OPEN SPACE ELEMENT

PREPARED FOR THE

| Mercer County Planning Board
| Mercer County Open Space Preservation Board

BY THE

| Mercer County Planning Department

September 8, 2010
Amended May 2016
COUNTY OF MERCER

MASTER PLAN
OPEN SPACE ELEMENT

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FRAMEWORK

The original of this plan has been signed and sealed in accordance with the New Jersey Professional Planners Licensing Act.

Adopted by the Mercer County Planning Board, September 8, 2010.

Amended by the Mercer County Planning Board, May 2016

Leslie R. Floyd, AICP, PP # 5681
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The national and international economies are much different in 2010 than they were when the Master Plan update began in late 2003. The theme of this plan is balance which seems even more relevant today. No longer can one component of our physical environment drive the others. This is not only an impractical approach, it is also an unsustainable approach. This plan seeks to balance the challenges and opportunities presented by our transportation system, our economy, and our environment through an interrelated set of policies and strategies. Together these policies and strategies will ensure that Mercer County is positioned to succeed in the new economy to guarantee on-going improvements to places where residents live and work.

Donna M. Lewis, Director
Mercer County Planning Division
March 2010

Since the Master Plan’s adoption in March 2010, there have been changes to open space and transportation funding. The Open Space Board in consultation with the County Administration will review funding through the Local Municipal/Nonprofit Assistance Program on an annual basis. This will allow more flexibility in funding open space projects with urban and regional significance. The Transportation Development District (TDD) was established 24 years ago, and over that time as land was developed or preserved, transportation improvements changed to meet the needs of new land uses. Upon approval by the Commissioner of the NJ Department of Transportation to dissolve the district, the Mobility element of the Master Plan, and all other references to the TDD throughout the Plan, including on several maps, will reflect the TDD no longer exists. The Mercer County Wastewater Management Plan (WMP) was adopted in October 2013. Lastly, to meet the recommendations of the Master Plan, the WMP will be incorporated by reference into the Mercer County Master Plan.

Leslie R. Floyd, Director
Mercer County Planning Department
May 2016
Open space needs are often measured quantitatively as acres preserved. But open space needs must also consider connections to the people it serves. Close to home open space and parkland must be available to all people, of all ages and economic status. Everyone should have a safe and convenient place to exercise, and play and be able to enjoy the fresh air and a clean natural environment. Moving forward, Mercer County will continue to aggressively protect the environment by preserving land, with a primary focus on land as it relates to the people it serves.

This plan summarizes the land the County has preserved since 1992 and identifies ways to meet the future needs with limited funds. This plan envisions a future where open space preservation protects the environment through good stewardship of the land, and reclaims and utilizes land in urban areas to provide quality local open space. Open space preservation is to be accomplished with stronger partnerships and more innovative tools. Land preservation criteria for acquisition and development include preservation for environmental, historical, recreational and economic resources. Local open space needs will be pursued though strong partnerships, and urban initiatives, while regional preservation efforts will continue through expanding existing regional open space and providing connections through greenways. County open space development funds will be used for improvements to existing County facilities to provide public amenities and access to these valuable recreational opportunities.
Almost one in five acres of Mercer County’s total land is preserved in some way. These lands are preserved as public parkland or nonprofit land, conservation easements with public access or privately-owned preserved farmland. This accomplishment is due to an aggressive county preservation program over the last two decades, along with an enormous collaborative partnership with the state, and local governments, as well as many active nonprofit land preservation organizations, and generous landowners.

Preservation efforts for the future must address the concerns regarding climate change, environmental protection, and provide open space and recreation opportunities to all communities. A cleaner environment, a stronger economy, a healthier population, and sustainable communities are all quality of life benefits that can be achieved through the preservation of open space.
III. History
The County open space and farmland preservation program was initiated in 1989 when Mercer County residents overwhelmingly approved the first open space preservation tax. This first initiative authorized a tax of up to $.01 of equalized assessed value. Prior to the tax, Mercer County owned 4,530 acres of county parkland and 189 acres of preserved farmland. When State and other preserved lands are included, approximately 9% of the County’s total land was preserved. (chart 1)

As of 2004 Mercer County voters authorized a tax of up to $.03 per $100 of equalized assessed value. Today there are an additional 5,270 acres of county owned and operated parkland (including conservation land with public access), 5,383 additional acres of preserved farmland, and 4,454 acres operated and maintained by the municipalities and or non-profits. These municipal and non-profit lands were preserved with County assistance through the County assistance grant program and cooperative acquisitions. In all, the Mercer County Open Space Preservation Tax has been leveraged to preserve 15,107 acres. The tax authorization was also been expanded by referendum to allow the use of the funds for recreational development and historic preservation, which are being used to build miles of trails, restore historic structures, and improve public access. These 15,107 acres, added to the pre-1989 total and the acres preserved by others without county assistance, brings the total to over 28,000 acres of protected land in Mercer County. Preserved land is over 20% of the developed and developable land in Mercer County as illustrated in Chart 2.
There are many ways to measure open space needs and to establish goals. The Land Use Balance guideline from the “NJ Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan” (SCORP), November 2007, is based on a percent of open space to the total land. Other measures are based on population. While the “Mercer County Open Space and Recreation Plan” adopted in 1992, has met many of its’ quantitative regional goals based on the “Guidelines,” it recognizes the importance of assisting local government in meeting their open space needs, by providing assistance towards preserving local and small neighborhood parks that serve the larger populations.

Out of the concern for local open space, the County established the Mercer County Nonprofit/Municipal Open Space Assistance Program in 1994. Funding for this program is reviewed annually by the Open Space Preservation Board and is subject to approval by the County Administration. This County funded program has been providing grants of up to 15% of the certified fair market value (CFMV), up to a limit of $300,000, to nonprofits and municipalities and encourages that the remaining funds be raised by the grantee through bargain sales, Green Acres grants and local open space funds. Preserving local open space to serve the more populated communities is challenging because these areas do not have much vacant

### Balanced Land Use Guidelines

**Source:** NJ Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)

**Municipal Level** 3% of the developed and developable area of the municipality

**County Level** 7% of the developed and developable area of the county

**Developable Areas:** excludes acreage of slopes over 12%, wetlands, low density areas of the Pinelands, and federal and state-owned open space

The Balanced Land Use Guidelines are a means of estimating the amount of recreation land that should be set aside by local governments in New Jersey to provide recreation opportunities for the existing and future residents of the state. The figures produced represent only minimum goals for recreation land acquisition programs. In order for public open space areas to be considered as supply toward meeting the Balanced Land Use goals, the areas must be environmentally suitable for the recreation activities generally provided.

Chart 3. Mercer County parkland represents over 8%
land and vacant land is in competition for economic development and/or in need of environmental clean up. In response to this, the County provides the City of Trenton and similar urban areas with enhanced funding.

