

Community Presentation on Open Space by County
Executive Dan Benson, MC Library West Windsor
Branch, 6/15/24



MERCER COUNTY OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION



View of the Delaware River from Baldpate Mountain

Presentation by County Executive Dan Benson to Friends of West Windsor Open Space,
June 15, 2024, at the West Windsor Branch of the Mercer County Library System.



BENEFITS OF OPEN SPACE



Introduction - Benefits of Open Space

Land preservation benefits the community by reducing the costs of infrastructure and community services, protecting the environment, enhancing neighborhood property values, providing a robust local food source and agriculture industry, and promoting health and economic growth.



BENEFITS OF OPEN SPACE



The Return on Environment Report concludes that Open Space:

- (1) increases the value of our homes by **\$791 million** and increases our tax base for providing services
- (2) supports approximately **980 jobs** and **\$40 million** in salaries
- (3) provides **\$97.6 million** in environmental services
- (4) provides **\$47.6 million** in recreation benefits to its residents

Beyond the intrinsic value of open space, in 2021 Mercer County completed a [“Return on Environment”](#) report, which analyzed the economic impact of protected open space in Mercer County.

The **major takeaways** from this report are that **open space:**

- (1) **increases the value of our homes** by \$791 million and thus, increases our tax base for providing services,
- (2) **supports approximately 980 jobs** and \$40 million in salaries,
- (3) **provides \$97.6 million in environmental services,** and
- (4) **provides \$47.6 million in recreation benefits** to its residents. This report is available on the County Planning website under “Master Plan and Studies.”

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HISTORY OF OPEN SPACE TAX REFERENDUM



- 1989 – Open Space Tax Introduced, Levy \$0.01
100% Farmland and open space preservation
- 1998 – Levy \$0.02
85% Farmland and open space preservation
15% Recreational development and historic preservation
- 2004 – Levy \$0.03
85% Farmland and open space preservation
15% Recreational development and historic preservation
- 2012 – Levy \$0.03
70% Farmland and open space preservation
20% Recreational development and historic preservation
10% Stewardship
- 2021 – Levy \$0.03
50% Farmland and open space preservation
30% Recreational development and historic preservation
20% Stewardship

History of the Open Space Trust Fund Summary is on the slide.

Every County OS referendum question in our history has received **strong support from voters**, so we know Mercer County residents support our investments in Open Space and parks.

Over time, more funds have been directed to recreational improvements, habitat management of our open space, and preservation of historic sites.



TYPES OF OPEN SPACE



Public Natural Lands



Public Active Recreation

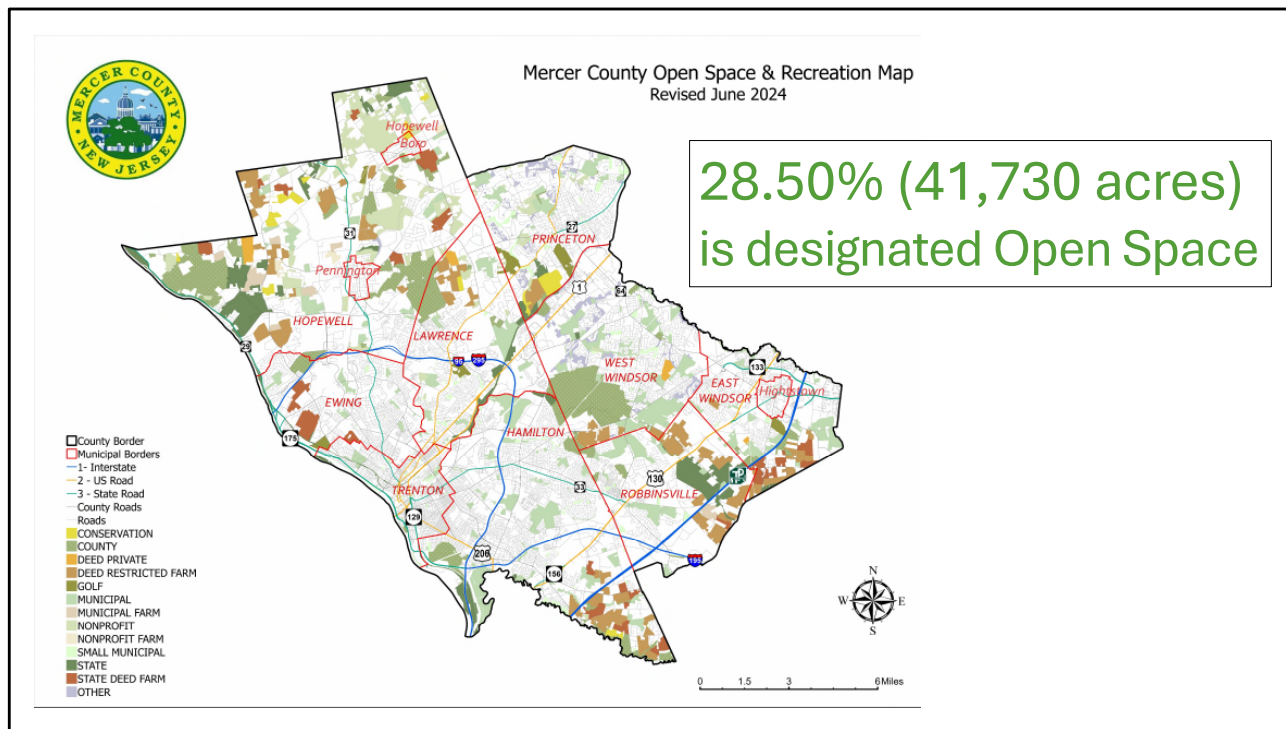


Private Preserved Land

Types of Open Space

- a. **Public natural lands** – These are natural areas, including forests, meadows, streams, and wetlands that are owned by a local government or non-profit and allow for public passive recreation. Baldpate Mountain and Mercer Meadows are examples of parks that are designed for passive recreation and public enjoyment, but also prioritize ecosystem health and protecting wildlife.
- b. **Public active recreation** – These are areas that are developed for a variety of outdoor recreational uses, including baseball fields and tennis courts, such as Mercer County Park. Studies consistently show that regular physical activity has been shown to decrease heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and feelings of depression or anxiety. These active parks provide community environments which are often accessible to citizens at low or no cost.
- c. **Private preserved lands** – These are lands that remain in private ownership but are protected by a deed of easement, which prohibits certain types of development. Mercer County works closely with the State Agriculture Development Committee to preserve privately owned farms, which helps keep the land affordable for farmers, protects the local agriculture economy, and provides fresh, local foods for residents. County staff visit these properties annually, to ensure the terms of the easement are upheld. **Mercer County actively monitors 94 agriculture easements and 6 conservation easements**

