

Investing in Preservation Makes Economic Sense

By Patricia Ruby, Hunterdon Land Trust Executive Director

You may know the Hunterdon Land Trust for our work to preserve land for conservation, farming, and recreation. These efforts support social engagement and ensure the future of our farming community, the security of our natural resources, and the beauty of our county...but did you know that this work also significantly contributes to a strong local economy?

The work of the Land Trust and our partners is actively supporting state and the county economic development goals. It attracts businesses and residents seeking a high quality of life. Ecological services provided by natural lands reduce public expenditures on services like provision of clean drinking water; according to a study commissioned by The Trust for Public Land and the American Water Works Association, an additional 10% of forest cover equates to a 20% reduction in water treatment costs. Conservation also supports jobs and related local tax revenue as our projects often require constructing park features, legal work, and land management services. Preserved lands increase property values and help to stabilize tax rates. Additionally, our work directly supports a robust agricultural economy.

Considering all of these benefits, conservation and land preservation pay significant economic dividends. A study commissioned by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation concluded that nearly three dollars in economic activity is generated for every dollar of public and private investment in natural resource conservation in the United States. In New Jersey specifically, outdoor recreation generates \$17.8 billion in consumer spending, 158,000 direct jobs, \$6.1 billion in wages and salaries, and \$1.3 billion in state and local tax revenue according to a recent Outdoor Industry Association report.

While the work of the Hunterdon Land Trust contributes to local tax revenue, it also helps to stabilize municipal tax rates. While development is sometimes seen as the best use of vacant land for increasing municipal revenues, preserving land as open space or farmland is actually a less expensive alternative to development. Development often requires more public expenditures, such as increased sewer, police, and school capacity, than it generates in tax revenue and therefore leads to increased tax rates. A 2010 study by the American Farmland Trust had very similar results to a 1994 study conducted here in East Amwell Township; it showed that for each dollar in revenue raised, municipalities spent 35 cents for open space and farms while they spent \$1.16 for residential properties. Likewise, commercial and light industrial development can have hidden costs as it drives the need for additional housing and other services when people move into the locality. A study commissioned by the Great Swamp Watershed Association in Morris County showed that the addition of commercial ratables in the county's 39 towns has not lowered taxes, nor has the tax rate for residential owners been reduced.

In addition to tax benefits, preserving farmland makes land more accessible to the current and next generation of farmers in order to sustain our agricultural heritage and its economic impact. Food and agriculture is New Jersey's third largest industry; the Hunterdon Land Trust's weekly farmers' market alone contributed \$2.3 million to the local economy in 2012.

In order to protect the economic, environmental, and social benefits that we all derive from natural lands, we have to balance preservation with development that meets other community needs. New Jersey residents overwhelmingly agree that conservation of natural and historic resources is a good investment. Since 1961, New Jersey voters have passed 13 of 13 ballot measures to publicly fund the state Green Acres and Farmland Preservation programs. Due to this consistent support, we preserved 60,000 acres through these programs in Hunterdon County alone. Despite decades of public support, renewed funding for these popular programs is not on the November ballot this year, and all existing funding from previous ballot measures has been allocated.

It is important that the public continue to voice support. As Election Day draws near, be sure to support your local open space taxes and ask gubernatorial and legislative candidates about what plans they have to make sure critical state programs do not come to an end. Remind your officials that preservation is important to the future of New Jersey and it just makes economic sense.