

Open Space in New Jersey. We need to help

Regarding the recent article in the Bergen Record's: "Give them their space."

In 1989, the New Jersey legislature enacted legislation authorizing counties and municipalities to establish a voter-approved Open Space Trust Fund supported by property taxes.

Apparently New Jersey's legislature had come to the same realization as some of the world's greatest powers; that protecting open spaces and preserving natural resources means protecting our environment. Open space promotes health and well being, and protection of our natural resources provides the only essential environmental balance that can be afforded.

Everything written today speaks of our dependence on fossil fuels and the greenhouse gas emissions that is its by-product. Our dependence on fossil fuels is certainly part of the blame for global warming, but not all of it. The world's diminishing forests is the other key ingredient.

Trees are one of our greatest natural resources. Trees use up the carbon dioxide (CO₂) that fossil fuels produce. They turn CO₂ into oxygen and store the carbohydrates as the fats, and proteins that make up the tree. Destroying trees releases everything that they have stored, back into the atmosphere. The annual net loss of trees throughout the world translates proportionally into the increase of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere. With fewer trees in the world our atmosphere will continue to pay the price.

25% of the world's trees, that have been lost in the last 10,000 years, were destroyed in just the past 30 years. In Brazil alone, the rain forests are disappearing at a rate of 20,000 square miles a year, 3 times the rate in 1994.

Though we can't personally slow the destruction of the rain forests, we can offer protection to our own trees and preserve the last few remaining open spaces that they require to survive.

While we sit around waiting for technology to rescue us from our dependence on fossil fuels, we must begin take on this fight. Our State Government has already given us the tools, but locally we have lost focus of their original purpose. LAND ACQUISITION AND PRESERVATION!

In 1999, New Jersey passed The Garden State Preservation Trust Act. I was among the proud NJ residents, who voted to approve this environmentally conscientious piece of legislation. In 1998, by a 2-1 margin, New Jersey voters agreed to a tax increase for the sake of preserving open space and protecting New Jersey's natural resources.

On June 30, 1999 Governor Christie Whitman signed The Garden State Preservation Trust Act into law, (codified in Constitutional Amendment - Art. VIII, Sec. II, Para. 6, N.J.P.S. §13:8C-1). The Act created the nine-member Garden State Preservation Trust (GSPT) and dedicated \$98 million each year for the ten years between 1999 and 2009 from the state sales and use tax towards Governor Whitman's goal of preserving one million acres (500,000 of open space and 500,000 of farmland).

Many townships in the Tri-state area, have already acknowledged that preserving open spaces and the protection of our trees is essential to our environment. Local town boards have incorporated language and issued resolutions; “That trees stabilize the soil and control water pollution by preventing soil erosion and flooding, that they reduce air pollution, provide oxygen, produce advantageous micro-climatic effects, they temper noise, provide a natural habitat for the wildlife of the town, and further, that unusual, large and old trees have unique aesthetic and historic values.” And that, “Trees protect our environment.”

New Jersey’s Executive Order # 215 states: “The Protection of the environment, which is the subject of a public trust administered by government for the benefit of all citizens, is a primary responsibility of State government...”

New Jersey Executive Order # 215, along with New York's State - Environmental Quality Review Act, has adopted the oath “to avoid or limit possible negative impacts on the environment from proposed actions such as sub-dividing land, adopting land use plans, building a housing development or a roadway, or filling wetlands. When any state or local agency makes a decision about a proposed action, the agency must give equal consideration to environmental protection, human and community resources, and economic factors”.

Our two state governments concur, “that it being the obligation of the town to serve as a steward of air, water, land and living resources and the obligation to protect the environment for the users of this and further generations”.

Bergen County with its 70 towns is among the most densely populated in the United States.

Where greater can there be the need to preserve these precious few remaining open spaces?
Where greater can the need be to protect, where possible, every last living tree?

Yet in Bergen County, 75% of the Open Space Tax dollars to date, haven’t been spent to preserve open spaces nor have they furthered the protection of New Jersey’s natural resources. Instead these monies have been used to defray township expenses, to repair and replace backstops on existing ball fields. Instead of using budget item monies, Open Space Tax Dollars continue to be wasted for new lighting on existing tennis courts, on outdoor carpeting on existing soccer fields and the like. Our towns are waste these “preservation dollars” monies in order to save on their budgeted tax expenditures. All while developers move in on what remaining land remains, tie our town up in the courts, so they can “pave paradise, and put up a parking lot.”

This is a race against time. Only 4 % of Bergen County land remains undeveloped. With the help of our 70 towns we must demand that our town officials begin to use the New Jersey’s Open Space Trust Fund for the purpose in which it was intended, for the preservation of existing open spaces, for land acquisition to prevent re-development and for the protection of our remaining natural resources. Our town leader must begin to plan ahead, not just for the here and now.

In Wyckoff and Franklin Lakes, residents have begun to take up this fight.

“The Friends of Wyckoff”, a non-profit group founded by Wyckoff citizens, has asked the community for help. They are circulating petitions on their web site to preserve open space, and prevent the unnecessary destruction of trees: www.friendsofwyckoff.org.

In Franklin Lakes, rather than see the construction of 8 new mega-mansions, residents are trying to save a 12 -acre horse farm, from a by-gone era, for future generations to enjoy. Their web site is: www.savemillbrookfarm.org

People to Wyckoff and Franklin Lakes: Take up the fight. Visit these web sites and let the passion in our hearts be heard.

Only some of New Jersey's 566 municipalities have begun to embrace some sort of open space planning, and / or provide for some protection of their trees.

Stand up and make a difference, for the sake of our children's quality of life.

Bob Traitz
Wyckoff, NJ