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Measuring Open Space (1)

1. This is our most recently updated Open Space map. This **includes lands preserved not only by Mercer County**, but also our non-profit partners, the state, and municipal governments. These areas include a variety of land types and uses, including forests and wetlands, active recreation parks, and preserved farmlands.
2. By the Numbers – There is a total of **41,730** acres designated as recreation and open space in Mercer County, approximately **28.50%** of the county's land area.



MEASURING OPEN SPACE

$$\begin{array}{r} 10,000 \text{ acres are owned \& managed by the County} \\ + \\ 6,000 \text{ acres are preserved by the County via easements} \\ + \\ 7,000 \text{ acres received County Funding} \\ = \\ 23,000 \text{ acres preserved using the} \\ \text{Mercer County Open Space Trust Fund} \end{array}$$

Measuring Open Space (2)

- The County owns and manages over **10,000** acres of this space and holds conservation or agriculture easements on an additional **6,000** acres.
- Approximately **7,000** acres have been preserved by partners using funding from the Mercer County Open Space Trust Fund.
- In total, Mercer County has helped to preserve more than **23,000** acres – **55%** of the total open space in the County.



PAST SUCCESSES - TRAILS



The LHT's New Pedestrian Bridge is a Winner!

Jun 12, 2021

Literally: The Stony Brook Pedestrian Bridge Wins Excellence Award



The New Jersey Recreation and Park Association (NJRPA) awarded the Mercer County Park Commission its Excellence in Design award for the Stony Brook Pedestrian Bridge in Mercer Meadows. The award – based on the quality of public use, recreation, and park facilities with unique aesthetics, design, usability, and versatility – was presented at the Summit Family Aquatic Center in Summit, New Jersey on Wednesday, May 26th.

Past Trail Successes

- The **four main County Parks** (John A. Roebling Memorial Park, Mercer Meadows, Baldpate Mountain and Mercer County Park) boast **more than 43 miles of trail** for hikers, cyclists, and equestrian users.
- Beyond its own parks, the **County works with partners to create trails** that connect communities and provide greener (and safer) commutes. Mercer County has been involved with the Lawrence Hopewell Trail since its inception, and much of the trail is located on county owned land and managed by the Park Commission. The LHT bridge over the Stony Brook in Rosedale Park is one of the longest pedestrian bridges in New Jersey, spanning 500 feet.
- Open space **acquisitions are partly targeted to potential trail corridors** to support the multi-county Capital to Coast Trail, the Assunpink Greenway, and the Crosswicks Greenway.
- **We support municipal trails**, including 20 years negotiating with Conrail for a rail-trail on the abandoned Camden and Amboy line along US 130, for a **Hamilton-Robbinsville Rail-Trail**, with no action by Conrail, and the **Union Transportation [Rail] Trail** in East Windsor and south through Monmouth and Burlington Counties.
- **CHALLENGES:** Maintenance, ROW easements, environmental constraints



PAST SUCCESSES - STEWARDSHIP



Mercer County Park Commission removed 40 acres of non-native *Phragmites* at John A. Roebling Park



Mercer County Park Commission restored 434 acres of grassland habitat at Mercer Meadows

Past Stewardship Successes

- **Phragmites management in the Abbott Marshlands**
 - The Park Commission began a large-scale freshwater tidal marsh restoration at John A. Roebling Park in 2018 to address an infestation of invasive plants, primarily phragmites (*Phragmites australis*). With expertise from professional wetland scientists and dedicated contractors and consultants, the Park Commission was able to shrink the 40-acres of phragmites mapped in 2018 to less than 5-acres in 2023. Once the phragmites was removed, native plants, such as wild rice, were able to return and provide a healthier ecosystem and rich habitat.
- **Grassland Restoration at Mercer Meadows**
 - In 2012, the Park Commission partnered with US Fish & Wildlife Service, using grant funds to restore 434 acres of grassland habitat for grassland-dependent birds and native pollinators at Mercer Meadows. The project transformed land previously dedicated to agriculture into warm season grasslands and pollinator meadows for benefit of native wildlife and park goers. Due in part to this restoration work, the park has become a favorite for local birders.
- **CHALLENGES:** Invasive species prevalence in NJ, overpopulation of white-tailed deer, introduced pests (eg. emerald ash borer), climate change (drought, warm winters, etc.)



Education & Community Engagement: Open Space Trust Fund capital investments have vastly increased our ability to provide environmental education and other recreational opportunities.

- The Park Commission’s **events and activities draw the public** to our open spaces. Some are just for fun, such as the summer concert series at Mercer County Park, but most of the programs are both fun and educational. Outdoor activities include Butterfly Bonanzas and Camp Outs offered by Environmental Education, riding programs at Mercer Stables, and experiencing 19th century chores at Howell Living History Farm. The Farm also gives back to the community via its Share the Harvest program, which provides free fresh produce and grains to local food pantries, and offers its horses to plow the Chestnut Ave Community Garden in Trenton
- The **Tulpehaking Nature Center** in Hamilton Township was opened in October 2014 and serves as the main educational facility at the Abbott Marshlands. The center is staffed with professional educators and provides programming for adults and children. Additionally, the center’s exhibits encourage visitors to explore and discover the many cultural, historic, and natural resources of the Abbott Marshlands.



