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cooperative livelihood

## Integrating Sustainable Enterprise With Close-Knit Community

Christmas tree farm and other sustainable businesses will support Pennsylvania's first cohousing community.

*Sheldon Bogos*

In June, 2000, the future residents of the Hundredfold Farm Cohousing Community purchased the picturesque 80-acre Seven Spring Christmas Tree Farm nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Seven Springs Christmas Tree Farm, located eight miles west of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, has been a holiday tradition for families throughout south central Pennsylvania and northern Maryland for more than 20 years. This impeccably maintained collection of 40,000 trees from more than a dozen varieties of evergreens has also been a well respected source of spectacular landscaping trees for nurseries from Virginia to Connecticut. From the time Hundredfold Farm Community came together in 1998, their intention has been to create Pennsylvania's first cohousing development, and to become a truly sustainable planned living and business community.

The community is a diverse group of individuals that have pledged their collective time, money and energy to create a safe, pedestrian friendly, and sustainable community for themselves and their children. They include a retired professor of religion, a past Peace Corps volunteer, an attorney, a Computer Aided Design professional, a family therapist, a massage therapist, a librarian, an elementary school teacher, a multimedia artist, a social worker and several children ranging in age from three to 17. Besides four families living in the Gettysburg area, members are coming to Hundredfold Farm from both Alexandria and Blacksburg, Virginia; Baltimore and Frederick, Maryland; and Benton Harbor, Michigan.

The group spent a great deal of time searching for the perfect site to build a cohousing community. When members learned that Seven Springs Tree Farm was going to be sold and subdivided into multiple lots, they began to explore the possibility of purchasing the land and business together.

In January, 1999, the original members of the community sought out the help of Heartbeat Cities Corp., a construction management firm in Pittsburgh with a strong focus on cohousing and sustainable development. Heartbeat Cities combines expertise in construction, banking and finance,

real estate development, and business management. It had been working with Hundredfold for about nine months when it found the tree farm and began to understand the components of the business. Heartbeat Cities was confident that the members of Hundredfold Farm could pool their collective creativity and energies to succeed.

## INTEGRATING BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY

The tree farm is a mainstay in the area, with some customers coming from more than 30 miles away for a family holiday activity. Community members have already begun to introduce past and present customers to the new ownership of the business, and the integration of Seven Springs Tree Farm with that of the Hundredfold Farm Community.

The previous owners, Alex and Jane Kessel, weaved the fabric of the tree farm into the heritage and tradition of many families' lives throughout the region since beginning in 1979. They had tried to sell the land and the business before, but nobody was willing to take on such a daunting venture. Hundredfold's purchase is ideal because it keeps the farm largely intact "instead of all that chopping-up business that would result if the farm was sold for a traditional development," Alex said. This solution also allows the township and county to preserve one of the most breathtaking and spectacular views in all of Adams County, Pennsylvania.

Alex and Jane gave the new owners a crash course on how to run and manage a tree farm. They learned when to mow, when to shear, how to manage insects, and who the customers are. "Never in our wildest dreams did we think we would own a tree farm, but what we are learning here is easily transferable to other enterprises," says Bill Hartzell. He manages the tree farm and is a resident of the cohousing community, which will be clustered on a five-acre piece of the more than 80-acre property.

A retail shop on the road greets visitors as they enter. Here folks can browse for Christmas decorations, holiday necessities or other items to brighten up the home. The new owners have set up a display in the shop to tell visitors about the Hundredfold Farm Community and help generate local support. A small building is made available to a local Girl Scout troop to run a snack shop, mostly for the convenience of customers and guests during the holidays.

## EXPLORING OTHER BUSINESS IDEAS

The business lessons have paid off, as Seven Springs is on track to have its most successful year ever. And buying a piece of land with a well-established business on it gives community members a way to reach out to a much greater circle of people more quickly. They are looking for additional economic opportunities, including a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. Fruits and vegetables will be grown for their

community and to fulfill outside subscriptions. Other business ideas that have been considered are massage therapy, canning fruits and vegetables, and woodworking.

To make way for the CSA farm, community members are systematically removing the Christmas trees from fields targeted for fruits or vegetables. They also have placed a higher priority on selling “dug” trees rather than “cut” trees, focusing on the more environmentally friendly act of replanting Christmas trees instead of the accepted tradition of a cut tree that is thrown out after the holiday season. The business venture is an example of the results that can be achieved when a group of individuals are committed to each other and their environment.

## ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND ALTERNATIVES

Everything about the community and business will have a focus on sustainability, including energy. The homes will take advantage of energy-efficient radiant floor heating, which provides high air quality with no forced air. The foundations will use a Polysteel system — concrete poured inside styrofoam — to improve air quality and provide a higher insulation “R” value because there is no infiltration. The homes will have noncarcinogenic Icynene foam insulation. The octagonal shapes of the houses with a southern exposure will lend themselves to extensive use of passive solar energy. The road between the top and middle tiers of homes is a “Green Road” using a porous product by Grassy Pavers. This environmentally sound alternative provides soil stabilization, natural water filtration and drainage, and reduced soil compaction, which mean less reliance on expensive drainage systems.

Conscious decisions are being made to create this planned living and business community to endure for generations, and to be as self-sufficient as possible. Hundredfold is still looking for a few more households to complete the cohousing community.

Sheldon Bogos is president of Heartbeat Cities. To learn more about the Hundredfold Farm Community, visit its website at [www.hundredfoldfarm.org](http://www.hundredfoldfarm.org), or contact Bill Hartzell at 717-33-4488 or [rhubarb@cvn.net](mailto:rhubarb@cvn.net). For more information about Seven Springs Tree Farm, visit [www.sevenspringstrees.com](http://www.sevenspringstrees.com). For more information about Heartbeat Cities, call (800) 505-3154 or visit [www.hundredfoldfarm.org](http://www.hundredfoldfarm.org).

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