

# Upper Dublin Township Recreation Land and Open Space Initiative

## Building a Greener Future: Open Space Basics

It's one of the first concepts learned in Public Administration 101 and Community Planning 101. Communities build a desired quality of life using two basic techniques. They raise and spend money to provide necessary facilities, such as roads sanitary sewer systems, and also for desired facilities like parks, pools, trails and athletic fields. They also enact fair and effective regulatory measures to encourage developments that provide good places to live, work and do business. Municipal ordinances also protect important resources and provide recreation land and open space through the development process. Using both capital investments and reasonable regulations, communities balance conservation of important lands with sustainable economic growth.

Municipal officials use their open space plans to identify desired lands for active and passive recreation. The purchase of land or certain rights to land, called conservation easements or development rights, help to minimize development's impacts on of natural resource areas and to provide trails. Smart government buys land or development rights to provide a desired life style for its residents and businesses. Upper Dublin Township will ask voters to approve a funding measure in this November's election to accomplish the recreation land and open space objectives identified in our Open Space and Environmental Resource Protection Plan of 2005.

There are numerous considerations that municipal officials evaluate when they plan to acquire recreation land or protect important natural areas. The following lists the important matters to be considered.

"It is our task in our time and in our generation, to hand down undiminished to those who come after us, as was handed down to us by those who went before, the natural wealth and beauty which is ours." John F. Kennedy

### Upper Dublin Township Open Space and Environmental Protection Plan

The Township's Open Space and Environmental Resource Protection Plan is subtitled "Pathways to Connect Us, Yesterday and Today with Tomorrow." This comprehensive and detailed study, prepared by residents appointed to a Citizen Advisory Committee, provides a solid framework and recommendations for short-term and long-term plans and strategies for acquisition, development and maintenance of open space and environmental resources. Conservation actions should always be guided by the goals, objectives and strategies included in this plan. For the purchase of a strategic parcel or conservation easement, the open space plan provides the basis to act...but act before that opportunity vanishes.

“Vision without action is but a dream;  
Action without vision is chaos;  
An action taken to fulfill a vision is the hope of the world.” Unknown Source

### **Quality of Life**

Many municipal officials inherently believe in the provision of parkland, trails and open space to achieve a high quality of life in their communities. Many officials believe that growth is inevitable and it’s important to attract the highest quality development possible. Economic studies show that, in this “age of talent,” communities that provide lifestyle amenities, particularly outdoor recreation and environmental quality, attract and keep residents and businesses who contribute to the community in many ways. Township provision of these lifestyle amenities is good economic and quality of life policy.

“As long as you’re on the side of parks, you’re on the side of angels. You can’t lose.”  
Robert Moses, New York City Parks Commissioner

### **Recreation and Health**

Community open spaces and recreation lands provide opportunities for activities that cannot be experienced on a homeowner’s property. These include active recreation facilities, particularly for team sports, and passive recreation. Hiking, biking, jogging, walking and baby carriage pushing on community trails enhance healthy life styles.

### **Fiscal Health**

The fiscal health of a community is enhanced by open space and recreation facilities. A number of reputable studies have documented that those places where money has been raised for lifestyle amenities attract and retain businesses and residents who contribute to their communities in many ways. Outdoor recreation and environmental quality are top ranked amenities. These places establish and maintain a competitive advantage in these times when talent is our most valuable economic resources. Other studies tell us that increased property values and incomes provide increased revenues that actually pay for these community investments.

“Quality of place – particularly natural, recreational and lifestyle amenities – is absolutely vital in attracting knowledge workers and supporting leading edge high technology firms and industries.” Professor Richard Florida

“The states that do the most to protect their natural resources also wind up with the strongest economics and the best jobs.” The Institute of Southern Studies

## **Water**

Among the many compelling reasons to provide open space are matters related to water. For those areas of the county that rely on groundwater, quantity and quality are directly related to open lands that recharge and filter that vital resource. Flooding can be better managed by encouraging groundwater recharge and the protection of riparian buffer areas along waterways.

Open space includes open water. Ponds, lakes and reservoirs are top quality areas for recreation, water sports and fishing.

## **Timing**

There are many places in Montgomery County where it's now or never to protect important lands before they are gone or preservation costs become prohibitive. There's no better time to act than the present.

