

SUSSEX COUNTY OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE

MINUTES

SEPTEMBER 22, 2016

The meeting opened at 7:30 p.m. by Vice Chairman Schweizer 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: Glenn Schweizer, Vice Chairman
Louis Caruso
R. Michael Dolan
Donald Ploetner
Stephen Skellenger

MEMBERS EXCUSED: Cliff Lundin, Chairman
Lisa Chammings

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

ALSO PRESENT: Sandy Urgo, The Land Conservancy of New Jersey
Harry Shortway, Vernon Township Mayor
Sally Rinker, Vernon Township
Mike Furrey, Vernon Township
Jean Murphy, Vernon Township

Vice Chairman Glenn Schweizer welcomed Stephen Skellenger as the new At-Large member of the Open Space Committee. He asked the Committee to introduce themselves to Stephen and also asked Stephen to say a few words. Stephen said he is a Councilman in Franklin Borough and has served on various boards in Franklin. He also served on the Solid Waste Advisory Committee until his appointment to the Franklin Council.

MINUTES CORRECTION/APPROVAL:

A motion was made by Donald Ploetner to approve the Minutes of June 23, 2016, as presented. The motion was seconded by Louis Caruso. All were in favor, with an abstention from Stephen Skellenger. Motion carried.

CORRESPONDENCE:

A. ARTICLES OF INTEREST:

Autumn provided the Committee with an article about the Corporate Business Tax which will be used for the Open Space Trust Fund, Farmland Preservation, Historic Preservation and the Blue Acres Program. She believes 29% will be used for Farmland Preservation. There will be \$70 million available for all projects, 60% will go towards Green Acres; and 31% will go towards Farmland Preservation and stewardship programs; \$3.1 million will go towards Historic preservation and 4% will go towards Blue Acres.

B. STILLWATER TOWNSHIP LETTER OF SUPPORT:

A letter was received from the Stillwater Township Environmental Commission supporting the Open Space Plan. The letter was addressed to the Freeholders and was included in their Resolution package at the September 10 meeting.

NEW BUSINESS:

A. VERNON OPEN SPACE TRUST FUND APPLICATION – MASKER PATH EXTENSION PRESENTATION:

Glenn said an Open Space application was received from Vernon Township. There will be a conceptual presentation this evening and then the Committee will conduct a site visit. Any questions or comments after review of the application and site visit will be sent back to the applicant. The applicant will return for a final presentation and address the questions or comments. The Committee will then make a decision on the application.

Mike Furrey said in January 2016, Mayor Shortway formed a Greenway Action Committee. The Committee is made up of eight members and its focus is on sustainability for the Township of Vernon. One of their objectives is to complete a greenway. They are here this evening to talk about one part of that pathway. He said this presentation was prepared with the help of Sandy Urgo, of the Land Conservancy.

Mr. Furrey said the property is on Block 92, Lot 2 and is 19.5 acres. It is located between Masker Road and Maple Grange Road. They are proposing the acquisition of property from the current owner, Sussex Bank. They want to create a recreational path and they executed an acquisition contract. When complete, it will be owned and managed by the township.

A map was displayed. Mr. Furrey said this property already has already an existing 15' easement for the path. He pointed out the easement and an existing park on the map. The easement is poorly aligned and does not connect to Masker Road. It needs to be rerouted. To connect the easement to Masker Road, they have to cross over privately owned property. They are unable to get an easement from this property owner. The township is currently getting a permit to reroute the path and connect it to Masker Road. They had a permit from DEP but must reapply for the permit. Mr. Furrey also pointed out a u-shaped path that goes to Maple Grange Park. They hope to have a path from the New York State into Hardyston. They want to connect federal open space, the Appalachian Trail and the Wallkill National Wildlife Refuges. They also want to connect the ski area to the town center. It is hoped that this greenway will stimulate the economy in the area. Mr. Furrey said the property has a view of the surrounding mountains. Some of the property is wetlands and home to many threatened and endangered species. It is also on the Vernon Valley Natural Heritage Priority site.

The cost of the land is \$70,000.00 and an additional cost of \$13,000.00 for due diligence. Vernon Township has an Open Space Trust Fund and they will contribute \$28,000.00 toward the project. The Land Conservancy has offered \$35,000.00 in Green Acres Planning Incentive Grant. They are asking \$20,000.00 from the County Open Space Trust Fund.

The acquisition of the property would connect Maple Grange Park to Maple Grange Road and on the other side it would connect to a recreational path on Canal Road. The Appalachian Trail crosses over nearby.

