

With the pending exhaustion of funding for open space in New Jersey, Public Question #1, appearing on the November ballot and authorizing a bond for \$400 million to replenish the Garden State Preservation Trust (GSPT) fund, is critical to the interests of open space advocates throughout the state. The Morris Green Table invited speakers to help detail the achievements of the GSPT for New Jersey and for Morris County in particular, along with some recommendations of how to rally support for open space funding in a time of economic downturn.

The forum was opened with a welcome from Barbara Davis of the Land Conservancy of NJ (TLC-NJ) and with an introduction of the speakers by Mayor Bill Cogger of Chester Township, the moderator of the forum. Tom Wells of the Nature Conservancy, representing the Keep It Green (KIG) Campaign, presented the recent history of the NJ's open space funding, starting with the creation of the GSPT in 1998 by Gov. Christine Whitman and the state legislature through the dedication of a portion of the state sales tax and the ability to issue bonds. Aiming at preserving 1,000,000 acres, the GSPT was able, with its funding lasting to 2006, to reach 300,000 acres due to the rapid increase in land prices. Overall, land preservation in NJ occurred at three times the rate prior to the institution of the GSPT, with 1,300 farms and over 400 historic sites being saved in the period. As funding is exhausted, the legislature has authorized stop-gap bonds to cover the shortfall until a stable source of funding for the GSPT can be created. KIG, a coalition of 135 non-profit organizations interested in open space, including outdoor sports, recreation, planning, hunting/fishing, and environmental groups, is currently working to increase awareness of Public Question #1 to keep NJ's land preservation programs from halting in their vital work.

Mr. Wells gave four benefits that KIG sees in Public Question #1. First, it will preserve land that protects drinking water supply and quality by keeping potential polluting activities away from source water areas. Second, it will contribute another 70,000 acres of open space and working farms to NJ's inventory. Third, through its historic preservation allotment, it can contribute 30 jobs to NJ's economy. Finally, the cost of the bond will amount to less than \$1 a month for each household in the state. Out of its \$400 million total, the bond will have \$216 million earmarked for open space through the state's Green Acres program, \$146 million for farm preservation given to the State Agricultural Development Committee (SADC), \$24 million for flood-prone area buy-outs through the Blue Acres program, and \$12 million in historic site preservation to the NJ Historic Trust. Mr. Wells exhorted the audience to look carefully at the top of the ballot in November to make sure that they do not miss Public Question #1, the only state-wide initiative that will appear there.

Following Mr. Wells, David Epstein, executive director of TLC-NJ and treasurer of KIG, gave some specifics on how the GSPT has benefitted Morris County directly, with nearly 40,000 acres of open space and farmland preserved, representing 13% of the county, thanks to \$210 million in GSPT funds spent here. Given the concerns about adding to NJ's debt with another bond, Mr. Epstein gave four reasons why bonding is appropriate for land preservation. First, the cost of the bond is modest, amounting to \$10 a year for each household, over a period of 20 years (the life of the bond). Second, the economic downturn has provided land preservation opportunities with both low land prices and low interest rates for bonds. Third, the process of land preservation helps real estate prices recover as it generates value for already built properties and reduces the supply of undeveloped properties. This combination of low land prices and government stimulus spending was practiced in the 1930s by the federal government, he pointed out, leading to the creation of

such national treasures as the string of Appalachian national parks that preserved some of the finest natural areas of the eastern United States and helped revive the surrounding depressed communities. Finally, Mr. Epstein pointed out that land preservation projects that were already in negotiation would be halted and vital areas that need to be protected could be lost to development, an unrecoverable loss in our densely populated state.

Even though Public Question #1 is a state-wide initiative, Mr. Epstein cautioned the audience that open space should be seen as a municipal issue, one which improves quality of life and is tax-neutral. Should Public Question #1 fail in November, he predicted that open space funding overall would start to decrease as counties and municipalities depend on the state matching funds to make land preservation deals happen. Already, Morris and Sussex counties have reduced their open space fund rates, and without state and county matches, it would be unrealistic to expect towns, currently providing 10-15% of the costs of acquisition, to be able to fund a 50% share. This lack of a match is critical for Highlands communities, as GSPT has so far been the sole source of funding to cover the landowner equity issues engendered by the Highlands Act. Overall, recreation development and historic preservation are funded by the state, which makes those efforts dependent almost entirely on Public Question #1. Further, a potential defeat would darken and delay the process of finding any future open space funding for GSPT itself, he asserted.

Mr. Epstein provided the audience with a few recommended activities to help pass Public Question #1. He asked members to take home a copy of the draft municipal resolution that KIG had brought to the forum and bring it to their town's governing body for adoption. County passage would also be important, so he recommended contacting freeholders to gain their support. Energizing voters is key as well, so he suggested that information on Public Question #1 be available at municipal buildings and included in community newsletters, along with information on voter registration and the early voting option (formerly called "absentee balloting"). KIG is ready to assist with creating press events to help highlight municipal efforts such as press conferences to announce passage of the resolution. Finally, membership in KIG would also help to contribute to its public information campaign during the next six weeks before the November elections.

Before opening the forum for audience questions, Mayor Cogger provided his experiences of open space as it has benefited Chester Township and, as a resident living on a preserved farm, himself personally. He saw the mission of the audience as shouting "Fire!" to get people aroused, as "Help!" is too often ignored. The ratables chase is an addiction that towns have to break, he warned. The most developed municipalities are also the ones with the highest property tax rates, thanks to infrastructure costs and COAH obligations generated by all that development. But, he has seen that there is a lack of political will for bonding, due to worries about debt, so legislative solutions to help fund open space will not be forthcoming without strong voter support.

With the floor opened, Mayor Mary-Anna Holden of Madison rose to give her account of how historic preservation benefits towns. Working on a study commissioned in 1998 by the National Park Service, she discovered that every \$1 spent on historic preservation would generate \$8 in the local economy surrounding the preserved site. Visits to NJ's historic sites outnumbered visits to Atlantic City casinos, she noted, showing the importance of those sites to NJ's economy. Looking at American cities that have successfully revitalized their inner core neighborhoods, she observed that historic preservation initiatives were at the center of bringing life back to those neighborhoods.

A question about specific benefits to Highlands communities in the Preservation area brought a response from Mayor Cogger about the establishment of the Highlands Bank and the transfer-of-development rights (TDR) program beginning with no other funding mechanism than the GSPT. He added that issues like the conversion of dairy farms, currently suffering from a collapse in milk prices, could not proceed without GSPT funding to help farmers pay for new equipment and materials. From the audience, Ralph Siegel, executive director of the GSPT, SADC member, and Highlands Bank trustee, arose to give his own account of GSPT and Highlands efforts (\$420 million spent in the Highlands, 20% of the total GSPT funds), as well as a general history of NJ's open space efforts. Currently, NJ ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> among the 50 states in open space preservation, allocating \$200 million a year for the past 11 years, trailing only Florida's \$300 million annual budget. States anxious to start preserving land look to New Jersey as a national leader, with good reason, he said. Morris County's farmland preservation ranks 1<sup>st</sup> in the nation, as it succeeds in preserving real, functioning farms in the midst of one of the most expensive counties in the US. Without a state match, though, he warned that even Morris County would be in trouble.

Ms. Davis closed the forum with thanks to the speakers and to the audience. She also exhorted the audience to help pass municipal resolutions to support the bond question, with only five or six towns in the county already doing so. Topics for future Green Table forums could also be suggested by audience members to any of the Steering Committee members who were present, she reminded everyone.