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Paying to Keep Farmers Down on the Farm; Leasing Plan Requires Land to Be Worked

By WINNIE HU

KINDERHOOK, N.Y., July 18— A Dutch settler, Lourens Van Alen, was so taken by the dark fertile soil here that he bartered with the Mohicans to own a piece of the land. Even in 1667, it cost a small fortune: five kettles, three guns, six axes, five cloth garments, six lead bars and 50 pieces of wampum, among other items.

Now, by coincidence or fate, another Dutch immigrant, Jean-Paul Courtens, finds himself entranced by the same land but facing an asking price that will never be met by kettles, axes and lead bars.

The result is an intriguing experiment in saving land for farming that has united conservation organizations with a diverse group of supporters, ranging from a food pantry on the Upper West Side to an order of nuns in the Hudson Valley. It comes at a time when American farmland continues to be eroded by two potent forces: the bulldozers of developers and the less familiar tendency of rich urbanites to annex prime growing fields to their rural retreats and take them out of production forever.

Instead of trying himself to buy the Kinderhook farmland, which lies just south of Albany, Mr. Courtens agreed to help two conservation groups raise \$600,000 to acquire 140 acres so that it could never be used for anything else. Mostly through word of mouth, the campaign has raised more than \$200,000 in six months.

The groups, the Equity Trust and the Open Space Institute, would own the property and the right to develop it, but Mr. Courtens would receive a lifetime lease for his business, Roxbury Farm, which supplies organic vegetables to 600 customers, each paying about \$350 a year to share the harvest. Among the faithful are dozens of Upper West Side residents who tote baskets to a neighborhood church every week to collect their fresh-from-the-farm rations.

The unusual Roxbury Farm partnership has earned cautious praise from some conservation groups, but has perplexed traditional farmers accustomed to owning the earth that they nurture. Mr. Courtens and others say it is an inevitable concession to the rising prices for farmland in the Hudson Valley and elsewhere.

"People always say you either own the land or you don't," said Mr. Courtens, 40, a wiry man with graying hair and sun-reddened cheeks who moved from Amsterdam in 1986. "It's not that simple anymore."

One reason it is not simple is the current boom, which has turned untold numbers of Internet millionaires and Wall Street moguls into aspiring country squires.

Conservation groups and government agencies have spent millions of dollars to buy the development rights on farmland -- a legal protection that prohibits any commercial or residential building there. But that farmland is now coveted by a new class of landowners who have snatched up the picturesque pastures and fields to adorn their sprawling weekend retreats and retirement homes.

"It's an inherent weakness in traditional farmland preservation," said Charles Matthei, president of the Equity Trust, who added that while such land is not developed, it remains fallow. "We may think we have protected farmland, but what we have protected is open space, because when that farmland comes up for sale, farmers can't afford it."

From Massachusetts to California, these affluent home-buyers have driven up the price of farmland in recent years by two or three times near major cities and even in more remote stretches once ignored by builders. The steep prices have sent farmers like Mr. Courtens, who earns \$30,000 in a good year, reeling from sticker shock and have enticed others to sell their property.

Although little data is available, real estate brokers and conservation groups estimate that a quarter or more of the farmland sold in many areas is being converted to country estates, where it is often used for hunting and fishing. And they say that number will surely rise.

In rural Columbia County, a growing number of Mr. Courtens's neighbors are Manhattanites with a yen for the country. Jim Waterhouse, an appraiser for First Pioneer Farm Credit, which provides financial services for local farmers, said that 2,000 to 5,000 acres of farmland are sold as part of country estates every year, up from less than 1,000 acres in the mid-1990's. "Once the land goes to that type of buyer," he said, "it rarely goes back to farming."

The new landowners are often willing to lease to farmers for a few years, but Mr. Courtens and others say they cannot build a secure future on borrowed land. He started Roxbury Farm in 1990 on property owned by his wife's family in the town of Claverack, about 12 miles from Kinderhook, but had to move after they separated two years ago. "It was a painful situation," he said. "As an organic farmer you invest tremendously in your land and you realize you can't take it with you."