PAST SUCCESSES - FUNDING



Mercer County's Open Space Assistance Program provided \$1.3 million in funding to help purchase Woosamonsa Ridge Preserve in Hopewell Township

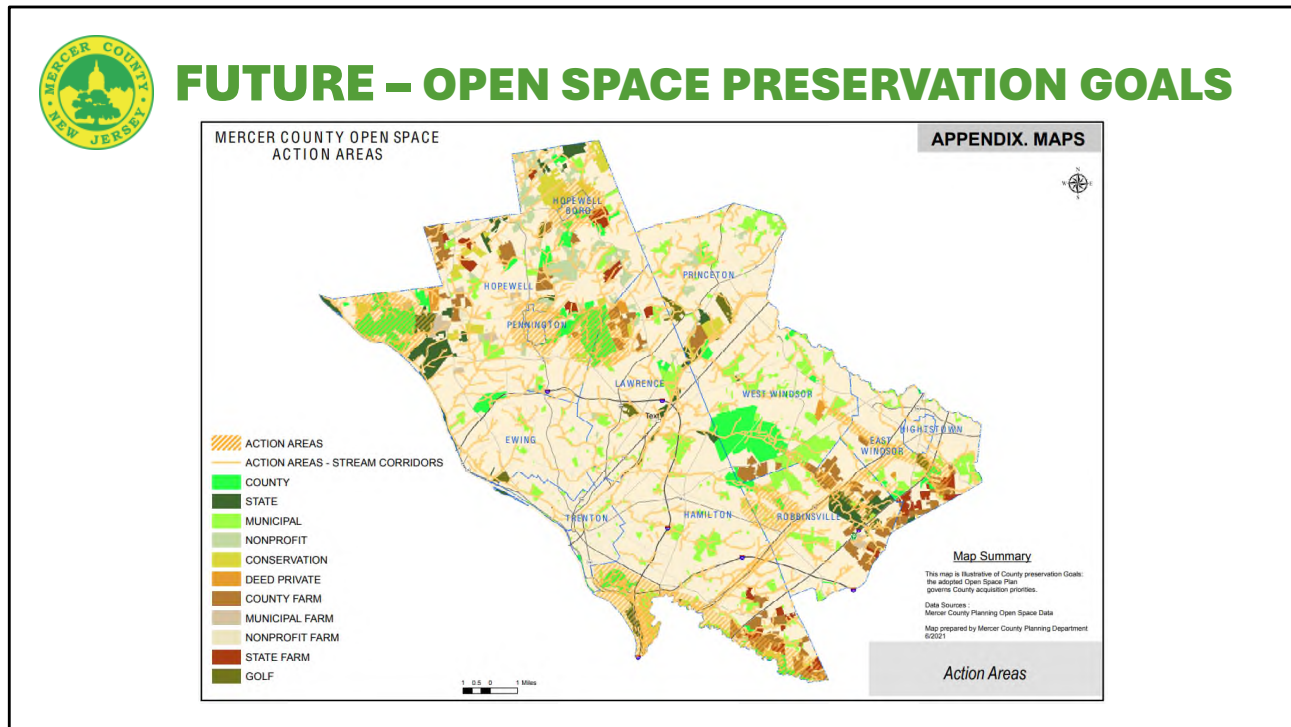


Mercer County's Mercer at Play Grant Program aimed to expand active recreation opportunities. It provided match funding for Ewing's Senior and Community Center Splash Pad

Funding and Grants

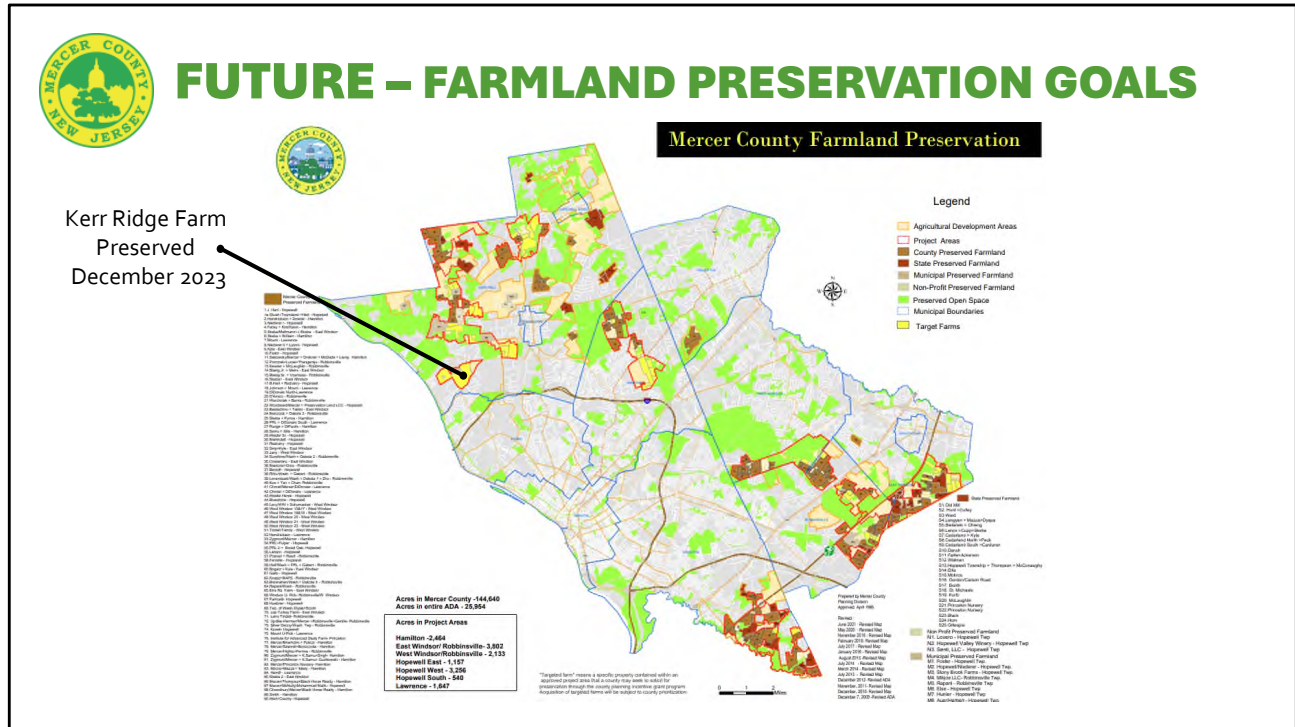
- **Mercer County Opens Space Assistance Program - provides funding for municipalities and non-profits to preserve open space** that are of local importance. To date, the County has funded 184 preservation projects and provided more than \$45 million in funding to partners.
- **Mercer at Play grants to towns for active recreation** - In 2016, Mercer County released a 2nd funding Round for the Mercer at Play Grant Program. Examples of fundable activities include ballfields, playgrounds, paved paths, swimming pools, gymnasiums, etc. Some examples of projects funded with Mercer at Play are: (1) Ewing Senior and Community Center Splash Pad (2) an Inclusive Playground at Hilltop Park in Princeton, and (3) Park improvements at Veterans Park, East Acres Playground, and the Ray Dwier Center in Hamilton