“Buy land. They ain't making any more of it.” Attributed to Will Rogers

## **Saving Land Saves Money**

Numerous cost of community services studies indicate that, in certain situations, the costs of conservation may be lower to taxpayers than the cost of community services related to residential development.

## **Acquisition Options**

If land is intended for a municipal park, playground or other public use, the property is purchased outright, called “in fee-simple.” Purchase costs, improvement, equipment, program and personnel costs are also involved. When the land is intended to be protected, but not owned, the community only purchases part of the rights to that land. The community buys the “development rights” and places “conservation easements” on the land to ensure no development or only a specified and limited amount of development may take place. Easement purchase costs are less than fee-simple purchases and the annual costs are negligible. Ownership remains with the property owner, who may sell it along with the development limitations. Although reduced in value, the property stays on the tax rolls. Public access may be limited, as for trail use, or may be prohibited.

## **Applicable Laws**

While various state codes authorize municipalities to purchase land for public use, such as for parkland, the authority to purchase development rights for open space falls under PA Act 153 of 1996.

Only if the municipality would exceed its taxing or borrowing limits would voter approval through a referendum be required. However, many municipalities ask for voter approval even if it's not required under law. All money raised for open space protection

under these acts must be placed in a special fund and not absorbed into the community's general fund.

### **Funding Considerations**

A municipality can use a bond to finance open space acquisition for a specified amount of money. Alternatively, it may secure a line of credit through a bank and take out money only as needed. Lines of credit don't have some of the procedural, timing and costs considerations associated with bonds. General tax revenues are used to pay off the debt. Special real estate or realty transfer taxes may be levied to support open space programs. Many municipalities use earned income taxes (EITs) which affect only those who have earned income and does not tax those who live on unearned retirement or investment incomes. Some communities use "sunset provisions" to establish a time when the tax would cease.

### **An Informed Public**

It is most important that, before voters are asked to approve referenda to raise money, an education and outreach effort should be undertaken to explain the proposal to the taxpayers. A committee, such as an environmental advisory council or a special task force, would be given the responsibility. A consultant usually provides technical assistance. Information sheets, public forums and newsletters should provide full information about the proposal. An open space or comparable plan should be in place to show or describe the types or locations of lands intended for protection. Well-prepared people should be available to answer questions on the proposal. Yard signs, phone calls and people at the polls will help at the critical finale of the campaigns.

### **Potential Impact**

The annual cost to the average household is often quite low and it's helpful to convey the likely costs to the voters. Analogies often put the impact into perspective. "Would you give up three large pizzas per year or the cost of a movie and popcorn for two per month to save the community's most important lands?" "You spend \$80.00 for a good pair of running shoes, would you spend the same amount per year to have a great place to run?" Some communities have provided an easy-to-use calculator for taxpayers to determine what their annual EIT might be.

If the voters would be asked to approve an \$18 million bond on this November's election day, the annual cost to the average household would be \$106. [Assumptions: Average home is \$195,000. 25 year-bond at 4.62%] They might be asked "Would you give up one medium pizza...with pepperoni...a month to provide recreation land and open space in Upper Dublin Township? You'd be a lot healthier!"

"We could have saved the Earth, but we were too damned cheap." Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

### **Collaboration and Leveraging**

Various state and county programs provide grant money for open space and recreation projects. However, most grant programs require local match money. Raising local dollars provides opportunities to qualify for outside money. A dollar raised locally may bring in much more than an additional dollar from other sources. Taxpayers should be aware that their state and county tax dollars will go to other places if they do not have ready match money.

Over the coming five years, the Pennsylvania Growing Greener II initiative will provide money for county and local land protection efforts. But Growing Greener will require local match money and each community needs to have its own ready money to bring home funds from the state program. That opportunity is about to unfold.

### **Recognition and Celebration**

After a community has done the planning, raised the money and successfully provide recreation areas or protected important lands, it is critical to recognize those involved in these complicated and time consuming efforts. Community volunteers should be given public recognition for their efforts. Press releases should be distributed when a piece of land has been protected. Signs should be placed on protected properties or recreation sites so that the public will be aware that their tax dollars are working to secure a higher quality of life for each and every citizen.