

History of Open Space and Farmland Preservation in Readington



Efforts to preserve Readington’s farmland and open space date back a full forty years, to the fall of 1977 and the beginning of a true “grassroots” movement. At that time in Readington Township, and in all of Hunterdon County, small historic villages predominated. They were connected by quiet country roads and surrounded by rolling hills of open land. There were many large dairy farms, pristine trout streams, and impressive hardwood forests on Cushetunk and Round mountains. New homes along some paved roadways accommodated new families “moving out” to enjoy the rural lifestyle of the countryside.

Suburban sprawl, characterized by large residential developments built on cul-de-sacs had effectively transformed vast areas of Somerset County and developers were starting to look towards Hunterdon for cheaper land. Aging farmers understood their “last crop” would be houses and even those not happy with the idea knew that this was the inevitable future for their farms. About this time, the Hunterdon County Democrat ran a story about a developer proposing a 99 lot subdivision on a 200-acre tract of land on Barley Sheaf Road. A handful of “newcomers” joined by some “old timers” came to Township Committee meetings asking what could be done to save the countryside. They predicted that if nothing is done, this entire 48 square mile township would be consumed by wall to wall development. In response, an Open Space Advisory Committee was appointed, and in November 1978, on the advice of this Committee, Readington Township held the State’s first municipal Open Space Referendum. Voters were asked if they favored bonding for \$1,000,000 to preserve farmland and open space, and they overwhelmingly approved. The Open Space Committee went on to write an *Open Space Master Plan*, which advocated preserving open space and farmland to protect the historic, environmental and agricultural resources of the countryside, and stated that *“Traditional zoning and planning techniques in New Jersey result in complete development of all agricultural and open land...We, in Readington.... can commit ourselves to a more sensible alternative. The community has the opportunity to balance development with the preservation of appropriate open spaces...”* The plan, approved in 1979, included a report outlining strategies for preservation, which Readington went on to utilize, most notably, clustering of development, fee simple acquisitions, purchase of easements, and accepting donations.

Active Recreation

To accommodate a growing population, Readington’s earliest priority was the acquisition of parkland suitable for active recreation. In the early 80’s, Readington purchased land for Pickell Park and Hillcrest Park. Land for Summer Road Park was purchased in the mid 90’s. The “Active Recreation” figure identifies all of the existing active recreational parks.



