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Washtenaw farm protected forever following six-year PDR process

Farm News Media

*Originally established by the Dresselhaus family in 1842, the Kress family has cared for and cultivated the land since 1920. After the passing of their parents, the Kress siblings — Joe, Jean, Jeff, Jana, and John — began working with Legacy in 2017 to secure a conservation easement on the farm, which ultimately helped keep the farm in the family.
| Photo by Legacy*

June 13, 2023

Locust Hill Farm, a scenic 226-acre family farm bisected by Pleasant Lake Road in western Washtenaw County, is now permanently protected by Legacy Land Conservancy, thanks to the efforts of siblings from the Kress family.

The farm consists of idyllic farm fields, a classic German style dairy barn, a picturesque farmhouse, and forest with rolling

hills. One of the siblings, Joe Kress, currently lives on and farms the property.

“All of us had ridden a tractor by the time we were five and we spent most of our childhood helping dad on the farm,” Joe said. “Knowing we banded together to permanently protect the farm would make him proud.”

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The cost to purchase the development rights from the Kress family farm was more than half a million dollars. Legacy worked over multiple years to secure a myriad of funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission (WCPARC), and other private entities.

Completing the lengthy process took extreme patience and commitment to the project for the Kress family, as a result of the pandemic, and a title issue discovered during routine due diligence work.

Encountering title issues — like a blanket pipeline easement on the Locust Hill Farm property — during the conservation easement process is not uncommon these days. But, in order to permanently ensure and uphold conservation value of the property, it required lengthy and extensive negotiations between Legacy, the Kress family, and the pipeline company.

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Eventually, the company agreed to remove its right to maintain, remove, and replace infrastructure within the entire parcel and narrow it to a smaller corridor surrounding the pipelines.

“Legally, a blanket pipeline easement gives the company the right to use the entire property. This conflicts with the goals of the conservation easement,” Sandra Sorini-Elser, attorney and Legacy trustee, said. “Legacy can’t commit to conserving these rich farm soils forever if another company could put infrastructure anywhere on the property.”

Despite all the challenges over the last six years, it is extremely rewarding to complete the Locust Hill Farm project.

“It’s been a long journey together, but we are pleased to see this through,” Joe said. “I’m proud to keep the family farming tradition going.”

Joe currently raises sheep on the property, mostly breeding bucks to sell, as well as hay, corn, wheat, soy, alfalfa, and clover.

“We’re thrilled to protect another piece of local farming history,” Legacy’s Executive Director Diana Kern said. “Family farms are increasingly disappearing as farmers age out of their work and sell their land to developers, making preserving farmland a critical part of land conservation. To help the Kress family continue their family farming tradition is a wonderful feeling.”

According to the Washtenaw County German Heritage Tour, the farm was established by the Dresselhaus family, who arrived from Germany in 1842 and purchased by Frank and Christina Kress (grandparents of the Kress siblings) in 1920. James and Geraldine Kress (parents of the Kress siblings) added to the original acreage in 1958.

The farm supported sheep, cattle, hogs, and a dairy operation throughout the Kress family’s ownership, with corn, soy, wheat, alfalfa, and oats grown in the fields. The barn on the south side of Pleasant Lake Road was erected in the 1860s.

Founded in 1971 as Michigan’s first local land trust, Legacy is a nonprofit conservation organization that protects land in southern Michigan. Legacy has helped to protect more than 10,000 acres of land. For more information, visit www.legacylandconservancy.org.

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