Mayor Shortway said this project has been in the works for over a decade. He talked about the loss of population in the County and added that Vernon leads the loss of population throughout the State. He believes preserving farmland, open space and trails will bring people into the county. The township has many people from outside counties coming to use the Appalachian Trail. There are also plans for a botanical garden and plans to have special education students plant a garden to be sold at a farmers market. He said that next year he will ask the town council to bond for

repaving work Maple Grange Road. He said the property has a lot of wetlands and wildlife. It is also a building lot and he does not want to lose it to a builder. Mayor Shortway said that Vernon Township is the recipient of a "no net loss tree grant." They've already started to look into putting trees on that property. The two residential home owners will welcome a tree screen. He said eventually, they would like this trail to connect to other Sussex County trails all the way out to the Delaware Water Gap. Mayor Shortway said if the township can get the trails to the Mountain Creek property, they will build a path through their property to Hardyston.

Lou Caruso said the last time the township came before the Open Space Committee; they had a big parking problem. He asked if this project will help that situation. Mayor Shortway said that the lots on Canal Road are small and that it is a bike path. He doesn't want to put parking there. He added that Mountain Creek offered free shuttle service every half hour from their parking lot to trail.

Lou asked for a bigger map of the trail system. Mayor Shortway and Michael Furrey said they would provide bigger maps.

Donald Ploetner asked Mayor Shortway about the timeframe for this property. Is there an agreement with the seller? Mayor Shortway said they ran into a problem because the due diligence has to be complete on September 13. He contacted the Executive Vice President of Sussex Bank and they were able to move the date to December 13. The Township since passed a Resolution to the survey, appraisal and environmental study done. The closing must be done by December 31. Donald asked if those will be available in time for the October Open Space Committee meeting. Sandy Urgo said that most of the vendors are given 30 days and that they were just authorized at the end of last week. She said even if they don't have a final report, they will have an appraised value. Mayor Shortway said the assessment value is \$183,900.00. Ms. Murphy said in 2015, the assessed value it was \$234,000.00.

Mike Dolan asked if the endangered species have actually been observed at the property or that this is a potential habitat for them. Ms. Urgo said it is a landscape project identified habitat and that there is already a DEP permit that the town obtained for constructing a house lot for someone. It was approved by the Planning Board but she is not familiar with the building plans or permits. She said about six to seven years ago, the township had their engineer obtain a permit for the path to inch it over so it connects to Masker Road beyond the private property. However, the permit expired.

Glenn Schweizer asked what kind of construction is proposed for the trail. Will it be cinder or paved? Mr. Shortway said it will be a permeable path similar to the Appalachian Trail. Mr. Schweizer said this application was presented to this Committee in 2009. At that time, the purchase price was much higher.

Autumn asked if there were plans for crosswalks. Mayor Shortway said there were plans for crosswalks but they have to look for areas with visibility. There is also a study being done to lower the speed limit from 35 mph to 25 mph. There are also plans for signage.

Mike asked if there is opposition within the township for this project. Mayor Shortway said some of the people who used to be for the project when they were in power, are now against it. He believes that this project helped him win the election.

There was some discussion on the timetable. Ms. Urgo asked if the County would allow a closing before County Trust Fund money is available. Autumn said there have been occasions when the County did a reimbursement. Ms. Urgo said there is also a time constraint with The Land Conservancy. She said the Conservancy's funding is Green Acres Funding. They must also meet a lot of requirements before receiving the funding. The likelihood is that the Township will use its fund to close on the property, and then be reimbursed.

The Committee thanked the applicant for the presentation.

OLD BUSINESS:

A. 2016 OPEN SPACE PLAN UPDATE;

Autumn said she emailed out the links to download the final presentation. The Land Conservancy had printer problems so they were not able to provide hard copies yet. The Open Space Plan update passed unanimously. Glenn said there was an issue raised regarding the importance of stewardship. Cliff Lundin said that currently, the open space funds can only be used for acquisition. A referendum is required to allow the funds to be used for stewardship.

Glenn talked about the Vernon application that came before the Committee a few years ago. It was one of four applications for open space. There was an effort to spend the money because if the money wasn't used, it rolled over to the farmland preservation funds. The Committee recommended funding of all four of the projects. The problem with the Vernon parcel was that the appraisal value was extremely high. The Freeholders decided not to fund that project. He believes there was some conjecture because the property was previously owned by a councilwoman in Vernon. There was also a feeling that Vernon should have put more funds to the project. Lou said the issue of wetlands was also talked about. Glenn said at the time the Freeholders did not want to spend money on wetlands.

There was some discussion about dates to visit the property. After a short discussion, the Committee agreed to visit the site on a Saturday, either October 8 or October 15 at 3:00 p.m. Antoinette will arrange the visits and also provide notice to the media.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

None

ADJOURNMENT:

All business having been completed, a motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Donald Ploetner. The motion was seconded by Stephen Skellenger and carried unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 8:25 p.m.