



**MOUNT LAUREL TOWNSHIP
100 MOUNT LAUREL ROAD
MOUNT LAUREL, NEW JERSEY 08054**

NEWS RELEASE

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PAWS FARM NATURE CENTER UPDATE

Since its founding in 1979 Paws Farm Nature Center became a beloved treasure in the Mount Laurel community. On January 6, 2020, Discovery Museum, the Township's vendor, publically announced it would close the doors and not continue to operate the facility. Discovery Museum operated under a three-year contract but breached this contract six months into its renewal.

Township officials became aware of this potential breach in December and scrambled to find a suitable vendor replacement. The Township was able to successfully convince Discovery Museum to leave a crew to care for the 180 animals on site for an extra month. The concern and action to care for these animals was met immediately, and the Township worked with nature centers, zoos, and other sanctuaries to seek interest for operating the farm and, in the alternative, to provide homes for the animals if a vendor could not be found.

The Township continued its search for a suitable replacement vendor. A proposal deadline of February 20, 2020 was set in place for potential operators to present plans for operating the facility for five years. Sadly, the proposals received were inadequate and failed to demonstrate the applicants would provide a sustainable long term vision for Paws. With no viable vendor, all animals were rehoused on or before February 28, 2020 when Discovery Museum ended its support for animal care.



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The Township created and published a second RFP process, but perhaps due to COVID, vendors were unable to submit proposals that demonstrated the ability to operate Paws and provided little assurance that the Township would not face a repeat performance from a vendor that did not understand the significant efforts and finances necessary to successfully operate the nature center and care for the animals.

“This has been truly frustrating as we build up hope each time that a vendor can present a viable plan and in the end we are left disappointed. We understand that this is an enormous venture requiring significant business planning and extreme details toward animal care. The RFPs have created a step-by-step outline, but of course, the devil is in the details,” explained Deputy Mayor Kareem Pritchett. “When we dig deep, the proposals come up short and lack the financial wherewithal and animal care standards that are necessary for a sustainable product”.

Last September the Township amended the RFP proposal process for a third time. Notice was made through newspapers and social media inviting businesses to submit proposals. An independent review committee was established. These individuals possess experience with animal care and significant business acumen. Each separately evaluated the proposals and submitted scores. Township Officials did not conduct these evaluations so there were fresh, independent eyes reviewing the submissions. To occupy the space that was Paws Farm, proposals would need to be clear on plans for animal care, funding, budgeting for the long term, and employee and operational management.

This independent committee thoroughly reviewed the proposals received. On a scale that measured animal safety and care, financial capabilities, employee and business management, and knowledge of New Jersey rules and regulations, the proposals received underwhelming scores in several of these categories. On a 100 point scale, one proposal received a score of 17 and the second vendor only received an average score of 49. The Township sought a score of 85 or greater but would have even reconsidered an application that scored at least 70 points. These



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proposals were not appropriate to proceed with a recommendation to the governing body to award the project.

“Obviously, this is not the outcome anyone had hoped for but the Township doesn’t want to create a false hope that the facility can re-open and successfully operate under these insufficient financing, staffing and animal plans,” explained Councilwoman Fozia Janjua.

Paws Farm holds a special memory for many residents. The Township recognizes that the property is bound by Green Acres restrictions and has the historically significant Darnell family homestead as its centerpiece. The property will never will be used for commercial purposes.

“Any rumor that is floating around on social media that insists this site will be used for anything other than a mission with recreation and historic preservation is completely wrong and would violate the Township’s obligations under New Jersey laws and the property’s deed restricted protections,” said Mayor Stephen Steglik. “This isn’t going to be anything other than a Township recreation and historical site. It won’t become a strip mall or a housing development,” Mayor Steglik insisted.

The COVID pandemic has not been kind to this RFP process. With social distancing and cases rising in Burlington County, potential vendors are limited in developing financial, staffing, and animal plans. It’s hard to find corporate sponsors when some businesses are simply trying keep their own business alive. This has greatly impacted the Township’s proposal process. Had Paws Farm not closed in January 2020, it would have been forced to close and likely bankrupt during the continued pandemic. In the past, Paws Farm cost an estimated \$500,000 to run the farm annually, and operated at an annual loss of \$100,000.

Mayor Steglik, Deputy Mayor Pritchett, and the Mount Laurel Township Council take finding a solution to Paws Farm very seriously. In regards to the next phase of this process, due to the extenuating and persistent health and economic circumstances involving COVID-19, Council



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and the township are re-examining the timeline and structure of the next PAWS Farm RFP with the intent to widen the prospects aimed at ensuring a long-term, financially stable, community based solution. The Council set forth a mission of transparency and communication in sharing this report with our residents and will continue to provide updates in the future.