Owners of Port Roadproperty say they are being selective on buyer

Farm foreclosures are the painful way many people exit the agricultural life, but such distressed circumstances aren't hanging over the Family Farm in the Town of Grafton.

Owners Jane Hamilton and Marko Musich have put their 30-acre restored farm on Port Washington Road on the market, but they are being very particular about a buyer.

The farm attraction, created 15 years ago on a farmstead that had been around since the 1890s, has very little debt.

"We can afford to take our time and find just the right buyer willing to embrace and expand on the dream we started with," Musich said.

Although the property south of the Grafton village limits has limitless development potential, the

couple said "the right fit" would be a new owner willing to continue its operation as an educational farm and banquet facility.

The couple said there have been several serious inquiries from prospective buyers who see the property's potential as an educational tool and tourist destination.

It took vision and more than a little faith for Hamilton and Musich to see the 140-year-old Hovener farm as an attraction waiting to be revealed.

They bought the property in 1995, opening it to the public two years later. Far more than a petting zoo for farm animals, the attraction introduces people from urban and suburban areas to life on a traditional working farm.

Among the exibits is a short film about the history of the farm, which began when Louis Hovener immigrated from Prussia and bought 300 acres in Ozaukee County to start a new life.

The business partners bought the property from Louisa Hovener, the last remaining family member.

Visitors get hands-on exposure to cows and chickens, and learn about the amount of work required to put food on their family tables.

"The vision of the Family Farm is to expose everyone to a part of history that is quickly disappearing," Hamilton said.

"We were very fortunate to find a farm that hadn't undergone a lot of remodeling or updating."

There are six restored farm buildings on the property

The notion of sharing a traditional farm experience was quickly embraced by the community. Teachers have led regular field trips to the farm, and many families have purchased "Frequent Farmer" memberships that allow
unlimited visits.

"What I enjoy most is watching grandparents who come with their grandkids and say, 'That is what I used to do when I was a kid,'" Hamilton said.

She said she has also seen how children who are exposed to being gentle around animals transfer that tenderness when dealing with their siblings and classmates.

The property has become a must-see destination during late fall, when colorful decorations and an abundance of pumpkins draw people from all over.

Situated within easy driving distance of Chicago, Milwaukee and Green Bay, Musich said, the location has proven to be ideal for reaching a large number of people.

"We spent a lot of time looking at 15 different properties in a four-state area before we settled on this place in Grafton," he said. "The fact is, every area in this country needs a place like this."

The commitment to preserving agricultural heritage may seem a bit out-of-character for the couple. Neither has a farming background — Hamilton, a self-described "city kid," worked in advertising before taking on the
farming life, and Musich was a builder.

"I was drawn to the idea because of my love of animals and nature. Over the years, I learned a lot about both, but I also learned a lot about people," Hamilton said.

The couple also acquired some unexpected skills in the area of farm work and property maintenance.

In the early days of the venture, Hamilton said she and a friend put up fencing around the perimeter of the sprawling property.

"You could say I developed an intimate knowledge about the old barbed wire that was used," she said.

The enterprise grew over the years, eventually including a gift shop, cafe and bed-and-breakfast.

A fire destroyed a barn on the property in 2007, taking with it a collection of antique wagons and farm implements.

A new building erected on the old fieldstone foundation is used as a banquet hall known as the Event Loft, with a capacity of 220 people.

The hall, which features cathedral ceilings and yellow pine floors, has been a popular venue for corporate events, church groups and wedding receptions.

Musich said reservations continue to be accepted for the hall and will be honored regardless of who the future owner is.

Because of the diversity of the Family Farm, it carries more than a dozen permits and license from the town, county, state and even federal government.

The farm includes the seasonal sale of produce and freshly butchered meat.

"I think it is safe to say we know every inspector who works in the county," Hamilton said.

Once a buyer for the property is lined up, the current owners don't have any great plans for the future.

Hamilton said she hopes to be able to spend more time on her art. Musich shrugged at the question, saying, "I guess I just want to build stuff."

MARKO MUSICH AND Jane Hamilton have converted a Town of Grafton farm into a popular tourist attraction, the Family Farm. Although the business is now on the market, they are committed to finding a buyer who sees the preservation effort as worth continuing. Photos by Mark Jaeger