The County and local nonprofits and municipalities have also partnered with the State to preserve land of statewide and historical importance. These projects include land to expand the State Assunpink Wildlife Refuge, as well as several partnerships on Baldpate Mountain. Lands preserved due to their historical significance include the Trenton Bath House designed by Louis I. Kahn at the former Jewish Community Center and historic Tusculum in Princeton, the home to John Witherspoon, signer of the Declaration of Independence.
IV. Vision for Future

| Preserving Land for Nature and Environment
| Preserving Land for People
| Preserving Land for Recreation and Public Health
| Preserving Land for the Community and Economy
Land preserved today has a significant impact on the future and affects how people live, work and play. The benefits for the environment, health, economy and society are seemingly limitless. Land preservation is critical to the quality of life for future and current generations.

The Vision of this Plan is to provide open space to protect the environment, serve the people, ensure public health and provide for a sustainable economy.

A. Preserving Land for Nature and Environment

Increased flooding and drought caused by climate change are ever growing concerns. Protected open space reduces the impact of impervious surfaces reducing run off and flooding. Land and stream corridor preservation protects the water supply and water quality as well as watersheds and wetlands. Mature forest canopies absorb pollution and CO2, and filter pollutants from water. According to the University of Washington’s Center for Urban Horticulture, a mature forest canopy can reduce air temperature five to ten degrees, helping to counteract the urban heat island effect. The preservation of large preserved natural areas, forests, stream corridors, wildlife habitat, grasslands, and watershed lands fosters the health and natural beauty of our community for future generations.

The successful acquisition of land for preservation is integrated with the responsibility to care for the land. Funds and programs to maintain and manage the land are essential. Even natural vacant land does not maintain itself. Healthy forests prevent the spread of invasive species that choke out the native plants and animal habitat. Grasslands are protected and managed to prevent the overgrowth of invasive species that destroy important breeding grounds for migratory birds. Management practices such as wildlife and deer control, grassland management and stream bank and wildlife protection ensure that the land performs its ecological function. Diligent stewardship and management is essential for protecting the lands natural resources. The acquisition of open space is an investment in the land and its inherent values such as environmental features, natural beauty, and the recreational opportunities it provides. The land is cared for to ensure those values will not be diminished.
B. Preserving Land for People

Large natural preserves are in the rural areas of the County far from the major population areas because that is where the acquisition opportunities exist. Public access to them through mass transit, educational programs and community events are important tools that connect people to these natural areas.

Although areas of dense population are challenged by the scarcity of land available for passive or active recreation, opportunities on vacant land in the city and older suburbs is balanced with open space and other needed land uses such as housing and economic development.

Urban parkland is available by reclaiming lands degraded by industry and neglect. These under-utilized lands provide opportunities for recreation in the more populated and underserved urbanized areas. Environmental remediation of such parcels is a valuable community investment. It not only increases close to home recreation but also increases the value and marketability of the surrounding neighborhood. Public plazas, improved streetscape, and pedestrian scale outdoor spaces, softens and naturalizes the urban landscape.

Visible and clear signage, well marked trails and adequate parking, information made available through the internet, and publications such as trails maps and brochures provides valuable information that makes the land more accessible to all users.

Greenways provide physical linkages to connect people to open spaces, as well as connections that conserve the environment, by creating large continuous areas for habitat and watershed protection. Linking our green infrastructure promotes walkable communities, encourages walking and bicycling in lieu of driving and promotes a healthy population.
C. Preserving Land for Recreation and Public Health

The availability of recreational land and open space is beneficial to public health. There has been national concern regarding the nation’s physical inactivity resulting in health problems including obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. This concern is addressed in the publication from the Trust for Public Land (TPL) entitled “The Health Benefits of Parks,” published in 2006. This health concern is not only for the aging population but also for the younger generation. According to the Center for Disease Control, only 25 percent of American adults engage in the recommended levels of physical activity and 29 percent engage in no leisure-time physical activity. The statistics for children and adolescents are similar: only 27 percent of students in grades 9-12 engage in moderate to intensive physical activity. According to the TPL “strong evidence shows that when people have access to parks, they are more likely to exercise, which can reduce obesity and its associated problems and costs. A group of studies in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine showed that “creation of or access to places for physical activity combined with informational outreach” produced a 48.4 percent increase in the frequency of physical activity.

Creative development patterns that prevent sprawl, while providing pedestrian and bicycle friendly facilities and quality parkland, increase opportunities for physical activity. Parkland and recreational land located close to where people work and live also increases opportunities for physical activity. Quality public mass transit in the urban and suburban areas, to rural passive recreation and natural resources brings the urban population to nature, resulting in more physical activity. All these open space opportunities provide a significant role in improving public health.

D. Preserving Land for the Community and Economy

Quality open space is good for the local economy, fosters community cooperation and unity, while also providing positive opportunities and alternatives for youth, resulting in the reduction of crime, and increasing nearby land values.
V. Policies and Strategies

| Acquisition  |
| Development  |
The following Policies and Strategies have been established to promote the open space vision.

Acquisition:

Policy:
Preserve lands of regional significance for environmental protection and recreation, through partnerships and financial leveraging for the benefit of Mercer County residents.

Strategies:

- Enhance, expand and protect existing regional open space project areas, natural preserves, parks and greenways through land stewardship and acquisition, to advance environmental protection and outdoor recreational opportunities.

- Preserve and maintain large contiguous open space and lands that have county-wide significance to be retained in a largely undeveloped state for purposes of protecting ecologically sensitive areas, valuable habitat, and vistas.

- Preserve land that has cultural and historical significance, and/or structures that will protect the historical and cultural resources as well as provide recreational opportunities.

- Preserve and acquire land and stream corridors for the creation of greenways to protect and maintain healthy environmental communities and provide pedestrian linkages that connect people to the land.

- Proactively pursue the preservation of quality open space.

- Balance economic development and other land uses with recreation and open space preservation, recognizing the need for growth in appropriate areas, and use open space and recreation as a tool and a catalyst for economic redevelopment.

- Encourage municipalities to use cluster, infill, Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) and other mechanisms to supplement acquisition programs.
Policy:

Preserve opens space and recreational lands that are accessible and connected to where people live and work.

Strategies:

- Help local government and non-profit environmental and land preservation organizations preserve land of local importance.
- Preserve, redevelop, and reclaim land in the urban areas to better serve and provide quality open space and recreation to the underserved population.
- Preserve land within redevelopment projects and properties as a catalyst for economic growth and quality land use.
- Connect densely populated areas and communities to natural areas through the preservation and acquisition of lands along utility easements, streams, abandoned rail lines, and lands that may need to be reclaimed from environmental degradation.
- Connect communities by preserving recreational land for the creation of walking and bike trails.

Development:

Policy:

Recognizing the financial limits in this area, provide active and passive recreational opportunities through well–designed parks, preserves and greenways. Invest in historic structures especially as they support recreational opportunities.

Strategies:

- Provide for both active and passive recreational development.
- Design recreation improvements to limit impact on environmentally sensitive areas.
- Identify opportunities for public access on farms prior to preserving farmland.
- Design and create recreational opportunities for all user groups to help keep the community healthy and fit.
- Restore and maintain historic and cultural resources to educate and enhance recreational opportunities.
Policy:

Provide active and passive recreation that is accessible to all, located in or near population centers.

