

## CHAPTER VII

### ACTION PLAN

The methods and means to accomplish the goals of the Open Space Plan are discussed in the following sections.

#### **Board of Chosen Freeholders**

Accomplishment of the Plan's goals must first start with Warren County itself. The Board of Chosen Freeholders need to approve of the Plan and its target areas and charge the Department of Land Preservation, Board of Recreation Commissioners, Planning Board, Morris Canal Committee, Planning Department with the directive to carry it out. The BCF should make the financial commitment to dedicate a portion of the Open Space Trust Fund for acquiring open space lands targeted and consider the organizational structure outlined in this chapter to accomplish the objectives of this plan. Having political, financial, and staff support are key to the Plan's implementation.

#### **Acquisition Programming**

##### Five-Year Budgeting Program

A five year acquisition program should be developed to guide the Dept of Land Preservation and the Board of Recreation Commissioners in the selection of properties and allocation of financial and staff resources. In qualifying the open space sites in the five-year program, the determining factor is the availability and certainty of funding. With a determined yearly allocation from the County Open Space Tax, the Board of Recreation Commissioners should continue to develop a financial program that utilizes the Open Space tax as its basis and projected over a five year period using projection techniques recommended by the Chief Financial Officer. Once this financial information is charted, the Board can develop a five-year financial program utilizing county and other funding sources to accomplish the goals of this plan. Below is a list of various financial methods available to the County. It should be noted that, as new financial methods become available, the Board should take full advantage of these methods.

- Partnership with other agencies.
- Long term payment plan.
- Using the Open Space tax to finance a bond.
- Seek financial funding from other agencies and/or grants.

Properties should be targeted in accordance with the Tier I and Tier II system. Tier I sites should be actively pursued by the County while eligible sites in the Tier II areas would be acted on as they become available. The Board of Recreation Commissioners should pursue their acquisition using any one or a combination of the methods described in Section IV of this plan. This will allow

the greatest flexibility in acquisition while still attaining the long-range goal of establishing a coordinated public open space system.

The Board of Recreation Commissioners should use the following additional criteria in preparing the five-year acquisition program:

- Anticipated use of property. Is the use needed in this area of the county?
- Parking availability. Is land available at the site?
- Linkages with other facilities.
- Amount of improvements needed to make site accessible.
- Number of daily visitors to use the site once developed.
- Amount of maintenance each site will require when developed for its use.
- Opportunity for multiple uses.
- Potential for Active/Passive Recreation.
- Impact on adjacent land use.
- Compatibility with existing open space or plans of other agencies.
- Special circumstances making one site more or less valuable.
- Multiple funding sources are involved.

Many of the properties recommended in this Open Space Plan are located in the Highlands Preservation Area. The dual appraisal method for properties in the Preservation Area will be expiring in 2009. Highland Council recommends extending this method for at least another 5 years. This plan supports it. Property owners should be willing to sell property now at the higher value before the dual method period expires.

### **Interagency Coordination**

#### County Agencies

In 1999, the Board of Chosen Freeholders created an Open Space Task Force consisting of two members each of the Warren County Board of Recreation Commissioners, the Warren County Agriculture Development Board, the Municipal and Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund, with staff from the Planning Department and the Soil Conservation District address four main issues. They are:

1. To develop a greater level of cooperation among all the agencies using the trust fund
2. Identify, review and recommend to the Board of Chosen Freeholders various funding mechanisms that should be in place to take advantage of the state funding
3. Identify and seek other funding sources such as grants, matches, etc from other public, private, and non-profit organizations

4. Review and recommend changes to the “Trust Fund Rules and Procedures” to include maintenance as an eligible funding category and to revisit eligible purposes for funding.

The task force discussed a number of strategies that existing agencies can utilize to improve cooperation and coordination. Other strategies would require freeholder action. Each strategy that was discussed is described below.

A. Use one Land Acquisition Routing Form that would be circulated to the various agencies involved in acquisition. The agency taking the inquiry would ask the prospective seller the questions contained on the routing form and then forward a copy of the form to the other agencies to determine their interest in the project. The Warren County Agriculture Development Board, the Warren County Board of Recreation Commissioners, host municipality, Green Acres, and appropriate non-profits would all receive a copy of the form. Using and circulating this form would increase the chances of pooling financial resources and improve communication among the agencies. A copy of the form is found in the appendix of the Open Space Task Force Report.

