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News:

Reaching for the sky

They've conserved their farm on the Ohio River, raising 300 bison on 1,000 acres. Now one Oldham County couple is looking to save more of Kentucky's open spaces by building upward.

Several years ago, Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown purchased the scenic 1,000-acre Woodland Farm bordering the Ohio River. In the process, the couple preserved the area from development by obtaining a conservation easement for the farm, a land designation ensuring that the farm will remain as it is forever.

Now the husband and wife team are taking their goal of conservation, as well as a love of art, to a new level - working as two of the developers for the proposed Museum Plaza skyscraper in downtown Louisville.

Museum Plaza, which will be located at the corner of River Road and Seventh Street in downtown Louisville, is expected to rise to 61 stories, making it the tallest building in Louisville. It will contain retail space, a hotel, restaurants, condos and offices, as well as a museum.

The project is expected to be completed by 2010.

Wilson and Brown, whose family has extensive holdings in the Brown-Forman Corporation, both grew up on farms. The development of Brown's family farm, which is now a subdivision, leaves her with some guilt, she said.

"I guess I have always borne some sort of guilt that when we couldn't find something else to do with that farm at the time that was appropriate to save it from being developed," Brown said.

Brown said she knew about Woodland, as friends had tried to persuade the couple to go take a look at it. Woodland is located off Greenhaven Lane and is bordered by the Ohio River, Westport and 18-mile Creek.

The farm was in danger of being developed, Wilson said - full-color brochures had already been produced highlighting the farm as the next big golf community.

“We weren't looking for a farm at all,” Wilson said. “We weren't looking for land even...”

Wilson and Brown now live on the farm in the historic home that recently received national historic designation.

“We spend every minute we can out there now,” Wilson said.

They also have found a unique way to use their farm. After considering other options, the couple decided to continue their conservation efforts with their livestock - bison.

Raising bison allows them to preserve a breed that had practically disappeared, Brown said.

“We felt that it would be an interesting project to concentrate on an animal that we could bring back to popularity,” she said.

Wilson said bison is also a healthy food choice, and they wanted to do something that could present a possible alternative livestock for Kentucky farmers.

The farm has roughly 300 bison, Wilson said, and they sell their meat to a variety of local restaurants and markets.

The couple is quick to highlight the efforts of groups like Oldham Ahead, that strive to manage the county's growth and protect green space. Wilson said most people are not aware of the effects on infrastructure and tax base caused by development.

“The public in general are really not aware of what it costs them for a developer to put in more houses,” he said.

While Wilson and Brown have gone to great measures to help preserve green space, both say there are ways for others to become involved in preservation of Oldham County's green space.

Wilson said that many farmers tend to think of their farms as their retirement, and only the wealthy can have easements. Wilson said there are tax benefits to easements, and that land with easements still has value.

Brown encouraged people to get involved with the planning commission, to encourage the further development of areas that have already been developed and resist sprawl.

Wilson thinks their efforts at preservation lead naturally into the Museum Plaza project. As suburbs grow, Wilson said it seems that downtown areas are abandoned.

“Everyone wants a bigger house, a bigger yard and they leave one spot and eat up more land,” he said.

The idea behind Museum Plaza, he said, is to create a place where it is more exciting to stay in the city because there are things to do. People can shop and raise a family all in the same place without having to travel back and forth from the country.

With offices, retail space, restaurants and a gym with a pool, the building will provide what people need.

“Basically you could live your whole life right there in that one building,” Wilson said.

The uniquely designed building features legs that will contain a hotel, student housing and lofts, followed by a tabletop area or “floating plaza” which will contain the retail space, lobbies and the museum. The towers above the plaza will contain offices and condos.

The project has also allowed the couple to pursue their passion for art. Wilson and Brown said they love to travel and collect art.

“We find that people who feel they don't like art or don't understand art probably haven't been exposed to the kind of art we like...” Wilson said.

Wilson said there are cities where people go into museums as an everyday part of life, and they hope to create a similar situation in Louisville.

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