

Local Open Space Planning

By Kerry Miller, ANJEC Assistant Director

Since 2002, ANJEC's Smart Growth Planning Grants program has helped to fund the development of open space plans for 30 municipalities of all types and sizes, from large rural towns like Frelinghuysen (Warren) to small, built-out, suburban towns like Watchung (Somerset). Though each town's open space needs and resources are different, a comprehensive plan is key to a successful preservation program.

By November 2006, voters had approved local open space trust funds in 231 of New Jersey's 566 municipalities. After a successful campaign to convince voters to tax themselves to create a local source of funding for land preservation, weary open space advocates might think the battle is won. In reality, the work is just begun, because funding is only one of the necessary ingredients for an effective, equitable and efficient local open space program. Towns also need a

comprehensive plan to guide the use of their open space funds over the long term, and help them secure additional funding from State, county and private partners.

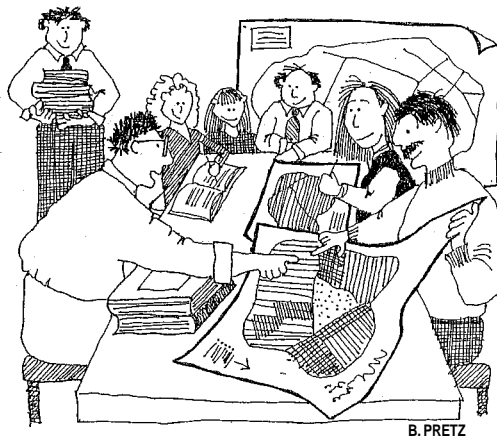
Generally, towns develop their open space plans in conformance with the NJ Green Acres Program's *Open Space & Recreation Plan (OSRP)* guidelines (www.state.nj.us/dep/greenacres/osrpg.doc), to help them qualify for larger grants from

the State. With a local open space trust fund and an approved OSRP adopted by the planning board, a municipality can enter the Green Acres Planning Incentive Program, which offers up to 50 percent contributions toward parcels identified in the OSRP.

Plan Development

An OSRP requires parcel-level mapping in addition to tables and narrative. For this reason, most towns hire a consultant to help develop the plan. Even with a

consultant, plentiful input from a local project team is needed to confirm local data, assess community needs and priorities, process community input, and ultimately chart an open space course for the municipality. The project team typically includes the open space committee and representatives of the environmental and recreation commissions and planning board.



Green Acres Open Space & Recreation Plan (OSRP)

Required Elements

- ✓ Executive Summary
- ✓ Goals & Objectives
- ✓ Inventory
- ✓ Needs Analysis
- ✓ Resource Assessment
- ✓ Action Plan
- ✓ General Open Space
- ✓ System Map
- ✓ Parcel Data
(for inclusion in state maps)
- ✓ Public Participation

The best open space plans begin with a tour. Armed with base maps, notebooks and cameras, the project team and consultant pile into vehicles and cruise around - sometimes for many hours - noting

- Open parcels (preserved and not),
- Potential greenways and connections,
- Parks and recreation facilities,
- Sensitive environmental resources,
- Viewscapes, and
- Historic locations.

A tour familiarizes the consultant with the community and its resources, and also helps team members develop a “big picture” view of their town’s open space. Photos from the tour can break up the text in the OSRP and give it more reader appeal.

After collecting existing maps and other information on local open lands and their use and ownership, the consultant can develop a draft map. (It is important to also review county, regional, and adjacent towns’ open space plans, to identify opportunities to create links.) With a draft base map in hand for

discussion purposes, the team is ready to gather input from residents, town boards, officials and staff, and other interest groups such as land trusts and recreation, conservation or historic preservation organizations and the school district.

Public Outreach

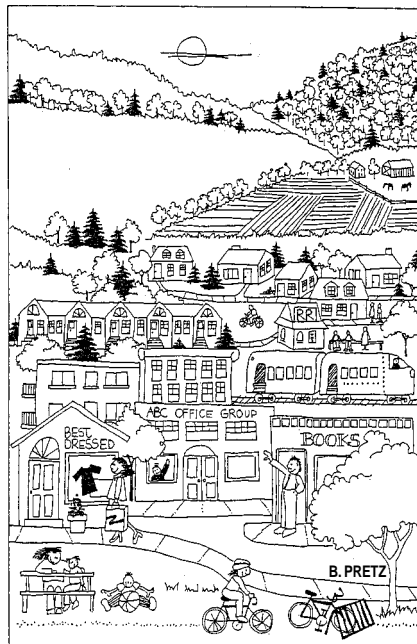
Extensive public outreach is worth the effort. It makes for a better plan by drawing in local people who have unique knowledge of certain sites and uses. It also builds support for the open space program, and helps to satisfy Green Acres requirements. Residents and stakeholders need to know about the open space plan, why it is being developed, and how they can weigh in. The project team can generate community interest and input by using multiple outreach tools including

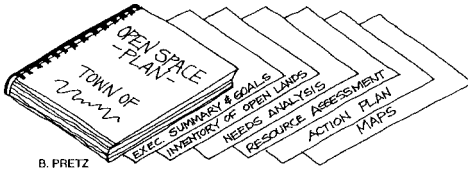
- Press releases and letters to the editor,
- Town newsletter and website postings,
- Surveys,
- Interviews with representative individuals and groups,
- Fair booths, and
- Public input workshops.

To encourage input at public information sessions, open space consultants from Morris Land Conservancy ([www.morrisland](http://www.morrislandconservancy.org)

[conservancy.org](http://www.morrislandconservancy.org)) and Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (www.dvrpc.org) ask attendees to place different colored stickers on large base maps to indicate sites or areas they believe are important to preserve.

At the outset of an open space planning project, there may be tension between the town’s “active recreation” and “passive” factions. The best way to break down misconceptions and get down to productive planning





is to involve a cross-section of residents, boards and officials in a well-informed discussion of needs, resources and goals often with the help of a consultant.

Key Plan Elements

An integral part of any OSRP is a system for prioritizing parcels for preservation. The project team must develop a list of the features or conditions that affect each parcel's value as part of the open space network. Is the land

- Containing or abutting a waterway?
- Contributing to an important vista?
- Suitable for recreation facilities?
- Home to endangered species?
- In an area underserved by open space?
- Adjacent to other preserved parcels that could create value as a larger park, preserve or greenway?
- Vulnerable to development pressure?

The team can assign weights for different characteristics to rank open lands and assemble a list of priority sites or areas. The community can contribute through interviews and surveys on their usage and priorities.

The action plan section of an OSRP details the various methods of preserving land, and lays out steps the town should take over the next five years to acquire funding and preserve parcels.

On completion, the project team presents its final draft OSRP to the planning board for adoption into the municipal master plan, and to the governing body, which is responsible for implementation, often through an open space committee. If the project team has kept these boards and the public involved throughout the planning process, the OSRP should move smoothly through adoption. 

