Overview
Hunterdon County residents have a long-standing commitment to open space and farmland preservation. In 1980, they supported the county’s first bond referendum ($2.2 million) for agricultural preservation. In 1993, results from a public opinion survey conducted by the Hunterdon County Planning Board indicated that 54% of respondents were willing to pay higher taxes for farmland and open space preservation. Since 1998, Hunterdon County voters have consistently supported land preservation through the Garden State Preservation Trust Act, which provides a stable source of funding statewide ($1-2 billion for farmland, open space and historic preservation through the year 2008) as well as county ballot referendums for a dedicated tax for farmland, open space and historic preservation.

Parks, Open Space and Recreation in Hunterdon County
Today, Hunterdon County has nearly 30,000 acres of parks, open space and recreational lands, exclusive of the land that has been preserved through the State Farmland Preservation Program. Roughly 75% of this land consists of publicly held properties. The remainder includes property of nonprofit conservation organizations, homeowners associations, or individuals who have deed restricted their property from further development (Table 1 and Map 1). These lands include environmentally sensitive areas, active and passive recreational lands and farmland. In total, protected open space represents 10% of the county’s land base.

County-owned Parkland
Hunterdon County obtained a 15-acre property in Delaware Township through a private donation in 1966. Six years later, an additional donation of 66 acres occurred. In 1973, the Hunterdon County Park System was created and the donated property, now called the Wescott Preserve, represented the first parkland acquisition. Today, the Hunterdon County Park System maintains 24 parks, totaling approximately 7,637 acres of parkland. Although park properties are located throughout the county, the majority are found in Raritan, Readington, Clinton and Lebanon Townships.
County Park Bioregions
The County Park System has identified six bioregions into which its various existing and future parks fall. Bioregions are discrete physical regions that contain unique physiographic and biological features. Parks located within these bioregions are classified as follows (Map 2):

- **Bioregion Preserves**: exemplary of the distinct physiographic and biological features of a county bioregion
- **Improved Natural Areas**: minimally developed to accommodate off-street parking, trails, rest rooms, campgrounds, and picnic facilities
- **Linked/Greenways**: corridors with natural features along rivers, streams, or abandoned rail lines that are part of a linked open space system with limited development
- **General Use Parks**: developed for active and passive recreation and made available for general public use
- **Special Use Parks**: developed for one or several unique uses, requiring special care and made available for public use in a controlled manner

County Recreational Facilities
The county’s park system consists primarily of lands set aside for passive recreational use. Steep topography, woodlands, and wetlands are common features of County parks and afford opportunities for nature observation, hiking, biking, horseback riding, and related activities. Most offer hunting and fishing as well. Some contain parking lots, picnic tables, and nature study areas.

Deer Path Park and Heron’s Glen Golf Course are the county’s largest active recreational areas. Deer Path Park, a general use park in Readington Township, has a softball field and two soccer fields. Heron Glen is a 240-acre county-owned golf course that opened in Raritan Township in 2002. The County has also acquired a 89-acre property in East Amwell Township, that hosts county agricultural fairs as well as other community events, such as horse and dog shows.

### Table 1. Parks and Open Space, Hunterdon County, NJ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Acreage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board of Education</td>
<td>1,011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Open Space</td>
<td>1,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County-owned</td>
<td>7,637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmland Conservation Areas</td>
<td>1,737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipally-owned</td>
<td>4,452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit Organization</td>
<td>3,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Open Space</td>
<td>464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-owned</td>
<td>11,512</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Common open space is open land maintained by homeowner associations. Farmland Conservation Areas are preserved properties currently farmed but not subject to the deed restrictions required under the State Farmland Preservation Program.
The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) developed a guideline for calculating the acreage of government-held open space that should be used for active recreation. This guideline, called the Population Ratio Technique, relates recreational land needs to existing and projected population. According to the guideline, a county park system should offer 12 acres of active recreation land per 1,000 people. Presently, the Hunterdon County Park System has 808 acres of active recreation areas. According to the NRPA guideline, it is deficient by nearly 700 acres. Given a projected population of 160,797 in 2020, the need for active recreational land would escalate to 1,930 acres. The Hunterdon County Park and Recreation Master Plan calls for an additional 1,100 acres of active recreation parks.

