

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Warren County's introduction to open space planning began in 1974 with the first open space element to the Warren County Master Plan. Back then, however, the perception of many county residents was that an abundance of open space existed. Unfortunately, this was common throughout the state, and now, land that once was perceived by many people to be "open space" has been developed.

The sprawling development experienced throughout New Jersey has focused the attention of most people on the pressing need to conserve open space for future generations, and, for that matter, for the present generation. As new growth in many areas of the state devours acres, and even square miles, for residential, commercial, and industrial uses, less and less land remains available to meet the growing demands of society for outdoor recreation and public open space areas. The consequence of this is that many political jurisdictions lose their opportunity to save open space and will, perhaps, never be able to provide a reasonable amount of open space, or, if they can, only at exorbitant prices produced by soaring land values. The perception of an abundance of open space exists to many Warren County citizens, but one only has to look to the east to see how fast the reality of open space can be lost.

As the demand for land increases, Warren County runs the risk of losing opportunities for the preservation of open space that will be of immeasurable benefit to future generations. This situation is inevitable, as vacant land in counties closer to the metropolitan core becomes more scarce, forcing developers and home seekers to outlying areas offering abundant land at less expensive prices. Faced with this prospect, only timely action on the part of the State of New Jersey, the County, and its various municipalities can assure proper direction of new growth and a proper balance of open space and recreational land.

Now imagine, hiking from Storm King Mountain on the Hudson River to Phillipsburg on the banks of the Delaware River, canoeing down rivers and streams that our ancestors used, exploring unique geological lakes formed during the Ice Age, or having trails near your home where one could walk for leisure or exercise or explore and share the rich history of our county. You may also want to visit one of the last two remaining steam engines of its size in the northern hemisphere, or show your children or grandchildren the farm you grew up on, or the woods, fields and streams that you played in as a youngster instead of just telling them what it was like there before the houses and shopping malls were built. This is all possible if we, the citizens of Warren County, work together to preserve open space.

The open space element of the Warren County Master Plan is intended to provide a framework for open space preservation through state, county and municipal planning. Open space can be defined as land acquired and dedicated to remain undeveloped for public use and access. These land areas may include streams, corridors, lakes, ridge tops, steep slopes, woodlands, grasslands, and agricultural lands. These features make up the character of the area and should be considered whenever sites are evaluated for acquisition. Areas designated for open space can protect many natural resources, such as the quality and quantity of surface and groundwater, cultural and historic areas, and view sheds associated with ridge tops. Open space acquired now can serve to

satisfy the recreational needs of county residents as development occurs in the future. This plan identifies areas and suggests ways to preserve open space in Warren County.

The Open Space Plan provides a blueprint of what the County Planning Board recommends as areas that should be preserved as public open space in the county, irrespective of the jurisdiction or ownership of the land. The County Open Space Plan discusses specific projects and target areas including greenways that should be pursued by the county's land preservation program. These target areas are intended to be pursued by the county, and where possible, as partnerships with other jurisdictions, non-profit groups, and other county agencies to meet the objectives of this plan.

The Open Space Plan is only a part of the overall planning effort of Warren County. The Plan must be coordinated with other facets of the County's planning program, including farmland preservation, general development, transportation, utilities, stormwater, and capital planning. As plans for these elements become more firmly established, and as population growth occurs, periodic review of open space objectives will be required.

Another purpose of the Open Space Plan is to meet the requirements specified in the Open Space Trust Fund legislation that allows counties to establish trust funds. Specifically, N.J.S.A. 40:12-15.2d(1)a states that the "selection of lands for acquisition for recreation and conservation purposes shall be in accordance with an open space and recreation plan prepared and adopted by the county". The maintenance of open space land is also an eligible expenditure of the County Open Space Trust Fund. County Trust Fund money may be used to fund historic preservation and farmland preservation projects. Pursuant to section d. of the same section, the county trust fund maybe used for projects selected for historic or farmland preservation shall be in accordance with a historic or farmland preservation plan prepared and adopted by the county.

To meet the intention of the Act, and to qualify for state funding for land acquisition for recreation and conservation, Green Acres requires the Open Space Plan to be adopted by the County Planning Board. Similarly the State Agriculture Development Committee requires the County Planning Board to adopt the county's farmland preservation plan as well.

MAJOR MILESTONES IN THE WARREN COUNTY OPEN SPACE PROGRAM

- The first Open Space Plan was adopted by the Warren County Planning Board in 1974.
- The Open Space Plan was updated in 1980 and then again in 1981.
- The Warren County Morris Canal Committee was created by the Board of Chosen Freeholders in April 1981 as a special committee of the County Planning Board. The purpose of the committee was to explore ways to identify and protect the Morris Canal as an irreplaceable feature of our culture and history.
- To further the work of the Canal Committee, the Board of Chosen Freeholders created a Board of Recreation Commissioners in 1986 to administer a matching grant in the amount of \$1.5 million from the New Jersey Green Acres Program that was being applied for to acquire Morris Canal lands for preservation. The grant was later reduced to \$1 million.