Strategies:
- Provide recreational opportunities and improvements in urban areas that will serve the recreational needs of the under-served population.
- Redevelop, reclaim and remediate appropriate brownfield sites to expand recreational opportunities.
- Connect people to open space and places of interest through the creation of Greenways.
- Support public mass transit opportunities that will connect people to open space and parkland within urban areas as well as to the rural and suburban areas.
- Improve existing properties to be accessible to everyone with quality parking and signage, and by providing information through the web and written brochures and guides.

Policy:

Maintain and protect the environment when developing all open space.

Strategy:

- Ensure that impacts of recreational development are appropriate to maintain and sustain the natural environment.
Design and construct all recreational development according to all required regulations and practices necessary to preserve environmentally sensitive land, water, scenic vistas and plant and animal habitats.

Minimize the clearing of land by situating active recreation in already cleared areas where possible, and implement reforestation where appropriate.

Maximize usable space to limit the impact on the land.

Maintain and operate recreational open space to insure the protection of environmentally sensitive features such as woodland and grassland habitat, wetlands, watersheds, streams, and water bodies.
VI. Criteria

| Protection of Lands in Largely Natural or Undeveloped State |
| Acquisition for Passive and Active Recreation |
| Acquisition in Urbanized Areas |
| Historic and Cultural Lands |
| Farmland Preservation |
| Administration and Acquisition |
Criteria have been established to determine the appropriate lands for preservation and development. These criteria are not listed in priority order

A. LANDS IN LARGELY NATURAL OR UNDEVELOPED STATE: The protection of natural resources and ecologically sensitive land, such as wetlands, wildlife habitat, waterways, slopes, mature woodlands, large stands of forests and ridge lines in their natural state is the primary goal of this plan. The criterion of the "Protection of Lands in Largely Natural or Undeveloped State", is to be the first criterion of all open space acquisitions and will govern the proposed uses of acquired lands. These large natural areas should only be developed for passive recreation.

1. **Water quality protection:** The protection of our watersheds and the potable water supply will benefit the environment and public health, and is critical for the maintenance of healthy plant and animal populations. As the human population grows and development expands, there is an increased demand for potable water and recreation. Recreation in environmentally sensitive lands must be compatible with the natural values of the site.

2. **Wetlands and slope protection:** Many of the wetlands and steep slopes are protected in part by government regulations. It is still important to provide the most protection for these sensitive environments. Disturbances to these areas and in the buffer areas surrounding them can result in flooding, erosion, increased water pollution, and loss of wildlife and vegetation.

3. **Habitats for plants and animals:** Conservation of the habitat of plants and animals is necessary to the survival of many unique and endangered species, and to maintain healthy environments for diverse communities of plants and animals that generate higher biodiversity, increasing the quality of life for the residents of Mercer County.

4. **Size of open space, larger areas afford more protection:** To provide adequate protection of a natural area, the protection of large areas of land containing many smaller natural communities is encouraged. Large natural areas reduce the edge effects that adversely affect natural communities. Large areas may include larger portions of watersheds, which serve to protect water quality and sensitive plant and animal habitats.

5. **Connections with other open spaces:** Open spaces that are near to or connected to other open spaces offer advantages in shared facilities and maintenance. Connected open space also provides increased protection of the natural environment by increasing the effective size of the protected open space.

6. **Threatened or endangered species:** Preservation of land containing the habitats of endangered or threatened species is needed to ensure the survival of these species.

7. **Geological significance:** Geologically significant features such as high ridges, unique
land formations, and unique rock formations are to be considered as valuable natural area for preservation.

B. ACQUISITION FOR PASSIVE AND ACTIVE RECREATION: Open space for public recreation is important and in high demand. The preservation of recreational land that will serve a diverse community and major population areas is a primary criteria of this plan.

1. **Relationship to natural and undeveloped open space:** The preservation and development of open space for recreational uses should provide for the preservation of the natural environment when developing the recreational facilities.

2. **Public access:** Recreational facilities should be accessible to the public which they are meant to serve. Access in urban areas should be available through local pedestrian circulation and local mass transit systems. Regional parks outside of urban areas should also be accessible via mass transit. Bike trails, nature trails, and urban paths are also important public access systems. Bike trails are for use by non-motorized vehicles; motorized vehicles should be prohibited except under extraordinary circumstances.

3. **Need as it relates to population:** Urban areas and high population growth areas are important considerations to the location of recreational facilities. These areas are in high demand for open space and there is little or no land available close to these population centers.

4. **Use-specific size:** The size of a park to be developed for recreation must be compatible with the use. Larger areas are required for passive recreation that will include activities such as hiking, horseback riding, and biking. Smaller sized parks may be appropriate for developed recreational facilities integrated with natural habitats. Small urban parks may be provided with playgrounds and other active recreation facilities.

5. **Water access:** Water access provides many possible amenities for recreation and scenic enjoyment. A river can provide a greenway for trails, non-motorized boating, and fishing. Lakes and other waterways may provide other water sports that may be practicable while maintaining the quality of the natural environment.

6. **Aesthetic views and vistas:** Significant and especially unique and beautiful views and vistas should be maintained. A scenic overlook of a natural, historical or expansive landscape is valuable.

7. **Passive recreation:** Passive recreation is best suited for natural and environmentally sensitive lands. Great care should be taken in selecting the appropriate recreational development.
8. **Active recreation:** Active recreation should be limited to lands that can sustain the impact of recreational development in a way that assures the maintenance of the natural environment.

C. **Acquisition in Urbanized Areas:** Preserving lands in urbanized areas, near where people live and work, is a high priority of this plan. Land is not plentiful or readily available in urban areas. Criteria to increase open space opportunities in the underserved urbanized areas have been established.

1. **Vacant or Abandoned Properties:** Many urban areas have properties that are vacant and uncared for. These properties can be preserved to help meet the open space needs of the underserved and will also help to build stronger communities by improving and utilizing vacant land.

2. **Brownfield Sites:** Old industrial sites and environmentally degraded lands blight the landscape and create unsafe and unclean communities. These neglected properties can be reclaimed and restored through environmental remediation and provide public open space, improve community health and safety, and provide a catalyst for economic growth.

3. **Redevelopment:** Urban redevelopment projects are planned to restore and promote economic growth. Successful redevelopment projects need to include elements such as public urban plazas and green spaces that will serve the community in and around the redeveloped area.

4. **Community Gardens:** Community Gardens should be encouraged and preserved where strong non-profit and community organizations are involved and dedicated. These gardens provide fresh produce and support sustainable living. A community garden should also be a place where the community gathers and socializes, while providing hands-on experience and knowledge of growing fresh produce.

5. **Greenway and Open Space Connections:** Greenways can provide pedestrians and cyclists with safe recreational opportunities and connections. River fronts, canals, abandoned transportation corridors, and utility rights of way can provide linear open space and alternative modes of transportation.