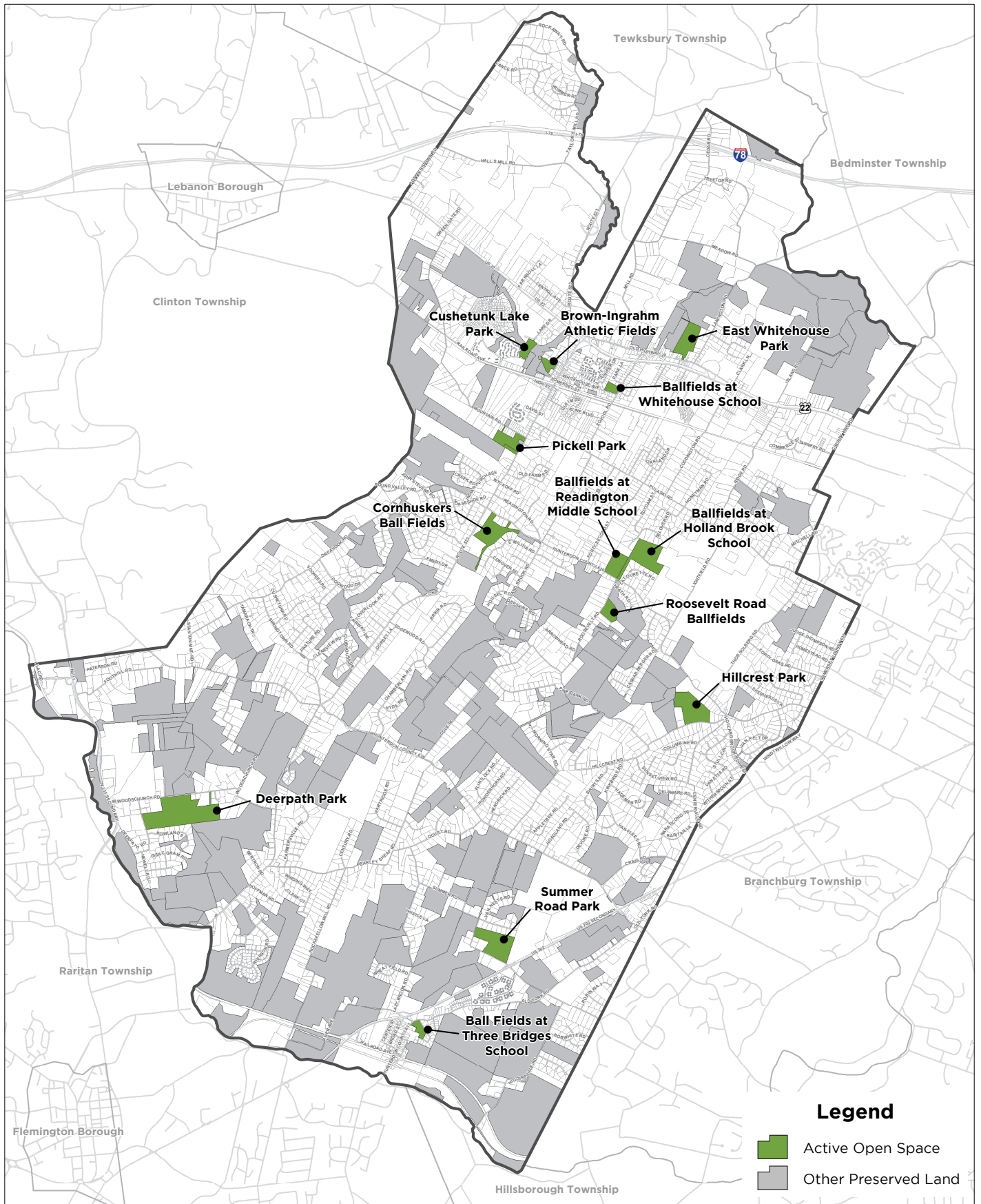
Active Recreation in Readington Township, December 2017			
Block	Lot	Name	Acres
13	54	East Whitehouse Park	31.33
21.12	94	Brown-Ingrahm Athletic Fields	8.45
21.13	2	Cushetunk Lake Park	9.58
25	35 & 35.01	Pickell Park	22.57
35	14	Ballfields at Whitehouse School	6.80
46	5.99	Cornhuskers Ball Fields	38.83
48	20	Ballfields at Readington Middle School	23.40
48	21.01	Ballfields at Holland Brook School	46.18
55	1.91	Roosevelt Road Ballfields	14.00
55	23.03	Hillcrest Park	51.52
72	31	Deerpath Park	104.23
75	18	Summer Road Park	48.46
93	61	Ballfields at Three Bridges School	8.50
Total			413.85

Farmland Preservation

The State Farmland Program began in the mid 80’s, and Readington took full advantage. The Township preserved its first farm in 1987. By 2001, a little more than a decade later, Readington had preserved 30 farms, totaling 3,000 acres, with an additional 350 acres under contract. An inventory of preserved farmland is provided in Appendix B. The “Preserved Farmland” figure identifies all of the farms preserved to date within the Township.

Clustering to Preserve Open Space

Over a period of thirty years, Readington used cluster zoning as an effective tool that preserved large amounts of open space. During the 80’s, with the construction of many large lot residential developments, the Township’s three-acre rural zoning allowed clustering on two acre lots with one third of the tract reserved for open space. Developers were happy to use this option. In the decades to follow, a variety of cluster



