

## Tinicum open space

Dear Friends,

Good morning. "Farms and open space require no school construction, highway improvements, or the installation of water and sewer lines," my fellow Bucks County commissioner, Joseph Canby, told me 40 years ago. His observation has stuck with me throughout the years.

I thought about that advice when I paid a visit to Karen Budd and Norman MacArthur a few weeks ago. MacArthur is the chairman of Tinicum Township's Open Space Committee. Budd is the president of the Tinicum Conservancy. Her husband, Boyce Budd, is chairman of the Tinicum supervisors.

Tinicum is one of the leading Bucks County townships in land conservation. It boasts of having close to 3,000 acres under easement of 66 properties. "We've leveraged \$5 million in tax dollars from federal, state, county and township governments," Karen Budd began.

"And the average cost per acre [to Tinicum Township] has only been \$3,600," MacArthur added. "Since 2002, Tinicum has spent \$4.6 million to purchase conservation easements. But the value of those easements is worth more than \$10 million today."

An unimproved acre in Tinicum typically sells for \$25,000. I wondered what happens to its value after a property owner puts conservation easements on the land? Developers won't have access to those acres. Wouldn't that reduce the worth of the property, I asked?

Not so, Budd and MacArthur answered.

"Newcomers are looking for rural properties that are not in a subdivision," Budd continued. "People want properties that have conservation easements on the land. There are many examples where the land is worth more after conservation easements have been added. Real estate agents tell me that people want conserved property, or one which is adjacent to conserved property."

That's like having your cake and eating it too. "Everybody wins," MacArthur told me.

The property owner gets a tax break because the IRS presumes that the value of the land is less because of the conservation easements. The difference between the market value and the value after the easements is treated as a charitable gift. The property owner can take a deduction on his income tax. Although the land can no longer be used for development, the owner can still sell it...and at the same or nearly the same price before he gave up his development rights.

The Palisades School District loves it because it doesn't have to build more schools. Tinicum is delighted because it doesn't have to build more roads or construct water and sewer lines. And open space doesn't require adding police to its force.

MacArthur is right. Everybody wins...and it's not smoke and mirrors either. So, how did this

concept begin?

"The Tinicum Conservancy was founded in 1992," MacArthur told me. "Residents saw that the rural nature of Tinicum was changing. They knew they couldn't stop development but wanted to protect Tinicum's rural nature. We had three things going for us.

"First Tinicum has a strong preservation ethic. Second, Pennsylvania is a pro-growth state, which encourages development...but local governments don't have enough power to restrict it. Third, with conservation easements, owners can still do what they've been doing...they just can't subdivide because they've given up their development rights."

"A developer may offer a high price but the owner doesn't get the money until the developer gets zoning changes," Karen Budd told me, "and that might take 10 years." By selling the development rights, the property owner gets cash. If the owner gives the development rights, he gets a tax break.

Every township in Pennsylvania should follow Tinicum's lead. Many in Bucks, like Buckingham, Milford, and Solebury are working hard on their townships' open space projects.

MacArthur serves on the Bucks County Open Space Task Force. Bucks is readying another bond issue to increase conservation easements. The county celebrated putting the 100th farm under preservation. Since 1989, the county has preserved 9,171 acres and hopes to bring that figure to 10,000 acres by 2007.

Tinicum wants to gather another 1,500 acres through its open space program. "We'll need another \$5 million bond issue to do it," Karen Budd concluded. "We've identified the properties and we'll ask the supervisors to hold a referendum."

She doesn't have to travel far to make her case. She's married to one of the supervisors...speaking about pillow talk!

And I have no doubt that, when asked, Tinicum voters will approve. The residents are very bright and practical. They understand that everybody wins.



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*Sincerely, Charles Meredith*

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