6. **Safe and functional Open space near Schools and Community Facilities:** Many urban schools do not have a proper place for children to play. Land preserved in urbanized neighborhoods should be encouraged near and adjacent to schools and other community facilities. Urban open space in the form of playgrounds and pocket parks are best utilized and protected when there is coordination with schools and other community facilities and should provide good visibility and safe access.
D. HISTORIC AND CULTURAL LANDS: The preservation of cultural and historical sites is essential in the preservation of our community's and country's history.

1. **Relationship to natural and undeveloped open space:** The preservation of an historical site must also include the preservation of open space in the natural environment. This will enhance the preservation of the natural environment as well as the historical preservation.

2. **Historical significance and value:** Historical and cultural sites are educational and are important reminders of our heritage and our past. Preservation of historically significant landscapes must be provided.

E. FARMLAND PRESERVATION: It is the intent of the Open Space Plan to include significant preservation of the County's farmland. This plan complements the Farmland Preservation element of the Master Plan.

1. **Relationship to natural and undeveloped open space:** As with all other preserved open space, farmland needs to coexist with and help maintain the preservation of the natural environment. Farmland with associated natural open space preserves our heritage of land use in Mercer County.

2. **Mercer County Farmland Preservation Plan:** The County shall preserve farmland consistent with the Farmland Preservation element of the Master Plan.

3. **Mercer County Agricultural Development Board Criteria:** Farmland preservation project selection will be based upon the established Agricultural Development Area (ADA) developed by the County Agricultural Development Board, utilizing the criteria set forth in the Farmland Preservation element of the Master Plan.

4. **State Agriculture Development Committee Criteria:** Farmland acquisitions will also reflect the criteria and policies set forth by the State Agriculture Development Committee.

F. ADMINISTRATION AND ACQUISITION: The following administrative criteria need to be addressed for each open space acquisition:

1. **Development pressure:** Projects that are under immediate threat from development will require priority and swift action. In some situations the development pressure must be weighed against the time frame and the feasibility of the project’s success.

2. **Relation to planning efforts:** To the greatest extent possible projects should reflect the goals set forth in the master plans of the local municipality, County, State and adjoining regions.
3. **Support from other public and private groups:** The support of the community, non-profit conservation organizations, local businesses and surrounding organizations is beneficial to the success of a project. Support outside of government can lead to donations and public involvement.

4. **Costs:** The market value of the land should be compared to the open space value of the land. A project that has a moderate or low market value along with the potential to serve a large population with a quality facility is often more appropriate than a more expensive property of equal open space value. The cost of maintenance and operating expenses must also be considered. Facilities close to existing parks that can be cared for by the same agency are more cost efficient. Generally, facilities with passive activities are less costly to develop and maintain.

5. **Donations:** A project with support and donations from the public has a significant advantage. All projects should attempt to have significant support and donations from outside County government. The State Green Acres program may match funding of all non-profit donations. Levering funds from a variety of sources and partners is essential.

6. **Acquisition expediency:** The lack of conflict, availability of funds, support, ease of transaction of sale and a cooperative seller are all helpful in acquiring open space relatively quickly and with minimal obstacles.

F. **ADMINISTRATION AND RECREATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** The following administrative criteria need to be considered when developing County parkland:

1. **Cost:** The cost to develop land for recreational purposes is significantly higher per acre than the cost of acquiring land. Active recreation facilities such as ball fields, tennis and basketball courts are costly to develop, operate and maintain. Careful consideration to the limits of the open space trust fund should be considered when selecting recreational development projects. Passive opportunities such as nature trails, picnic areas, boating and fishing have less impact on the environment and are less costly to develop and maintain.

2. **Donations and Private Investment:** Due to the high cost of developing land for recreation, projects that can secure funding from private donations, public/private partnerships or other funds should be encouraged.

3. **Protection of the Environment:** Protection of the natural environment is an essential consideration in type and location of recreational facilities to be developed.

4. **Coordination of development projects with the Mercer County Park Commission:** It is necessary to coordinate all land acquisition and recreational development projects with the County Park Commission. The Commission is responsible for the management of these properties and their ongoing operation and maintenance costs.
VII. Needs Analysis

I Regional Analysis
I Regional Needs
I Regional Opportunities
I Local Analysis
I Local Needs
I Local Opportunities
The Mercer County 2008 population, according to estimates by the State Department of Labor, is 364,883. Mercer County covers 226 square miles and consists of thirteen municipalities, including Trenton, which serves as both the State Capital and the County seat. The land uses are diverse. With the urban areas in and around Trenton, many suburban communities, and large agricultural and rural communities, the County as a regional entity must address many different open space needs.
Regional Analysis
Over the past 20 years, the County open space program has focused on preserving large parcels and greenways that provide for contiguous open space, protecting natural resources and providing county-wide significant public open space opportunities. Exceptional properties such as Baldpate Mountain were not specifically preserved to serve a local population. Baldpate and many other significant properties were preserve solely for their unique natural features and resources. This has been an important focus in order to secure land for future generations. The preservation of over 15,000 acres has mitigated the loss of valuable habitat and natural landscapes while easing the effects of development on the community. Although the County has successfully preserved the regional acreage recommended by the SCORP guideline, the County needs to reach beyond and preserve land of quality and variety for all citizens throughout the County. Most of the large contiguous land has been preserved or is developed. Moving forward, the limited resources available need to be used to acquire critical linkages, provide open space in urbanized areas and improve access to these existing open spaces.

Regional Open Space Needs
The Balanced Land Use Guideline, from the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreational Plan (SCORP), recommends that seven percent of the total developed and developable land be preserved at the county level. The Mercer County Park System meets this with over eight percent of the total land preserved for public regional open space. This eight percent is based only on county facilities and does not include state, municipal or non-profit lands, which can also serve regional needs.

The National Recreation and Park Association recommends regional parkland to be fifteen to 20 acres per 1000 people. County parkland represents 26.8 acres per 1000 people. Per this standard, as the population increases the acres per population will go down unless land continues to be preserved.

Regional Open Space Opportunities
Based on these two standards, Mercer County is doing well preserving land of regional significance. This will continue to be an important goal for the County and shall be accomplished with State and County funds through cooperative partnerships. The focus will be to preserve lands that create connections through greenways and to expand upon regionally significant open space opportunities. The need and the challenge will be to manage and maintain these valuable public lands. The County must manage these lands to protect their natural resources, and plan and develop the land to provide for safe, quality recreational access to all citizens. Meeting these needs will be costly, but they are essential to the quality open space that the county parks must provide. Increases in funding at the county as well as the state level will be necessary in the future to meet this crucial need.

Local “Close to Home” Open Space Analysis
The open space deficits in Mercer County are local, existing predominately in the most densely populated urban areas. Mercer County’s most densely populated municipalities are Trenton, Hamilton and Ewing. Other municipalities such as the townships of Lawrence and East Wind-
The boroughs of Princeton and Hightstown also have areas of dense population.

There are 73 small neighborhood parks in the City of Trenton, including Trenton’s Cadwalader Park (105 acres) and Stacy Park (32 acres), which are both larger community parks that serve a regional population. Mercer County owns and maintains the Route 29 Deck Park created by the NJ Department of Transportation (DOT) as part of the Route 29 highway improvements, as well as South River Walk Park along the Delaware River adjacent to the Waterfront Park Baseball Stadium. Mercer County also owns and maintains Millyard Park in South Trenton. Half of Trenton’s neighborhood parks are very small, less than one acre, and many of these parks are not well maintained and do not have updated and desirable park amenities.