Legend

- Active Open Space
- Other Preserved Land

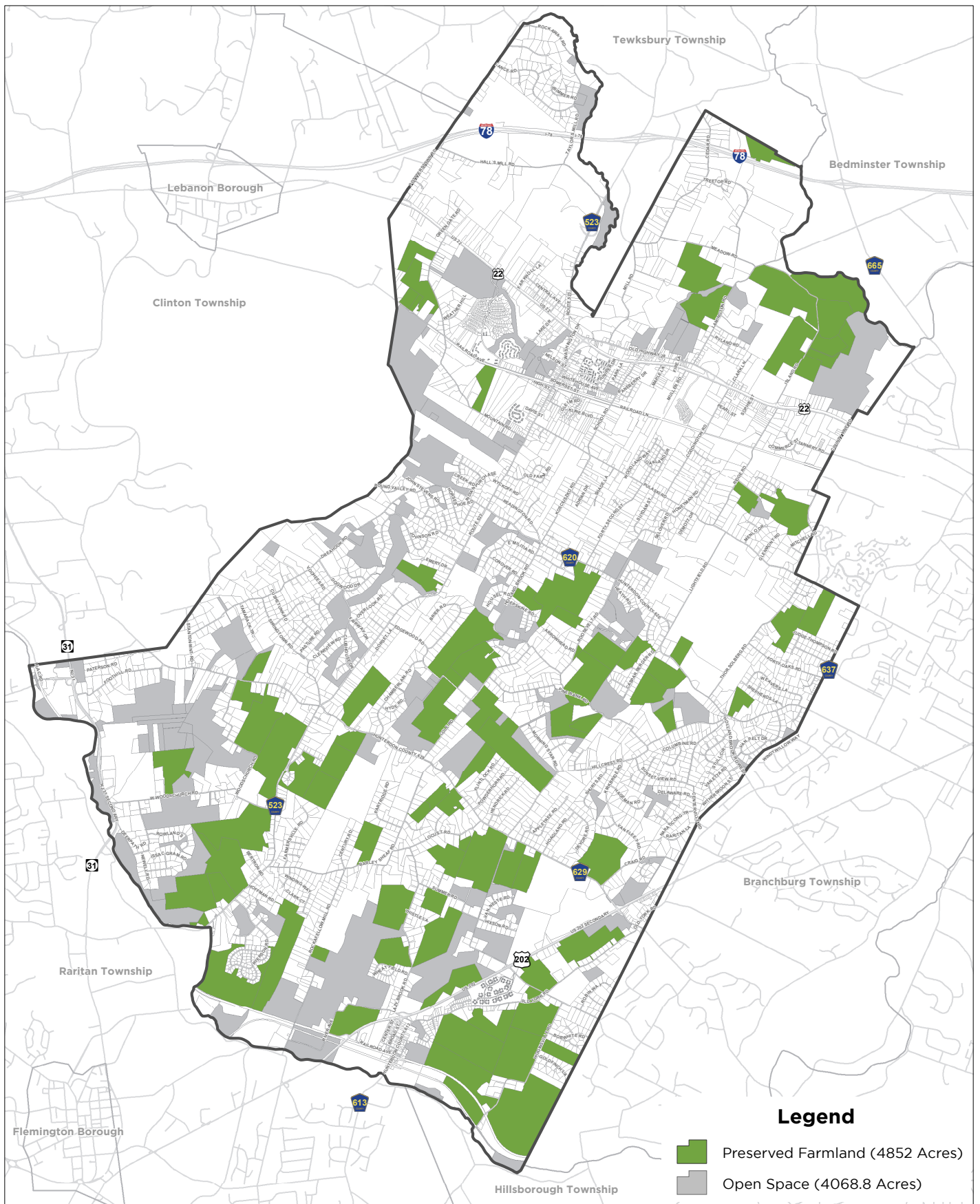


Sources:
 Open Space and Preserved Farmland (2017)
 Readington Township & Clarke Caton Hintz
 Parcels of Hunterdon County, (2017)
 Originator: Hunterdon County Division of GIS
 Publication Date: 08/28/14
 New Jersey Real Estate MOD-IV Tax List Search Plus Database, 2016
 Originator: NJ Office of Information Technology (NJ/OIT),
 Office of Geographic Information Systems (OGIS)
 Originator: NJ Department of the Treasury, Division of Taxation
 Publication Date: 07/13/16

Clarke Caton Hintz ● ● ■
 Architecture
 Planning
 Landscape Architecture

Active Open Space

LOCATION: Readington Township, Hunterdon County, NJ | DATE: December 2017



Legend

- Preserved Farmland (4852 Acres)
- Open Space (4068.8 Acres)



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 Architecture
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Preserved Farmland

LOCATION:
 Readington Township, Hunterdon County, NJ

DATE:
 December 2017

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provisions resulted in the preservation of over 35 tracts of open space, with about 700 acres deeded to Readington Township and several hundred additional acres retained by homeowner's associations.

