

Partnerships Best Use of Public Funds Say Preservationists at First Forum

Linda Arntzenius

Representatives of grassroots, county and state preservation groups gathered in the Johnson Education Center last Thursday, November 30, to discuss ways of "Stretching Preservation Dollars."

The meeting, held in the headquarters of the D&R Greenway Land Trust off Rosedale Road, was the first in what is hoped will be a series of such forums by the Mercer County Green Table — a composite body comprising the D&R Greenway Land Trust, Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association, Mercer County Open Space, and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) Green Acres Program.

The speakers were Bill Rawlyk of the D&R Greenway, Jennifer Coffey of the Stony Brook-Watershed Association, Lisa Fritzinger and Leslie Floyd of Mercer County Open Space, and Renee Jones of the NJDEP Green Acres Program.

"Partnerships are the best use of public funds," said Ms. Jones who described the main challenge facing land preservation in Mercer County as "low funding."

She advised preservationist groups to look for bargain basement properties, avoid targeting properties that have already received development approval, and to form partnerships with other groups. "Bring together state, county, municipal, and non-profit acquisition dollars to projects of state, regional, and local interests that meet mutual preservation priority themes," she said.

Ms. Jones reported that funding for the Green Acres Program, which offers grants to nonprofits and municipalities and has to date helped to preserve some 1,334,389 acres across the state, not including farmland, is about to dry up. The Garden State Preservation Trust Fund, which supports the program, is due to run out in 2009, she said.

The future of the Trust and the program, whose mission is the creation of preserved and interconnected open space across the State, was the subject of a Preservation Funding Forum held last July by the Corzine administration. For more information, visit www.nj.gov.gspt.

In addition to offering advice, Ms. Jones commended local groups in Mercer County for their efforts in preserving farmland, historic landscapes and important watershed lands, in particular projects such as Baldpate Mountain for which nonprofit preservation groups presented a "sophisticated" effort.

Tusculum Project

Bill Rawlyk, a naturalist with the D&R Greenway, described the Tusculum project as an example of a successful partnership effort involving the D&R Greenway Land Trust, the State, the County, the estate's owners, Avril and Tom Moore, Friends of Princeton Open Space, and Princeton Township.

As a result, the historic property off Cherry Hill Road, the summer estate of Princeton University's sixth president John Witherspoon and signatory to the Declaration of Independence, is now preserved as permanent open space. The house dates to the late 1760s.

Much of the land surrounding the house and other buildings was officially preserved in early November, at a cost of \$2.9 million, making it the first property to be protected since September when the U.S. Congress recognized the Crossroads of the American Revolution National Heritage Area — the result of a bill, introduced in 2005, to preserve and fund important Revolutionary War sites.

Friends of Princeton Open Space raised the majority of the funding, \$1.4 million, including a \$300,000 nonprofit assistance grant from Mercer County. Princeton Township, which will operate and maintain the property, contributed \$800,000, of which the County provided \$300,000 through a municipal assistance grant. Mercer County also contributed an additional \$300,000. The State provided \$400,000.

The D&R Greenway Land Trust, which works in five other counties in the region besides Mercer County: Burlington, Hunterdon, Middlesex, Monmouth, and Somerset, has preserved some 9,000 acres comprising 159 properties valued at approximately \$193.4 million, since its founding in 1989.

In Princeton, the group helped preserve the former Robert Wood Johnson estate on Rosedale Road as Greenway Meadows Park, and Coventry Farm on the Great Road, over 220 acres of land for use as public parkland. The former space includes The Greenway Center, a circa 1900 barn that has been adapted for use as a meeting place for grass roots preservation groups.

Mr. Rawlyk also described resources available to support municipalities and grassroots organizations in their land preservation and stewardship goals.

"While acquisition is important, stewardship such as maintaining trails and promoting their use is also important," he said.

Jennifer Coffey of the Stony Brook-Watershed Association, which maintains 800 acres in Hopewell including 14 miles of hiking trails, described resources for municipalities, land trust groups and civic organizations. The association offers advice on protecting water corridors and stream banks and identifying important sites for land preservation and aquifer recharging. It has also helped corporations change lawns into wildflower meadows.

Since 1949, it has been monitoring the health of the watershed and educating the public on environmental issues such as the impact of land use on water quality.

A current goal, said Ms. Coffey, is the increase of grasslands in New Jersey so as to keep streams healthy. Such lands also support bird species that are declining in the state, such as the bobolink, the grassland sparrow, and the Eastern meadowlark.

Also working with municipalities and preservationist nonprofits, Mercer County Open Space, with funding from a three cent tax, which raised \$11.5 million in 2006, provides grants to open space and farmland projects. Fifteen percent of this can be used for historic preservation and improvement of parkland such as the Baldpate mountain preservation.

According to Leslie Floyd, assistant Planning Director for Mercer County, there are now 71 preserved farms in the County as compared to only one 18 years ago. The county's agricultural development board buys development easements to preserve land that has the potential for future agricultural use.

For more information, call D&R Greenway Land Trust at 609-924-4646, or visit www.drgreenway.org or www.thewatershed.org.