

Autism group acquires new site

MIDDLETOWN As awareness of autism exploded in recent years, much of the attention focused on children who have the developmental disorder.

Thinking ahead to when their children would grow up, a group of parents decided to work together to secure a location in the region that could serve young adults with autism.

After four years of navigating a complex purchasing process involving multiple government agencies and nonprofit organizations, the parents' group, Impact OASIS, closed on a 25-acre property in Middletown last week.

"This will be a positive setting that will bring about positive behavior for everyone involved," said Mai Cleary, the group's president. "It's important for us that their spiritual and emotional needs are met."

The group's goal is to use a farm setting to help develop social and employment skills for adults with autism between the ages of 18 to 26, Cleary said. Six to eight adults enrolled in the program will stay overnight for various periods of time, while an additional six to eight adults will visit the site daily before returning home, she said.

Impact OASIS and Middletown both own the Sleepy Hollow Road property, previously held by the Coe family.

The \$2.9 million purchase price was paid by \$900,000 in township funds, \$1 million in contributions to Impact OASIS and \$1 million in state Green Acres funds. Of the Green Acres funds, the state allocated \$650,000 to the township, \$250,000 to NY/NJ Baykeeper and \$100,000 to the Monmouth Conservation Fund.

Under the deal, Impact OASIS will own the home and seven surrounding acres while Middletown will own the balance of the property.

The township has yet to settle on an exact development plan for its portion of the property, but Deputy Mayor Pamela Brightbill believes it likely will be used for passive recreation, such as walking trails.

"We're so thrilled," Brightbill said. "What a beautiful piece of property to add to our parks."

From Sleepy Hollow Road, the property simply looks like an undeveloped set of woods intersected by a driveway. But after traversing through the greenery, the roadway leads to a property that includes open fields, a portion of McClees Creek, and a large house with a sizable front porch.

On Thursday, Sue Koenigsberg stood on the porch and watched the rain fall together with her son, Tim, and his friend, Thomas D'Augusta.

Koenigsberg intends to enroll her son in the program once it commences, in 2012.

"It'll teach him how to be independent, but not while he's completely alone," said Koenigsberg, of Middletown. "Plus, sitting on a front porch like this is a dream."