

Open Space

Preamble

Preservation and enhancement of open space is a fundamental goal of the Monroe 2020 planning process. A system of protected, highly diverse, open land and water areas is essential to Monroe County's economic well being, public image, fiscal balance, and overall quality of life.

- The county's natural environment, combined with superb highway access, can be a major attraction for long-term investment in a wide range of economic enterprises. That environment contains features unique to northeast Pennsylvania and must be sustained.
- Mountains, valleys, lakes, and wildlife habitat characterize Monroe County's image to the visitor market and to the tens of thousands of families who have made this their home.
- Sobered by the rapidly escalating costs of public services, especially for education and transportation, county and municipal leaders understand that land in farms and forests, even with preservation incentives, returns more in public benefits than it demands in public expenditures.
- The presence of these farms and forests, the ski slopes, the swimming lakes, and the banks of the Delaware, all of which are accessible for residents and for employees of local business, is an intrinsic feature of Monroe county's quality of life.

The Inventory

As of 1998, approximately 20% of the land and water area in Monroe County is public open space (public property, agricultural or scenic easements, or fee simple ownership by conservation groups). With the addition of Act 319 tracts and Class 6 Common Open Space of homeowners' associations, for which tax relief is granted so long as land is not developed, the total climbs close to 50%. This is a good beginning, but much of the tax relief acreage is vulnerable to development pressures, and other important areas - including linear corridors of open space - are still altogether unprotected.

If the land-consuming zoning and subdivision standards that prevailed during the county's peak period of residential growth continue into the next century, more than 70,000 acres (over 100 square miles) would become housing sites between 1995 and 2010.

The System

The open space system to be preserved, enhanced and regenerated consists of many components.

The Natural Areas

As depicted in the Monroe County Environmental Alert:

"Monroe County offers mountains, lakes, streams, and woodlands...but our environment is more than this. It's also watersheds, wetlands, clean water supply for ourselves and the Lehigh Valley, bogs and barrens, habitat for the black bear, and many

Part III . . . The Policies

rare species. It's vegetation found nowhere else in Pennsylvania. These features comprise a fragile ecological system, unique on the American Continent. Ecological splendor is not confined to a particular section or district of the County. Exceptional natural features extend throughout the entire 605 square miles, from township to township and even to the urban boroughs of Stroudsburg and East Stroudsburg.”

These include:

- *Areas of biodiversity and fragile ecology* that are yet to be protected and are identified in the County's Natural Areas Inventory. The County water supply plan indicates critical recharge areas and these should also be included for protection. A specific action target of Monroe 2020 will be to establish protective measures for all of these within the 1998-2020 period.
- *Important wildlife habitats that may not be included in this inventory* have been identified through the Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory (PNDI). These are being mapped through the County's Geographic Information System (GIS). Strategies for their preservation should be evaluated in the context of overall open space protection priorities as set by the County and municipalities.
- *Areas of high scenic value*, i.e. superior views from the road and or points from which the beauty of the Poconos can be seen, which have been identified by Task Force members (e.g. The Knob at Mt. Pocono) and in the Harvard University study, *Alternative Futures for Monroe County, Pennsylvania*. These are being added to the County's GIS database, and the most unique should receive priority attention for conservation measures.
- *Open areas of historic significance* may be the settings for historic houses, edges of settlements dating back to the 19th century where farming occurred, historic landscapes, archaeologically important sites, etc. Their function as the frame within which significant features of the County's history can be viewed merits their protection.
- *Greenways that represent linkages among natural areas and recreation opportunities* are corridors of open space which, in general, protect natural, cultural and scenic resources. They provide recreation benefits and enhance the natural beauty and the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities, while stimulating economic development opportunities. Greenways can protect critical ecological functions and provide hiking or biking trails for recreation and health. State and national programs now foster greenway creation. Potential greenways will be identified in Monroe County as part of the 2020 planning process and will be mapped in the County's GIS.

Agriculture

Farming is still an important economic activity in the West End, along the Delaware River and in other areas. It has great potential for continued diversification with high-value crops, for agricultural product processing, as well as being a special component of the County's tourism industry. About one-tenth of the remaining 20,000 acres ± of active farmland is protected by present or pending easements. That approach to preservation merits intensification, especially in securing key lands that may fall below the 50-acre threshold of the current state program in which the County participates.

