

Future of Burden Hill Forest at stake

At fourteen thousand acres the forest known as Burden Hill straddles much of Alloway and Quinton townships, with smaller portions extending into several adjacent towns in both Salem and Cumberland counties.

Once thought of as a Pine Barrens outlier, Burden Hill has proven itself almost too unique for comparison. While similar to the Pinelands in many ways, Burden Hill harbors a number of rare plant and animal species more akin with forests in Virginia than that found in New Jersey.

As an island set amidst two county agricultural development areas, Burden Hill is surrounded by thousands of acres of productive farmland, which depend on the long-term availability of ground and surface water supplies, an oft—overlooked forest product.

Simply put, forests protect and purify our water supplies. They provide the most effective land cover for recharging groundwater aquifers and in filtering both natural and man-made pollutants out of water entering our wells and surface water supplies. In this way, the Burden Hill Forest is not only important to both homeowner and farmer's wells alike, but actually functions to help hold back the ever-advancing salt-line for several towns below it along the Bay and tidal creeks.

Burden Hill also serves as the headwaters for several important tributaries to the Delaware Bay, including Alloways Creek, the Salem and Cohansey River.

If communities within these watersheds want to protect their water-supplies and ensure clean drinking water into the future, then the protection and preservation of the Burden Hill Forest should become a key issue in such towns as Alloway and Quinton Townships.

For if the forest core within these two townships continues to be cleared for major subdivisions, new roads and watershed-devastating mining expansions, then communities next door and along the Bay will pay a very real price in the form of new wells, hastened salt-water intrusion and the forced conversion to prohibitively expensive public water supplies.

Luckily, the preservation of Burden Hill has already begun. Many landowners and farmers are leaving a legacy by either preserving or selling their land to groups like the Natural Lands Trust and New Jersey Conservation Foundation, or are pursuing farmland preservation through state and county programs. These collective actions do add up, especially when they inspire others.

Yet, the balance of Burden Hill remains highly vulnerable to forest fragmentation, clearing-cutting and incompatible land uses. While residential development can be limited to an amount that makes sense given the multiple impacts it has on taxpayers and natural resources - equally important are measures which enable development to be a better neighbor to communities and to co-exist with the environment.

Clustered development is one tool being implemented in more area towns every year. Other tools also critical to protecting Burden Hill and its associated waterways include ordinances, which require developers to preserve forest resources when they build, and buffers to keep subdivision and private septic out of floodplains and stream-corridors.

Of immediate importance to towns like Quinton Township, is final passage of the proposed, new Soil Removal Ordinance, which would finally put the breaks on sand and gravel mining's ever-increasing expansion into some of Burden Hill's most exceptional forest areas and wildlife habitat.

A chief recommendation of the town's master plan, the ordinance was passed by the planning board by a unanimous vote several months ago, before heading to the township committee where it was recommend for preliminary approval under first reading. However, should final approval and adoption not happen before the end of the year, the entire process will have to begin all over again.

The issue is time-sensitive, because the planning board is scheduled to hear mining company, Continental Aggregates', application for a significant mine pit expansion on Tuesday, December 11th – something the proposed new ordinance would prohibit once-and-for-all.

While existing and permitted operations should have the right to live out their useful lifetimes, towns like Quinton have already witnessed much important farmland and forest converted into Martian landscapes of little future use and tax value. Many feel enough is enough and want Quinton to avoid becoming another Downe Township, where miles of holes in the ground make future ratable generation at these sites difficult to imagine.