Clustering to Preserve Farmland

Cluster was also used to preserve agriculture. In the mid 80's, Readington allowed homes to be clustered on 20% of the tract, with 80% reserved as a privately owned preserved farm. In 1988, to stem the loss of prime farmland in the Township's designated Agricultural Development Area, this clustering provision became mandatory. In 1992, it was revised to mandate a 67% set aside for agriculture. Developments using these agricultural cluster provisions created 5 preserved farms totaling 385 acres.

Clustering to Protect Natural Resources

In 1998, Readington again revised its land use ordinances, lowering overall development density, and favoring open space preservation. A mandatory cluster required a 70% open space set aside in low density residential areas. Readington's final cluster revision, in 2009, focused on protecting the townships natural resources, particularly its water resources and critical habitats. With a lower overall density, the ordinance mandates an 80% conservation set aside in the Township's Special Resource and Agricultural Residential zones, and a 50% set aside in the rural and village residential areas.

Readington's Greenways Initiative

In 1992, the Readington Township Environmental Commission surveyed township resident's preferences for the preservation of open space and 83% of respondents gave high marks to strict open space protection and strong preservation actions. The Commission formed an ad-hoc group of interested citizens known as the Greenways Work Group, which concluded that the promotion of Greenways, made up of contiguous parcels of open space assembled to create corridors of undeveloped land, should be used to preserve the Township's natural resources and protect rural character in the context of new development. In November of 1994, Township voters passed a referendum that set aside \$0.02 of assessed valuation for the purchase of open space. The workgroup produced the *Readington Township Greenways Plan*, which was adopted by the Planning Board as an addendum to the Master Plan in 1995, along with The *Readington Township Open Space Inventory and Recommendations for Preservation*. The Plan, adopted as part of the 1996 Reexamination Report, set out Greenways goals that



would guide preservation efforts for next 20 years. Information pertaining to the Greenways Initiative is provided in Appendix C.

Green Acres Planning Incentive Program

The Greenways planning documents provided the basis for an application submitted in 1996 for a Green Trust Planning Incentive Project Grant. Readington learned in 1997 that it was awarded an initial \$3-million-dollar grant (25%) and low interest loan (75%), followed a year later with a \$2 million grant (50%) and low interest loan (50%). In subsequent years, the Program shifted its funding strategy to offer 50% grants, requiring a 50% local match. Grants are made available to municipalities on an annual basis to purchase conservation and recreational lands which implement their Plan. To maintain eligibility, the municipality must have an updated Open Space Plan which is being actively implemented. As of 2017, Readington has been participating in this Program for 2 decades. It has received 15 grant awards totaling \$7,525,000, and two low interest loans totaling \$3,250,000. Readington's local matching funds are listed as \$5,225,000. The local match for acquisitions has come either from the Readington Township Open Space Fund, from a Hunterdon County's Open Space Trust Fund grant, or from municipal bonding. Readington's current Green Trust Planning Incentive Project Grant status is included in Appendix D.



Preservation Partnerships

In the late 90's Readington benefited from a partnership with the private nonprofit conservation organization known as The Trust for Public Land (TPL). TPL was awarded a half million-dollar State Green Acres grant to assist with Readington's Greenways Project. These funds were applied to the purchase of conservation easements and land on three properties; the Renda Farm on the Rockaway Creek, the Knocke Farm on the Holland Brook and the Lane Farm on the Pleasant Run. Between 2001 and 2004, Readington received low interest loans from the NJ Environmental Infrastructure Trust for three additional Greenways projects, two along the Holland Brook and one along the Pleasant Run.

Fee Simple Purchase of Large Tracts

To facilitate preservation, Readington Township, on four separate occasions, purchased large tracts of open land, selling them, in turn, to the State DEP for conservation purposes. In each instance, Readington sold the land for the exact amount it paid. Two of the tracts make up the 500-acre South Branch Wildlife Management Area, and another 230-acre tract has become the Lamington Greenway Wildlife Management Area. An additional 31-acre tract on Cushetunk Mountain was purchased by DEP to buffer the State's Round Valley Recreation Area. On a number of projects, Readington moved quickly to purchase large tracts in fee, then divided the land, preserving a portion using Farmland Preservation Funds and preserving the balance using a combination of State Green Acres and local funding. Two notable examples of this type of project were the former 183 acre Romano property on Cole Road in 1999 and the 310-acre Toll Brothers/Daniels Tracts on Summer Road and Route 202 in 2009.

