

FRIENDS OF CAPE MAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

24 Kimbles Beach Road • Cape May Court House, NJ 08210 • (609) 385-5527

www.friendsofcapemayrefuge.org

September 20, 2010

Middle Township Committee
33 Mechanic Street
Cape May Court House, NJ 08210

Dear Mayor and Township Committee:

RE: Refuge acquisition boundary areas within recommended growth management centers

My name is John King and I am a member of the Friends of Cape May National Wildlife Refuge Board of Trustees. The Friends is a recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit advocacy group for the Cape May NWR and is dedicated to advancing the collective mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System to conserve and protect wildlife. I come before you tonight on behalf of the Friends to express our concerns with the location of certain proposed growth centers in the recently updated master plan.

In three instances, the new master plan, approved by the Planning Board on June 24th, would allow up to six units per acre adjacent to existing refuge lands, in environmentally sensitive areas long-ago approved for inclusion within the refuge. It would also grandfather in lots as small as 12,000 square feet. We do not believe this is an appropriate level of density for the refuge acquisition lands and urge the Township Committee to instead place these areas within the more protective zoning of the Rural Conservation Zone (3.5 acres per unit).

According to the Land Use Plan, “the intent of the Rural Conservation area is to permit single-family residential development and related agricultural and recreational uses at a density that will ensure that the water quality of the three HUC11 Watersheds within the Township will not be substantially degraded by potential future development.” (pg 54, Draft Land Use Plan)

It also states that “the majority of publicly owned lands in the Township are located in the Rural Conservation area...environmentally sensitive lands continue to be acquired by federal, state, county, not-for-profit interest groups in an effort to preserve the critical wildlife habitat and rich natural resources they contain.” (pg 54, Draft Land Use Plan)

We believe this definition and description for the Rural Conservation Zone best characterizes the refuge acquisition boundaries.

However, despite the Zoning Board’s denial of the Conifer Project on Railroad Ave in Cape May Court House, as well as the site’s inclusion in the refuge acquisition boundaries, it remains within the proposed CMCH Center boundaries. The site is surrounded by the federal refuge on three sides in an area with documented vernal pools and state-endangered Eastern Tiger Salamanders and other listed amphibian species which spend part of their life cycles in upland habitat. Also, the surrounding habitat was given the second-highest conservation ranking under the *NJDEP Landscape Project* (4 on a scale of 1-5, 5 requiring highest protection).

In addition to the Conifer site, the two other instances where the town proposes to extend the centers into the federal land acquisition boundaries include:

- 1) the triangular area between Goshen Rd. and Johnson Ave in CMCH; and
- 2) Secluded Acres, which is the area adjacent to Secluded Lane and Route 47 in Rio Grande

The 2003 Master Plan recommended that the “township should continue to protect and enhance the Cape May National Wildlife Refuge by supporting the protection of natural resources and water quality of lands adjacent to this area.” We don’t see how the town’s selection of the Conifer site to meet its Affordable Housing obligations implements these objectives and we strongly believe that all lands within the US Fish and Wildlife Service land acquisition boundaries should not be included in centers and instead be placed in the Rural Conservation Zone.

Suburban development within these areas threatens adjacent refuge lands in three ways:

- 1) Associated deforestation and clearing destroys on-site natural resources,
- 2) Fragments refuge lands, and
- 3) Resultant lawns and residential use increases non-point source pollution runoff onto refuge lands

In 2007, Defenders of Wildlife, a national non-profit environmental group designated the Cape May National Wildlife Refuge among America’s ten most endangered national wildlife refuges - one of the most endangered yet most important when you factor in the role the Cape May forest plays in providing critical habitat for tens of thousands of migrating birds. Zoning for suburban levels of development within the refuge acquisition boundaries undermines public efforts to protect it, and increases the likelihood that such areas will be developed.

Due to its critical and ecologically-important location, the refuge has received many regional, national and international designations, including:

- Flagship refuge of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan;
- RAMSAR Wetland of International Importance;
- Hemispherically-important Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site;
- Globally Important Bird Area;
- Part of the Pinelands National Reserve;
- Part of the Great Egg Harbor watershed, which is a National Scenic and Recreational River;
- and,
- New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail destination

The Friends will continue to assist in efforts to complete the Cape May NWR, 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.

In closing, we are not asking the town to render these three sites unbuildable, but simply to remove these areas from growth centers and zone as Rural Conservation, which allows for development at lower densities.

On behalf of the Friends Board of Trustees, we would like to thank you for this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,
John King
Friends of Cape May National Wildlife Refuge Board of Trustees