The NRPA Population Ratio Technique may be a useful guideline for general planning purposes, but it fails to account for a variety of local factors that could influence active recreation needs. For example, demographic data such as age and disposable income, and valid resident-based recreational needs surveys are important considerations when planning for new park facilities. In addition, many active recreational facilities are more appropriately provided for at the municipal level. The 1994-1999 New Jersey Open Space and Outdoor Recreation Plan Summary indicates that municipalities in New Jersey provide far more outdoor sports facilities and swimming pools than do counties. Conversely, counties tend to offer more golf courses, horseback riding facilities, environmental centers, campsites and picnicking facilities. The Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders recently charged its Parks and Recreation Advisory Board to conduct a recreational facilities needs assessment for the county so that needs and priorities unique to Hunterdon County can be identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park Classification</th>
<th>Existing Holdings (Acres)</th>
<th>Future Total Holdings (Acres)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bioregion Preserves</td>
<td>1,316</td>
<td>9,816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved Natural Areas</td>
<td>2,137</td>
<td>3,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Use Parks/General Use Parks</td>
<td>1,810</td>
<td>2,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linked Greenways/Trails</td>
<td>107*</td>
<td>907*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In addition, the South Branch Reservation is a 645-acre trail system included under Bioregion Preserves. Proposed future holdings total 1,000 acres.

Note: Existing holdings have been increased since the time this table was created.
Park Acquisition Priorities

Park system acquisitions have reflected environmental protection priorities, such as maintaining biodiversity, enhancing watershed protection efforts and sustaining water quality. These priorities reflect the framework of the Hunterdon County Park and Recreation Master Plan (2000), which suggests the following goals for future county park acquisitions:

- Preserve the natural environmental features that define Hunterdon county’s landscape
- Provide programs and facilities that allow the public to fully experience nature and enjoy outdoor recreation activities in Hunterdon County

In addition, the Park System is interested in sites for future regional-scale recreation activities.

The 2000 Hunterdon County Park and Recreation Master Plan calls for a future park system consisting of 17,520 acres or approximately 6.5% of the County’s land base. The majority of additional parks are envisioned as bioregion preserves (Table 2 and Map 1). However, 645 acres that were designated as bioregion preserves also qualify as greenways and trails.

Map 1. Parks and Preserved Open Space, Hunterdon County, NJ
Primary data sources: Municipalities, Hunterdon County Park System, nonprofit organizations, NJDEP. Note: Farmland Conservation Areas are preserved properties currently farmed but not subject to the deed restrictions required under the State Farmland Preservation Program. Also note that Board of Education properties are not necessarily preserved open space.
The plan also envisions the acquisition of lands within designated conservation zones and greenway corridors. Since the county alone cannot preserve and manage the extensive area identified in the plan, it recommends working collaboratively with other government agencies, nonprofit organizations and private property owners to preserve these lands.

**Financing Open Space and Parkland Acquisitions**

Prior to the passage of the Hunterdon County Open Space, Recreation, Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund in 1999, the county spent over $23.5 million from capital funds on the purchase of approximately 5,400 acres of parkland. Most of these purchases were fee simple, rather than easements, and averaged $4000 per acre in County contributions.

The dedicated Open Space Tax, which went into effect in 2000, allows the County to raise up to 3 cents per $100 equalized assessed value for farmland preservation, open space preservation and the preservation of County-owned historic structures. Valid for four years, another ballot question was approved in November of 2004. Detailed policies on how to spend its tax dollars are spelled out in the Hunterdon County Open Space, Farmland, and Historic Preservation Trust Fund Plan. In 2000, $3.6 million was generated by the tax. Thus far, $37 million has been collected for the preservation of 6258 acres of farmland, 2939 acres of County parkland, and 5622 total acres of municipal and nonprofit land acquisitions.

Hunterdon County has been able to leverage its funding for parkland acquisitions by taking advantage of low interest loans and grants offered through the NJDEP Office of Green Acres. More recently, its policy has been to maximize funding opportunities by seeking additional and creative partnerships with other entities, including municipalities and nonprofit organizations. This is becoming increasingly important, given projected costs of parkland acquisitions over the next 8 to 10 years. The Hunterdon
County Park and Recreation Master Plan anticipates the need for $80 million in future expenditures ($8,000/acre) to acquire nearly 12,000 acres of parkland. This estimate did not consider future cost, which will invariably increase as time and market pressures continue to influence land values.

*Other Park and Open Space Priority Areas*
Open space priorities of various state and federal interests have been reviewed for consistency with the county’s priority areas.

Natural Heritage Priority Sites and properties targeted by the New Jersey Water Supply Authority for protection of the Spruce Run Watershed are generally consistent with the County’s plan. The County’s conservation zones capture portions of the Wild and Scenic designation of the Delaware and Musconetcong Rivers.

Finally, the National Park Service has completed a study evaluating a possible national heritage area designation for portions of New Jersey based on each site’s Revolutionary War Era historic value. Called the “Crossroads of the American Revolution,” the preferred boundary of this area captures more than half of Hunterdon County, from Kingwood and Franklin Townships to East and West Amwell Townships, and from Readington Township south through Raritan Township. A National Heritage Area was enacted for this region in 2006 and Congress will provide funding for a local management committee for ten years. This initiative is important for both open space and historic preservation interests in the county.
Agriculture

Hunterdon County has a diverse agricultural base, ranging from small fields to moderately-sized farming operations. The most significant issues facing Hunterdon County farmers today are the costs of farming, competition from other agricultural areas, lack of local support services, nuisance complaints about farming practices and the appeal of high-value development offers for their land.

