February 2, 2016

Patricia Walsh, Director
Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders
County Administration Building
20 Grove Street
P. O. Box 3000
Somerville, NJ 08876

RE: 2015 Open Space Advisory Committee Annual Report

Dear Freeholder Walsh:

On behalf of the Somerset County Open Space Advisory Committee, I am pleased to submit our Annual Report for 2015. The Somerset County Open Space Preservation Program had another successful year with respect to implementing the County’s duly adopted "Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan". With the addition of over 304 acres, the total park inventory now exceeds 14,300 acres.

2015 was extremely busy in terms of land acquisition and related parks, recreation and open space initiatives. Key target areas saw an increase in activity and many noteworthy property acquisitions were negotiated.

The continued support of the Board of Chosen Freeholders is greatly appreciated. Without the Board’s endorsement and follow through, the Open Space Preservation Program would not be as successful as it is today. We look forward to the combined efforts of the Freeholders, Somerset County Park Commission and Open Space Advisory Committee in 2016 to continue the past success of the Open Space Program.

Sincerely,

Kacey Dyer, Chair
Open Space Advisory Committee

Attachment
c: Freeholders
Park Commissioners
OSAC Members

- Mission Statement -

The County of Somerset is committed to excellence and innovation in public service, promoting the well-being of all residents and communities by providing effective, efficient and responsive leadership.

Somerset County Is An Equal Opportunity Employer
Membership

The ten members are chosen, two each by the Democratic Party, Republican Party, Planning Board, Park Commission and Board of Chosen Freeholders.

Ten individuals were appointed and served on the Committee in 2015 for a term of one year. Officers were determined by election in accordance with adopted bylaws.

  Kacey Dyer, Chair
  Helen Haines, Vice Chair
  Mark Caliguire, Freeholder
  A.D. Amar
  Randy Jones
  Michael Kirsh
  Lisa Marshall
  Suzanne Ochse
  Walter Rusak
  Doug Stevinson

Staff/Non-Voting

  Thomas Boccino, Principal Planner, County Engineering Parks Section
  Brian Mundhenk, Principal Engineer, County Engineering Parks Section
  Raymond A. Brown, Director, Park Commission
  Walter Lane, Director, County Planning Board

County Counsel

  William T. Cooper, III, Esq.
  Carl Taylor, Esq.

Summary of Meetings

The Open Space Advisory Committee met on ten occasions at the Somerset County Administration Building:

  January 14, 2015
  February 11, 2015
  March 11, 2015
  April 8, 2015
  May 13, 2015
  June 10, 2015
  August 12, 2015
  September 9, 2015
  October 14, 2015
  December 9, 2015
2015 Attendance

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<th>3/11</th>
<th>4/8</th>
<th>5/13</th>
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2015 Land Acquisition Summary

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<th>Acres Preserved</th>
<th>Total Park Area Acreage</th>
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<td>South Franklin Initiative</td>
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<td>Sourland Mountain Preserve</td>
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<td>Second Watchung Greenway</td>
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<td>South Branch Greenway</td>
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Open Space Preservation Highlights

1) The County acquired parcels from 7 property owners totaling 304.1 acres. The total Open Space Inventory now exceeds 14,351 acres.

2) The single largest acquisition of 2015 was 149.68 acres in the South Franklin Initiative in Franklin Township from William H. Stavola and Trap Rock Industries. The property is vacant and primarily wooded with a small area of open field. The preservation of the property achieves a major goal of the County Parks Recreation & Open Space Master Plan by preserving lands of countywide geological, botanic, cultural and historic significance. This preservation effort helps to maintain habitat for many plant and animal species in an area of the County severely impacted by suburban sprawl. Sharing the same preservation goals for the area, Franklin Township has committed to contribute funds toward the purchase. The acquisition of this land more than doubles the acreage of the South County Initiative to over 250 acres.
3) With the assistance of New Jersey Conservation Foundation, the County acquired the 73.59 acre Higgins property in the Sourland Mountain Preserve in Hillsborough Township. The property, which is located near the intersection of Wertsbridge and Montgomery Roads, is contiguous to other open space lands acquired by Somerset County in recent years and will encourage the expansion of the Preserve to the Hunterdon County border, where many local, county and nonprofit preservation initiatives are currently underway. The property is vacant and primarily wooded and will remain largely in its natural state. The County and NJCF will work together to develop a Management Plan that will outline planning and management activities most appropriate for the health and public enjoyment of the land. Hillsborough Township and the County share the same preservation goals for the area prompting the Township to contribute funding toward the County’s acquisition of the property.

