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Hunterdon County
Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan
2008
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Introduction

Through various public forums and public opinion surveys, Hunterdon County residents have clearly stated their desire to preserve the County's rural character, its farmland and open space. County residents have overwhelmingly approved farmland preservation bond issues since the first referendum in 1980 and the participation of landowners in the farmland preservation program has increased since its inception in 1985. The interest of residents and landowners in preserving farmland, however, is countered by development pressure in the County and the concurrent decline of full time farmers. This has made farmland preservation a challenging task.

Hunterdon County is situated in northwestern New Jersey on the fringe of the New York metropolitan area. As a result of its proximity to the New York metropolitan area, Hunterdon County has undergone rapid growth during the past few decades. The population from 1980 to 1990 increased by 23.4% and according to the 1990 U.S. Census, Hunterdon County was the second fastest growing county in New Jersey. The latest Hunterdon County Planning Board estimate indicates a 40% population increase from 1980 to present day.

Farmers and non-farmers concerned about Hunterdon County’s transformation from a rural to a suburban county started a farmland preservation effort in 1981. The farmland preservation program has grown tremendously since then and will continue to evolve to meet the needs of the ever changing agricultural economy. This Plan provides an overview of Hunterdon County’s farmland preservation program, offers recommendations for meeting future demands as well as improving the current program, and satisfies State requirements for a county comprehensive farmland preservation plan.

"Why preserve farmland?"

Farmland is a non-renewable natural resource - when it's gone, it's gone forever. With the current rate of development in Hunterdon County, farmland is diminishing at a rapid pace. It is expected that Hunterdon County's growth rate - which has been one of the fastest in the State for the past two decades – will continue. Unfortunately, however, the land that is best for development is also best for agriculture.

The most important and obvious reason for preserving farmland is to permanently preserve quality farmland that can provide food and fiber products for both present and future generations. Local farm operations can offer a variety of fresh local produce and animal fiber through farm markets or other types of direct marketing initiatives. Fresh produce is typically healthier, more convenient, and often offers varieties that are not otherwise available locally. Local fiber offers similar advantages.

Preserved farmland also offers property tax benefits. It helps stabilize property taxes because
farms require less governmental services. The largest category of property taxes is the cost of schools. Although new residential development pays its share of property taxes, it does not cover the entire cost of educating its children. The annual costs are therefore distributed to other existing homes and properties. Studies have shown that even considering the cost of bonding money for farmland preservation, the overall cost to the taxpayer is less with one-time investments in farmland (preservation) than with a new residential development.

Preserving farmland offers other benefits. It maintains clean air and generates little traffic. Farmland often offers attractive views and provides land for groundwater recharge so that rainwater can filter back into the ground. Farmland can contribute to an eco-tourism program, benefiting area towns and businesses. Finally, farmland contributes to the rural quality of life that has been enjoyed in Hunterdon County for centuries. It is for all of these reasons that a farmland preservation program is important to Hunterdon County residents and local officials.