Agriculture in Hunterdon County Today

Hay comprises 30% of agricultural lands in Hunterdon County, and is the leading crop countywide and statewide. Corn and other grain crops, soybeans, specialty crops, nurseries, cattle, milk cows, and horses also characterize the county’s agricultural base. In 2004, Hunterdon County ranked first in New Jersey for hay, fourth for corn for grain and also for cattle and calves, and fifth for soybeans for beans, wheat for grain, and nursery stock acreage (New Jersey Department of Agriculture, 2005). The county hosts a diverse array of agricultural operations because of the above average soils, relatively good climate, proximity to various types of agricultural markets and presence of part-and full-time farmers with varied farming interests.

According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, 53% of Hunterdon County’s 1,514 farms are operated by farmers who did not claim farming as their principal occupation. Since 1974, the majority of Hunterdon County farmers have been “part-timers.” There are a couple of explanations for this trend. The first is New Jersey’s program for preferential farmland assessment. A landowner with six or more acres qualifies for a reduced property tax on that portion of the property that generates a minimum of $500 annually of qualified agricultural income. The County has appealed to many newcomers because of the availability of larger properties in a predominantly rural environment. While many are not interested in farming themselves, they often lease a majority of their land to full-time farmers in order to qualify for reduced property taxes. The second reason for the high number of part-time farmers is the economic reality that many are unable to derive enough income from farming alone.

The changing profile of Hunterdon County farmers has been coupled with changes in farm size. Contrary to national trends, Hunterdon County has witnessed a reduction in the size of farms over the past several decades. In 1969, the average farm was 111 acres; by 2002, it fell to 72 acres. As the most densely populated state, New Jersey has witnessed a decline in average farm size statewide.
The Economics of Farming

New Jersey is one of the most expensive places to farm in the country. Farm income has been relatively low while farm production costs continue to be high. In 2002, only 362 (24%) of the County’s 1514 farms had a net cash gain from farm income of operations. These 362 farms include those farms with total production expenses equal to the total market value of agricultural products sold, government payments, and farm-related income. In other words, 1,150 farms (76% of Hunterdon County’s total farms) had a net loss of farm income.

Two of the most significant factors contributing to the high cost of farming are the high value of land and the heavy reliance on property taxes to support municipal and county government expenditures, most notably expanding school costs. High value farmland is better suited for more intensive, higher yielding outputs than produced by the crops typical to the county. Furthermore, high land values make it difficult for new farmers to establish operations in the county. While farmers benefit from preferential tax assessment on their farmland, the improvements on their property, including farm buildings, are taxed on their true value. Since most farm operations require such investments, these taxes contribute significantly to the expense of farming in Hunterdon County.

Located midway between two of the country’s largest metropolitan areas, Hunterdon County farmers have the opportunity to supply two major markets. The large farm operations that previously defined the county’s rural landscape—most notably dairy and grain—have been on the decline for decades. More intensive, non-traditional types of farms are taking their place. Christmas tree farms, pick-your-own operations and wineries provide a pleasant day-trip for many urban residents contribute to the growing agritourism market in the county. Nursery and greenhouse operations are supported by the new development occurring throughout the county. Many farmers have found their niche by producing specialty crops that are in demand at ethnic restaurants and farmers markets in the cities. In addition, equestrian operations have become more numerous as Hunterdon County establishes itself as a destination for horse riders.

The Challenges Facing Farming

The average age of Hunterdon County’s farmers has been increasing for the past 30 years. In 1969, the average age was 53; by 2002, it rose to 56. As farmers approach retirement, there is little room for risky ventures or for investments to adapt to a changing industry. Consequently, if profit margins are minimal, the path of least resistance is often to sell the farm. Some farmers hold onto the land and bequeath it to
their children. However, with the current estate tax laws, even this can be a costly endeavor.

Another challenge to the agriculture industry is that farmland is often the easiest to develop. Real estate developers aggressively solicit farmers to sell their land through letters, phone calls and door-to-door visits. Many large developers offer down payments to landowners in exchange for contracts to sell their farmland after subdivision approvals have been secured. Such offers are difficult to resist if the farmer’s profit margins have been low or retirement is near.