Without new strategies to help these struggling farmers, conservation groups say that the surge in home buyers will quicken the erosion of working farmland. From 1992 to 1997, 9 million acres of farmland throughout the country were developed for commercial, residential and industrial uses,

including 209,000 acres -- 327 square miles -- in New York State, according to the most recent estimates by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Kathryn Ruhf, co-director of the nonprofit New England Small Farm Institute, which manages a training center for farmers in Belchertown, Mass., said that her organization had started to inform farmers about practical alternatives to land ownership, especially for those just starting out or moving into a new area.

"It's the American dream, but we're very culture-bound in thinking you have to own property," she said. "You don't have to own property to care for it and be responsible for it."

The Roxbury Farm campaign will provide Mr. Courtens and those who come after him -- the terms of the lease specify that they must also be farmers -- with land to call their own without the burden of a mortgage. The money raised so far has been used to buy the first 13 acres of farmland, including a graceful wooden farmhouse that Mr. Courtens and his three children call home. The remaining 127 acres have been leased from the owners, with an option to buy them later this year.

He plans to harvest crops on 40 acres at any one time and leave the rest for hikers and nature lovers. "More and more, I am the front person for this campaign, but it's not really about me," he said. "We're not asking people to contribute so I can farm. We're asking people to help create a living model of new land ownership where public and private interests are met."

Although conservation groups have bought development rights on farmland for years, they have rarely bought property outright to lease to an independent farmer. Mr. Matthei, of the Equity Trust, said his group's arrangement with Roxbury Farm was patterned after community-development and housing programs in which tenants receive a lifetime lease as a way of encouraging them to make improvements on land that is not their own.

Already, the Roxbury Farm campaign has stirred interest around the country because it is one of only a handful of conservation efforts that guarantees that farmland will remain in the hands of farmers. For instance, the Peconic Land Trust on Long Island operates the Quail Hill Farm in Amagansett with two staff farmers and interns. At the Live Power Community Farm in Covelo, Calif., two farmers own the 40-acre property but the Equity Trust paid \$81,000 for additional safeguards: The land must remain working farmland, and if it is offered for sale, Equity Trust has the right to buy it or ensure that it is bought by another farmer.

Jerry Cosgrove, the Northeast field director for the American Farmland Trust, a national conservation group, said that the Roxbury Farm partnership could become an effective model for preserving farmland. But he said that other steps were also needed to help farmers, like increasing government assistance and farmers' profit margins.

"I agree with their concern, but I'm not sure that's necessarily the only approach to ensuring that the land is farmed," Mr. Cosgrove said. "My question to them is, 'What are you to do if for whatever reason, no one wants to farm it?'"

For now, at least, there seems to be no shortage of people willing to lay their hand to the hoe at Roxbury Farm. Mr. Courtens's regular customers -- they prefer to be known as "members" of the farm -- have already come by to pluck scallions and sweet potatoes out of the fields and feast on strawberries and potluck dinners. Many refer to Mr. Courtens as simply "my farmer."

In addition to paying for their annual share, these faithful members have raised most of the money for the new farmland. "When you join, you basically make a commitment to the farm to ensure its existence," said Jonathan Hilton, 49, an arts administrator from Manhattan, who donated \$5,000 with his partner. "The vegetables are just a bonus."

But for Mr. Courtens, the real measure of the campaign's success is not in dollars but in acres. Bounding over a wildly overgrown slope on a recent afternoon, he pointed to the newly plowed fields stretching below him. Green flecks of sorrel and parsley were just beginning to sprout alongside golden sunflowers and marigolds.

"I felt the serenity of this property when I first walked here," he said with an air of contentment. "It's kind of like a no man's land. There's no development here whatsoever."

Photos: Roxbury Farm in Kinderhook, N.Y., delivers food to members of a cooperative in a church courtyard on the Upper West Side. A list shows how much produce each member can take. Ariana Daglian, top left, and Sarah Shapiro pick peas on the organic farm. (Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. B1) Map of New York showing location of Kinderhook: Nonprofit land buyers are giving working farmers lifetime leases. (pg. B5)