Hamilton Township lists 99 parks in their Green Acres Inventory. Of these parks many are small local parks of less than one acre and several are 10-15 acres. Parks such as Switlik and Sunnybrae have ball fields which are well used for organized sports, but most of these parks, including the ones used for organized sports, have not been updated in many years and do not provide any other high quality park amenities. Larger regional parks in Hamilton include Mercer County’s Roebling Memorial Park (over 400 acres), County preserved land along the Crosswicks Creek (340 acres), and Hamilton’s Veterans Park (427 acres). Veterans Park has direct connections to several neighborhoods including Briarwood, Abbott Commons and Ravenscroft, which collectively include single family homes, condominiums, and townhouses. Also near the park are two active adult communities. Roebling Park is close to Trenton and is in an urban area of Hamilton. The Crosswicks Creek Greenway is in the rural southern portion of Hamilton.

Ewing has 17 parks. Community parks include Moody Park, Armstrong Park and Banchoff Park in addition to preserved land along the Shabakunk and Rambling Creeks. Regional Parks include Mercer County’s Mountain View Golf course, and the Ewing Township Senior and Community Center and pool. The Senior and Community Center is the site of the former Jewish Community Center (JCC), which includes the architecturally significant Louis Kahn Bath House. The County purchased the former JCC and gave the fee interest to Ewing Township for use as a community recreation center and a community pool, while the maintaining conservation and historic preservation easements on the property. This community center has become an extensively used and important facility for Ewing.

The rural and very suburban areas of the County have been the recipients of regional open space efforts. Even though local recreational land has not been the focus in many of these less populated areas, there are several good community and local parks. Lawrence and Hopewell Township and Pennington and Hopewell Boroughs have partnered on the acquisition and recreational development of the former Twin Pines Airport. This will provide community recreational open space on a smaller regional scale. The Lawrence Hopewell Trail, a 20-mile multi-use trail, is in development and it provides linkages to community facilities, schools, shops, corporate campuses and public open space. The trail is accessible to many residential neighborhoods. Overall the suburban areas of the County have quality community parks for active recreation.
Local “Close to Home” Open Space Needs
According to the Trust for Public Land, popular urban parks such as Lincoln Park in Chicago and Central Park in New York, have more annual visitors than the Grand Canyon. Obviously Mercer County’s urban areas do not compare to these large cities, but it demonstrates the need to serve urban areas.

### NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION
**RECOMMENDED CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL RECREATION OPEN SPACE**

#### A. LOCAL/CLOSE TO HOME SPACE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPONENT</th>
<th>DESIRABLE SIZE</th>
<th>ACRES/1000 POPULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MINI - PARK</td>
<td>1 ACRE OR LESS</td>
<td>0.25 - 0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEIGHBORHOOD PARK/PLAYGROUND</td>
<td>15+ ACRES</td>
<td>1.0 - 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNITY PARK</td>
<td>25+ ACRES</td>
<td>5.0 - 8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL CLOSE TO HOME</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.25-10.5</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### B. REGIONAL SPACE

| REGIONAL/METRO - POLITAN PARK | 200+ ACRES | 5.0 - 10.0 |
| REGIONAL PARK                  |            | VARIABLE   |
| RESERVE                        | 1000+ ACRES|            |
| **TOTAL REGIONAL SPACE**       | **15-20**  |            |

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) recommends recreational open space needs based on population. This recommendation is appropriate for assessing local open space needs in the more populated areas of the County. As analyzed in the previous section, regional open space needs have been well addressed through county parkland in addition to some state and larger community municipal parks. These lands are primarily in the suburban and rural areas of Mercer County.

This Plan begins by quantifying the needs of the three most populated municipalities. As a whole, Hamilton Township appears to have quantitatively met the open space acres per population standard, and to some extent so has Ewing. But it is not the intention of a county wide plan to base needs on municipal boundaries. Therefore, further analysis, based on an urban core that includes all of Trenton and the urbanized areas of Hamilton, Lawrence and Ewing, has been done to more accurately reflect the local open space needs as they relate to the County’s urban population.
According to the Hamilton Township Green Acres Recreational Open Space Inventory (ROSI) and including County parkland, Hamilton has 3,300 acres to serve a population of 90,402. Using the NRPA recommendations, Hamilton as a whole provides significant open space per person. However, Hamilton Township is large in land size, at over 39 square miles, and has diverse land uses. There are very low density areas in the southern portion of the Township, suburban areas, such as Yardville, and many urban areas just outside of Trenton. The open space need in Hamilton is on a neighborhood scale.

Veterans Park is a model regional park, but it does not serve a neighborhood function for most of the population. The 340 acres preserved on the Crosswicks Creek are located in a low density area, a density consistent with many rural areas of the County. The Bear Swamp and the Township’s Marshlands are significant wetland areas, each over 400 acres in size. These two open spaces are in different parts of the Township but are critical wetlands and have the potential for quality passive open space on a regional level. The Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh is part of a larger public area consisting of Mercer County Roebling Park and the Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park. The Bear Swamp is part of the Assunpink and is a critical link in the Assunpink Greenway Plan to connect Trenton to Mercer County Park. These large open spaces function primarily as regional parks and represent 26 acres per 1000 people. The remaining Hamilton open spaces are predominantly smaller local and community parks representing 10 acres per 1000 people. This is within the NPRA recommendation, but it is important to recognize that in a large municipality, individual neighborhoods in the most urban areas, similar to Trenton, are in need of quality parks. Because of the intimate scale of these areas, “close to home” needs are less quantifiable, but are certainly known to exist. Efforts to identify those specific needs should be done in partnership with local government.

Ewing Township, according to their website, has 361 acres of open space to serve a population of 36,062. Approximately half of the open space is regional and half local, representing 8 acres per 1000 people of local open space and 8 acres per 1000 of regional open space. But the NRPA recommendation is not entirely applicable in Ewing since a significant amount of land in Ewing consists of large tracts of land owed by institutions and/or government. Ewing is home to the Katzenbach School for the Deaf (State), Trenton-Mercer Airport, NJ Department of Transportation, NJ State Police Headquarters, and the College of New Jersey. With the exception of the School, these properties are not residential, decreasing the population density as a whole, but they are unavailable to the public as preserved and accessible open space.

The City of Trenton has 320 preserved acres (ROSI) for a population of 82,883. This equals just under 4 acres of public open space per 1000 people including regional and local open space. Although there is a great need to provide parks and open space throughout all areas of the city, there are limited opportunities to acquire land. The city also struggles financially with maintaining and policing the urban parks.
To better understand the need for open space for a significant portion of the County’s urban population, the open space and population for the area shown on the map 3 was analyzed. This relatively limited area represents the almost 1/3 of the total County population, and has only 731 acres of open space. This is less than 6 acres per 1000 people. Much of the 731 acreage is contained within the Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park, Cadwalader Park and Mercer County’s Roebling Park, which provide quality urban open spaces but do not provide local “close to home” open space for all.