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- **Map is from the Open Space Element of the County Master Plan.** It shows ‘action areas’ – areas of priority for preservation.
- Specifically, the preservation goals are:
 - Preserve open space that enhances the county park system
 - Provide access to open space where people live—stream corridors and centers of development
 - Preserve land through cooperative partnerships to leverage funds on properties of regional significance and greenways
 - Assist municipalities and nonprofits in preserving locally significant open space through the County grant program.

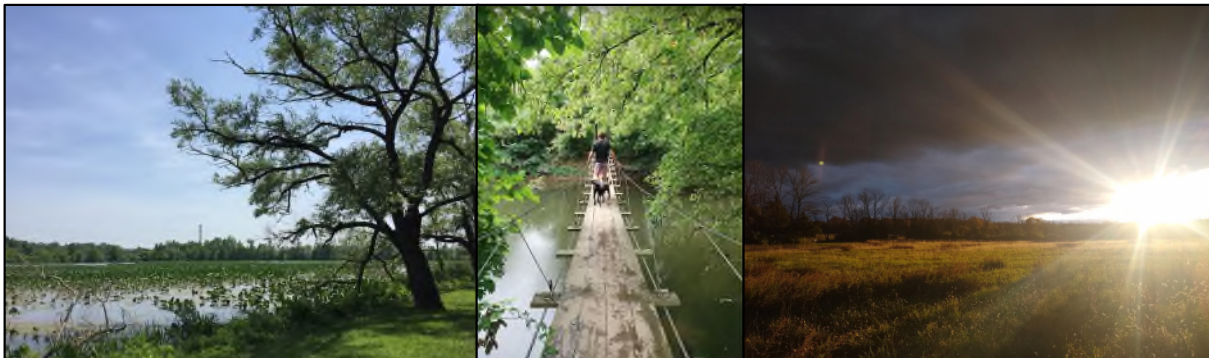
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- **Map is from the Farm Preservation Element of the County Master Plan.** Areas where we want to preserve the agriculture industry are outlined in orange (agriculture development areas, ADA). ADAs serve as the general focus for the County’s preservation efforts. They are areas in which agriculture is the preferred land use
- Specifically targeted farms are bright yellow.
- Kerr Ridge Farm was preserved in 2023. It was one of three remaining large farms in the county under single family ownership.



