

New Jersey voters urged to support land funding measure

Jesse Crooks

The Hunterdon County Green Table Forum convened last week to discuss the renewal of New Jersey's Garden State Preservation Trust, a major source of funding for land preservation efforts in the state.

Although Gov. John Corzine has acknowledged the importance of the trust, the program lost its funding this year amid the state's budget crisis. This is a major setback for conservation efforts in New Jersey according Michael Catania, a former deputy commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), who spoke at the March 22 forum.

The trust was created in 1999 to provide a stable source of funding for the DEP's Green Acres Program, which finances and supports open space, farmland, and historic preservation, as well as recreational development.

Under the purview of the DEP, the trust is used to provide grants and low interest loans to counties, municipalities, and non-profit organizations, allowing

them to acquire land and conservation easements they would have difficulty purchasing on their own. At its peak, the trust provided \$320 million per year.

Overall, Hunterdon County has received more funding for farmland preservation, state land acquisition, and municipal projects than any other county, and Holland and Delaware Townships are among the 54 municipalities across the state that have passed resolutions supporting the renewal of the trust.

All previous funding for the Green Acres program, since its inception in 1961, has been secured by referendum. From 1961 to 1995, it was supported by nine bond issues earmarking \$1.4 billion, and funding for the Garden State Preservation Trust was approved by referendum in 1998.

Catania urged those in attendance to support a new ballot initiative in support of the trust. He stressed that although land preservation is a costly venture, limiting development and protecting sensitive ecosystems is an important investment for the state.

Catania claimed that preservation efforts in New Jersey have a total value

of between \$19 billion and \$24 billion, including costs related to water filtration, stormwater management, and other problems that would be avoided through land conservation.

Likewise, protecting land from development helps to stabilize property taxes, he said.

Although the Green Acres Program will receive no more funding until new legislation is passed, the program still has some money allocated to spend on existing projects.

According to Martha Sullivan Sapp, the head of the program's Bureau of Local and Nonprofit Assistance, the program will never completely run out of money because it will continue to receive interest from loans made to counties and municipalities, but she expects to receive only about \$22 million each year, greatly reducing the scale of their activities.

The Hunterdon County Green Table will meet again on May 24 to tour the Dvoor Farm and Mine Brook Park and review stream restoration projects.

Contact the South Branch Watershed Association at 908-782-0422 or info@sbwa.org.