It is also important to note that the less populated suburban and rural areas need to provide open space for the future, as these areas are where the greatest pressures for development and increased housing and population will be in the future.

**Map 3. Mercer County Open Space / Population Density**

**Local “Close to Home” Open Space Opportunities**
Remediation and reclamation of under-used or contaminated properties can provide land to help meet open space needs in urban areas. Remediation and environmental clean up take considerable time and funding, as well as qualified staff to administer the regulatory processes. Mercer County needs to work closely with the urban community to support these efforts.
Meeting local open space needs will require collaboration from many partners on the local, county and state levels. The County and the State have been working with the City of Trenton and in Hamilton on several projects that will serve primarily urban communities.

The Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh, which is an abundantly diverse freshwater tidal wetland, is in Hamilton Township and just outside Trenton’s city limits. The Marsh and the Abbott Farm National Historic Landmark have much to offer the urban population in Trenton and Hamilton; a unique and diverse urban open space and rich cultural resources. The Abbott Farm National Historic Landmark Interpretive Plan, prepared by the County in May 2009, recommends improvements that would greatly enhance pedestrian access to the Marsh for large population areas in Trenton and Hamilton. Mercer County has also begun plans to build a Interpretive Center at Roebling Park that will provide education programs for school children and families that will tell the stories of the Marsh and the Landmark.

The State of New Jersey has funded a master plan and construction for the New Jersey Capital Park. The master plan was prepared by Wallace Roberts & Todd (WRT). The New Jersey Capital Park will connect New Jersey’s capital to its historic sites and existing parks and reclaim the historic Stacy Park along the Delaware River. The first phase of this park includes improvements near the State House Commons and is currently under construction. This effort will provide linkages to the capital complex and provide green space to the local population.

More significantly, it will bring visitors from beyond to explore the State Capital and its many cultural and historical resources. Future phases will connect to existing open spaces such as the Assunpink Greenway, Waterfront Park and eventually the Hamilton- Trenton-Bordentown Marsh. In addition, efforts will be made to connect to other regional and local projects which are presently in the planning stage.
Mercer County is also working closely with the City to acquire lands along the Assunpink Greenway. This Greenway is in Trenton and also continues into the suburban areas of the County towards Mercer County Park and the State’s Assunpink Wildlife Management Area. The County will continue to provide the City with grants, valued at 50% of the Certified Fair Market Value, for the purchase of parcels on the Assunpink. These urban properties require a great deal of environmental remediation. Therefore, the County staff continues to support Trenton’s planning process and remediation.

This plan recognizes the need to support local government in the urban areas of the County, and will seek to be partners in the planning process, provide staff assistance and expertise, and continue to fund neighborhood and community acquisitions by providing urban grants of up to 50% of the certified fair market value of the land. The County will continue investing in the Marsh and other regional open spaces that are in, or are easily accessible to, urban neighborhoods. The County also recognizes the burden the City of Trenton and others have maintaining and developing urban parks. However, County development funds are extremely limited and only available for county owned and maintained parkland. The number and the amount of open space is important, but how well a park is maintained and how well it provides the aesthetics and amenities to create a functioning safe community park are critical. The need for maintenance and development funding continues to be a concern at all levels of government.

In the less developed regions of the County this plan continues to support local efforts and provides municipal and non-profit open space grants, encouraging partnerships with all levels of government and land preservation organizations to preserve land that will serve the recreational needs of all the citizens in the County. It is important to ensure that these suburban and rural areas preserve adequate local recreational land for today as well as the future, particularly in pockets of population such as in the hamlets and villages within the larger community.

Stacy Park, Trenton
In the less developed regions of the County this plan continues to support local efforts and provides municipal and non-profit open space grants, encouraging partnerships with all levels of government and land preservation organizations to preserve land that will serve the recreational needs of all the citizens in the County. It is important to ensure that these suburban and rural areas preserve adequate local recreational land for today as well as the future, particularly in pockets of population such as in the hamlets and villages within the larger community.
VIII. Partnership and Funding Programs
Taxpayer support has been the key to the success of the County open space and farmland preservation program. The County’s accomplishments have also relied on the many partnerships and programs that have leveraged and supported the county program. The many funding programs and partnerships include NJDEP State Green Acres program, NJDEP Environmental Infrastructure Financing program and the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) as well as local government and non-profit organizations. The availability of funds has allowed Mercer County to leverage the taxpayer’s money.

The Green Acres program initially provided grants and loans to Mercer County for assistance in preserving several significant county properties, including 1100 acres on Baldpate Mountain, the 243 acre equestrian facility and Curlis Lake Woods, the 812 acre AT&T (Pole Farm) property and land along the Crosswicks Creek in Hamilton Township, to name the most well known. Since the Garden State Preservation Trust was established in 1998, Mercer County has received an additional $9,000,000 in Green Acres grants that have helped to keep the County acquisition program active. These grants have helped fund acquisitions along the Bear Brook in East Windsor, land in the Trenton-Hamilton-Bordentown Marsh, additional land adjacent to Howell Living History Farm and Baldpate Mountain, land in Lawrence on Fackler Road, land of historical significance in Princeton, as well as properties in the Washington Greenbelt and land adjacent to Veterans Park in Hamilton.

The County open space program has worked closely with the County Agricultural Development Board. Farms that have streams have been preserved to include public access along the stream corridor while preserving irrigation rights for the farmer. In these projects and others, State Green Acres funds and SADC funds have been leveraged with county funds. The County has preserved over 5,000 acres of farmland with funding assistance provided by the SADC. (See Farmland Preservation element)

The County Non-profit and Municipal Assistance Program has awarded over 100 grants totaling over $18 million to municipalities and non-profits resulting in the preservation of 4,136 acres of locally important open space. The total market value of these properties is over $113 million. Non-profits leverage these grants, and through their outreach and landowner relations they have been extremely successful in securing bargain sales and private individual and business donations. These funds raised by the non-profits, along with Green Acres grants, and county grants have been the formula for the success of this program.

The County has also partnered on large regional acquisitions such as the historic Tusculum property, lands that expand the Stony Brook Millstone Watershed Association preserve, State purchases next to Baldpate Mountain and the State Assunpink Wildlife Management Area, land adjacent to Hamilton’s Veterans Park and property in the Hopewell Borough Greenbelt. Preserving large costly projects cooperatively with numerous partners and programs has provided flexibility and has led to great success.
The continued availability of a stable source of State funding, as has been provided by the Garden State Trust, is critical to the County open space program, as well as programs throughout the entire State. Future voter support for local and county open space initiatives is also essential.

The County continues its cooperation and partnerships with non-profit organizations, not just for funds, but to share all resources including professional staff knowledge and experiences and volunteer groups and efforts. With the current state of the economy and as the pressure for funding the race to preserve our open space continues, all these funding sources and efforts need to be available.