4) The 29.11 acre Princeton Research Lands property in Montgomery Township is relatively flat, completely wooded and is traversed by Cruser Brook. It provides protection for an additional segment of the brook which is located within the Raritan River drainage basin and fills in a remaining gap of the Sourland Mountain Preserve along County Route 601. New Jersey Conservation Foundation assisted with the preservation effort.

5) The Patti property is a 24.99 acre parcel located in the southern portion of the Sourland Mountain Preserve in Hillsborough Township. The property is partially open where a residence and outbuilding once stood and the remainder is wooded with a significant stand of pines. The property helps to define the southern border of the Preserve and continues to preserve the scenic value of Long Hill Road.

6) The County acquired four parcels consisting of a total of 20.34 acres from Bernards Township within the Second Watchung Greenway. The parcels are contiguous to existing preserved County open space and help to continue the preservation efforts along the Second Watchung ridge.

7) The Bellavia property is a 5.00 acre wooded parcel located along Old Georgetown Road in Franklin Township. The County acquired 6 acres of adjacent land from Mr. Bellavia in 2011. The preservation of this land helps to make the connection between the existing 97 acres of the South Franklin Initiative and the recently acquired “Trap Rock” properties to the south.
8) At 1.38 acres, the Dabrowski property is a small but important parcel within the South Branch Greenway. The acquisition of this parcel preserves more than 2,000 linear feet of scenic frontage along the South Branch of the Raritan River which contains red shale cliffs along the water's edge. In an area of Hillsborough Township that has seen residential development almost to the river's edge, this parcel creates a much needed buffer between the river and existing development.

9) Based on the recommendation from the Open Space Advisory Committee the Board of Chosen Freeholders authorized its second grant from the Somerset County Municipal Flood Mitigation Funding Program in the amount of $103,288 to Manville Borough. The County grant provides the required FEMA match for the buyout of four flood prone residential properties on Huff Avenue, Boesel Avenue, Knopf Street and North Second Avenue.

10) Based on the recommendation from the Open Space Advisory Committee the Board of Chosen Freeholders entered into an agreement with Somerville Borough to provide an $850,000 “Special Projects Grant” for the Borough’s purchase of a commercial lot along Route 206. The Borough will demolish the structure and incorporate the property into the portion of the Somerville Landfill Redevelopment project known as the Green Seam. This is the last parcel necessary for the Borough to acquire before environmental cleanup can begin on the Green Seam.

11) The County is currently actively negotiating or under contract for the acquisition of over 200 acres in several target acquisition areas.

12) The Somerset County Engineering Division Parks Section continues to assume administrative responsibilities for the Open Space Advisory Committee.
Open Space Trust Fund

During 2015, open space acquisition costs totaled $6,754,786. As of December 30, 2015, a balance of $3,641,345 was available for acquisitions. Purchases are still pending for several large acquisitions that were made through the Somerset County Improvement Authority that will ultimately be reimbursed from the Open Space Trust Fund.

In addition to its own open space acquisitions, the County authorized a total of $953,288 in grants to municipalities for local open space acquisitions.

- Manville Borough - $103,288 “County Flood Mitigation Funding Grant” toward the Borough’s required FEMA match for the acquisition 4 flood prone properties near Main Street and in Lost Valley.
- Somerville Borough - $850,000 “Special Projects Grant” toward the Borough’s acquisition of a property within the Somerville Landfill Redevelopment Project’s “Green Seam”.

State, local and non-profit commitments for contributions towards County open space acquisitions in 2015 totaled $2,600,000.

- NJDEP Green Acres Program - $1,375,000 matching grant through its ongoing Planning Incentive Grant Program toward future open space acquisition projects.
- Franklin Township – up to $500,000 toward the County’s acquisition of the “Stavola/Trap Rock” properties.
- Hillsborough Township – $500,000 toward the County’s acquisition of the “Higgins” property.
- Transco Gas Pipeline Co. – $225,000 for compensation for easement takings on County open space lands associated with the Skillman Loop pipeline expansion.

To date the NJDEP Green Acres Program and the Garden State Preservation Trust Program has awarded the County $17.7 million in matching grants and loans through its Planning Incentive Grant Program.