- In 1992, the County Planning Board began work to create a new Warren County Open Space Plan coinciding with efforts to establish a dedicated open space trust fund tax. Meetings were held with the general public and potential properties for acquisition were obtained from municipalities. County officials met with individuals from Morris County to learn how to start an open space trust fund and to learn how to conduct a public information campaign.
- On November 2, 1993, the citizens of Warren County passed a public question on the general election ballot to create the Warren County Open Space Trust Fund. The trust fund was to be funded by a tax, not to exceed two cents (\$.02) per one hundred dollars (\$100) of total county equalized real property valuation. A trust fund was implemented by the Warren County Board of Chosen Freeholders by resolution, dated October 26, 1994, and began collecting in 1995. The ballot question is included in the Open Space Trust Fund Rules and Procedures as Appendix A.
- On November 14, 1994, the Warren County Planning Board held a public hearing on a draft Open Space Plan. On December 19, 1994, the Open Space Plan was adopted by the Planning Board.
- On June 26, 1996, the Board of Chosen Freeholders passed a resolution to approve the Warren County Open Space and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund Procedures and Rules, which were established to regulate the use of the trust fund including the percentage allocation to each purpose, and to create the committee to review projects submitted by municipalities for county grant funding using 25% of the Open Space Tax. The most recent version of the rules are found in Appendix A.
- In 1997, White Lake was acquired at a county cost of \$1.5 million through a Green Acre grant/loan agreement. The entire acquisition was a partnership between the NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife, the County, and the Ridge and Valley Conservancy.
- In the 1998 ballot referendum, the citizens voted to add maintenance as an eligible Open Space Tax expenditure. Up to 10% of the amount collected was to be used for this purpose. Two other questions were on the ballot as well. One asked to raise the tax by 1 cent for farmland preservation only. The other asked to raise the tax by 1 cent for open space, farmland, and historic preservation. Only the maintenance question passed. The approved ballot question is included in the Open Space Trust Fund Rules and Procedures in Appendix A.
- In February 1999, the Board of Chosen Freeholders created an Open Space Trust Fund Task Force. Their assignment was to explore ways to improve coordination and cooperation of agencies using the trust fund (County Agriculture Development Board, County Board of Recreation Commissioners, County Municipal and Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund Committee), to leverage and increase funding for land acquisition, to recommend staffing levels to adequately oversee the acquisition process, and to recommend changes to the "Trust Fund Procedures and Rules". A report of their findings and recommendations was prepared and submitted to the Board of Chosen Freeholders in June 1999. A copy of the report is in Appendix B.

- On March 24, 1999 The Board of Freeholders adopted “Regulations Governing Conduct in Public, Historical and Preserve Recreation Areas of the County of Warren. They were amended on June 14, 2000, and September 13, 2000. A copy is found in Appendix C.
- On April 26, 1999, the Warren County Planning Board held a public hearing on its Open Space Plan. On May 25, 1999, the Warren County Planning Board adopted the Plan with changes after the Board considered the testimony given at the public hearing.
- On July 14, 1999, the Freeholder Board passed a resolution approving portions of the Open Space Task Force Report. A copy of the resolution is in Open Space Task Force Report in Appendix B.
- In the 1999 ballot referendum, the citizens voted to increase the amount of tax money collected from two cents (\$.02) to four cents (\$.04) per one hundred dollars (\$100) of total county equalized real property valuation. In addition to the existing approved purposes, historic preservation was approved as an eligible expense. The ballot question is included in the Open Space Trust Fund Rules and Procedures in Appendix A.
- On March 8, 2000, the Board of Freeholders held a public hearing on the filing of a planning incentive grant application to the Green Acres program for the acquisition of properties discussed in the Warren County Open Space Plan in 1999. The application contained an estimated cost of \$39.7 million for the county to acquire a total of 9,312 acres of land in fee simple.
- On May 16, 2001, the Board of Freeholders adopted revisions to the Rules and Procedures to change funding allocations, clarify budgeting procedures, and to limit historic preservation applications to the Municipal and Charitable Conservancy to acquisition and stabilization only. Funding allocation became 37.5% farmland, 37.5% open space, 25% Trust Fund Committee.
- On June 12, 2002, the Board of Freeholders created a Department of Land Preservation to administer the Open Space and Farmland Preservation Programs and relieve the Planning Department and Soil Conservation District from these duties.
- In 2002, the citizens voted to increase the amount of money collected from \$.04 to \$.06 to fund the acquisition of farmland, open space, historic site preservation, maintenance, and debt service. The ballot question is included in the Open Space Trust Fund Rules and Procedures in Appendix A.
- By Freeholder resolution and effective January 1, 2003, the funding allocation and rules and procedures were changed to 55% for County Agriculture Development Board for farmland preservation, 25% for Municipal and Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund Committee for grants to municipalities and non-profit agencies, and 20% for the Board of Recreation Commissioners for the county’s open space preservation effort in concert with the Open Space Plan. A copy of the current Rules and Procedures are in Appendix A.

- On May 14, 2003 the Board of Chosen Freeholders adopted a bond ordinance in the amount of \$5.5 million to acquire land for open space preservation purposes. Open space preservation as defined in the body of the resolution includes open space, recreation, farmland and historic preservation purposes. The ordinance identified over 50 properties for acquisition.
- On May 26, 2004 the Board of Chosen Freeholders amended the 2003 bond ordinance to remove properties from the acquisition list because they were “no longer available for purchase, or no longer considered for acquisition”. The excess proceeds were re-appropriated and new properties were added to the acquisition list.
- On August 9, 2006 the bond ordinance was amended again to remove properties from the acquisition list because they were “no longer available for purchase, or no longer considered for acquisition”. With this action the available proceeds were reprogrammed for the purchase of a newly added farm property. A copy of the bond ordinance and amendments are in Appendix D.

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