

Owners consider selling Bonnybrook Farms

By Yvonne Teems, DBJ Staff Reporter

Bonnybrook Country Farm is considering selling its 95 acres in Washington Township and moving to a 300-acre site in Warren County.

The 40-year-old educational farm, known for its Haunted Hay Rides, field trip programs and corporate events, received an offer and will decide whether or not to sell by next summer, said Bonnie Mercuri, co-owner.

If sold, the land would be developed into a senior independent living facility or high-end residential housing. Terms of the potential deal were not disclosed.



Unlike many farms, which profit from selling their land to developers and give up the farming business for good, Bonnybrook's agricultural entertainment -- or "agri-tainment" -- sector is growing.

In fact, the success of these entertainment ventures makes selling the land more enticing because the owners say they could use more acreage to grow.

Other educational and entertainment farms in the area have grown over the years as well, bolstered by heightened public interest in farming, experts say. But while these programs are fertilized by suburbanites' curiosity, educational programs have chilled as school districts allot fewer dollars for field trips.

Because Bonnybrook has watched its entertainment services grow, it closed in June its equestrian center, which was the farm's main focus when it opened in 1966. As the popularity of its equestrian center began to decline, its entertainment portion grew.

At its peak, the center taught 300 students per week, hosted horse shows and traveled to other shows.

Today, the farm has beefed up its entertainment segment and has a new look. Each fall, the farm is infiltrated with ghosts and ghouls for its Haunted Hayride and Crazy Corn Maze. Last fall, the popular hay ride brought in \$80,000 in revenue from 20,000 guests. In addition to the haunted adventures, visitors come to buy pumpkins, eat at the Pumpkin Cafe, listen to storytellers and warm up next to the bonfires.

The farm also hosts more than 20,000 students per year through its educational program, up from 400 to 500 when it began the program in the early 1990s. The field trips make up just 10 percent of its revenue, while most of its income is generated from corporate and fall events, Mercuri said.

Farm managers say agricultural entertainment is blossoming because people are less exposed to rural settings. Mercuri said that many people visit the farm because they enjoy its beauty, especially when they spend most of their time in city or suburban areas. She said that when children come for field trips, they step off the buses and start sprinting through the fields.

As agricultural entertainment grows, Mercuri notes that Bonnybrook won't disappear if it sells its Centerville plot. With a spot in Warren County three times its current size, Bonnybrook would be able to serve more people from both Dayton and Cincinnati, Mercuri said.