FUTURE – ‘30 BY 30’ GOAL



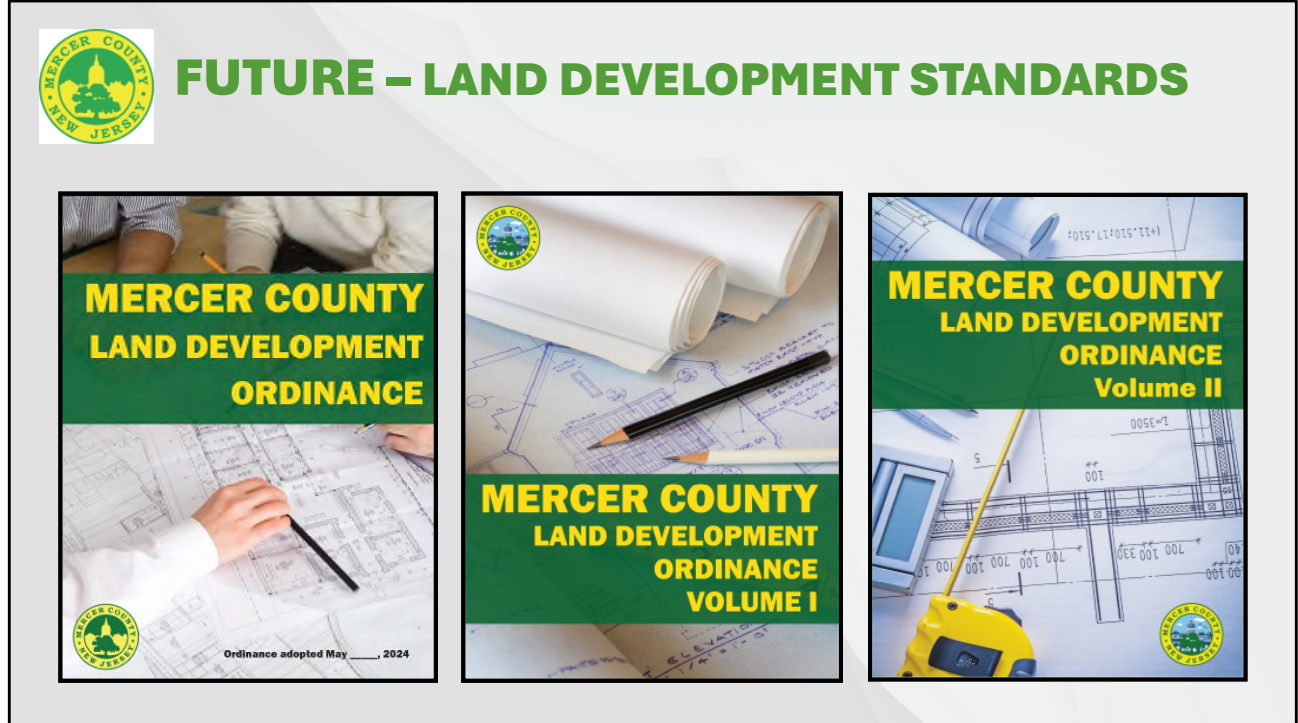
John A. Roebling Park
Hamilton

Institute Woods
Princeton

St. Michaels Preserve
Hopewell

30 by 30 Goal

- In May 2021, **President Biden** announced a **goal of conserving 30% of U.S. lands and waters by 2030**. Fortunately, Mercer County has had a 30-year head-start on this “30 by 30” goal. As our population grew, Mercer County residents recognized the need for land preservation and the County has been hard at work to achieve substantial land preservation objectives since 1990, while enjoying the many benefits associated with land preservation.
- Although the President’s goal is important and worthwhile, **it will be challenging to achieve in Mercer County**. To accomplish this goal would require the preservation of an additional **2,200** acres by 2030, which is ambitious but possible as we continue to work cooperatively with our partners and leverage available funds. The President’s goal is for the nation as a whole; some areas of the country will exceed 30% while others preserve much less. Nevertheless, Mercer County, along with our land preservation partners, will continue our efforts to preserve land for its environmental qualities, for use by people, and for its public health and economic benefits.
- **CHALLENGES:** Most of the largest parcels have been preserved; smaller parcels require the same effort but preserve fewer acres, so progress is slower.

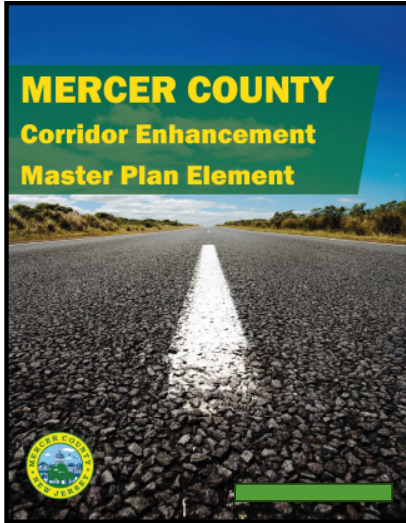


Land Development Standards

- County recently adopted new Land Development Standards, **updating standards dating from 1969**. Will address things like Complete Streets, proper lighting, landscaping, design and highway access. Will **tie County stormwater review to NJDEP standards**. Green Infrastructure is now required as part of State and County approvals. Will also update fees to make developers pay more of fair share of review costs and staff time.
- Corridor Enhancement Program will require modest fee for safety improvements, streetscape improvements, and planning and design.
- Will **allow street trees and streetscaping improvements in County ROW**- so long as property owner signs a maintenance and indemnification agreement for improvements. Will allow for more streetscaping and street trees.
- [2024 Land Development Ordinance on Mercer County Website](https://www.mercercounty.org/home/showpublisheddocument/30976)
<https://www.mercercounty.org/home/showpublisheddocument/30976>



FUTURE – LAND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS



Corridor Enhancement Program Master Plan Element

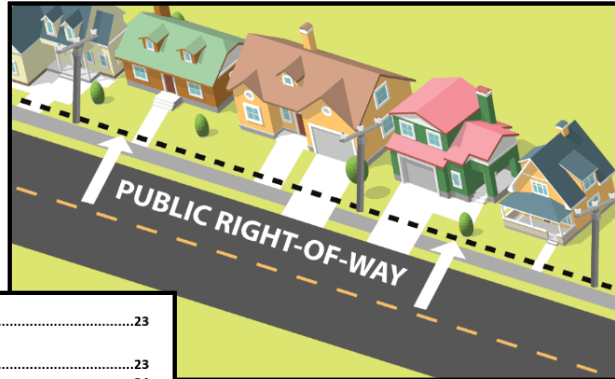
- For commercial sites, modest fee based on linear foot of frontage developed along a County Road.
- Proceeds used only in the municipality from which they came.
- Mercer County Corridor Enhancement Program described in the County Corridor Enhancement Plan Element of the Mercer County Master Plan.

The **Corridor Enhancement Program** is based on a Passaic County program long in existence. Funds collected from development along County roads can be used for planning, design, and construction of off-tract improvements such as multimodal facilities, streetscaping, and safety.



FUTURE – LAND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

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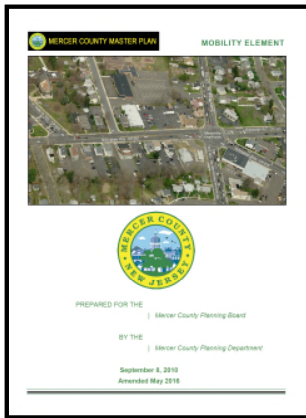
Right of Way Requirements

Future vision for roadways are recorded in the Mobility Element of the County Master Plan, based on intensity of current development and municipal zoning, and now accommodate bicycle facilities. Additional requirements in the Land Development Ordinance include safety standards for sightlines, turning lanes, and access for bridge and stormwater facility maintenance.



