

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 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 meets 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 goals of the plan are similar to the 1999 Plan and are described in Chapter II.

Chapter III discusses the roles of federal, state, county, municipal and non-profit agencies. It states that the County has the role to acquire open space lands for public use and to maintain, manage, and develop them in a manner that is consistent with this Open Space Plan. The purpose of County owned open spaces is broader than municipal levels, can extend across municipal boundaries, but are generally less in total acreage than statewide acquisitions. The county system integrates outdoor recreation with environmental protection, farmland preservation, historic preservation, natural resource and historic resource education.

Chapter IV contains a complete inventory of land areas currently owned by all governmental levels, non-profit groups, and private owners. It provides an overview of the funding sources available for acquisition including the county open space trust fund, bond issues, and grants. A discussion on acquisition partners and acquisition methods is included in the chapter.

Chapter V contains a needs analysis to describe why Warren County needs public open space and how much it should have by region and jurisdiction. Population and development trends are reviewed and the social, health, and economic benefits of public open space are described.

Using the balanced land use method, it is estimated that there should be 46,690 acres of public open space in the County. Currently, over 44,000 acres have been acquired by governmental agencies for public open space with close to $\frac{3}{4}$ of it owned by federal and state agencies. The analysis shows that the central and the southern regions are lacking in the amount of preserved public open space while the northern region has a surplus. The balanced land use method calculations reveal that there should be 9,790 acres of open space in County ownership while the county owns 1,624 acres currently. It is noted that while there may be an over abundance of state and federal lands in one region, it should not preclude the county from acquiring additional lands in that particular region.

Chapter VI is the Resource Assessment and Open Space Plan. To meet the goals of the Open Space Plan, the land areas targeted in this 2007 Plan are classified into two tiers.

Tier I properties are those for which the Department of Land Preservation and the Board of

Recreation Commissioners (BRC) would be more proactive pursuing by initiating contact with landowners, securing additional funding sources, and partnering with other agencies.

Tier II properties are those for which the Dept. of Land Preservation would take a reactive approach toward acquisition where the property owner or partnering agency contacts the County first. If the property is consistent with the Open Space Plan, the acquisition may be pursued.

The 2007 Warren County Open Space Plan envisions the County investing in four broad types of open space areas; Greenways, Special Use Areas, Conservation/Natural Resource Areas, and Open Space Lands.

Tier I Greenways include the Morris Canal, the Warren Trail, Ridge and Valley Trail, Inter-connecting Trail Systems such as the Morris Canal – Warren Trail Connections, Morris Canal – Musconetcong River Connections, and the Jenny Jump – Paulinskill Trail Connection.

Tier II Greenways include railroad corridors, Delaware River Greenway Trail, Musconetcong River Greenway Trail, and the Liberty Water Gap Trail.

Special Use areas include significant features of the Morris Canal that have been acquired and need special attention for the management, maintenance, and future development. Tier I special use areas include Inclined Plane #9 west in Greenwich Township, and Bread Lock Park (Lock #7 west). Other special use areas in the County are Florence Kuipers Park in Hackettstown, the Port Murray Boat Basin property and the Consumers Water Company Pump House property.

Conservation Areas are acquired for the preservation and enhancement of valuable natural resources and are generally managed for that purpose. Tier I areas would include those areas that function as a link in a Tier I greenway or special use area as defined in this plan. Existing Conservation/Natural Resource Areas include White Lake Natural Resource Area, Oxford Mountain Natural Resource Area, and the Marble Hill Natural Resource Area.

Open Lands are lands that are acquired to advance regional objectives for watershed protection, farmland preservation, and to enhance regional quality of life by preserving certain lands of county significance in an essentially unimproved condition. Tier I lands would include those that form part of a link in a Tier I greenway project or are adjacent to a Tier I Conservation/Natural Resource Area. County lands that fall within this category include the Nabozny Tract in Franklin Township.

Chapter VI also contains a description of sites identified by municipalities and non-profit agencies and the state's open space acquisition plans affecting Warren County. They include, Garden State Greenways, Pequest River Greenway, Delaware River Greenway, Highlands Greenway, Historic Resources, Jenny Jump State Forest Musconetcong River/Pohatcong Creek Greenway, Natural Areas, Paulins Kill Greenway, Watershed Lands.

Chapter VII contains the Action Plan which discusses the methods and means to accomplish the goals of the Open Space Plan. The recommendations are:

1. The Board of Chosen Freeholders should approve of the Plan and charge the Department of Land Preservation, BRC, Planning Board, Morris Canal Committee, Planning Department with

the directive to carry it out.

2. A five year acquisition program should be developed to guide the Dept of Land Preservation and the BRC in the selection of properties and the allocation of financial and staff resources.

3. Interagency coordination within the county government is needed. In 1999 an Open Space Task force was created by the Board of Freeholders to prepare a report that identified ways to improve on cooperation and coordination among the BRC, County Agriculture Development Board (CADB), and the Municipal & Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund Committee (MCCTF). Those strategies are endorsed in this plan. The major interagency coordination tasks include:

A. 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.

B. To help guide the MCCTF and other county agencies in providing financial assistance to municipalities and non-profit groups it is recommended that the Open Space Plan be consulted to determine how the proposed acquisition fits in with the County's vision for open space. It is recommended that the MCCTF transmit the applications it receives to the County Planning Department to determine consistency with the Open Space Plan.

C. In 2006 an interdepartmental process was instituted with the Department of Land Preservation, where sites proposed for preservation through the BRC, CADB and MCCTF are forwarded 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.

4. 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.

5. It is recommended that, at least once per year, an Open Space Preservation Forum be held. 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.

6. There will be opportunities for Warren County to acquire land with technical and financial assistance from the State Green Acres Program. Periodically, the Green Acres Program receives offers of land that do not meet the criteria for state agencies to acquire and manage. Some of these lands may meet the County's site selection criteria and, through a cooperative agreement, the land could be purchased utilizing State resources and assigned to the county for administration and management.

7. 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.

8. National Heritage Corridor designation should be pursued with the Morris Canal and Musconetcong River as its basis. 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 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.

9. The 25 Year Morris Canal Greenway Action Plan should be completed. 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.

Organizational Structure for Managing Open Space

Currently, the County owns over 1,600 acres of open space land. Prior to August 2002, management of these areas was the responsibility of the Warren County Planning Department under the advice and guidance of the BRC and the Morris Canal Committee. The Planning Department had a Chief of Land Acquisition and a Park Ranger to acquire, manage, maintain, monitor and patrol the properties.

In August 2002, the Department of Land Preservation was created to coordinate land acquisition and management responsibilities 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 is responsible for coordinating the acquisition of properties recommended by the BRC. Most maintenance 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, inspect and patrol open space sites and issue hunting permits.

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. The coordinator could seek out participants and direct the activities of these groups and others that may be interested in maintaining and using county lands in the future.

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 ISTEPA Project
11. Assist in the preparation of site management and maintenance plans
12. Inspect farm preserved properties
13. Contact landowners for prospective interest in selling property for open space

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

stem from the use of off-road vehicles such as ATVs and dirt bikes on public hiking trails.

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. 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. 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 MCCTC process or through a special grant program earmarked for this purpose that could be administered through the MCCTF or the BRC.