

The following article was written by Michael Frank, Director of Community Planning at Heritage Conservancy. Portions of the article were printed in the Fall 2005 Plumstead Township Newsletter. It is provided here in its entirety.

Your Community. Your Quality of Life. Your Choice. November 8, 2005.

Do you mind if we ask you a few personal questions? Actually, these questions are more for your use than ours.

Do you live or own a business in Plumstead Township? Do you like living or owning a business here? Do you plan to stay? Have you invested in your property by making improvements that you need or just want? What things do you like best about Plumstead? Do those things include athletic fields, walking trails, parkland, open space and farmland? What do we need to do to ensure that the things you like remain parts of our community? How much would you spend to make sure this community evolves the way you like it?

Obviously, the time frames of these questions focus both on today and on the future. And we have asked you to consider two aspects of your quality of life: your personal property and your community. On different levels, both affect your life, your family members' lives or those of your business associates. To maintain or improve your quality of life, your property and your community, investments and care are required. Investments in your property and your community are tightly intertwined. If either your property or your community is not cared for, the other suffers...and so do those investments and your quality of life.

Let's focus on the community. On Election Day, November 8, you'll have the opportunity to protect and improve the quality of your community by voting for a modest investment in its future. The ballot will include a proposal for an \$8 million bond that will be used exclusively to protect open space and farmland. This commitment to your quality of life is not new for Plumstead voters. In 1996, a \$4 million bond was approved and a second \$6 million in 2001. Other Bucks County communities have made similar investments in their quality of life. Buckingham Township voters approved two open space bonds for a total of \$13.5 million. Upper Makefield passed two for \$21 million. Solebury Township passed three for \$26 million. In total, 16 Bucks County townships, including Plumstead, have approved bond initiatives for \$127.425 million to preserve open space and farmland. Ten townships have enacted earned income or real estate taxes that provide annual streams of funds for recreation land, open space and farmland protection.

In addition to the quality of life reasons, there are financial arguments for the protection of important pieces of land. In most cases, the municipal purchase of residentially zoned land will be less costly for the community than the costs of services resulting from development. With few exceptions, residential development costs more for school district services than the tax revenues cover.

Many studies, called Cost of Community Services Studies, provide support for these concepts. The American Farmland Trust conducted 83 studies over 15 years throughout the nation. It was found that, on average, a dollar collected from residential development costs \$1.15 in municipal and school district services. Farm and forestland costs \$0.36 in services for every dollar collected in tax revenue. That's a pretty good deal for the community.

The Penn State Cooperative Extension has conducted similar studies throughout Pennsylvania. One study done in neighboring Bedminster Township showed that a dollar collected from residential development costs \$1.12 in services while a dollar collected from farm and open land costs four cents in services. A similar study in Buckingham Township show that a dollar from residential development costs only \$1.04 in services, but a dollar collected from farms and open land requires only eight cents in services.

There are a number of studies that show property values are higher in communities with athletic fields, walking trails, parkland, open space, scenic vistas and farmland than comparable homes in communities that don't provide and protect these assets.

Closer to home, Heritage Conservancy's publication, Opportunity Knocks: Open Space as a Community Investment, includes an example of the comparative costs of development versus preservation for a hypothetical 100-acre farm in the Central Bucks School District. School costs were based on figures in the 2001-2002 school year budget.

The evaluation showed that the development of a 100-acre farm in a rural area of the district produced, on average, 66 homes. It was also estimated that the development would result in an annual shortfall of costs over revenues of \$273,834.

If that 100-acre farm would be preserved, that \$273,834 annual shortfall would be avoided after the cost of land protection would be paid. The purchase price of undeveloped land varies substantially, based on many factors. Back in 2001 to 2002, the average per acre price for a municipality to buy land in the Central Bucks area was about \$23,303 and the per acre cost to purchase a conservation easement was \$16,982. These figures came from actual appraisals submitted to the Bucks County Agricultural Land Preservation program.

The community has choices. One choice is to invest that \$273,834 in land conservation rather than paying the shortfall. The cost, on average, to purchase the 100-acre farm, for a township park for example, would be \$2,330,300. The breakeven point would be reached in 8.5 years (\$2,330,300 divided by \$274,834), after which time the taxpayers avoid that annual shortfall and the community enjoys the parkland.

What if it's better for everyone, the farm owner and the taxpayers, if the community just purchases conservation easements? The farmer continues to own the land and is paid for the development value of the land, but a conservation easement prohibits non-farm development of the land... forever. The average cost to purchase conservation easements, also called development rights, is \$1,698,200. It would take about 6.2 years to break even (\$1,698,200 divided by \$273,834).

Obviously, this is a very simple illustration. There are costs and revenues on both sides of the equation that would add complexity to the evaluation. While we may debate the amount of the spread between the school system costs and land preservation costs, the cost to educate a public school student appears to be more than the average home provides in school district revenues. The balance is made up by others in the community. If land or conservation easements are purchased, the shortfalls will not be as great.

It should be understood that the community's purchase of land or conservation easements will not stop development. That would be an unrealistic goal. There are many undeveloped acres and not enough money. But these investments provide the community the ability to play an active and direct role in the protection of its most important land resources. The community need not accept the idea that all the land, in time, will be fully developed. As a community, it is possible to balance new development with land conservation and protection of community character.

The township's efforts to raise money locally for the preservation of critical areas should be supported for reasons related to the quality of life in Plumstead Township as well as the fiscal advantages that would result. These bonds are investments in the community's future that pay for themselves in savings for the township and school district services required by new residential development. The community does have choices and, simply, land preservation is a good deal.

When you enter the voting booth on November 8, keep both your quality of life and the cost of community services aspects in mind. The decision is in your hands.

Above all, remember to vote!

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For additional readings on open space, consider Heritage Conservancy's publication, Opportunity Knocks: Open Space as a Community Interest. You can contact Heritage Conservancy at 215-345-7020.