FUTURE – LAND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

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Access Chapter has Two Key Components:

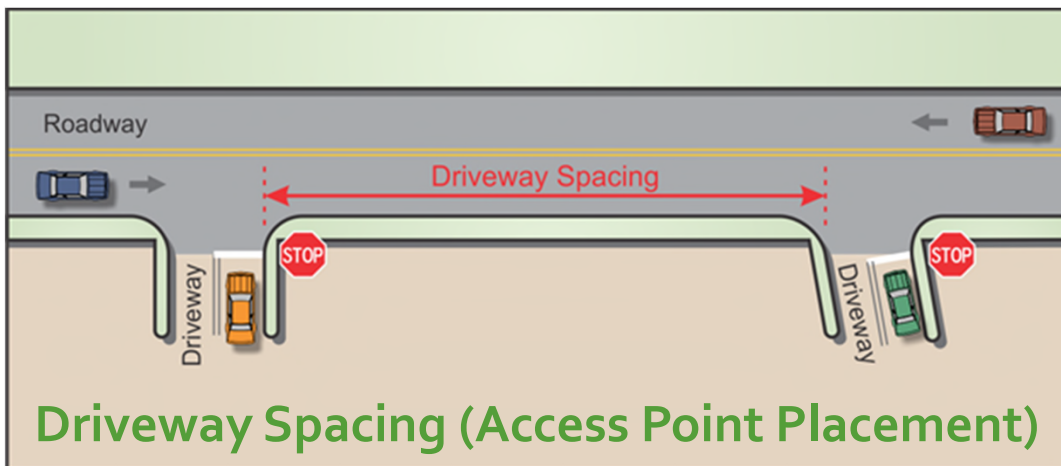
1. All (re)development projects along a County Highway are required to meet access spacing requirements set by Mercer County as designated in the Mobility Element of the Mercer County Master Plan.
2. Cross Access Easement and Declarations will be required for most properties along County Highways.

Access management seeks to improve safety by controlling the number and spacing of driveways and new streets, thus reducing conflicts between vehicles on and vehicles entering or leaving the roadway. Access spacing standards are codified in the Mobility Element of the County Master Plan. The updated Land Development Ordinance adopts these and, anticipating retrofit access management as sites are (re)developed, requires developers to grant cross-access to neighboring sites so that their future development may get to the County road if their site frontage cannot safely accommodate a new driveway.

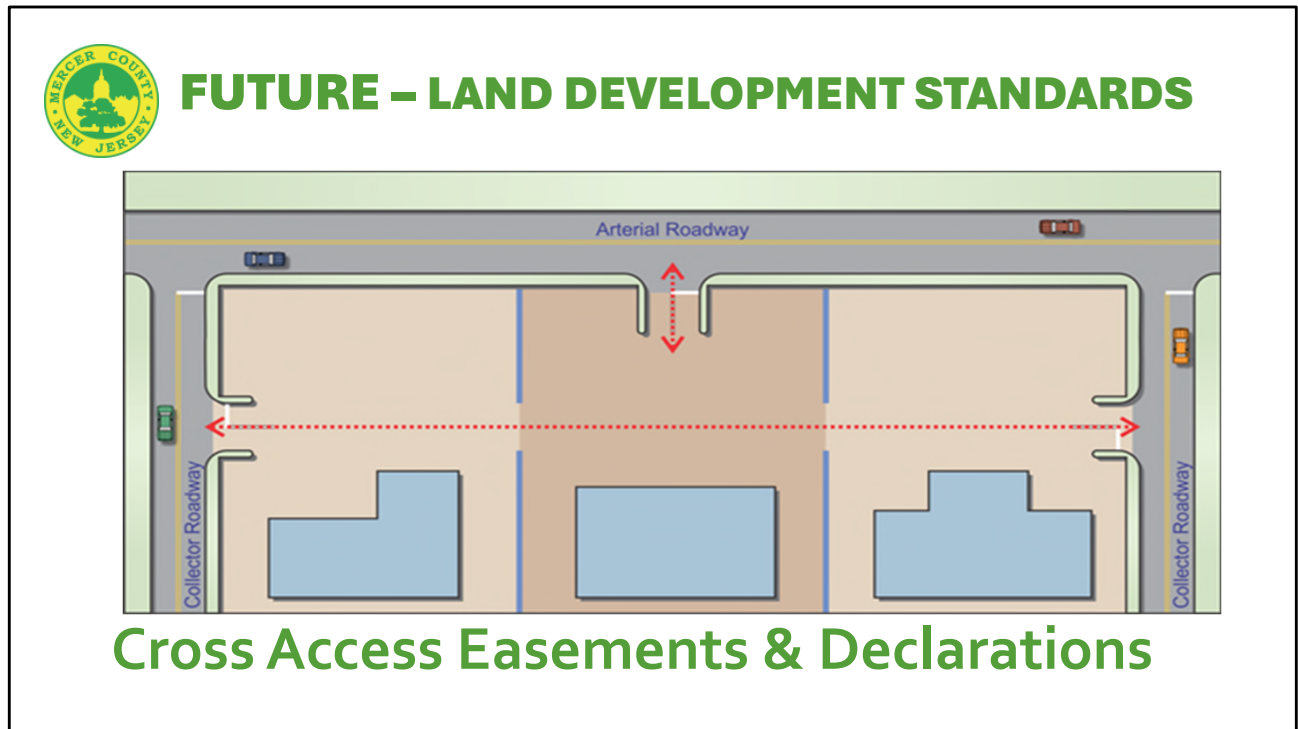


FUTURE – LAND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

Chapter 4- Control of Access, Access Management & Cross Access Requirements



Example of safe driveway spacing, defined by stopping sight distance relative to posted speed and other safety factors.



Example of separate development parcels with cross access and multiple routes to county highway and municipal streets.



