

Open Space is Good for New Jersey

By Lori Jenssen
Contributing Writer

The arguments for preserving open space go beyond the health and diversity of plants and animal communities.

Just as farmland assessment has been shown to reduce the tax burden of a community, preserving open space has the same indirect benefit. Open space can take on many forms, such as the breathtaking view from a Sussex County forest, the urban park in Newark, the bike paths leading up to the Ken Lockwood Gorge, or the vast and far-reaching farmland of Hunterdon County.

Beyond the satisfying sights, open space preservation ensures the most densely-populated state will continue to have undeveloped land that will provide many advantages to its residents and visitors.

With open space, we protect the soil and purify the air. Open space can prevent increased flooding caused by additional impervious land cover. It provides space for

inland migration of coastal wetlands as they are inundated by rising sea levels.

Natural systems such as wetlands and floodplains provide water purification and help prevent floods. Surface and ground water quality and quantity is protected, as is the vital agricultural industry in New Jersey, with farms growing everything from blueberries to Christmas trees that account for over \$1 billion in sales (National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA).

Our open space is a haven for thriving outdoor tourism activities where residents and guests can fish, swim, boat, hunt, bike and hike. Tourism in New Jersey generates over \$42 billion in revenue annually. More than 15 million people visit New Jersey's state parks and natural areas each year, with an estimated economic impact of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Visitors to open space often spend money locally for supplies, fuel and food. This local economic stimulation can help maintain commercial property values and may help

attract additional businesses.

Quality of life benefits from forests, parks and open space may be difficult to monetize, but have economic value to communities. Health conditions such as heart disease, obesity and diabetes have high costs both to individuals and society, and physical inactivity is a known contributor to these diseases. The availability of safe, convenient public space in which to walk, jog or ride a bike makes it more likely that a person will exercise regularly (remember those New Year's resolutions?)

There is a heavy reliance on property taxes to fund important services such as our schools. The preservation of open space can outweigh both the cost of an open space purchase and the loss of a "ratable" property that generates tax income.

Studies have shown that residential development costs municipalities more in educational and public services than it generates in additional income (ANJEC, 2014). In the long term, investing in open space, forestland or farmland

results in a cost-savings for municipalities than allowing development.

Property values can increase when accompanied by areas with parks, forests and preserved open space. The quality of life benefits of having desirable recreational amenities makes a municipality more appealing. Higher property values result in higher tax revenue for towns.

Open space can provide an economic value by avoiding projects that create new environmental problems like flooding. Natural resource functions such as filtering surface water runoff will prevent towns from having to spend additional money on sewer treatment, water supply and flood control projects, which are very costly.

To learn about the many methods of conserving open space such as outright purchases, donations, conservation easements, zoning, greenway or trail plans and farmland preservation programs, reach out to your town leaders.

Funding for open space

can include resources from New Jersey's Green Acres/Blue Acres grants, county and local open space trust funds, which are funded through property tax assessments, the state's Farmland Preservation Program and local bonding.

The Green Acres Program was created in 1961 to meet New Jersey's growing recreation and conservation needs. Together with public and private partners, Green Acres has protected over half a million acres of open space and provided hundreds of outdoor recreational facilities in communities around the state.

We look forward to seeing you in one of the many forests that have benefitted from open space initiatives!

Editor's Note: Lori Jenssen has been the Executive Director of the New Jersey Forestry Association since 2005 and holds a Master's degree in Non-Profit Administration from Rutgers University. She can be reached at njfajorij@aol.com or by calling 908-832-2400.