

SUSSEX COUNTY OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE

MINUTES

FEBRUARY 26, 2015

The meeting opened at 7:38 p.m. by Chairman Lundin in the Freeholder Meeting Room at the Sussex County Administrative Center, One Spring Street, Newton, New Jersey. The meeting was held in compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act, N.J.S.A. 10:4-1 of 1975, as amended. Notice has been forwarded to the newspapers and posted on the bulletin board maintained at the Sussex County Administrative Center for public announcement.

ROLL CALL:

MEMBERS PRESENT: Cliff Lundin, Chairman
Glenn Schweizer, Vice Chairman
Louis Caruso
Donald Ploetner

MEMBERS EXCUSED: Lisa Chammings
Wolfgang Gstattenbauer
Wes Powers

STAFF PRESENT: Autumn Sylvester, Program Coordinator
Antoinette Wasiewicz, Recording Secretary

ALSO PRESENT: Freeholder Liaison Richard Vohden

MINUTES CORRECTION/APPROVAL:

A motion was made by Donald Ploetner to approve the Minutes of January 22, 2015, as presented. The motion was seconded by Louis Caruso and carried unanimously.

CORRESPONDENCE:

A. ARTICLES OF INTEREST:

Autumn provided the Committee with a copy of a NJ.com article relating to the passage in the legislature of a dual appraisal process for properties in the Highlands Region. New Jersey already had a special appraisal process in place for the property owners, but it expired in 2014. Under the bill, that process is extended through 2019. The appraisal process entitles owners to two appraisals, one based on the present-day value and one based on the value predating the 2004 Highlands Act. The Highlands Act restricts development throughout much of northern New Jersey in the interest of protecting drinking water resources.

The Frankford Township Committee approved reintroducing the township's open space tax. The tax would increase local taxes on the average assessed home by \$26.00/\$100,000 of assessed value.

Lawmakers have drafted a bill to allocate money from the open space ballot question approved last November. Voters approved a measure that would allocate \$71 million of corporate business taxes to fund open space preservation for four years, and then increase it to at least \$121 million in succeeding years. Under the draft bill, \$45 million of the money would be allocated to the State's Green Acres program, which preserves open space and develops parks in urban areas. Another \$21 million would be set aside for farmland preservation; \$3 million for the State's Blue Acres program to buy up flood-prone properties; and \$2.1 million to maintain historic structures.

OLD BUSINESS:

None

NEW BUSINESS:

A. OPEN SPACE PLAN UPDATE – DISCUSSION:

Cliff Lundin said at the last Open Space Committee meeting, there was some discussion about the need to update the Open Space Master Plan. He said that he and Autumn met with Planning Director, Eric Snyder last week to discuss the plan. There was some thought to the possibility of using the funds to have some of the work done by the Land Conservancy of New Jersey and a summer intern. Mr. Snyder indicated that Planning's budget includes money for a summer intern but not the Land Conservancy. He feels that the plan can be updated in-house, primarily by the Committee with help from Autumn and an intern.

The existing plan outlines the goals of the open space preservation program but it was not specific enough. Cliff said the plan was very well written and that the bulk of it does not need to be updated; however, it does lack specifics. Also, the plan was written at a time when the County had to qualify for State Funding and State Planning Incentive Grants. At the time the County did meet the criteria.

Mr. Snyder said in the past, the open space funds have been used to purchase parcels that probably would never have been developed due to wetlands, steep slopes, etc. There were also parcels that a municipality may have given approval to develop and then changed their mind and now wants it preserved. The fact that the town gave approval to develop the parcel raised the price of the property.

B. OPEN SPACE TRUST FUND – STATUS REPORT;

The Open Space Trust will expire at the end of this year. Cliff said at one time, there were two County Open Space Trusts. The first trust established a 90%/10% allocation (with Farmland Preservation.) The second trust was not confined to the 90%/10% allocation. The first trust expired two to three years ago without any discussion of renewal. If the second trust is to be renewed, it will have to go back to a ballot. This means that the Freeholders will have to authorize a referendum. Cliff thought the deadline for authorizing a referendum is mid-August. He said, from a practical perspective, it should be done earlier than that in order to get publicity out.

