Cumberland County Farmland Preservation, Open Space, Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Plan (1996)

In 1994, Cumberland County voters passed a trust fund referendum to set aside one (1) cent per $100 of assessed valuation to preserve agricultural lands or open space. The primary purpose of the Cumberland County Farmland Preservation, Open Space, Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Plan is to continue providing County matching funds for the Easement Purchase Farmland Preservation Program. The Plan also marks the beginning of a comprehensive effort to coordinate local, state and federal government, and non-profit and private investments.

This Plan is based upon several principles. It recognizes the importance of recreational facilities to health and fitness, as well as the importance of hunting, fishing and birding to Cumberland County's ecotourism program. Agriculture has long been the backbone of Cumberland County's economy, generating over $2 billion per year and employing over 5,000 people. Further, because farms require relatively little public services, the lands result in a net positive tax ratable even with the application of Farmland Assessment tax rates. Finally, when the Cumberland County Department of Planning and Development conducted a business survey preceding its Economic Development Strategy for Action, the presence of farmlands and open space were identified as the most prominent aspect of the County's quality of life.

As of 1993, there were 3,036 acres of state forest and natural areas, 50,727 acres of federal fish and wildlife management areas, 14,210 acres in private and quasi-public holdings, and 95 other acres in protected land in Cumberland County. Largely because of the considerable acreage in protected natural areas, the total amount of protected open space is consistent with New Jersey Balanced Land Use Guidelines, despite the fact that the County has no state park, and runs a 22,000-acre deficit for local park land according to these same guidelines.

The County has 609 farms covering 68,000 acres, or 20 percent of the County's area. Easement Purchase Target areas encompassing more than 64,000 acres of prime farmland are concentrated almost completely in the western half of the county, with the one exception being an area in eastern Vineland. As of 2000, over 7,000 acres were permanently preserved. The Plan projects that the use of Trust Fund Revenues will enable the County to preserve 800 to 1,000 acres of farmland per year.

Following are the short-term objectives and long-term goals for the Plan:

**Short-Term Objectives**

- Continue to support the Easement Purchase Farmland Preservation Program using Trust Fund revenues.
- Continue to solicit Easement Purchase applications from land owners adjacent to program participants in an effort to assemble blocks of contiguous deed restricted farmland;
• Evaluate application selection criteria and target areas annually;
• Collaborate with municipal officials to keep target areas and priorities coordinated;
• Update the county inventory of open space, preserved farmland, and parks and recreation facilities on an annual basis;
• Encourage municipal planning boards to provide incentives for clustered development in exchange for permanent preservation of open space;
• Begin dialogue between residents, local officials, and state and federal agencies to identify priorities to protect strategic resources;

**Long-Term Goals**

• Identify and acquire key access points to outdoor recreation facilities, especially water resources;
• Provide increased outdoor recreation opportunities for citizens with disabilities;
• Seek opportunities to partner with other organizations to protect resources;
• Use State Balanced Land Use Guidelines to continue to create a coordinated network of open space;
• Link investments in open spaces, farmland and recreation facilities using trails and greenways as linear parks;
• Leverage additional funding to the maximum extent in preserving and developing projects;
• Cultivate the philosophy of preservation of critical farmland and open space in advance of development.