Acting on Opportunities

Throughout the previous decades, Readington has developed a very meaningful open space network. There is no question that Readington's success can be attributed to its willingness to act quickly when opportunities have presented themselves. To accomplish this, Readington utilized short term, low interest notes to raise money for municipal "pre-purchasing" of land and easements, cost effectively bridging the gap between acquisition and the receipt of state and county preservation funding. In the past, in order to help preservation projects succeed by enabling a quick closing, Readington Township has purchased a property or an easement using short term, low interest, municipal notes. These notes are then reimbursed using preservation funds or auction proceeds as they become available. Often, entire projects were completed without the use of long term municipal bonding and without the long-term expenditure of any municipal funds. Two examples follow:

- I. Forest Hill Preserve, 20 Acres on Case Boulevard in Three Bridges: Purchased by the Township for over \$500,000 but all funds were reimbursed by the State Green Acres Planning Incentive Grant Program, the County Municipal Grants

Fund Program, and the proceeds from auctioning a house divided from the property on a one-acre lot.

2. Lamington Greenway Wildlife Management Area– A parcel of 230 acres was purchased by Readington Township and was sold within one year to the State of New Jersey, Department of Environmental Protection, for use as a State Wildlife Management Area. Readington was reimbursed for 100% of the purchase price, and significant riparian habitats were preserved along the Rockaway Creek and the Lamington River.

The Garden State Preservation Trust

Readington took full advantage of New Jersey’s unprecedented funding for Open Space and Farmland preservation in the decade between 1999 and 2009. In 1999, then Governor Christie Whitman, a Hunterdon County resident, signed the Garden State Preservation Act, which established a stable source of preservation funding and authorized the expenditure of one billion dollars over ten years. The State’s goal was to preserve one million acres, and Readington became one of the leading municipalities to use local initiatives and take full advantage of generous State funding to further its Open Space and Farmland Preservation goals.

Shifting gears during the “Great Recession”

Beginning in 2009, the Readington Township Committee shifted its focus. Readington had borrowed money in order to take full advantage of State funding opportunities that required a local match during the previous 10 years. For the last nine years, now, the Township has been repaying this debt using all of the proceeds from Readington Township’s Open Space Tax, approximately one half million dollars annually, towards the payment of debt service. During this time, the Township has continued to pursue key parcels and smaller projects, helping to build on past initiatives, while using County Trust Fund grants to satisfy the requirement for a local match.

Trail Development

Over the last eight years, Readington’s nine-member Open Space Advisory Board has concentrated on stewardship of Open Spaces and the development of a Township wide trail network. The Board’s goal has been to make the Township’s Public Open Spaces more accessible to township residents. In a relatively short period of time, the Township has successfully developed over 20 miles of improved trails, serving all regions of this 48 square mile Township. Most impressively, this has been accomplished predominately using volunteer labor and funding from grants. Trail development used the



combined efforts of the Open Space Advisory Board members, local Boy Scout troops, dozens of Eagle Scout Candidates, local neighborhood volunteers, along with the support of the Readington Trail Association and the Township's Department of Public Works. Open Space Walks, scheduled for the third Sunday of each month have helped introduce residents to these new trails and to the Township's beautiful and interesting open spaces.

Where We Are Today

Readington's preservation efforts over the last 40 years have not, by any means, stopped development, but they have successfully balanced development with appropriate open spaces. Readington, through its land preservation efforts, has successfully preserved both its precious natural resources and its enviable quality of life. In 2017, Readington Township can and should reflect on its impressive accomplishments. Readington boasts approximately 4,000 acres of preserved Open Space and close to 5,000 acres of preserved farmland. Preserved land makes up 29% of the township's 30,000-acre land mass. Despite these successes, however, Readington's preservation goals have not yet been met. A review of Readington's newly updated plans reveal that continued efforts are needed to further implement Readington's long standing preservation goals.

