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Empire Tract to stay wild

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By **BOB IVRY**
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A nine-year wrangle over 587 acres of wetlands known as the Empire Tract ended Friday, when Mills Corp. - which once wanted to build a mega-mall in the marsh - transferred the parcel to the not-for-profit Meadowlands Conservation Trust.

The signing of the complicated deal ensures the Empire Tract's preservation as open space. It coincides with Mills and its development partner, Mack-Cali Realty, getting a go-ahead to begin work on Xanadu, a \$1.3 billion entertainment and shopping project slated for the Meadowlands Sports Complex.

The Empire Tract is just northeast of the complex, and the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority paid the tract's \$26.8 million sales price.

"This is a momentous occasion for us," said Mitchell Hersh, president and CEO of Mack-Cali. "It's the culmination of a series of events, critically important to move Xanadu forward and create a significant economic engine for the entire region. We're proceeding full bore with construction of the site."

Bill Sheehan, the Hackensack Riverkeeper and chairman of the Meadowlands Conservation Trust, hailed the transfer as a victory for grass-roots environmental organizing.

"Now that the Empire Tract is in public hands, the hard work of managing and monitoring the site begins," Sheehan said.

The Empire Tract has attracted its share of controversy through the years. Jeffrey Tittel, executive director of the state Sierra Club, said he was happy that the 587 acres of wetlands had been preserved, but doubted developers would have been able to get permits to build there anyway.

"Mills and Mack-Cali are getting paid quite handsomely for a tract that never would've been developed," he said.

Hersh said the deal on the Empire Tract couldn't be viewed without looking at the bigger picture.

"Did we get a good deal?" he said. "We're proffering a very good deal for the state and the region. Meadowlands Xanadu will create more than 20,000 construction jobs during construction and more than 20,000 permanent jobs. And we've committed \$70 million in private capital for infrastructure improvements. You can't view one part of the deal in isolation."

The Sierra Club is suing to stop the Xanadu project, and one of its partners in the lawsuit is the borough of Carlstadt, where the Empire Tract is located.

Stuart Lieberman, special counsel for Carlstadt, said the sports authority, by establishing the \$26.8 million sale price, should pay tax to the borough on the transaction.

"I'm not happy about any of this," he said. "But it carves in granite our legal position. Now that they've done this, they have to pay us money if our challenge of the entire [Xanadu] project doesn't go through. If we don't prevail, they'll have to pay us a large sum of money."

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