

County Refuses Millions for Open Space

Cape May County Herald

Letters to the Editor | Tue, 08/17/2010

By Matt Blake, Delaware Bayshore Program Manager, American Littoral Society

Between 2005 and 2010, the state Green Acres program handed out over \$98 million to county governments throughout New Jersey to preserve open space, while Cape May County took a pass and declined the money. County residents and towns need ask their freeholders why they continually refuse millions from Green Acres. Earlier this month the Littoral Society sent a letter to the County Freeholders, which urged them to consider applying to Green Acres to seek available funding to match funds currently raised through the County Open Space and Farmland Preservation Program. Cape May County established a trust fund in 1989 to preserve open space and agricultural lands. The trust is funded by a county property tax of 1-cent per \$100 of assessed valuation, which raised \$5.5 million toward land preservation last year. Since the county program's inception, the county has always had the option to leverage local open space dollars with State Green Acres funding for a wide variety of projects, but has chosen not to do so. Indeed, for the past 10 years, the county has repeatedly refused this funding, which most other counties compete for on an annual basis. By comparison, 18 other counties in the state regularly apply for and receive substantial matching funds from Green Acres to both acquire open space, or fund the development of recreational infrastructure in trails, picnic areas, playgrounds, athletic fields, fishing piers, boat ramps, and even public bathrooms. At their July 13 meeting, the Littoral Society again urged the freeholders to take advantage of this competitive program. Director Dan Beyel responded by stating that the county has chosen to not apply because they would prefer to not partner with local land preservation organizations, which they have "adversarial relationships with." According to Beyel, because the county has a finite amount of land, he doesn't believe land conservation groups should be interfering with efforts to develop what little remains, somehow forgetting why the county open space program exists in the first place. Beyel's odd view that groups who are working to complete places like the Cape May National Wildlife Refuge are somehow adversaries doesn't make any sense. Worse, it punishes every town, which could benefit from seeing the county's Open Space fund doubled. Think of all of those beautiful and special places lost and paved over these past 10 years that could have otherwise been preserved had the county merely submitted an application. We keep hearing about situations where towns seeking to create a pocket park or some access point to a beach or waterway are being turned away because the county maintains it just doesn't have the money. The truth is that the county simply never asks for it. If it did, the county could have doubled the amount of open space it has preserved. For example, the county could use Green Acres funds to assist in efforts to complete the Cape May National Wildlife Refuge, which has only acquired 11,800 acres of the 21,820 acres that congress envisioned necessary to protect wetlands and wildlife resources of international importance. Considering that the county preservation program is paid for by county taxpayers, the freeholders should be doing everything possible to get a maximum return on their money. Cape May County benefits greatly from being the eco-tourism capital of New Jersey. According to a recent study by the Atlantic County Community College, eco-tourism generates over \$522 million annually in Cape May County. Given the accelerating economic value of eco-tourism in the county, the freeholders should be aggressively going after every state dollar to advance and support open space and park development efforts, not limit them. MATT BLAKE Millville (ED. NOTE: Blake is manager of the Littoral Society's Delaware Bay Program