Furthermore, conflicts between farmers and their non-farm neighbors are becoming more frequent as development spreads into rural areas. Nuisance suits, trespassing and liability issues often arise when farms are surrounded by residential developments. Frequently new neighbors move in without understanding the reality of living near a farm and are quick to complain about how nearby farm operations are impacting them. Most rural municipalities have adopted right-to-farm ordinances that afford farm operations protection from nuisance complaints, provided that these operations follow established best management practices. As the farms that have long defined Hunterdon’s rural landscape are replaced by new, more competitive forms of agriculture, these conflicts could increase.

Farmland Preservation

The Agriculture Retention and Development Act of 1983 established New Jersey’s Farmland Preservation Program. Even earlier, Hunterdon County had begun what would become one of the most successful farmland preservation efforts statewide. In 1980, voters approved a $2.2 million bond referendum for farmland preservation. According to the SADC, as of July 31, 2007, there have been 254 farms preserved in Hunterdon County. Since the first farm was preserved in 1985, the County has invested an estimated $27 million to preserve a total of 22,582 acres of farmland (Map 3). This success has been made possible through partnerships with municipalities and the state who have contributed $26.5 million and $118.2 million respectively.
The State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) was formed to administer the farmland preservation program statewide. The SADC is responsible for establishing the rules and policies governing the program. While counties are responsible for administering many of the program’s elements, the SADC grants final approval for every application. The Hunterdon County Agriculture Development Board (CADB) administers the county’s farmland preservation program. In addition to reviewing and approving applications for easement purchase, the board participates in negotiations and disputes involving right-to-farm conflicts. For their part, municipalities cost-share farmland preservation applications, educate landowners about farmland preservation and provide a regulatory climate suitable for agriculture. There are a variety of programs created by the SADC that are available to landowners interested in preserving their farm.

- **Fee Simple Purchase:** A farm is purchased and resold with an agricultural easement restricting it to agricultural use in perpetuity. Since it is much more costly up-front to purchase the farm rather than an agricultural easement, this approach is intended to be used only when a farm is in imminent danger of being developed.

- **Purchase of Development Rights (PDR):** The most commonly used program, the development potential from a farm is purchased (an agricultural easement) restricting the farm to agricultural uses in perpetuity. The farmer retains ownership of the land and is free to sell it with the agricultural easement on it. This program is particularly attractive to younger people who want to establish a farm operation in the county but are deterred from doing so by the high cost of unrestricted land.

- **Planning Incentive Grant (PIG):** The PIG program allows a municipality to preserve large, fairly contiguous areas of farmland. The municipality plays a larger role in farmland preservation by preparing a multi-farm application. Farms are then preserved through the acquisition of an agricultural easement. A major difference between the two programs is that the cost of acquiring the easement on PIG farms can be spread out over a number of years, while the easement on a PDR farm is fully paid at the time of purchase.
In order to be eligible for farmland preservation, a farm must be located in an Agriculture Development Area (ADA). Agriculture Development Areas are lands identified by CADB where agriculture operations are likely to continue in the future. An ADA must have a predominance of prime and statewide important soils, have a minimum contiguous area of at least 250 acres, be reasonably free of non-agricultural development and not be included in a sewer service area. Consistency with the State Development and Redevelopment Plan is a new consideration of eligibility for preservation funds. The SADC now uses the state’s Planning Area designations as criteria for a farm’s eligibility. When ranking farms, the SADC will give the most points to those in the Rural Planning Area (PA 4); fewer points to farms located in the Fringe (PA 3) and Environmentally Sensitive (PA 5) Planning Areas; and no points to farms in the Metropolitan (PA 1) and Suburban (PA 2) Planning Areas.

Funding for Farmland Preservation
Hunterdon County’s success in preserving farmland is largely attributed to the partnership that has been established between the Hunterdon municipalities, the County and the State. Generally speaking, the State pays about 60% of the cost of acquiring easements. The County and municipalities split the remaining 40%.

The creation of the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund provides a stable source of state funding for acquisitions through the year 2008. The Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders appropriate funding for farmland preservation annually through the capital budget. Also, since 1999, the Hunterdon County Open Space Trust Fund (voter-approved $0.03 property tax) provides funds for farmland and open space preservation, as well as funds for the preservation of county-owned historic structures. Most Hunterdon municipalities with active farmland programs have voter-approved property taxes dedicated to farmland preservation.

The Future of Farming in Hunterdon County
Hunterdon County’s identity has strong roots in its agricultural heritage. Farming in the county has faced many challenges in the past, but historically farmers have taken on the challenge, quickly responding to changing conditions. In the mid-19th Century, beef cattle and wheat production shifted from the East to the Midwest with the rise of the railroads. Hunterdon County farmers responded by turning to dairy farming. Hunterdon had in excess of two million peach trees in 1890.
With the onset of the San Jose Scale scourge in the early 1890’s, the peach industry was doomed as orchards were destroyed. During the first half of the 20th Century, the poultry industry in the county successfully evolved with numerous changes in production and marketing. By the late 1950’s the County lost most of its poultry farmers as production nationally shifted to the south where land was cheaper and there was less development pressure.