B. Share agenda packages and the minutes of CADB, BRC, Warren County Planning Board, and Municipal & Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund with each other. This will help the agencies better understand the status of projects underway or being considered. Member of the respective agencies or their staff should consider attending the other agencies meetings as well.

C. Have quarterly or semi-annual “task force meetings” to discuss projects and finances. This would continue the current task force on an informal basis. The advantage is that it would provide for face to face discussion of shared issues.

D. Institute joint marketing of programs to landowners. Brochures of programs offered by the county should be distributed to municipalities, landowners, and non profit agencies. Displays can be erected at the Warren County Farmers Fair and at other similar gatherings to provide information and to promote the programs.

E. Geographic Information System mapping is playing a key role in portraying information graphically. The State Agriculture Development Committee and the Green Acres program are requiring all maps to be submitted in digital form. The mapping of all open space and preserved farmland properties should be coordinated in one county office. The Planning Department could work with other departments that use or could use GIS such as the Health, Engineering, Cultural and Heritage Commission, 911, Elections etc.

The BRC and CADB should work together on properties of mutual interest. Farms that are proposed for preservation that contain the Morris Canal are ideal for joint purchases. Ideally, the Canal right of way should be acquired in fee simple from the farmer and the balance of the farm entered into a farmland preservation easement. If the fee simple acquisition is not possible, a conservation easement on the Canal should be explored with the right to public access to be granted immediately or in the future under certain conditions. At a minimum the survey of the property should delineate the Morris Canal in accordance with the standards contained in the WC Planning Board’s development review regulations.

### Interdepartmental Coordination

An interdepartmental process has been instituted with the Department of Land Preservation, where sites proposed for preservation through the CADB and MCCTF are forward to Planning and Engineering for review and comment. The purpose of the review process is for the Department of Land Preservation to obtain recommendations on where properties or easements would be desired for open space, roadway, and bridge maintenance purposes.

### Funding Coordination

State, county, municipal, and non-profit agencies should work together to coordinate open space preservation efforts and to pool financial and technical resources to help ensure that large and possibly more difficult acquisitions can be attained. The successful acquisition of White Lake in Hardwick Township is one example. The purchase pooled the financial resources of the County of Warren, the State of New Jersey, and the Ridge and Valley Conservancy. Working with the Township of Hardwick to support the acquisition, the \$3.5 million purchase was accomplished. Without this coordination and cooperation, the acquisition may never have happened.

### Open Space Forum

It is recommended that, at least once per year, the Warren County Planning Board and the Warren County Board of Recreation Commissioners, Warren County Agriculture Development Board, and the Municipal and Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund Committee through the Department of Land Preservation and the Planning Department sponsor an Open Space Preservation Forum. All players involved with open space preservation will be invited to share with each other the past year's successes and failures, and discuss the following year's activities. This forum will become the catalyst for formal and informal contacts to be made.

### State Agencies

In addition to this, interagency cooperation can be taken a step further. There will be opportunities for Warren County to acquire land with technical and financial assistance from the State Green Acres Program. Periodically, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Green Acres Program, receives offers of land that do not meet the criteria for state agencies to acquire and manage. Some of these lands, however, may meet the County ' s site selection criteria and, through this cooperative agreement, the land could be purchased utilizing all available resources and assigned to the county for administration and management.

### Planning Board

Through the Warren County Planning Board's development review process, subdivisions and site plans are reviewed for consistency with the county open space plan. Special attention is afforded to properties containing or adjacent to the Morris Canal. Through the review process, and in conjunction with the Morris Canal Committee, recommendations are made to conserve, protect, and potentially acquire the Morris Canal. Developers are required to delineate the Canal on the site

plan and delineate a 100 foot buffer on each side of the Canal. Model conservation and public access easements are provided in the development regulations and are included in Appendix G.

### **Management of County Open Space**

The management of county open space can be defined as the maintenance, development, use and enforcement of adopted rules and policies.

It is noted that a number of documents have been prepared concerning the use, management and development of the county's significant sites.