B. Open Space and Recreation Policy

Municipal, School District and Other Parks and Recreation Land

Despite Monroe County's vast natural areas, state parks, and the National Recreation Area which is one of the most heavily used in the country, recreation space is apparently in short supply for County residents. Lack of ball fields, biking and hiking paths, and neighborhood parks were matters addressed again and again in the 2020 Task Force meetings and forums. The County Recreation and Park Department is making an inventory of current assets and conducting a survey in order to create a county-wide comprehensive recreation and parks master plan. That plan will augment individual municipal facilities. Several municipalities have already created facilities with citizen support.

National and state standards for community park and recreation space exist and serve as a guide for local approaches. These should be cited in the plan and adapted for Monroe County municipalities to reflect the special characteristics of the county. Revised standards should then serve as the basis for local area recreation and open space plans. They can also be a framework for local acceptance of donated or dedicated lands and easements. County and Monroe 2020 financial and technical assistance to evaluate and apply the standards will be essential.

Subdivision Design and Redesign

Concern for open space enhancement and preservation must extend to the areas where people work and live. Since the early 1960s, most new development has occurred via residential and commercial subdivisions. Some outstanding examples exist, but open space conservation has not been a significant objective of most local ordinances, nor has adequate buffering or landscaping. Indeed, Monroe County has thousands of subdivided lots, still unsold or undeveloped, that reflect conventional layouts of a generation ago. If developed, costs of public services will be particularly excessive and degradation of the County's environment will accelerate. Monroe 2020 Task Forces have called for new approaches to subdivision design that emphasize clustering to achieve ample, usable areas of open space and more attention to landscaping, especially in commercial areas along arterial roads. The Task Forces have also called for special efforts by municipalities and the building industry to encourage replotting of obsolete subdivisions to achieve greater open space and higher standards of environmental quality.



Restoration of Open Space for Viewshed Management

Even while planning and implementation efforts for Monroe 2020 focus on protection of open space, restoration of certain highly significant open views should proceed as well. Billboards have proliferated in the County along arterial roads (i.e. Routes 209, 611, 940, 115), both obscuring the countryside and conveying to many visitors and residents alike a tawdry image. Despite concern expressed by vocal citizens and unflattering articles in the public press, both in the Poconos and in tourist market areas outside, billboards appear to be increasing in certain highly visible locations. They block scenic views rather than provide useful information. Economic, political, and administrative issues are bound to arise in response to efforts for control, but other jurisdictions have resolved similar problems. Restoration of open space in degraded viewsheds is as appropriate a focus for Monroe 2020 as adding new areas for protection. In the process, any roads that are especially scenic or historic should be identified and their rights-of-way and scenic viewsheds protected from alteration. Cellular phone towers are an emerging viewshed issue that also needs to be addressed. Along with power lines, they threaten intrusion into the Pocono landscape without clear, community-endorsed guidelines for their placement.

The Strategy

The principal instrument for expressing long-term open space strategy will be the county-wide Open Space Plan, now under preparation with significant community input. That plan should be available in draft form within the next 6-8 months. Like those in Montgomery, Bucks, and Chester counties, Monroe's Plan will recommend:

“Creating an open space system with a network of interrelated preserved lands and trails protected through various actions. Land suitable for public access will be acquired through various acquisition strategies. Other lands will be protected through land use controls or other nonacquisition techniques. These nonacquisition controls will be established through a partnership between the County, municipalities, and landowners.”

Also, like other counties in Pennsylvania, Monroe County can follow up with financial and technical assistance to municipalities, enabling them to prepare their own open space and recreation plans and thereby qualify for state and federal grants as well as proceeds from the Monroe County Open Space bond issue approved by voters in May 1998.

The Open Space Plan will present a revised inventory of sensitive land and water areas and those now protected. It will indicate priorities and quantitative targets for preservation measures of various kinds. For example: the extent of additional farm land and scenic areas for which easements should be purchased during the plan period, the amount of local park and recreation space needed to meet acceptable standards for outdoor recreation, the number and acreage of greenways to be secured through a combination of public/private administrative arrangements and outright land purchase, etc.