Innovative tools and techniques for preservation are also important to leverage the available funds. Often the recreational and environmental values of certain lands can be preserved through easement purchases. The county purchases the development rights and preserves the land, but the owner continues to care for and own the land. This can save the county in acquisition and maintenance costs. The County should support and encourage local ordinances that encourage and allow for Transfer of Development Rights (TDR), cluster development and stream corridor preservation. Through site design the County and private developers should continue to build creative partnerships to further expand preservation. Tax benefits for landowners, creative financing and banking are effective tools that can benefit the seller.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTNERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **DEP Green Acres / Garden State Trust**  
Grants and loans for acquisition and development |
| **DEP**  
National Trails Grants |
| **DEP Environmental Infrastructure Financing Program**  
Acquisition loans |
| **DOT**  
Trail Grants |
| **Local government**  
Local open space tax |
| **Regional Non-Profits**  
*D&R Greenway land Trust Inc.*  
*New Jersey Conservation Foundation*  
Funding, landowner negotiations, programming, staff support, Volunteers |
| **Local Open Space and Friends Organizations**  
Funding, volunteers |
| **Corporations and Local Business**  
Volunteers, donations, program support |
| **Volunteers**  
Time, labor, support |
The County should explore with non-profits the legal and the technical process for new approaches for raising preservation funds such as voluntary surcharges though local businesses and private transfer fees. These techniques have been most successful as non-profit programs and are described in A Field Guide to Conservation Finance by Story Clark.

The D&R Greenway Land Trust, Inc. has initiated a voluntary surcharge with Blue Mountain Sports in Princeton. This pioneer endeavor can set the stage for other initiatives and programs that have the potential to leverage limited public dollars.

**D&R GREENWAY SURCHARGE PROGRAM**

During the spring of 2009, Blue Ridge Mountain Sports, located at 301 North Harrison Street, Princeton, invited customers making purchases to donate $1.00 toward creating trails right in their own back yard! The funds make it possible for D&R Greenway Land Trust and New Jersey Trails Association volunteers to build and maintain trails that enhance the environment and the quality of life for the community. In June 2010, Blue Ridge Mountain Sports will once again sponsor Partnership for Public Paths and all funds will again support this important work!

Although these programs are best administered by non-profits, the county could benefit greatly from these and other business and private partnerships. Local businesses can support preservation efforts and stewardship by the distribution of information and brochures at their place of business, as well as sponsoring programs and educational materials that also support their business. Examples of businesses that can benefit from recreational opportunities include nearby restaurants, bicycle shops, sports and recreational retailers, real estate brokers, corporate employers and historical and cultural places of interest.
IX Action Program Areas

| County Open Space Preservation Project Areas
| Regional Cooperative Open Space Projects and Green Corridors
| Local Municipal/Non-Profit Assistance Program
| Urban Open Space Initiative and Brownfield Remediation Program
| Coordinated County Wide Trail Systems and Connections
| County Farmland Preservation Program
| Development Projects
The Action Program Areas have been identified for priority funding. These programs leverage funding and provide for the most efficient use of all resources available for land preservation and development.

I. County Regional Open Space Preservation Projects Areas

The County Regional Open Space Preservation Project Areas are identified as being large areas for preservation that will protect lands in a largely natural or undeveloped state, and provide regionally significant recreational opportunities. These project areas are to be owned by the County and maintained by the Mercer County Park Commission in cooperation with the municipalities, as public parkland, regional greenways, stream corridors and greenbelts. These areas are primarily to be funded through the County Open Space Tax and State Green Acres funds and provide for passive recreation. This category will be generally for expanding existing county parkland through acquisitions that protect or enhance the existing facility.

There are currently five active County Open Space Preservation Areas: Baldpate Mountain, Howell Living History Farm, Crosswicks Creek Greenway, Bear Brook Greenway, and Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh.

II. Regional Cooperative Open Space Projects and Green Corridors

As funding at all levels has become more competitive, it has become imperative to work cooperatively with all preservation organizations and governments to pool all resources, expertise, experiences and funds. Many projects are too large and costly for one entity to preserve. These cooperative projects require that all funding sources be utilized, including State, County and local money, but also to leverage these public dollars with private funds. Employing non-profits to raise private funds from the community, businesses, and individuals can be very effective. These cooperative land acquisitions will require using tools such as conservation and view shed easements, bargain sales, and innovative financing and land use principals. The ownership of these properties may have an undivided interest with all funding entities on a single deed, or divided into several properties with specific uses or restrictions that are best suited to each particular organization. These transactions must include clear management and stewardship responsibilities for the maintenance and use of the property.

Greenways are regional projects that most often span multiple jurisdictions and will best be accomplished through a cooperative approach. Greenways and linear parks are proposed along the Assunpink Creek, Jacobs Creek, connecting to the Stony Brook, Bear Brook, Millstone River, Crosswicks Creek, Shipetaukin and Shabakunk Creeks, and other smaller streams. Larger patches of open space along the streams, and connections with other open spaces are proposed where important wildlife habitat, valuable farmland, or sensitive habitats are identified. These greenways and corridors are coordinated with similar proposals at the municipal level for these and other streams. Connections should be made to the efforts of the State D&R Canal Commission to reclaim and restore trails on Delaware and Raritan Canal throughout the County.
III. Local Municipal/Nonprofit Assistance Program

Pursuant to NJSA 40:12-15.6, distribution of grants for land preservation to local non-profits and municipalities is appropriate from the County Open Space Recreation and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust fund. The Mercer County Municipal/Non-profit Assistance program provides grants to municipal and nonprofit organizations to acquire lands of local importance. Local parkland that serves a community is important in meeting the goal of providing “close to home” recreation and open space. It is recommended that the local entity secure Green Acres funds as well as landowner donations and private funds from business and foundations. The County grant is designed to fill in funding gaps. Since the County has limited funding for park development, the County grants can only be used for acquisition. Local government is encouraged to develop local parkland for active recreation.

Funding is eligible to all municipalities and non-profit organizations for the preservation of open space. The property must be consistent with the Mercer County Master Plan Open Space element or the open space element of the local master plan. All applicants must apply to the Mercer County Open Space Preservation Board for recommendation to the County Administration and approval by the Board of Chosen Freeholders.

The Open Space Preservation Board will review the program and the grant structure annually and make a recommendation to the County Administration. This recommendation is subject to approval by the County Administration. Projects demonstrating regional significance, urban projects and projects in the City of Trenton qualify for enhanced funding.

IV. Urban Open Space Initiative and Brownfield Remediation Program

This program recognizes the importance of supporting the need for recreation and open space in the urbanized and under-served areas of the County. The City of Trenton and urban areas can receive 50% acquisition funding from the County and the State; the difficulty is finding land in the urban area that is vacant, available and clean from contamination. This Initiative seeks to assist in the acquisition, remediation and maintenance of urban parkland. To accomplish this, the County will partner with the City to purchase and remediate identified parcels for acquisition and clean up. These lands could be cooperatively owned and managed by the City and or the County. The Assunpink Greenway, lands along the Trenton waterfront, the Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh and land associated with the Capital Park are currently identified for this program.

