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## News

## Middletown Ordinance Would Fund Land Purchase For Impact Oasis

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By Ryan Fennell

MIDDLETOWN - After proclaiming April 2009 Autism Awareness Month in Middletown Township, the Township Committee introduced an ordinance that would authorize the Township to enter into a land purchase agreement with a local non-profit organization known as Impact OASIS.

Impact OASIS is the sister organization of IMPACT which stands for Improving Middletown's Program for Autistic Children Together.

Impact OASIS (Ongoing Autistic Success in Society) was formed in September 2007 to develop programs for autistic children as they get older and enter into adulthood.

Impact OASIS with cooperation from Middletown Township, the Monmouth County Conservation Foundation, NJDEP Green Acres, and NY/NJ Baykeeper are planning to purchase the property at 89 Sleepy Hollow Drive consisting of approximately 22 acres.

With an existing home on the property the project is intended to become a transitional program for young adults with autism that will provide a college-like experience focusing on independent living skills, self-awareness and self-determination, social skills, and career exploration.

The program would provide a transitional residence for six to eight young adults between the ages of 18 and 26. There will also be six to eight more day students who will participate in activities but who will return home at the end of the day.

"The kids with autism are getting older," Impact OASIS President Mai Cleary said. "There is a huge population. Almost 80 percent are under the age of 18, so there is going to be a lot of kids with autism growing up and this is a therapeutic, healthy lifestyle with work they can do and feel good about."

"When kids grow up and leave the educational system there's not really many options out there for the college-like experience where they can learn to live a life away from home but have a structured life," Cleary continued.

Young adults with autism that participate in the Impact OASIS program will use the land for farming and raising animals such as pigs, chickens, dairy cows, goats, and dogs.

They will also learn about healthy food choices, cooking, cleaning, budgeting, doing laundry and taking care of the home according to Cleary.

"That kind of stuff will be incorporated into the program as well as the vocational end, in this case, farming," Cleary said.

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Although each member of the Township Committee agreed that the purpose for purchasing the land was for a worthy cause, there was some apprehension regarding the Township's ability to afford entering into the partnership.

"This obviously has a wonderful purpose," Committeeman Sean Byrnes said after voting in favor of introducing the ordinance. "As good as the purpose is it's still a very tough decision given our budget climate. What put me over is that autism is certainly a problem that has grown tremendously and has created a need. But (this purchase) also preserves a significant piece of property."

The Township would have an initial contribution of \$1.5 million but the total cost would be approximately \$650,000 after receiving money in return from Green Acres.

"Of all the open space purchases that I've been involved in I haven't been more proud of any than this particular one," Deputy Mayor Dr. Gerard Scharfenberger said. "It's a great, great deal for the Township. We're getting 22 plus acres for a mere fraction of what we'd pay through traditional means and also being a partner with a great organization like Impact OASIS.

Just the energy and commitment they have to make life better for autistic kids is really heart wrenching and I'm really proud to be helping to do something for these youngsters. This is something we should all be very proud of."

Committeeman Patrick Short was opposed to introducing the ordinance.

"I voted no on this and it is less of a question of the purpose and more of a question of whether we can afford to do this at this particular point in time and I don't think we can," Short said. "We will dole out \$1.5 million and we hope to get back \$900,000 back through Green Acres and then our bill will be around \$600,000 but that bill will be due. We are in a situation now where we are trying to control costs and control spending and it's just not a timely opportunity to go out and spend that kind of money. I struggled with the purpose (of the purchase) and whether we can afford it."

Clery called the introduction "a big step that had to happen."

"We started on this a long time ago," Clery said. "Comparatively it's moving faster than a lot of things do. I'm happy to have the support (of the Committee)."

"From the beginning the state Green Acres really liked the project as well as Monmouth Conservation and the Township," Clery added. "We're a partner in the deal and we couldn't do it without the Township. All in all I think it's a win/win for everybody."

In addition to using the land for transitional housing and farming, Impact OASIS is also hoping to integrate the program for several uses by the general public.

Impact OASIS has plans to hold afternoon tea for the older adult population, provide the community with organic grown products, and hold showcases for people to learn about ways to use "green" alternatives.

"It's a nice thing because it would bring people in from the outside because we really want integration too," Clery said. "We plan to be educational as a way of giving back to the public." The public hearing on the ordinance is scheduled for May 18 at the Middletown Township's regular Committee meeting.

Impact OASIS currently leases a tract of land at Stevenson Park that is used for farming, gardening and horticultural purposes. Impact OASIS will begin planting this Saturday April 4th at 2 pm. Volunteers are welcomed and greatly appreciated according to Clery.

For more information visit [www.impactoasis.org](http://www.impactoasis.org) and for more information about volunteering during the planting dates at Stevenson's Park the contact email is [imapactoasis@gmail.com](mailto:imapactoasis@gmail.com).