1. In 1999 the Board of Chosen Freeholders adopted the "Regulations Governing Conduct in Public, Historic, and Passive Recreation Areas of the County of Warren". These regulations established the land areas where hunting by county permit was allowed, and specified other permissible uses and conduct on the county's land holdings.

2. In June 2003, a White Lake Natural Resource Area Inventory and Management Plan was prepared by the Nature Conservancy and the North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development Council through the County Planning Department using an Environmental Services Grant provided by the NJDEP. The management plan was developed through a White Lake Planning Team consisting of Warren County Planning Department staff, Warren County Board of Recreation, North Jersey Resource Conservation & Development Council, The Nature Conservancy, Ridge and Valley Conservancy, Warren County Soil Conservation District, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, NJ Division of Fish & Wildlife-Bureau of Freshwater Fisheries, Nongame & Endangered Species Program, Bureau of Land Management, NJ Natural Heritage Program. This partnership assessed the White Lake site and recommended implementation strategies needed to protect and manage this regional treasure.

#### **Strategies To Mitigate Threats to the Site Include:**

- Acquire lands within the watershed to reduce development threats
- Properly steward the property by patrolling the site, controlling invasive species, continue deer hunting, and manage fishing activities to eliminate impacts to globally rare wetlands and fen communities
- Encourage Best Management Practice's for agriculture and forestry
- Manage recreational uses with regard to globally significant plant and animal communities. In addition to assessing impacts and strategies to mitigate problems the Team developed a short term action plan to address the most immediate challenges threatening the site. The most critical need is to fund a part time Land Steward position to oversee and direct the Team members to facilitate the implementation of the action plan. One direct outcome of this planning process is that the Nature Conservancy was hired by the County to manage the site in accordance with the Plan. Meetings of the planning team are held periodically to review progress and discuss on-going and new projects.

### 3. Lock # 7 west (Bread Lock Park)

The Highlands Project, a non-profit group that helps youths with projects, occupies the house located in the canal prism. The Project has cleared the canal prism and towpath, uncovered to a limited degree the foundations of the structures that were located on site, removed debris and other matter from the barns, and blazed a walking trail around the site. The Highlands Project keeps the building open the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the month for public visitation.

A Historic Preservation Plan for Bread Lock Park was completed and is dated February 22, 2003. It contains an number of recommendations including the need to conduct archeological investigations, restore the canal prism and towpath, stabilize the lock, lock tender's house and other ancillary buildings and provide interpretive signing, renovate the cabinet shop to serve as a visitors center and exhibition space, and relocate the dwelling that the Highlands Project occupies currently, out of prism. The work identified in the plan is recommended to be carried out in six phases over time. It was estimated that the improvements would cost \$3 million.

Lawn cutting and building repairs are handled by the Department of Land Preservation primarily through private contracts.

### 4. Inclined Plane #9 West

A Historic Preservation Plan was completed and dated May 3, 2002. The plan contains a number of recommendations that can be completed in phases over a number of years. The recommendations include: the removal of the modern garage and restoration of the plane incline, partial reconstruction of the inclined plane and retaining extant features of the site such as the stone sleepers, iron rails etc. Archeological investigation would be needed during any reconstruction or restoration work performed. Additionally, the plan recommends the restoration one half of the plane tenders house to its historical significance and using the other half for exhibit space and the caretaker's residence. Lastly, the plan does not recommend the full restoration of the power house and flume. The plan does recommend interpretation through partial reconstruction and enhancement of existing features on site. Throughout the site a series of interpretation stations are recommended to be set up to allow a visitor to enjoy a self guided tour.

### 5. Morris Canal, Rt 22 to County 519 Restoration Project (ISTEA)

Engineering plans are being prepared to restore this section of the Morris Canal and rebuild the Hamlen waste weir. Balancing the needs of historic preservation with environmental regulation have been challenging, in particular with respect to stormwater runoff into the Lopatcong Creek from CR 519 through the Canal.

### 6. Florence Kuipers Memorial Park

The park has been established beginning on Harvey Street in Hackettstown and continuing westward for approximately 1.5 miles. The towpath has been cleared by volunteers and the county

road department. Routine maintenance needs to take place to ensure that the towpath remains free of brush and other obstacles.

