

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Lake in Byram Township

“By choice, or by default, we will carve out a land legacy for our heirs. We can misuse the land and diminish the usefulness of resources, or we can create a world in which physical affluence and affluence of spirit go hand in hand.”
Stewart Lee Udall, *The Quiet Crisis*

Sussex County is New Jersey’s frontier and northwestern gateway. The County is home to superlative natural resources, such as globally rare butterflies, pristine stream corridors and geologic features found nowhere else in the state. The county boasts distinctive and exclusive habitats for a variety of plant and animal species. Sussex County hosts plenty of day trippers eager to drop a fishing line or explore the rich array of cultural sites reminiscent of New Jersey’s agricultural roots—not easily remembered in the more developed parts of the state. The bucolic scenery and open lands that support such biodiversity are also attracting the sprawl that has characterized much of the rest of New Jersey. An Open Space and Recreation Plan consistent and compatible with a strategic growth plan will ensure that the natural, cultural, recreational and aesthetic values that make Sussex County special are sustained.

Sussex County has nearly one-third (111,170 acres) of its land as permanently preserved open space. This land is owned and managed by a variety of state and federal agencies, municipalities, and nonprofit land conservation organizations. By far, the largest owner of preserved open space in the county is the State of New Jersey, owning two-thirds (73,870 acres) of the county’s preserved land. With adequate stewardship, these lands will be part of the Sussex County landscape forever. A small portion (7,057 acres) of the preserved open space includes preserved farmland, ensuring that agricultural land uses remain a significant part of the county’s countryside in perpetuity.

To preserve this rich heritage and to build on this legacy, voters of Sussex County overwhelmingly (73%) supported a referendum to establish a “Farmland, Recreation and Open Space Trust Fund.” The County Board of Chosen Freeholders began to collect the tax in July 2001 at a rate approved by the voters of two cents per \$100 of equalized property value. The amount collected each year is about \$2 million. The bulk (90%) of the funding supports farmland preservation efforts, leaving about \$200,000 per year to assist in the acquisition of open space lands. In March 2002, the Freeholders appointed an Open Space Advisory Committee to recommend properties and oversee a grant process that allocates the proceeds of the Trust to municipalities. The first grant awards were announced in early 2003.

In addition to county funds for open space, over one-third (9) of the municipalities in Sussex County have established open space trust funds. These funds are dedicated for municipal park and recreation acquisition and development purposes as well as farmland and historic preservation. These local funds generate about \$1 million annually. Green and Vernon use local trust funds for acquisition purposes only. The other seven municipalities can use funds for recreation facility development and improvements. Two municipalities include maintenance of preservation areas as an eligible expense for dedicated local trust funds.

The Sussex County Open Space Advisory Committee was also charged with developing an Open Space and Recreation Plan to guide the county’s expenditure of the Open Space Trust. Other roles of the Committee include taking a snapshot of the status of land conservation in the county and looking toward the future to shape the growth of the county.

The outreach activities for the open space planning process began in January 2003. In concert with the Sussex County Open Space Advisory Committee, Morris Land Conservancy organized a variety of outreach activities to ensure that the Open Space and Recreation Plan reflected the intentions of residents and community leaders as well as those agencies and organizations actively involved in open space preservation in Sussex County. These outreach activities engaged over 300 people and included:

- A written survey targeting municipal leaders to identify goals of open space preservation (269 respondents representing every town except Walpack);
- Eight public meetings with municipal leaders that included elected officials as well as members of Environmental Commissions, Open Space Committees, Recreation Committees, Planning/Land Use Boards, governing bodies, and others (62 participants from 17 towns)
- Three special meetings with targeted groups—state and federal public park managers; nonprofit land conservation organizations; and recreation/sports groups (38 participants). *Special follow-up was made to those groups that were unable to attend the meeting.* All of the nonprofit organizations that own land in Sussex or work on land conservation activities in the County were contacted and interviewed about their activities and are represented in this plan.
- Telephone survey of recreation representatives, including directors and chairs of recreation commissions, from each municipality in Sussex County.

- Many other outreach activities occurred to verify information needed for the Plan. For example, tax assessors were contacted to confirm land ownership, and school boards were contacted to determine the extent of recreation activity.

