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Smart Land-Use Decisions Can Save Open Space

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A special fund set up in the 1990s to buy open space in New Jersey is expected to run out of money in July. Media attention has focused almost exclusively on how to raise the money to replenish the fund.

What's missing from the conversation is how changes to land use plans and zoning could have prevented the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund from running dry several years earlier than expected — after saving only a quarter of the land originally targeted for purchase.

The problem: almost all land in New Jersey is zoned for some sort of development. Conservation zoning only exists in the Pinelands. And land zoned for significant development — subdivisions, shopping centers and office parks — is much more costly than land set aside for conservation.

Almost 50 acres of open space is lost each day to development in the Garden State. We are consuming land at a rate that is 2.3 times faster than the increase in population.

It is alarmingly clear that New Jersey must aggressively preserve open space. But to do this most effectively, we need a more coordinated, strategic approach to land use planning statewide, especially if we are to meet our original target of preserving 1 million acres of the 2 million acres remaining to be developed.

An excellent example of how proper planning and zoning can work together to reduce the cost of open space preservation can be found in Plainsboro in Middlesex County. More than half of the township's land was preserved using the tools of zoning and negotiations, working hand-in-hand with existing state and county farmland programs.

To prevent sprawl from a planned new highway connection, Plainsboro officials worked with the New Jersey Audubon Society to protect land near the interchange and create a nature preserve on the sensitive land. This action reinforced Plainsboro's desire to channel new development to its growth area — Princeton Forrestal Center on Route 1 — before the highway was built.

Other important steps that need to be taken include:

New Jersey's Green Acres program should coordinate open space preservation across agencies and jurisdictions, and from state to local government. Purchases should be prioritized to preserve large swaths of land to protect regional systems: watersheds, aquifer recharge areas and critical habitats. In urban areas, funding should be prioritized to provide access to open space for large sections of the population.

Appropriate zoning should be put into place for conservation. Although all land is zoned for some sort of development, it does not have to have suburban-style zoning everywhere. Municipalities applying for preservation funding should have to demonstrate that the land is appropriately zoned for conservation — in other states that standard is at least 25 acres per unit — and is supported by a natural resources inventory and an open space master plan.

Since the cost of land is affected by whether infrastructure — water supply, sewers and roads — is already in place, careful plans must be made to use that infrastructure efficiently by

planning access for new development and preventing access in conservation areas. What a waste to purchase land with taxpayers' money at a price inflated by investment in infrastructure that has been subsidized — again — by taxpayers, but will never be used if the land is preserved.

There is a growing recognition that "green infrastructure" (open space, stream corridors, farmland, tree-lined streets) is just as important as "gray infrastructure" (roads, sewers and utilities) as planners strive to build livable communities. Green infrastructure increases property values, reduces energy costs and provides opportunities for agriculture, habitat and recreation.

There is no question that the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund must be funded to pursue its original target to preserve 1 million acres. But if this target is to be reached, land use planning on all New Jersey's remaining land must be changed to ensure that the price of preservation is right and that the development that does take place bolsters our economy while reducing the consumption of land, energy and our state's precious natural resources.

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