The current trust does not have the 90%/10% limit but it has been implied that 90% of the money raised by the trust is going to farmland preservation and 10% to open space. Cliff said he asked Eric if it is possible to vary those percentages in the new trust. Mr. Snyder's feeling was that the Freeholders are probably more in favor of farmland preservation than general open space. There is a sentiment that there is enough open space in Sussex County. The figures Eric quoted to Cliff were that approximately 121,000 of acres of Sussex County are preserved, which is approximately 1/3 of Sussex County. He also indicated that the economics have to be looked at. In the recent study done for the Freeholders or being quoted by the Freeholders, the demographics of Sussex County are down---the population is decreasing. Millennials don't want to or aren't moving here at the current time. Therefore we are looking at a declining revenue stream.

There was some discussion about the fact that if you look at what Sussex County is about and why most of us moved here, it was to get out of the city---to have open space. Cliff feels the economics can be shown to work, that in fact, open space can attract people to be here. Homes don't necessarily make money for towns; homes lose money for towns when you have kids in the school system.

Cliff said he also discussed with Eric that in the days of the original trust, the money that was used for open space stayed in the open space coffers. If we didn't spend it one year, it was available the following year. With the second trust, if the open space money

isn't used in the first year, it's rolled over into the farmland funds. At a minimum of 10%, the funds come to \$90,000.00 a year. If the Committee gets a really good project, we may want those funds to roll into the following year. Eric thought that there might be some flexibility in keeping those funds for Open Space. Donald Ploetner asked how much funding goes to the Farmland Preservation Program. Autumn said the open space tax collects about \$450,000.00 for Farmland Preservation.

Cliff said the tasks before the Open Space Committee this year are to redo the Plan, to show that the economics work and to identify some specific tracts before convincing the Freeholders to get an Open Space Referendum back on the ballot, and getting the ballot passed. There was a statewide question on the ballot last year dealing with a dedication of a portion of the corporate business tax to Green Acres preservation. In that election, it carried in every one of the 21 counties in New Jersey. In Sussex County, it passed by 61% in favor/39% against. However in the 2009 Green Acres Referendum, the public question passed statewide but failed in Sussex County by 43% in favor and 57% against. Glenn Schweizer pointed out that the referendums asked different questions. If you were to ask the residents of Sussex County, "Do you want to continue the County Open Space tax to acquire open space properties in Sussex County?" it would pass 61/39. People who live here or have moved here have done so because the quality of life is enhanced by the farmland and open space properties. As far as economics, he does not feel that the exodus of the millennials is a strong correlation between increased open space and that phenomenon. That's more of an economic issue about job availability. Economic analyses show that if you were to replace some open space with housing; it is a loser from the tax perspective. It's going to cost the town more to provide services necessary than what you're getting back from those new residents. Autumn said residential development is a lot more costly. Cliff added that it is more so for non-age restricted residential development.

Freeholder Vohden said the study about millennials done by Dean Hughes shows that in every county around Sussex County, the population of the millennials is growing at a rate of 15-17%. In Sussex County, it's .08%. They go away to college and they don't come back or they get a job and move out of here. Even if they want to live here, most of the students have an average college debt of \$35,000.00. They have to pay off the \$35,000.00 before they even think about buying a home. What could possibly help in keeping them here is moderate/low income housing. This sector of the population leaving hurts the businesses that would have been supported by them. School enrollment is also down by 22.5%. Freeholder Vohden said 36% of Sussex County is preserved open space; 38% of the County is in the Highlands which leaves 26% available for future development.

Donald asked if the Open Space Plan should address a percentage of how much acreage we want to acquire countywide, and have an end number. Glenn pointed out that the County has not acquired any open space in the last few years, other than the parcel in Andover. Lou Caruso said his town has been competing with developers.

Freeholder Vohden said now is the time to buy property. Cliff said according to data from the Soil Conservation Districts, in 2008 there was a dive of applications to zero all around the State. The trend is on an up-curve statewide, but it is the eastern counties that are booming. There is a ring around the Delaware River (Sussex, Warren, Mercer, Hunterdon and Gloucester) that is still dead. His office is seeing a little more life, but it's coming out of Sparta primarily. Freeholder Vohden said last year, home values (and probably property values) in Sussex County decreased 5.78% from what they were the prior year. The only two areas that are doing halfway decent are Sparta and Hopatcong. Cliff said the school enrollment in Hopatcong is down about 16% and there are about 300-400 vacant houses in town that are either in short sale or the foreclosure process. Home prices are not going to go up until those houses are off the market.