FUTURE – LAND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

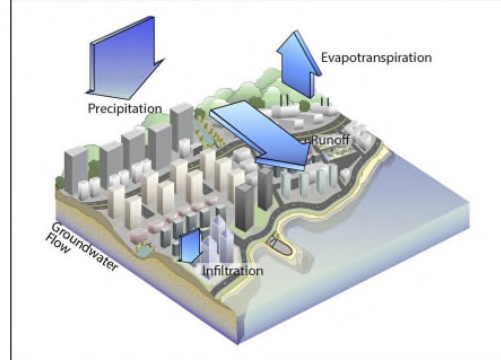
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**NJDEP
 REGULATION
 UPDATE**



Hydrologic Cycle – Post-development



Stormwater management regulation and review is now tied by reference to NJDEP requirements so that, when NJDEP updates their standards, the County standards update automatically. County standards also include extensive guidance on best management practices to capture stormwater on site.



FUTURE – LAND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

Chapter 11- Landscaping Along County Roads

Tree Size	Height in feet	Spacing in feet
Large Trees	45+	45 feet
Medium trees	25 - 45	30 feet
Small Trees	Below 25	25 feet

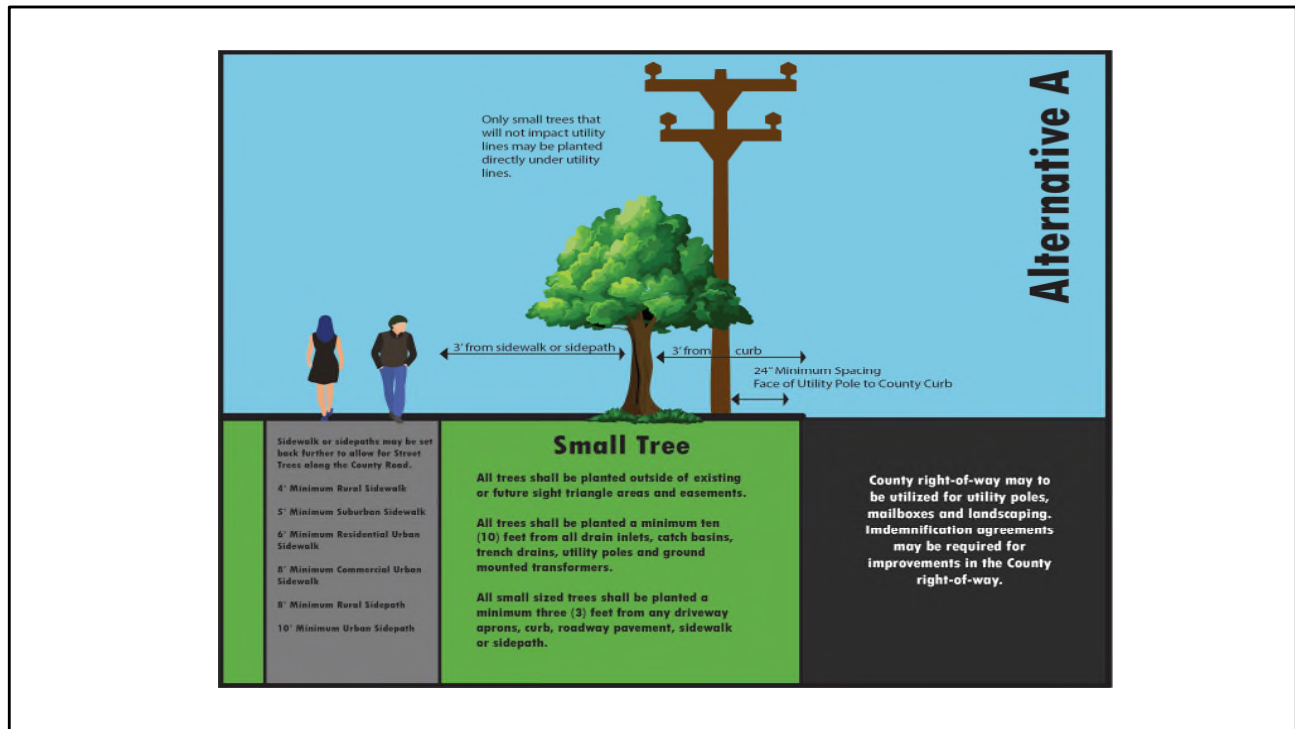


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Street Trees and Landscaping

