical rock formations.

Plans initially were for Planned Communities to develop the property for housing. The property is adjacent to the U.S. 23 development, Olen-tangy Crossing.

Because of the deal, Preservation Parks will have development rights to

the property, and the land cannot be used for anything but passive recreation purposes, Gordon explained. Passive recreation purposes could include the construction of walking paths or areas for bird watching, but not much else, she said.

The deal at Big Run, finalized this past spring, is similar to one reached

earlier this year on 115-acres at Camp Lazarus on U.S. Route 23. That land also is off limits to developers indefinitely. Preservation Parks director Rita Au said the parks district does not have any immediate plans for passive recreation on the land, except for a small parking area for maintenance and security on the property.