

Pond Hill Farm

CONSERVATION OPPORTUNITY

A Community Resource that Benefits us All

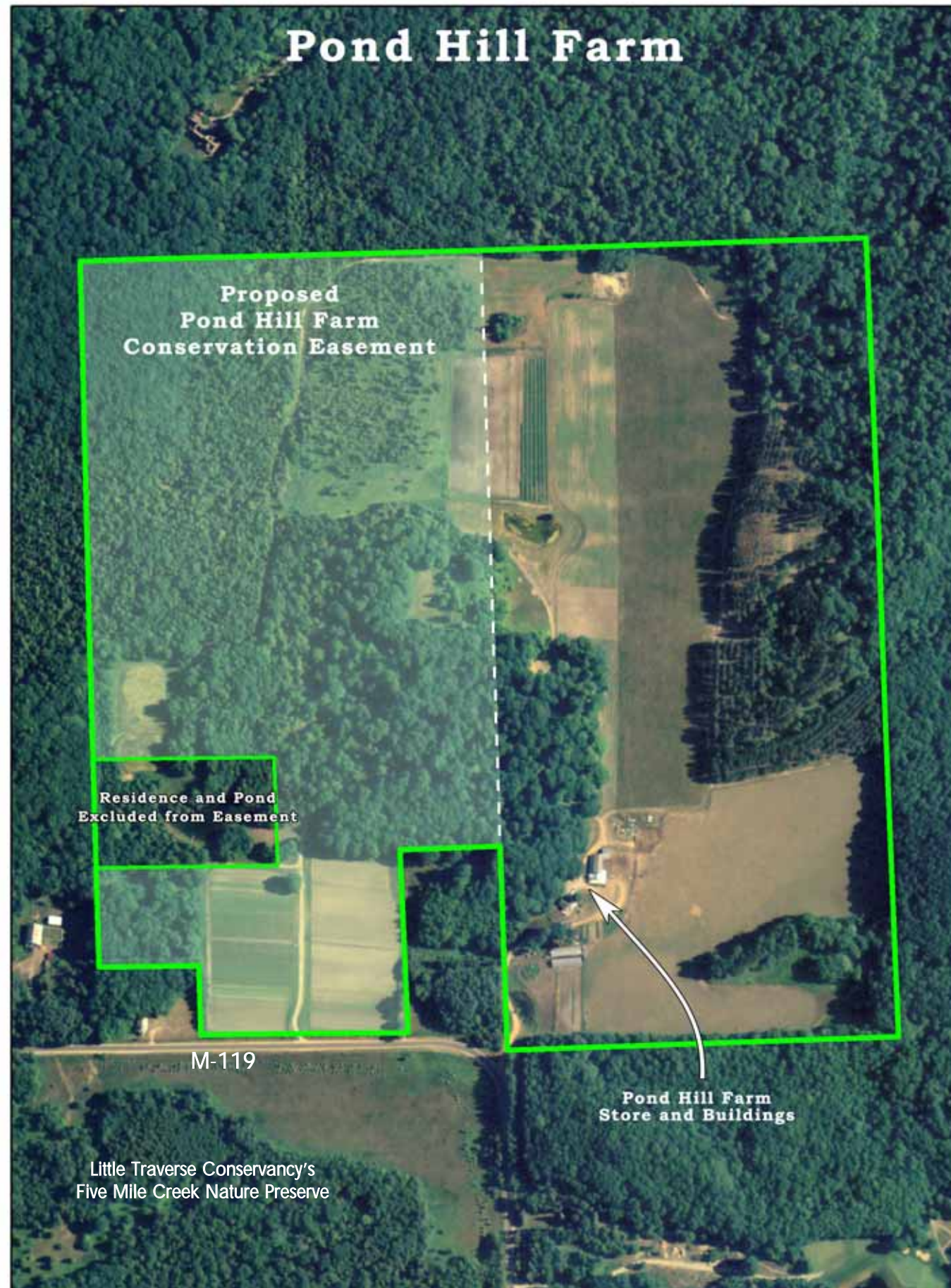


Pond Hill Farm is a small family-owned and operated agricultural business that has become a unique community resource for the Harbor Springs area. The farm is a hub of activities in four seasons – a place where friends and families meet to experience the many joys that a working farm offers. These are essential experiences for all of us, and especially for our young people who today are more and more removed from the source of their nourishment and from the wonders of what good farm living encompasses.

All told, Pond Hill Farm measures 153 acres and is comprised of hardwood hills, fields, swamps, three ponds, and several small creeks and streams. Most activities occur near the farm store which offers produce grown at the farm, as well as farm products created by the Spencer family and by other local farming families. The store lies adjacent to the barn and pastures, offering visitors a chance to interact with the animals first hand. Currently, the livestock operation includes a herd of 26 Black Angus cattle, 42 sheep, 8 pigs, 2 goats, 200 chickens, and one goose.

The Little Traverse Conservancy is working with the Spencer family to protect nearly half of the farm's acreage through the purchase of a conservation easement (see map on back). This easement would permanently prevent all future development on the property, protect scenic road frontage along Hwy. M-119, and help the Spencer family continue to provide locally grown food and a "sense of place" for this community.

We have an opportunity to help ensure that this land remains undeveloped and active as the valued resource it has become.



The Little Traverse Conservancy is raising \$250,000 for the purchase of a conservation easement on 70 acres of Pond Hill Farm to permanently protect the west end of the Pond Hill Farm complex.