The Open Space Plan will also serve as a mechanism for coordinating application of open space preservation techniques to meet the targets.

These include:

- *Public Agency Land and Easement Acquisition.* The agricultural easement program

B. Open Space and Recreation Policy

underway in the County with state support will continue and be expanded. The \$25 million bond issue will provide funds for direct County or municipality land/easement purchases of scenic and natural areas as well as farms, plus seed money for some of these purchases in which other agencies may participate. For example, the Commonwealth generally provides up to three dollars for each one the County currently spends toward agricultural easements. Conservation or scenic easement programs for non-farm sites might involve direct \$1/\$1 matches by other public agencies. New techniques of utilizing public funds, such as land banking for strategic purchases, should also be explored.

- *Private Acquisitions and Donations.* The Nature Conservancy is an important steward of sensitive areas in the County (i.e. ownership of the Cranberry Bog and purchase with federal funds of scenic easements in the area of Long Pond) and other trusts and conservancies also hold land and are extremely interested in expanding their efforts. The County's own Kettle Creek Wildlife Sanctuary and Monroe County Environmental Education Center is an example of an extremely important and well used land donation.
- *Capital Expenditures.* As Monroe County and the municipalities begin to create formal capital improvement programs, utilizing both local funds and grants, creation of trails, bikeways, and public parks becomes more possible. Municipalities will draft their own open space plans to qualify for grants. School districts can also earmark capital expenditures for recreation space that would serve both students and a larger municipal community.
- *Transferable Development Rights.* TDRs are authorized for Pennsylvania municipalities, and legislation pending in the State House and Senate would permit use among municipalities or on a county-wide basis. Thus far, no Monroe County community has adopted the technique, but it can be an extremely powerful tool to support an open space protection program. Transferable development rights is a technique, used extensively in Maryland and New Jersey, whereby owners of farms or environmentally significant lands can sell rights to the dwelling units for which their land is zoned to developers. The developers then "transfer" the rights to sites identified by a jurisdiction as suitable for higher density. The original landowners derive profit from the sale, but their land is protected in perpetuity. The developer purchasers derive value by building even more dwelling units than initially zoned in the "receiving" area.
- *Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances.* Several Monroe County municipalities have adopted zoning or subdivision provisions that emphasize open space and conservation and bear replication throughout the County. The County is also in a position to offer model ordinances and to provide technical assistance in establishing joint municipal agreements that will help conserve environmental features that cross municipal boundaries. Of particular importance may be ordinances that will control the proliferation of billboards, along with potential funding to amortize existing concentrations of billboards to ensure their early removal.
- *Efficient use of utilities and services to contain sprawl.* Some existing water and sewer systems have additional capacity and some can be extended to adjacent areas. Concentrating new growth on lands served by these systems can relieve pressure on unserved areas that should be retained as open space.

Part III . . . The Policies

- *Design Review Panels.* As have many other jurisdictions across the country, the County and municipalities can offer the services of skilled architects, landscape architects, and other design professionals to provide expert comment on preliminary development plans and/or work on re-plotting obsolete subdivisions that could help raise the overall standard of community design in Monroe County as well as assist in protecting open space.

Other Considerations

In implementing the open space strategy, Monroe County will need to address a number of other considerations:

- *Administration.* A mechanism or mechanisms needs to be established, through the use of existing agencies, such as The Planning Commission, Recreation and Park Commission or creation of a new instrumentality, to carry out the strategy. Consultation with other counties who have embarked on major programs, such as Bucks and Montgomery, might well be warranted in determining how the activities should be organized.
- *Sustained Financing.* The bond program is a major step. Long-term preservation goals will require yet additional funds, and thought should be given to establishing a sustained basis for budgeting acquisition, protection, and management of open space.
- *Public Participation.* Through the 2020 planning process and the May 1998 bond referendum, significant public participation has dramatized the need for open space protection and helped define the strategy. Mechanisms to sustain and increase that participation, as the program is implemented and new needs are identified, should be assured.

County and municipal officials, along with citizen support groups, should address these considerations in the months to come.

