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CONSERVATION PROFITS FROM DEVELOPMENT

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By Bruce Pringle

Coastal Sussex County development firm RDM and the Rehoboth Beach based real estate company Ocean Atlantic Agency donated profits for the sale of home at The Villages of Five Points to the Sussex County Land Trust.

The development of hundreds of homes at The Villages of Five Points will help ensure that land elsewhere is spared from development.

Financial backers of The Villages, a new Lewes-area community that eventually is to include 580 homes and a number of businesses, on Friday donated \$68,000 toward the purchase of property that will remain in its natural state.

The coastal Sussex County development firm RDM and the Rehoboth Beach-based real estate company Ocean Atlantic Agency presented a check for that amount to Sussex County Land Trust. The contribution equals .5 percent of revenues from homes sales at The Villages.

The trust uses private and public donations to purchase land that is declared permanently off-limits to development.

Mike Lynn, president of RDM, said the trust offers developers a way to serve the general community in addition to serving the people who settle in their communities.

The land trust was started in 2001 as a way for developers to donate profits from the booming real estate market of recent years. Wendy Baker, president of the organization, said Tuesday that \$4.9 million has been contributed and the trust has been involved in the acquisition or pending acquisition of 3,056 acres.

Only three days before the presentation by RDM and Ocean Atlantic, Sussex County Council approved a \$1.5 million grant to the trust, which will combine the county's gift with \$3.5 million in state funds to purchase more than 600 acres near Camp Arrowhead in Angola Neck. A public recreation area will be established on that property.

Coincidentally, the Delaware General Assembly last week wrapped up its annual session with a number of financial decisions, including one that surprised and delighted conservationists: The legislature allocated more than \$50 million to buy and preserve about 3,300 undeveloped acres throughout the state.

Besides the \$3.5 million that will be combined with Sussex County's contribution to the land trust for the Angola Neck purchase, the state funds include money to continue a multiyear effort to buy or protect more than 2,200 acres in scattered sites in Sussex belonging to Glatfelter Pulpwood Co. Properties in potential growth areas in New Castle and Kent County also are earmarked for purchase.

Delaware Transportation Secretary Nathan Hayward said some of the state purchases will save taxpayers money by averting growth that would choke traffic and lead to road-construction costs.

The state's decision followed committee meetings held last month behind closed doors.

"They seem like political decisions made at the last minute, maybe for good reasons," said John Flaherty, a lobbyist for the government-watchdog group Common Cause. "But there's no reason this couldn't have been brought up earlier in the public process."

Meanwhile, in Sussex, Baker, the head of the land trust, praised RDM and Ocean Atlantic for contributing more than is common. While others have given \$500 per unit sold, their contribution -- amounting to \$1,000 on a \$200,000 home sale -- "is commendable," she said. "We'd would like to commend (them) for stepping up to the plate."

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