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CHESTER TOWNSHIP MAYOR: Setting aside land stabilizes taxes in long run

Land preservation ballot question's passage urged

By **MEGHAN VAN DYK**
STAFF WRITER

HANOVER — Preserving land for open space, farmland and historic reasons is the smartest way a community can save taxpayers' money in the long run, Chester Township Mayor William Cogger said.

"Not only does it protect the environment, provides us clean drinking water and leaves a legacy of conservation to our children, it makes economic sense," Cogger said. "Open space stabilizes taxes — it doesn't require the building of new schools, there are no COAH obligations and you don't need to hire police officers to patrol fields and forests."

More than 50 Morris environmental and municipal leaders gathered at the Frelinghuysen Arboretum on Wednesday at a meeting of the Morris County Green Table to rally for the passage of a \$400 million question on the November ballot that would replenish the Garden State Preservation Trust.

If the initiative is approved, \$218 million would be set aside for open space; \$146 million for farmland preservation; \$24 million for flood-plain and watershed management, and \$12 million for historic preservation over the next two years.

The cost of the bond issue would be \$10 annually per household, less than \$1 per month, according to David Epstein, president of The Land Conservancy of New Jersey.

"Lands we want to preserve are still under threat today and we have an opportunity to provide a silver lining for taxpayers," said Epstein, also a treasurer for the "New Jersey Keep it Green" campaign, a coalition of 135 organizations from across the state working together to pass the initiative. "Interest rates are at their lowest rates in our lifetime and land prices have dropped significantly. This is the time."

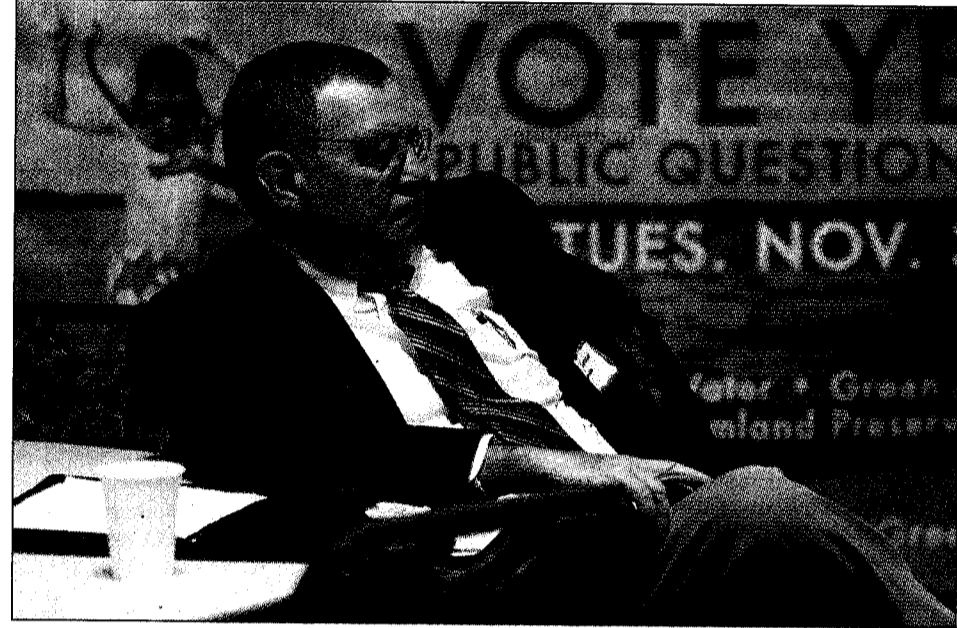
Epstein said some 40,000 acres of Morris County land has been preserved in the past decade using \$210 million provided by the state's Green Acres, Farmland Preservation, Blue Acres and Historic Trust pro-

grams. That accounts for 13 percent of the entire land mass of the county and 20,200 acres of open space, 108 farms encompassing 19,300 acres and \$7 million that preserved historic sites, he said.

Kathy Murphy, grants coordinator for Mount Olive, said the Garden State Preservation Trust has played a critical role in acquiring the 2,211 acres of municipal open space in the 31-square-mile township. That number does not include state-owned land and preserved farms, which account for another few thousand acres, she said.

"There are still important lands to preserve, like the headwaters of the South Branch of the Raritan River, which provides drinking water to thousands," Murphy said.

Mary-Anna Holden, Madison's mayor, said Madison has benefited from the trust by receiving funds for historic buildings. It's been a good investment, she said, citing a 1997 study by the National Parks Service which determined that for every dollar spent on his-



STAFF PHOTOS: BOB KARP

James Leach of Jefferson (above) listens during the Morris County Green Table breakfast at the Frelinghuysen Arboretum discussing the November ballot question to renew state funding for open space preservation. David Epstein, president of The Land Conservancy of New Jersey (at left), says with interest rates and land prices down, "This is the time."

toric sites in New Jersey, eight dollars are returned to the economy through tourism.

Cogger also stressed the importance of the trust to the Highlands region. The trust, he said, is the "only best hope" for landowners

in the Highlands because it is the only source of funding in which to purchase and preserve land. Since 1961, state voters have approved every open space bond issue put before them. The dozen bond issues resulted in the

state spending \$2.1 billion to preserve 300,000 acres of open space and farmland and preserving 400 historic sites.

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