During the last 40 years Hunterdon farmers have responded to changing markets, rising production costs and high land values by changing their operations. As a result, agriculture in the County has become much more diversified. High land values cannot support the dairy, poultry and grain operations that once typified agriculture in the region. Nursery operations, spurred on by sustained residential growth, is one of the fastest growing segments of the agriculture industry. Similarly, equine operations are responding to the recreational demands of new residents. Focusing on markets outside the County, smaller farms have begun producing high-value specialty crops for the Philadelphia and New York City metropolitan regions.

Will agriculture in Hunterdon County be sustainable in the future? A number of factors will influence this over the next 20 years:

- **Enhancing agricultural viability:** Municipalities, the state and the county need to recognize the changing nature of agriculture, specifically its diversification and its changing value locally and regionally. Policies and planning tools need to be put in place in order to ensure the viability of agriculture in the future.

- **Non-farm residents’ understanding and acceptance of the changing nature of agriculture:** Farming is an industry that relies on land. If a farming operation is not profitable, non-agricultural land uses become a more cost-effective alternative. More often than not, the alternative use of farmland is for residential development, resulting in an irreversible loss for the county’s agriculture industry.

- **Conflicts between farmers and non-farmers:** New residents are quick to complain about odors and noises emanating from farms. Furthermore, farmers are often subjected to crop losses from off-road vehicles trespassing on their property. Most municipalities with active farmland have adopted
right-to-farm ordinances that afford farmers protection from nuisance complaints, provided that their operations comply with best management practices. While this provides some protection to farmers, local land use policies should recognize the need for contiguous areas of farmland. Where new homes are constructed in rural areas, attention should be made to their location and orientation in order to minimize the potential conflicts between farmers and their non-farmer neighbors.

- **Finding common ground between farmer and non-farmer constituents:** Issues such as roadside farm stands, impervious coverage and the construction of agriculture-related commercial facilities (i.e. horse show barns and wine-tasting venues) often force municipal officials to take sides in the ongoing debate of what constitutes farming. A healthy agricultural economy can only be sustained when farmers and non-farmers find common ground on the issues that divide them. This will only be achieved through mutual respect and understanding.

- **Aging Farmers:** The average farmer in Hunterdon County is nearing retirement age. The future of agriculture will depend upon whether or not the next generation will be able to afford to farm. Given the County’s high land values, this will be a major challenge. Farmland preservation programs have been designed to help provide affordable deed-restricted farmland, although more needs to be done at all government levels in order to ensure a viable future for the agriculture industry.

- **Available funding and planning techniques:** Today Hunterdon County ranks second in acres of preserved farmland in comparison to all other New Jersey counties. Nonetheless, this acreage comprises only 18.6% of farmland assessed properties in the County and 7.2% of the total land area. Increased funding from both the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund and the County’s Open Space Trust Fund in recent years have significantly bolstered efforts to preserve farmland. However, there will never be sufficient funds to permanently preserve all of the desired farmland through easement purchase. Hunterdon County communities will need to turn to a variety of other tools such as density transfer programs and residential clustering options to help achieve this goal (Refer to Section 5 of Chapter 3 for more on this topic).
**Explanation of Land Preservation Policy**

Land preservation is a top priority among residents of Hunterdon County. They have demonstrated this through support in public opinion surveys. And they have consistently supported state, county and local land preservation taxes and bond referenda.

Because development pressures are so great today, government and private nonprofit organizations must be aggressive in their land preservation efforts. While municipalities, county, and nonprofit organizations may have their own unique target areas where they want to spend their preservation funds, there are many opportunities to pool resources on geographic areas of common interest. The Highlands, the Delaware River corridor and the Sourland Mountains are all state-designated open space priority areas. The county and its municipalities should take advantage of state funding and focus their own preservation efforts in these locations, among others. The state’s priority areas for farmland preservation, identified in its Strategic Targeting Plan, must be coordinated with county and municipal target areas to ensure limited funding is applied in the most cost-efficient way to preserve the best farmland in the county.

Aside from funding mechanisms, municipalities have the unique opportunity to preserve open space and farmland using a menu of land use planning tools. Land use planning tools offer equitable ways of securing open space and farmland through the land development process. These should be actively used to supplement limited funding opportunities. In some communities, literally hundreds of acres of land have been preserved in this way.