V. Coordinated County Wide Trail System and Connections

Mercer County recognizes the many initiatives for trails systems within the County and also for trails that connect from outside the County and State borders. Mercer County has been supportive and an active participant in the Lawrence Hopewell Trail, East Coast Greenway, Capital to Coast Trail, Heritage Trail, Crossroads to the Revolution, and Conrail Rails to Trails. Preserving land
that connects trails is a high priority not only to connect people to nature and community but also to provide alternatives to the automobile and protect corridors of wildlife habitat.

VI. County Farmland Preservation Program

A Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan has been prepared as required for SADC cost share grants, and it sets the goals and policies for farmland preservation in Mercer County. Mercer County open space and farmland preservation efforts are coordinated and cooperative-ly implemented to ensure the integrity of both programs. Where appropriate, it is often best to partner with the farmland program on certain properties that may have agricultural values, as well as recreation and environmental values.

VII. Development Project Areas

Mercer County parkland development projects are specifically for improvements on lands in which the county has an ownership interest. These projects are intended to improve public access and use of these County lands for recreation. Funding for parkland development and historic preservation is currently authorized up to 15% of the County Open Space Preservation tax and is therefore limited. The referendum authorizing the three cent tax imposed this limit. Therefore the limit cannot be raised without a new referendum. The primary use of these funds is to improve access to the many County lands that have been preserved though the County Open Space Preservation tax. The acquisition of land has been aggressive and successful. These properties now need to be made accessible through trails and trail head parking, signage and comfort facilities. Development projects for major active recreational projects such as playing fields are costly and must be carefully designed to fit into natural landscapes. County open space trust funds for recreation should continue to be leveraged with County capital and Green Acres funds.

The following development projects are priorities that should be funded through the open space tax while funds are available. Since use of the tax is capped, use of capital funds should also be considered.

Mercer County Park Northwest

Mercer County Park Northwest is located in Lawrence and Hopewell Townships and is over 1700 acres that includes the AT&T (Pole Farm) tract, Rosedale Park, Curlis Lake Woods and land along the Stony Brook Greenway. In September 2006 the Master Plan for this park was completed. The Master Plan establishes passive recreational uses such as trails, interpretive areas, both historical and environmental, parking and comfort facilities. The only paved trails in the park will be the portion of the Lawrence Hopewell Trail that will go through this park.
Baldpate Mountain
Baldpate Mountain is to be protected as a preserve and provide passive trails for hikers and equestrians and, in limited areas, mountain bicycles. Volunteers, under the supervision of a professional trail builder hired by the Park Commission, have been tremendously successful in building and improving trails on the mountain. The skills, techniques and experiences learned here will be extremely beneficial for the trail system at Baldpate and other trails throughout the County. The main house and old lodge have been recently upgraded. The improvements upgraded the utilities and provided restrooms and ADA accessibility. The buildings will be open to the public as a visitor and information center with opportunities to use the space for retreats, group meetings and educational and environmental programs. The Mountain shall be managed and maintained in accordance with the “Ted Stiles Preserve at Baldpate Mountain Management and Protection Plan”. Future improvements to the mountain include stabilizing the barn and garage at the main house and restoring the historical gardens and patio. Nature interpretive facilities at the pond area are proposed along with stabilizing the outbuildings.

Crosswicks Creek Greenway
Mercer County has preserved several significant properties along the Crosswicks Creek in Hamilton Township. The northern portion of the Creek from Extonville Road downstream to and including the 130 acres preserved on Iron Bridge Road, has undergone some preliminary master planning and design. The design includes comfort facilities, ADA trails, parking, and canoe launches at Extonville and Iron Bridge Roads. Passive recreational improvements that will create a continuous public access trail for hiking, canoeing and associated passive recreation along the Crosswicks Creek to the Delaware River and the Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown marsh are proposed.

Roebling Park/Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh
The County of Mercer, in partnership with D&R Greenway Land Trust, has developed a master plan for a Nature and Interpretive Center at the Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh. In April 2005 Mercer County purchased a residential property adjacent to John A. Roebling Park. Roebling Park is over 400 acres and includes Watson Woods and Spring Lake. The 1.3 acre nature center property is located in a residential neighborhood, and is bordered by a PSEG right-of-way and County parkland. The property includes an existing single-family residential
house which will be adaptively reused and renovated into the Marsh Nature & Interpretive Center. The programs and the center are designed in concert with the environmental, cultural and educational resources of the greater Hamilton-Trenton-Bordentown Marsh, and the Abbott Farm National Historic Landmark. The Master Plan has two phases. The first phase calls for renovation of the existing building for classroom space, exhibit space, ADA accessible restroom facilities and access, upgraded utilities, a staff office and storage space. It also includes site improvements for interpretive areas, access and parking from the rear of the building and landscaping. Phase II includes an addition with a large classroom, indoor and outdoor accessible restrooms, additional exhibit space, research space, and an outdoor classroom.

The Nature and Interpretive Center will be designed and constructed utilizing Green Building and sustainable development practices. Environmentally safe, renewable and recyclable materials will be use whenever practical. LEED certification for energy efficiency will be sought. The landscaping will incorporate sustainable elements such as a rain or gutter garden, native vegetation and energy efficient design. This Center will be featured as a demonstration project for green building and sustainability.

The rich archeological, historical and environmental resources of the Marsh can provide many educational and recreational opportunities. The Nature and Interpretive Center and the many resources of the Marsh are within the Abbott Farm National Historic Landmark. An Interpretive Plan and Technical Document of the resources has been prepared that identifies the resources and recommends programs, exhibits and strategies to bring visitors to the Marsh. Specific elements of the Interpretive Plan will be implemented at Roebling Park and the Nature and Interpretive Center.

Regional Trails and Access improvements
There are many regional trail networks throughout the County and the State that provide a vision for connecting open space and community facilities to people with pedestrian and bicycle paths. Some of the current systems are the Heritage trail, Capital to the Coast, Lawrence Hopewell Trail, East Coast Greenway, and Crossroads of the Revolution. These efforts, along with many others, can provide valuable recreation and community connections and alternatives to auto dependency. Many of these existing and proposed trail systems connect to or are through County parkland or open space. In these instances the County can help develop and support these trails through partnering on signage, parking and other facilities.
APPENDICES

| Open Space Recreation and Plan map
| Open Space/ Population Map 1
| Open Space/ Density Map 2
Map 1. Mercer County Open Space

This map illustrates the existing open space within Mercer County by category of preservation.

Data Sources:
Mercer County Planning Open Space Data

Map prepared by Mercer County Planning Division.
February 24, 2010
This map illustrates the existing open space overlayed on the population 2000 census data. The census data reflects a person per acre query to show population density and the need for open space close to these areas.

Data Sources: 2000 Census and Mercer County Planning Open Space Data
Map prepared by Mercer County Planning Division. February 24, 2010
Map Summary
This map illustrates the existing open space overlaid on the population 2000 census data. The census data reflects a person per acre query to show population density and the need for open space close to these areas within the Population Buffer Zone.

Data Sources: 2000 Census and Mercer County Planning Open Space Data
Map prepared by Mercer County Planning Division.
February 24, 2010

Map 3. Mercer County
Open Space / Population Density