#### 7. Oxford Mountain Forest Management Plan

The Warren County Soil Conservation District prepared a forest management plan for this site in 2000.

#### 8. National Heritage Corridor Designation

A National Heritage Area is a place designated by the Congress where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a distinctive landscape. The NHA is a collaborative strategy where residents, government agencies, non-profit groups and other private partners plan and implement programs and projects that recognize and preserve the designated area.

The Morris Canal Greenway and the Designated Wild and Scenic Musconetcong River can form the basis for the designation. It would be a continuation of the Delaware and Lehigh Canal National Heritage Corridor in Pennsylvania.

The National Park Service becomes involved in the process because it is the federal agency responsible for preserving nationally significant resources and National Heritage designation allows the NPS to accomplish its mission without acquiring or managing more land.

There are four critical steps that need to be taken before congressional designation. They are; the completion of a suitability/feasibility study, public involvement in the study, demonstration of widespread public support for the designation, and commitment to the proposed designation from key constituents including governmental, industrial, private, and non-profit organizations, and private citizens.

At the present time an effort is underway to seek designation consisting of private citizens, members of the Morris Canal Committee, Musconetcong Watershed Association, the Board of Recreation Commissioners, and others. The NPS has met with the group and provided guidance for next steps.

More information can be found about the National Heritage Program as [www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas](http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas).

#### 9. 25 Year Morris Canal Greenway Action Plan

On October 24, 2007, the Board of Freeholders passed a resolution to develop a 25 year action plan for the Morris Canal Greenway. The resolution calls for the establishment of a vision for the Greenway, establish goals and milestones, propose projects necessary to meet the goals, define the strategies and methods to be employed, project the costs and the funding sources, propose the organizational structure and interrelationships of public and private entities needed to meet the vision, and to project the economic and public benefits that will be realized when the Action Plan is completed.

The Department of Land Preservation and the Department of Planning, is directed to put together a Request for Proposals for consulting services to prepare the Action in cooperation with the Board of Recreation Commissioners, the Morris Canal Committee, the Planning Board, and the Warren County Regional Chamber of Commerce.

### Organizational Structure for Managing Open Space

Currently, the County of Warren owns over 1,600 acres of open space lands that are grouped into three primary target areas; the Morris Canal Greenway, the Warren Trail, and natural resource areas (White Lake). Prior to August 2002, management of these areas was the responsibility of the Warren County Planning Department under the advice and guidance of the Board of Recreation Commissioners and the Morris Canal Committee.

To manage these land areas the Planning Department staff consisted of a Chief of Land Acquisition and Design, a Park Ranger, an Assistant Planner and secretary. The Department was responsible for securing routine contracts for lawn mowing and snow plowing, and coordinating projects with other county departments such as Road Dept., Buildings and Grounds, Corrections, and Mosquito Commission to accomplish various maintenance objectives. In addition, staff coordinated with non-profit groups such as the Youth Corp., Highlands Project, Friends of the NJ Transportation Museum, Nature Conservancy, North Jersey Resource Conservation District, watershed associations, etc. for land maintenance and management projects that were needed. The park ranger ensured that the land areas were posted properly, patrolled, and maintained and kept litter free. Perhaps the most important job was that he established a presence on the properties and cast a positive public image to those he encountered on the properties. The Ranger provided in field coordination with groups working on county owned sites, issued permits to hunters, explained access points and where land areas were available to hunt.

In August 2002, the Department of Land Preservation was created to coordinate land acquisition for public open space and farmland preservation. As part of the restructuring the Park Ranger position was eliminated, the Sheriff's Office was given the duty of processing hunting permits and patrolling the lands. Assisting the Morris Canal Committee and certain management activities remained with the Planning Department. The Department of Land Preservation became responsible for the Board of Recreation Commissioners. Most management projects are processed through the Department of Land Preservation, with the Planning Department and Morris Canal Committee focusing mostly on limited maintenance and educational projects and tours.

After four years under this organizational structure, the County Planning Board recommends that the County reevaluate the structure and develop an organizational and action plan that will carry the county open space program into the future.

