

# Environmentalists urge preservation of Millville's Wawa tract

By EDWARD VAN EMBDEN Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, December 29, 2009

**MILLVILLE** - City officials have asked the public for input on what to do with more than 300 acres of prime lakeside property. In response, several environmental groups have come out with a request for preservation.

Representatives from seven different groups signed a letter addressed to the city and its Planning Board calling for preservation of the land in the city's north end known as the Wawa tract.

Penned by Matt Blake, of the American Littoral Society, the letter indicates that the groups believe the acreage is worthy of preservation and represents a top conservation priority in the state.

The tract has been designated by the state Department of Environmental Protection as an environmentally sensitive planning area. As recently as a year ago, however, a 532-unit housing development was planned for the site.

"Equally important are the exceptional opportunities for recreation that public ownership as a logical expansion to the Union Lake Wildlife Management Area would provide to both Millville residents and visitors alike," the letter reads.

The land is prized for its potential for both development and environmental conservation. The entire tract is about 400 acres, although 85 of those have been zoned for commercial development and to facilitate the construction of a road through the property.

Rezoning of the land owned by Wawa Inc. happened relatively quickly and without much public input. However, city officials have said they will rely, in part, on what the public has to say when it comes to deciding what to do with the remaining land.

"We would all prefer to see all 400 acres preserved," Blake said. "It was pretty clear early on that that wasn't going to happen. Certainly, early on we said, 'Let's look at the reality. We're not likely to win everything, so let's look to the middle, let's look at what's best for the environment, the city and the residents of Millville.'"

In addition to the American Littoral Society, the letter was signed by Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and its Tributaries, the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions, New Jersey Conservation Foundation, New Jersey Audubon Society, New Jersey Environmental Federation, and South Jersey Land and Water Trust.

Planning Director Kim Ayres and other officials recently met with residents living next to Union Lake to discuss development plans. Like the environmental groups, open space was favored, although concerns centered more on increases in traffic and sprawl than anything else.

Ayres said the city has promised to be comprehensive when it comes to finding out what the public wants. In addition to public meetings, the city is also holding private meetings and accepting input in the form letters.

No deadline for rezoning has been set, although Ayres has indicated that it likely would happen relatively soon in the new year.