Through this outreach, the planning process identified common goals of open space preservation, listed here in the priority order obtained through the written surveys and public meetings. The goals of land preservation in Sussex County:

- Protect the quantity and quality of water resources
- Secure protection of and access to surface water bodies
- Shape growth or maintain the character of a community
- Enhance land and sites with historic value
- Safeguard threatened and endangered species habitat
- Provide opportunities for active recreation (such as organized youth sports and other facility-based recreation)
- Offer opportunities for passive recreation (resource-based recreation, such as hiking, bird watching, fishing, other activities reliant on natural resources)
- Connect land for greenway or trail development
- Preserve scenic vistas
- Add to publicly owned park land
- Promote tourism activities

Participants in the outreach meetings identified a number of issues they faced in preserving open space. The most common issue faced by nearly every group—municipalities, public park managers, and nonprofits—was funding. Funding to purchase land as well as maintain existing open space was a common concern. Issues revolved around the following topics:

- recreation needs
- legal and planning concerns
- government participation
- ecological resources
- education
- stewardship

Common specific issues expressed include:

- The need for adequate space for athletic fields to serve a growing population.
- Lack of education by municipalities and landowners concerning land conservation options.
- Need to promote regional conservation initiatives, especially to promote long distance trail plans.
- Need to engage in regional stewardship activities, especially as related to the fight against invasive species.
- Lack of funding to promote public access in appropriate areas.

Open space is like any infrastructure. It must be planned and designed as carefully as roadways and utilities. This Plan suggests several systems for Sussex County to achieve

the goals outlined above. Participants in outreach meetings identified special areas in the county and gave reasons why these areas should be protected. The results of these meetings have been mapped and form the foundation of a system of open space for the county. If the county were to invest its resources in preserving open space that promotes water quality and quantity, the areas identified in the public meetings and other research materials obtained through the planning process represent a good place to begin. Systems are described to achieve the following goals:

- Maintain water quality and quantity
- Protect plant and wildlife habitat
- Meet community recreation needs
- Link trails and greenway corridors
- Preserve vistas and community character
- Enhance historic and cultural resources
- Promote tourism

To achieve these objectives, the Open Space and Recreation Plan lists an extensive number of government, nonprofit and private partners that supply funding and programs promoting open space preservation and stewardship. This list of partners is targeted towards Sussex County's priorities and resources and will help Sussex open space leaders leverage their funding and resources to accomplish their land preservation goals.

The Open Space and Recreation Plan concludes with a list of steps to undertake to implement a county-wide open space program. The Action Program consists of a list of recommendations to be accomplished by the first, third, and fifth years of the program as well as those activities that should be ongoing. The first recommendation is for Sussex County to send its Open Space and Recreation Plan to Green Acres to become eligible for state acquisition grants. Examples of some of the longer-term recommendations include:

- assessment of and potential increase in the Open Space Trust.
- encourage additional municipalities to establish local open space trust funds.
- develop educational materials for municipalities and landowners about conservation options and values of open space preservation.
- facilitate regional meetings among municipal open space and recreation officials as well as resource managers and nonprofit land conservation organizations to discuss common issues as well as land preservation and recreation projects.
- ensure adequate protection of the natural resources of Sussex County.

Sussex County enjoys rich abundant wildlife, diverse economies, lively communities, pastoral scenery, a vibrant agricultural industry, tourist attractions, clean water, and historic resources, including archaeological artifacts. It is a playground for many New Jerseyans escaping to the countryside from stresses imposed by urban life. Some of the county's natural resources are found nowhere else on earth. The agricultural, rural setting enjoyed by county residents contributes to a rare, endangered and diminishing lifestyle in New Jersey's sprawling landscape.

According to the 2000 Census, Sussex County is home to 144,166 people—a population growing steadily at one percent (1%) a year for the next 10 years as sprawl spreads

westward. This growth is putting pressure on the county's unprotected lands. Preserving special lands and features that continue to keep Sussex County an attractive, healthy place for people and nature is a challenge. The Open Space and Recreation Plan is a step toward meeting that challenge.

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