Organizationally, the county may realize efficiencies if the three open space trust fund programs are looked at simultaneously rather than independently. Preserved farms must be inspected at least once per year to ensure that they are in compliance with the development easement. One inspector could be hired to conduct the farm inspections, discuss availability of property for sale with property owners, inspect and patrol open space sites and issue hunting permits. In addition the North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development District identifies



the need for land management on preserved agricultural and public open space lands and may be contracted with to perform certain management activities.

It is recommended that a coordinator of management activities be added within the Department of Land Preservation whose responsibility would be to coordinate and supervise maintenance, development, and other activities of county, private, and non-profit groups on county lands. Currently, the Nature Conservancy is paid an annual sum to manage White Lake. The Highlands Project leases Bread Lock Park and conducts open houses and tours of the area, and works to unearth archeological features of the lock and canal, and to maintain the barn and house on site. The Friends of the NJ Transportation Museum leases the former Consumers Water Company property and use the buildings on site to store transportation equipment. The Friends have also restored the old steam engine and pump house and have opened the site for tours annually. Other groups maybe interested in working on preserved lands and a coordinator of these activities should be hired to facilitate these groups' efforts.

#### Potential Responsibilities of Warren County Open Space Coordinator

1. Post property boundaries and rules of conduct signs
2. Ensure that information kiosk signs are placed at trail heads and at other key points
3. Oversee standard contracts for lawn mowing and farming
4. Monitor conservation easements on Morris Canal and other properties
5. Oversee and assist volunteer tenants occupying buildings:
6. Work with and assist volunteer groups for the clean up of properties, educational seminars etc. Includes the Morris Canal Bus Tour, Ecological and Educational Seminars at White Lake and at the county owned Lopatcong Creek Corridor that are often organized by the Rutgers Cooperative Extension Service, NJ Youth Corps, and AmeriCorps.
7. Routinely monitor and visit properties and inspect for litter, damage, downed trees, and other problems that need correction or enforcement action
8. Respond to visitor questions, be the county's public representative on the properties
9. Write and file reports of daily activities and site inspections
10. Monitor Morris Canal Reconstruction in Lopatcong/Greenwich as part of the ISTEAA Project
11. Assist in the preparation of site management and maintenance plans
12. Inspect farm preserved properties
13. Contact property owners for potential sale of properties (outreach coordinator)

#### Safety

As more lands are acquired for public open space and in particular the establishment of trails, the need for trail security and policing becomes more of an issue. The issues that typically arise stems from the use of off-road vehicles such as ATVs and dirt bikes, on public hiking trails. Several years ago when the Park Ranger was still employed there was an incident where an ATV was damaging portions of the Morris Canal prism and banks. After some detective work and warnings

the guilty party was eventually found and the activity stopped.

Trail networks also require policing in case of emergencies such as when a user becomes lost or injured. A partnership between the county and local police and emergency response teams is needed to mitigate security related issues as they develop. When the Park Ranger was employed, he routinely met with the local police chiefs and fire chiefs associations to establish familiarity and to discuss protocol etc in times of emergency. All chiefs were given maps of the county properties with access and addresses in case an emergency developed on one of the sites.

One way to help a trail user identify where he is to use a trail marking system that incorporates a colored marker with a number at a prescribed interval. Therefore if an individual requires assistance their location on the trail network can be pinpointed more accurately and the responding rescue team can enter the trail network at the best possible location.

### Visibility and Accessibility

Accessibility of public lands is important to many segments of the population and in particular to the elderly, the handicapped, and the young. This issue surfaced in the Warren County Community Health Improvement Plan where lack of physical activity was identified as one of the contributing causes of obesity. One of the obstacles to allowing for a range of physical activity is that there are facilities located at schools and other public areas that are inaccessible to the general public because they are fenced in or otherwise considered to be off limits for public use. It is recommended that these areas be opened for public use.

In addition, some trails are not marked adequately nor are they maintained properly. In some cases, land areas have been acquired but trail development stalled because of the lack of money or man-power. To address this issue it is recommended that a program priority be set using the county open space trust fund as a source of funding for grants to municipalities or non-profit agencies to acquire, construct, maintain and/or mark trails. The grant funding could be made available through the Municipal and Charitable Conservancy Trust Committee process or through a special grant program earmarked for this purpose that could be administered through the MCCTF or the BRC.