

River association buys tract for conservation

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CHESTERTOWN — It might seem odd at first for the Chester River Association to buy a piece of land just south of Kennedyville, on Wallis Brothers Road. Kennedyville is a good distance from the river, isn't it?

Actually, according to Executive Director Bob Parks, the association was "delighted" to get the land, a marshy 7-acre tract. The feature that interested the CRA is that Morgan Creek, a key tributary to the Chester River, winds through the property. That makes it waterfront — and a very valuable acquisition for the environmental group.

Better yet, the land was effectively donated — a "gift property." For an essentially unspoiled piece of the watershed, the \$100 sale price was a true bargain.

John Hildebrandt, who grew up around Chestertown and now lives in Silver Spring, donated the land to the CRA. Contacted by phone on Tuesday, he spoke fondly of his memories of Kent County, which he still visits "a couple of times a year."

He said the land was the last bit of a large family farm, which he and his late brother Philip had been unable to sell because it was unbuildable. Philip's death in 2005 left John the last surviving trustee of their mother Grace's estate, and at that point he began looking for someone who might be able to put the land to good use.

Hildebrandt said that he originally contacted the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy about selling the land. He credited Sandra Edwards, ESLC's land protection specialist for Cecil, Kent

and Queen Anne's counties, for referring him to the CRA after learning of the land's location on Morgan Creek. "I know the creek enters the river," Hildebrandt said, "so I thought it would be a nice idea to do that [donate it to the CRA]."

"It was wonderfully generous and we appreciate it," Parks said. He said the CRA would probably use the plot as a demonstration site, bringing in school children to see how water is tested and to observe the ecology of a rural stream. The plot is "just above the tidal portion of the stream," he said.

"There's some restoration to be done," Parks said, adding that the CRA is getting estimates on the costs of different options before deciding what to do.

Ladd Rutherford, a CRA volunteer who has taken a particular interest in the project, said on Tuesday, "The ultimate goal is to take all advantage of that piece of ground to make sure the water flowing out is as pure as we can make it." He said the CRA would need to talk to various government bodies to determine what restrictions might be involved.

As a first step, he said, the CRA will have the property surveyed. "We don't know where the corners are, yet," he said. The second step is to get "appropriately trained people to tell us what we've got," identifying the species of trees, noting invasive plants that should be taken out, and so forth.

Rutherford said the CRA is looking for "the best source of information to help us maximize the value of the property as a natural space." He said one likely improvement would be to put in a trail, "possibly no more than wood chips," to make access easier for school groups.