The examples of regional cooperation to preserve open space, farmland, and historic resources listed above represent the collaborative approach to preservation that Hunterdon County supports. While each aspect of preservation may have its own objectives, they should not be viewed as competing interests. For example, the preservation of open space can serve and aid farmland preservation by establishing buffers, conserving water resources and reducing soil erosion/sedimentation. It can assist and aid in the preservation of historic structures and historic landscapes and can work to address smart growth and transportation initiatives by strategic purchase locations. These recommended goals and objectives cannot be viewed separately; they need to be viewed holistically and interdependently particularly when addressing such complex strategies as Transfer of Development Rights.
Policies, Strategies and Actions  

Land Preservation

Strategy #1: Land Preservation
Historically, we have preserved open space and farmland preservation using local, county and state bond referenda and dedicated land preservation funding sources. These monies have assisted government and nonprofit organizations in the protection of thousands of acres of land in Hunterdon County. Several donations of land or easements by individual property owners have supplemented funding programs over the years as well. In 2000, the Hunterdon County Agriculture Development Board set an ambitious goal of preserving 50,000 acres of farmland by the year 2010. More than 22,000 acres have been preserved thus far however, additional methods are needed to complement these efforts.

Open space zoning, noncontiguous clustering and the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) are three very important land use techniques that must be aggressively employed to maximize land preservation in Hunterdon County. Open space zoning is an underutilized technique. One concern expressed by municipal officials is that the resulting open space is either unusable land or inaccessible. This can be resolved by identifying criteria and/or preferred locations and uses of open space areas in the master plan. Other concerns include the perceived loss of control over growth with the introduction of community wastewater treatment systems to serve tightly clustered open space developments; long term costs of malfunctioning wastewater treatment systems; limited water supplies; and the lack of sound design in tightly clustered new development. TDR is a new tool that must be thoroughly understood before it is actively used. Noncontiguous clustering increases flexibility in open space zoning by allowing development to be transferred between properties, but isn’t as flexible as TDR. Nonetheless, the three techniques together have potential to preserve hundreds of acres if land in any given municipality, if not more. The county can further encourage land preservation by addressing concerns that discourage local communities from employing these preservation techniques.

Action #1: County Agriculture Development Board continues to market the state’s farmland preservation program, reaching out to landowners and local officials.
Action #2: County Planning Board markets open space zoning, noncontiguous clustering, and TDR and provides planning assistance to interested municipalities.
Action #3: County Planning Board and Open Space Trust Fund Coordinator focus preservation priorities on the county’s open space priority area map.

References:
1. Hunterdon County Farmland, Open Space and Historic Preservation Plan
2. Hunterdon County Farmland Preservation Plan
3. State Strategic Targeting Plan
Strategy #2: Land Management
Land in the public domain and land dedicated to preservation must be properly managed in the long term. Woodland resources are a good example of this need. Left unmanaged, deer browsing, invasive species, pests, and disease can destroy a once valuable community resource. Another important aspect of tree and woodland management is street tree pruning. Often, utility companies must prune trees when they interfere with overhead utility lines. However, proper pruning is about more than simply the elimination of conflicts with utility lines; pruning techniques must reflect the need to protect streetscapes and aesthetic values.

The New Jersey Community Forestry Program, housed within the NJDEP Parks and Forestry, offers financial and technical incentives to manage and maintain tree resources owned or maintained by municipalities and counties. Only a handful of communities in Hunterdon County have thus far elected to participate. Most likely, there would be more interest if the program were better marketed.

The farmland preservation program has an ongoing program that ensures annual monitoring of preserved farmland. In Hunterdon County, the Soil Conservation District handles this responsibility. The State’s new stormwater management rules require detailed maintenance plans for properties dedicated to natural and structural stormwater facilities. North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development Council is currently developing recommendations for wetland protection and management programs. Land that is preserved through conservation easements, fee simple or development rights acquisition, and public lands and rights of way must be allocated necessary resources for long term management.

Action #1: County obtains NJDEP approval of its Community Forestry Plan and subsequently secures funding through the NJ Community Forestry Program for tree and woodland management on County maintained properties.
Action #2: County continues to market municipal participation in the NJ Community Forestry Program.
Action #3: County teams up with environmental organizations to host periodic public programs on natural resource management for municipal officials and interested residents.

Strategy:
Ensure proper long term management of publicly maintained and privately preserved lands.

References:
1. Building Greener Communities-Planning for Woodland Conservation
2. Model Conservation Easement Language-Environmental Toolbox
Woodland Conservation Model
Ordinance Technical Appendix
Policies, Strategies and Actions

Land Preservation

Strategy:
Take full advantage of Transfer of Development Rights to help preserve farmland, open space, historic resources and environmentally sensitive areas.