About the Little Traverse Conservancy

The Little Traverse Conservancy is a local land conservation organization serving Charlevoix, Cheboygan, Chippewa, Emmet, and Mackinac counties. Our primary purpose is to protect the natural diversity and scenic beauty of this region. We work with landowners to permanently protect all the types of undeveloped lands that make the area so special: the forests and farms, scenic views, beautiful country vistas, sensitive wetlands, and significant wildlife habitats.

To accomplish this primary purpose, we utilize several tools depending on what is most appropriate for each important property. We can protect land through outright ownership as a nature preserve. Sometimes we help units of government acquire lands that are important for conservation, but more appropriately held by a public entity. We also work with private landowners who want to keep their land, but protect the important conservation values through the use of conservation easements.

In recent years, the Conservancy has become more involved in protecting working farms. We have protected almost 1,000 acres of active farmlands with most of those projects involving the purchase of a conservation easement from the farmers.

What is a Conservation Easement?

A conservation easement is a binding agreement between a landowner and the Conservancy. The conservation easement "runs with the land" and is perpetual, meaning the restrictions it places on a property are permanent. The conservation easement typically limits the landowner's ability to develop or divide the property. It usually includes other restrictions tailored to each property in order to protect vulnerable conservation values. Conservation easements allow conservancies to protect land without having to own it, an approach that is most logical on "working lands" such as Pond Hill Farm. Conservation easements can be donated, purchased, or purchased at a reduced rate or "bargain sale," as is the case with this project. Conservation easements do not provide public access and the property stays on the property tax rolls. Both the IRS and State of Michigan have recognized the important role conservation easements play in protecting our natural resources by creating significant tax incentives for landowners.

The conservation significance of the Pond Hill Property:

- 1) This parcel is identified as "High Priority" for protection in the Little Traverse Bay Watershed Protection Plan. The unique wetlands and streams leading to Five Mile Creek are in good condition and contribute to the overall health of the Bay.
- 2) The property provides outstanding wildlife habitat. Deer use the cedar lowlands for winter survival. Turkeys, bears, bobcat, coyote, and other wildlife are also present.
- 3) The property includes scenic frontage on the portion of Highway M-119 that has been designated as a Heritage Route by the local units of government and the Michigan Department of Transportation because of its unique and historic scenic quality. To date, the Little Traverse Conservancy has protected almost 7 miles of frontage along this beautiful route through conservation easements and nature preserves. M-119 is one of the special roadways that make living in northern Michigan so wonderful.
- 4) The Pond Hill Farm and Five Mile Creek area form the northwest portion of what we call the "Harbor Springs Greenbelt." This is a Focus Area in which the Conservancy has concentrated our land protection efforts. Across the road, more than 90 acres have been protected as the Five Mile Creek Nature Preserve.

- 5) This parcel is an integral part of the Pond Hill Farm complex. While this portion of Pond Hill Farm is primarily forested and not considered typical farm land, it plays an important role in the production and education aspects of the business. Maple syrup, fish, and vegetables are all produced on this part of the property. A small orchard is planned for one of the open areas in the future. This part of the land is also used for hay rides and educational programs about farming and the local ecosystems.

What restrictions are proposed in the Pond Hill Conservation Easement?

This conservation easement will:

- 1) keep the property in one piece (it can not ever be subdivided);
- 2) eliminate any future residential development; and
- 3) require best management practices for timber.

At the same time, this conservation easement will allow for:

- 1) certain agricultural uses in appropriate areas;
- 2) creation of trails to be used in education programming and to access portions of the property for management and agriculture; and
- 3) the exclusion of approximately 5 acres around the existing home and pond from the conservation easement.

Why is this the best way to protect this portion of Pond Hill Farm?

Farmers and other landowners who derive income from their property need to keep ownership of their land for their livelihood. When the uses are consistent with the conservation goals of the Conservancy, it is just as well that the farmer keeps their land and continues those uses.

However, agriculture is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain economically, especially in northern Michigan. This has been complicated by the rapid increase in the value of land which makes it difficult to buy land for farming and tempting to sell land for development when times get lean.

By selling a conservation easement, a farmer can take some of the equity out of their land and re-invest it into a more economical way of farming. Whether they pay off existing debt or shift to raising a more profitable product, they now have capital to get started or to keep going.

Pond Hill Farm is clearly one of the innovative farms in our region that has adapted to the increasing economic challenges of farming. To the folks at Pond Hill Farm, selling a conservation easement not only ensures their long-term goal of protecting their property from development, but it also just makes good business sense and is another innovative approach to what they are trying to accomplish.

How much will it cost?

The proposed conservation easement for this portion of Pond Hill Farm has been appraised at \$300,000. This means the appraiser determined that the conservation easement will reduce the overall value of the property by \$300,000 (because it could no longer be subdivided or developed). The Spencers have agreed to sell the easement for \$250,000. They are willing to sell it for less than it is worth because it means so much to them to keep it protected. The Board of Trustees at the Little Traverse Conservancy has dedicated half of this cost from our Land Protection fund. That leaves \$125,000 to raise from other sources to complete the protection of this property. As of August 9, 2007, we were \$55,000 away from our goal.



Back field facing west toward swamp.



The raspberry patch.



Hayride at Pond Hill.



Five Mile Creek.



The Frog Bog.



Feeding the sheep.



Fall Harvest Festival.



Hiking the trails.

Photos from Pond Hill Farm.