

Andy Warren: On Open Space

Does history repeat itself?

Does history repeat itself? I'm one Bucks Countian who hopes it does.

In 1997, Bucks County citizens overwhelmingly voted in favor of a \$59-million bond issue that enabled the county commissioners to preserve 15,000 acres of farmland, natural areas, county and municipal open space.

Some might argue that to preserve as open space 15,000 acres of the more than 388,000 acres that comprise Bucks County is a mere "drop in the bucket." Rather than merely looking superficially at surface acre-to-acre numbers, let's examine 15,000 "open space" acres from another perspective – 15,000 is roughly the combined acreage of Bristol Township, Bristol Borough, Morrisville Borough and Tullytown or Doylestown Township, Doylestown Borough, New Britain Borough and Dublin Borough.

Many building lots in Bucks County average between 1/3 and 1/4 acre, therefore, 15,000 acres could be developed into 45,000 to 60,000 new homes. If an average housing unit in Bucks County generates two vehicles per unit it quickly becomes apparent that 15,000 acres not preserved as open space could generate 50,000 new homes, 100,000 more people operating a minimum of 100,000 additional vehicles. The potential congestion as well as demands placed upon existing highways and infrastructure would be tens of millions of dollars annually!

Our county is home to six major traffic corridors. Today, our busiest road, a stretch of I-95 in Bensalem, handles more than 80,000 cars daily. The intersection of Street Road and Route 1 handles more than 30,000 cars daily. Even as far up in Hilltown, Route 309 at Bethlehem Pike handles nearly 30,000 cars per day.

The amount of volume our roads handle has slated Bucks County to receive 20 major transportation projects totaling over \$930 million by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commissioner. No matter how you slice it, the cost of preserving open space is certainly much cheaper than the close to \$1 billion that will be spent on roads in Bucks County.

In fact, Bucks County has been one of the fastest growing counties in the Delaware Valley region for the past several decades. Our population is projected to grow with another 88,000 people by 2020. Local governments and residents alike face ongoing challenges of population growth, rising land values, and increasing pressures to develop farmland and open spaces. Bucks County holds a national reputation for quality of life, culture, history, natural beauty and unique charm.

Experience has taught me that preserving land in conjunction with sound planning is one of the best things Bucks County residents can do to control traffic in the future as we continue to grow.

Some municipalities have attempted to limit development with very strict requirements, only to learn that zoning may not be used to control development to anywhere near the same extent that conservation easements and purchase of development rights do.

No zoning ordinance can protect the blocks of productive farmland, the expanses of scenic meadows and woodlands or the good parkland that a well designed open space program can preserve. In short, in order to protect and preserve the wonderful quality of life we enjoy in Bucks County, it is necessary to utilize every tool at our disposal: thorough and comprehensive county, regional, and local planning; well constructed zoning ordinances to implement that planning; and most particularly, the protection and preserving of as much open space as possible.

As was the case in 1997, this election day, Bucks County voters will once again be asked to consider a referendum in support of a new ten year bond issue.

I strongly urge all Bucks County citizens to vote *yes* on Nov. 6 and continue to preserve our County's precious heritage and dwindling open space.

Andy Warren, co-chair of Save Bucks County, is a former Bucks County commissioner and PennDOT regional administrator.