References:
1. State Agricultural Development Committee:
http://www.state.nj.us/agriculture/sadc/tdr.htm
2. Office of Smart Growth:
http://www.state.nj.us/dca/osg/resources/tdr/index.shtml

Strategy #3 Transfer of Development Rights
Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) is a land use planning tool that shifts development from one location to another, allowing preservation in certain areas and designating other areas for growth and the receipt of additional development potential. Development should be transferred to areas that a community or communities determine to be optimal growth areas where infrastructure can be provided while simultaneously preserving open space or farmland elsewhere. TDR has resulted in tens of thousands of acres of preserved land in various areas of the country including Eastern Maryland and Pennsylvania. Until recently, this tool was available in limited parts of New Jersey, but became available on a statewide basis in 2004. Municipalities can transfer development from one area to another; alternatively, they can send development to other communities through mutually agreed upon arrangements. As part of the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, municipalities within the Highlands Region have the option to send and receive development rights within each of the Highlands counties.

For TDR to be effective in Hunterdon County, several steps must be taken. Communities must first commit to using this tool. With this commitment comes the responsibility to prepare the required background studies, including a real estate market analysis, growth projections, and determination of needed infrastructure for the receiving areas. Additionally, communities must complete a development transfer plan for inclusion in its master plan, a development transfer ordinance, and adopt several otherwise optional elements of the master plan. Background analysis and plan preparation is a time consuming and costly undertaking. Where Hunterdon County has the technical and financial resources available, it should assist interested municipalities in carrying forward a TDR program.

Action #1: Hunterdon County Planning offers technical and planning assistance to municipalities interested in developing a TDR program.

Action #2: Hunterdon County Planning continues to educate county communities regarding the benefits of TDR.
**Explanation of Agricultural Viability Policy**

Recent trends in agriculture have left many feeling pessimistic about its future not only in Hunterdon County but throughout New Jersey. The average age of the Hunterdon County farmer is 56 and over half of county farmers consider agriculture a part-time job. The number of Hunterdon County farms by commodity is decreasing in most every category but hay and horticulture. New Jersey farmers pay the highest property taxes in the entire country, despite the Farmland Assessment program. The high cost of production poses additional challenges. New Jersey represents only 0.09 percent of the total farmland in the United States.

Despite these challenges, agriculture is indeed a positive contributor to the state and county economies. New Jersey ranks second nationwide in blueberries, eggplants and green peppers; third in cranberries and peaches; and is a major player in the greenhouse and nursery industry at the national level. Hunterdon County farms provide a variety of local produce. Home grown produce has great popular appeal. Hunterdon County ranks fifth in nursery stock acreage in the state and ranks second statewide in the acreage of preserved farmland. Approximately half of our land is in farmland assessment. In 2002, the total gross value of agricultural products in Hunterdon County amounted to over $42 million. Agriculture contributes to a high quality of life because of its scenic value, among other things. This in turn brings in tourism dollars.

The key is to figure out how to sustain agriculture in the future. This means finding ways to keep our preserved farmland productive. It means figuring out how to draw and retain younger farmers into the industry. It means helping them find creative niches and ways of directly marketing their goods. And it means adopting planning policies that are both protective of the environment and supportive of agriculture.
Strategy:
Support a broad range of educational opportunities for farmers, local officials and the public.

References:
1. Rutgers Cooperative Extension: http://njaes.rutgers.edu/

Strategy #1: Agricultural Viability Education
Hunterdon County farmers need to stay apprised of state-of-the-art agricultural practices as well as marketing, financing and all other aspects of a successful business operation. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, among other organizations, offer farmers educational programs on these matters. However, such efforts should be expanded and coordinated to reach as large an audience as possible.

Municipal officials must also understand land use issues that impact the farming industry to create communities that support agriculture. Some land development regulations can harm the agriculture industry, such as ordinances that impose excessive restrictions on farm retail marketing, impose excessive requirements for farm improvements, or that preclude agriculture as a principle permitted use. Thus, there should be a concerted effort to inform local officials about the impacts of their ordinances on agriculture and the types of changes that would be more supportive.

Many residents have moved to the County from more suburban or urban areas are not familiar with the inconveniences that farming can pose to homeowners. Residents appreciate the County for its rural, agricultural ambiance and they must be educated about the needs of the agricultural industry.

Action #1: The Hunterdon County Agriculture Development Board (CADB) and Rutgers Cooperative Extension prepare a pamphlet that informs residents about the nature and needs of agriculture in the county. The pamphlet should be presented to the public at an annual public education program and/or distributed by realtors to new residents.

Action #2: The CADB, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Farm Service Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Soil Conservation District inform farmers and municipal agricultural advisory committees about educational programs and farm market opportunities.

Action #3: The CADB hold meetings and conduct farm tours to assist municipal officials with ways to make local ordinances and actions more supportive of farm operations.

Action #4: The CADB develops an outreach program to the area’s schools that involves arranging and promoting field trips to local farms.

