

Economic Conditions Halt Open Space Acquisitions

By Julia Allen

Readington Township Committee

For over two decades, Readington's Open Space Program has delivered financial as well as quality of life benefits for our Township. Our township's long history of success with its Land Preservation efforts can be attributed to a well thought out and well executed plan.

Much has been written supporting the concept that "Open Space Pays," because less development means a need for fewer services and fewer tax dollars. Sprawling development, on the other hand, which has consumed neighboring townships, has cost their taxpayers dearly. A comparison between Readington and nearby Raritan Township illustrates this point. New census data revealed that Readington had less than 2% growth over the last decade, effectively eliminating the need for a new school. In contrast, Raritan grew by about 12%. This growth did, in fact, necessitate a new school, which added ongoing operating costs and approximately \$40 million in new school debt for

Raritan's taxpayers. By controlling growth, Readington's adjusted total tax rate, including school taxes, continues to be lower than Raritan's and is below both the mean and median for Hunterdon County.

Beginning in 1999, when Readington was 50% agricultural, and continuing through 2009, our township took full advantage of New Jersey's unprecedented funding opportunities for land preservation. Readington Township is among the leading municipalities in the state, having preserved almost 30% of its total land area and having received over \$56 million dollars in federal, state, and county funding to date. Readington is home to 70 preserved farms totaling over 4,500 acres, and 4,000 acres of preserved open space, permanently set aside for recreation and conservation. Readington's successes have protected the township's historic rural character and its unique scenic beauty. Our quality of life has benefited, and our township stands in sharp contrast to our more densely populated neighbors.

Worsening economic conditions

and a necessary shift in priorities created a need to suspend the program in 2009, and defer new acquisitions. Since 2009, the township's Open Space Committee has turned its attention to the creation of public access opportunities on our existing open spaces with the help of federal trail grants and also to stewardship activities with the help of Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Grants.

The Township Committee has also shifted its attention. It is working to process outstanding Green Acres and Farmland Preservation Grants that are continuing to help pay down remaining land debt, principally the debt resulting from recent, yet to be reimbursed, acquisitions. This effort is going well. In 2010, land reimbursements totaled \$5.4 million, and in 2011, an additional \$4 million is anticipated. Debt service for land preservation in 2010 accounted for about 3% of your annual property taxes. By the end of 2011, land debt will have been reduced by 20%, and this trend will continue in subsequent years.