Glenn said if the Open space Plan is going to be updated; the ideal thing to do would be to take a look at what's been achieved both in tab form and map. From that you can match it against the goals of smart purchases. He suggested having a meeting with municipal people who are involved in Open Space to discuss what they are looking for in their towns. Freeholder Vohden said that is the key to promote this as greenways and continuous properties. Lou suggested that the towns rank their priorities. Donald suggested that the towns be given an option of adding a priority to the existing list. Cliff said he would like to have the towns come to next month's meeting. Autumn agreed that a needs assessment will have to be done. We are going to have to examine what we have and how we met the goals of the 2003 plan. Going forward, we may not need a percentage of lands we want to acquire but what we want to do, such as improve trails or passive recreation areas. The County never allowed for that before. Donald asked if that can be changed. Cliff felt that may cause us to be over-flooded with requests. Glenn said the trust will only be about \$90,000.00 a year and that if you open it up to park development, a lot of residents would vote against it. He feels the residents would see a higher and better use in acquiring the necessary properties, not to use the funds to give to town X to put in a ball field or install new turf. Autumn said it could be more for passive recreation such as clearing a trail or signage. That was the number one wish by town officials from the 2003 Plan. Donald asked if there was grant money available for Open Space. Autumn said there are a lot of federal grants but they are more targeted. Cliff said the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) has a grant program that they are bringing out this year for trail maintenance and trail development, but it is for matching funds of \$2,500.00. Rich said the North Jersey Transportation Authority has TAP grants (Transportation Alternative Programs) for safe school routes, rails to trails, trails, signage on trails and historic preservation. However, you have to submit a grant for \$250,000.00. Autumn said that size of a grant would work as a joint venture. She said the New Jersey Trails Plan that was done in 2009 listed the top six trails in the State by users. Sussex County had four or five of them. The Rails to Trails conservancy group did a study about individual users, and the Paulins Kill Valley Trail had about 40,000 individual users; the Sussex Branch had 25,000.

Cliff suggested that we send the towns a survey and ask them to come in with any maps that they have and what they would want to see. Glenn said since there hasn't been a lot going on, the towns may need a little time to focus on what their needs are. If they come too early, they may not have thought through the process enough. Donald agreed that they could use the time but that there isn't much time to get this to the Freeholders and on the ballot by August. Freeholder Vohden said he will bring up the subject of the trust funds expiration at the next Freeholder meeting. Autumn felt that there will be more support for the open space trust fund if it could be used for other than acquisition. Many people feel we don't need to buy more open space, we already have enough. Glenn said he has reservations about that. Cliff said he wouldn't open it up to active recreation but he would like to see it opened up to passive recreation and development, maintenance or stewardship of properties.

Autumn had a copy of Passaic County's plan survey and said that we should look at doing a community survey. Cliff wants to get a brief survey out to the towns and invite them to the March meeting just to start dialog. Autumn said that the County does not qualify for Green Acres funding because the County tax was so low. Now with Green Acres funding being so limited, the County may not be able to apply to them. Cliff said the Open Space authorization had a range on the tax rate. He would like the tax to stay within that range.

There was also discussion about making an outreach to the County Agriculture Development Board. Donald suggested a joint meeting with them in March. Cliff felt the towns should come to the Open Space meeting and that the Open Space Committee can approach the Agriculture Development Board at their March meeting. Donald suggested that the March meeting begin a little earlier to allow more time for discussion with a large group. It was agreed that the meeting should begin at 7:00 p.m. rather than 7:30. There was also some discussion about the towns that have open space taxes.

Autumn also shared some highlights or ideas from other county's Open Space Plans which she thought might be useful for Sussex County. Cliff said the County's Strategic Growth Plan focused on tourism, transportation, agricultural development and open space. It would be ideal to bring trail networks to destinations. Autumn said that the Chatterbox is right on the Sussex Branch and that many users of the trail go to this restaurant. The Chatterbox's owner may be someone to talk to. Freeholder Vohden said it would be helpful to tie open space in with economic development. Sussex County is behind in the State National Recovery and it needs to promote growth and recovery.

Glenn provided the Committee with a copy of the Economic Impact Analysis from the Morris County Preservation Trust Fund Analysis and Strategy Report. The Economic Study was done to show the value of open space. He said it might be a smart move to merge the interests of Open Space and Farmland for agri and eco-tourism. Autumn

provided the committee with a copy of the Draft Strategic Growth Plan update. The Plan focuses on open space as the County's most valuable resource. Freeholder Vohden said the Committee is going to have to balance open space with economic development. Glenn said it may be helpful to promote open space as a way to protect our groundwater supply. Autumn said she can create a map showing the well heads and vernal pools.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

None

ADJOURNMENT:

All business having been completed, a motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Glenn Schweizer. The motion was seconded by Donald Ploetner and carried unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 8:40 p.m.