Action #5: The CADB works with the State Agriculture Development Committee to monitor proposed legislation involving agriculture and informs all partner organizations.
Strategy #2: Agricultural Products and Tourism

Hunterdon County is known for its agricultural diversity. County farmers grow grains, hay, vegetables, fruit and nursery stock and they raise farm animals. As relatively small producers, it is difficult for county farmers to compete with corporate farms so direct retailing of agricultural products is optimal for farmers to receive better profits.

Encouraging greater market opportunities and reaching out to farmers about such opportunities would facilitate profitability. Farmers benefit financially by selling their products locally. Farm markets are important because they provide farmers the opportunity to sell locally however, additional initiatives are also necessary to increase the opportunities for county farmers to sell their products close to home. The state’s Jersey Fresh campaign encourages consumers to buy local produce in a variety of ways. County wineries currently participate in a very successful marketing program sponsored by the state Office of Travel and Tourism and the Garden State Wine Growers, which culminates in a bi-annual state wine trail event.

Agri-tourism promotes the use of agricultural amenities and resources, such as open fields, farm houses and buildings, livestock, and other scenic components of the farm for tourism. Besides supplementing the farm income, bringing tourists to the farm may result in increased sales of products produced on-site. Agri-tourism can also benefit local communities by attracting tourists to the area who not only spend time at participating farms, but spend money that supports other local businesses. The New Jersey Agri-tourism Industry Advisory Council is charged with researching current and potential opportunities and making recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture on ways to expand and promote agri-tourism in New Jersey. The CADB should stay updated on the council’s findings and disseminate the information.

Action #1: The CADB works with the County Chamber of Commerce to develop a County agricultural theme in conjunction with Jersey Fresh and produces an informational county agricultural brochure to promote agri-tourism.

Action #2: The CADB works with other agricultural partners to host festivals that feature Hunterdon County and the region’s agricultural products.

Action #3: CADB works with the County’s Information Technology office and County Chamber of Commerce to expand websites to include agricultural events, and farm markets.

References:

1. New Jersey Agri-Tourism Initiative www.state.nj.us/jerseyfresh/agritourism home.htm
2. Garden State Wine Growers http://www.newjerseywines.com
Strategy #3 Agricultural Business Opportunities

Hunterdon County’s oldest business is agriculture. Yet, over the past few decades, businesses that have located in the county have tended to be nonagricultural in nature. Municipalities should take the appropriate steps to attract businesses that use local agricultural products. At the same time that this gains the community a ratable, it also supports area farmers.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture, Division of Marketing and Development, is host of the Jersey Fresh campaign and is also responsible for other initiatives that promote and support New Jersey agriculture. The division offers free advertising materials to farmers to use for direct marketing. The division is a resource that can be used to identify opportunities that are helpful to agricultural businesses. For instance, the division has identified an opportunity for New Jersey farmers to sell over-produced or under-valued product to the New Jersey Department of Corrections. This opportunity would be beneficial to framers when market conditions are very poor and regaining only production costs is an appealing alternative to suffering a financial loss. Hunterdon County farmers are eligible to take advantage of this safety net if they register with the New Jersey State Treasury. Opportunities like this should be identified and information should be made available to local farmers to help support agricultural businesses in the county.

Action #1: The CADB supports Rutgers Cooperative Extension and the Hunterdon Economic Partnership in efforts to maintain existing agricultural businesses and encourage new business opportunities via training and other programs.

Action #2: The CADB works with Rutgers Cooperative Extension to explore new and profitable agricultural opportunities and products, and disseminates relative information to farmers.

Action #3: The CADB investigates opportunities for farmers can sell their produce to local institutions such as schools, corporations, jails, and restaurants and takes actions to promote any such opportunities.
Strategy #4: Reduced Taxes on Farm Buildings
Despite the Farmland Assessment Act, which provides for reduced taxes on agricultural land that qualifies under this program, farmers are still faced with a significant tax burden. Aside from taxes paid on their home, they also pay high taxes on their farm buildings. If the public supports the need for continued agricultural viability, then their support for reduced taxation on farm buildings should be gauged as well and the appropriate lobbying pursued.

Action #1: The CADB and other partner agricultural organizations research the taxation issue thoroughly and formulate a position regarding taxation of agricultural buildings.
Action #2: The appropriate entities approach state legislators representing Hunterdon County to solicit a constitutional amendment to facilitate reduced taxation on farm buildings.

Strategy:
Seek a constitutional amendment for tax breaks on agricultural buildings.

References:
1. New Jersey Department of Agriculture: http://www.state.nj.us/agriculture/
2. State Agriculture Development Committee http://www.state.nj.us/agriculture/sadc/sadc.htm