WESTCHESTER LAND TRUST ANNOUNCES RECENT GRANT AWARD TO FURTHER EFFORTS TO PRESERVE STUARTS FRUIT FARM.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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BEDFORD HILLS, NY - Westchester Land Trust (WLT) has been awarded a $1.84 million dollar Hudson Valley Agricultural Enhancement Program (HVAEP) grant from New York State’s Department of Agriculture and Markets to facilitate the permanent protection of Stuart’s Fruit Farm in Somers. The project—which took nearly a decade to put together—is valued at almost $3 million, and includes critical financial support from Westchester County, Scenic Hudson, the Town of Somers, and Somers Land Trust as well as WLT, with additional technical assistance from the Watershed Agricultural Council and the Westchester County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board. Once completed, the deal will extinguish the farm’s development rights and ensure that the land remains available for agricultural use in perpetuity through the application of a conservation easement to be held by WLT. In the absence of these funds Stuart’s Farm could readily be sold and converted into a residential subdivision.

Established in 1828, Stuart’s Fruit Farm is the oldest working farm in Westchester County. According to current owners, Bob Stuart and Mary Lee Stuart Gerlach, the farm welcomes more than 20,000 visitors each year who pick peaches and apples, purchase produce and flowers at the on-site farm stand, select Halloween pumpkins and Christmas trees, and recreate along the adjacent North County Trailway. The farm is also a beloved destination for thousands of school children who visit the farm to learn about agriculture, local history, and the importance of local food production.

Working farms and orchards serve as important multifunctional community spaces that provide food security, education, job opportunities and an environmental legacy to the surrounding region. In their seminal 2013 report “Securing Fresh, Local Food for New York City and the Hudson Valley: A Foodshed Conservation Plan for the Region,” project partner Scenic Hudson identified Stuart’s Fruit Farm as one of the highest priority farms in the region to protect. The 2014 Draft New York State Open Space Conservation Plan named Stuart’s Fruit Farm as a high priority farmland protection project due to the confluence of public benefits including the protection of critically important watershed identified by NYC DEP.

“This award from the State Department of Agriculture and Markets to permanently conserve Stuart’s Farm is a gratifying validation of Scenic Hudson’s Foodshed Conservation Plan”, said Steve Rosenberg, Senior Vice President of Scenic Hudson. “The award and 27 others in seven counties across the Hudson Valley, means that the Stuarts and other farm families can realize cash equity from their farms without selling them for development. We thank Governor Cuomo and the Department of Agriculture and Markets, the Hudson Valley legislative delegation in Albany, as well as Westchester County, the Town of Somers, and the Westchester Land Trust for their commitment to conserving this very special part of the Hudson Valley.”

State farmland protection projects are time intensive and involve a highly competitive application process. “The Stuarts have been dedicated stewards of their land for almost 200 years in the face of such intense pressure to sell,” said WLT’s President, Lori Ensinger. “We are extremely grateful to the Department of Agriculture and Markets for affirming the importance of this farm in the broader agricultural industry of the Hudson Valley. We thank all of our project partners, supporters, and the Hudson Valley legislative delegation for their energy and vision. We could not have gotten to this
point without their widespread bi-partisan support, and I am eager to begin the work of finalizing this project over the coming year.”

“Congratulations are deserved for the broad scope of public and private partners who have come together to preserve this great piece of living history—especially for our kids,” said Westchester County Executive Robert P. Astorino. “Saving this farm will serve the public good for generations to come.”

“After working on this project for years as a Legislator representing Somers, being able to participate in bringing this to fruition is a great honor,” said Chairman of the Board of Legislators Michael Kaplowitz (D, Somers). “This was a team effort for sure, and I really want to thank Lori Ensinger, Supervisor Morrissey and the County Executive’s Office. Together we were able ensure the promotion of agri-business and the preservation of precious open space, with minimal tax dollars,” Kaplowitz continued.

“The preservation of Stuart’s Farm has been a long time in the making,” affirmed Somers Town Supervisor, Rick Morrissey. “We are proud to be a partner in this conservation initiative. The Stuart family’s farm is an invaluable asset and will be a welcome addition to the growing acreage of protected land in the Town of Somers.”

“Preserving the rural atmosphere and scenic beauty of Granite Springs Road is a priceless product of this partnership,” said Somers Land Trust President, Michael Barnhart. “It is a great gift not only to our town but to Westchester County and New York State.”

ABOUT WESTCHESTER LAND TRUST
Based in Bedford Hills, the Westchester Land Trust works with public and private partners to preserve land in perpetuity and to enhance the natural resources in Westchester and eastern Putnam counties—a densely populated region under persistent threat from the pressures of development. Through the use of conservation easements and outright acquisition, WLT’s efforts benefit the long-term health of these communities by safeguarding air quality, food supply and community character, as well as critical watershed areas. Since its founding in 1988, WLT has preserved almost 8,000 acres of open space including more than 700-acres of preserves owned by the organization which are free and open to the public year round.

For more information about WLT, please visit westchesterlandtrust.org and connect with us on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/WLandTrust) and Instagram (@WestchesterLandTrust).