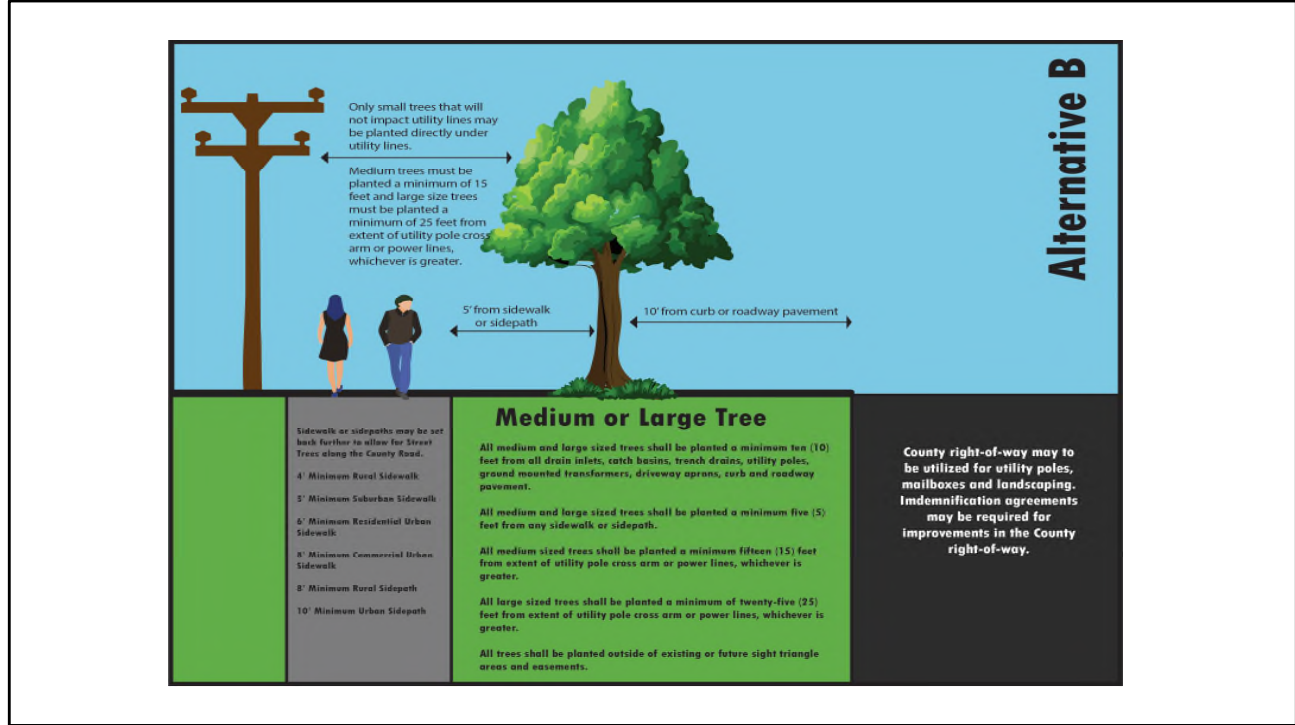
The Land Development Ordinance changes longstanding policy to allow trees and street furniture in the County right of way, so long as the adjacent property owner or the municipality accepts maintenance and liability.

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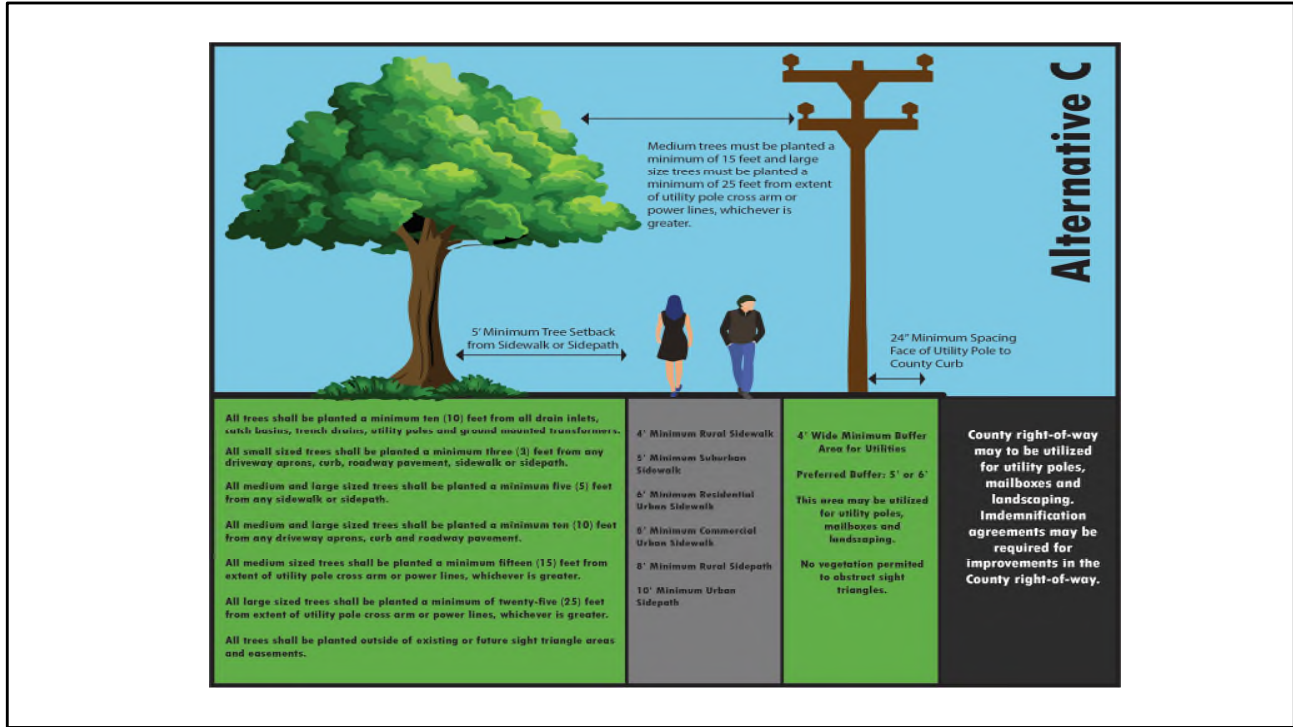


Several alternatives for tree planting relative to utility lines to accommodate healthy tree growth.

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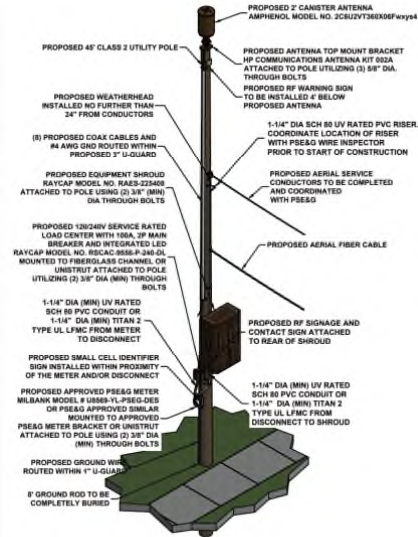
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FUTURE – LAND DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS



Chapter 13- Small Wireless Facility Standards

Small Wireless Facilities

State statute limits local government powers to manage public utility installations. Federal law supersedes local laws to class private wireless facilities as public utilities. The Land Development Ordinance specifies materials, placement, and to a degree aesthetics.

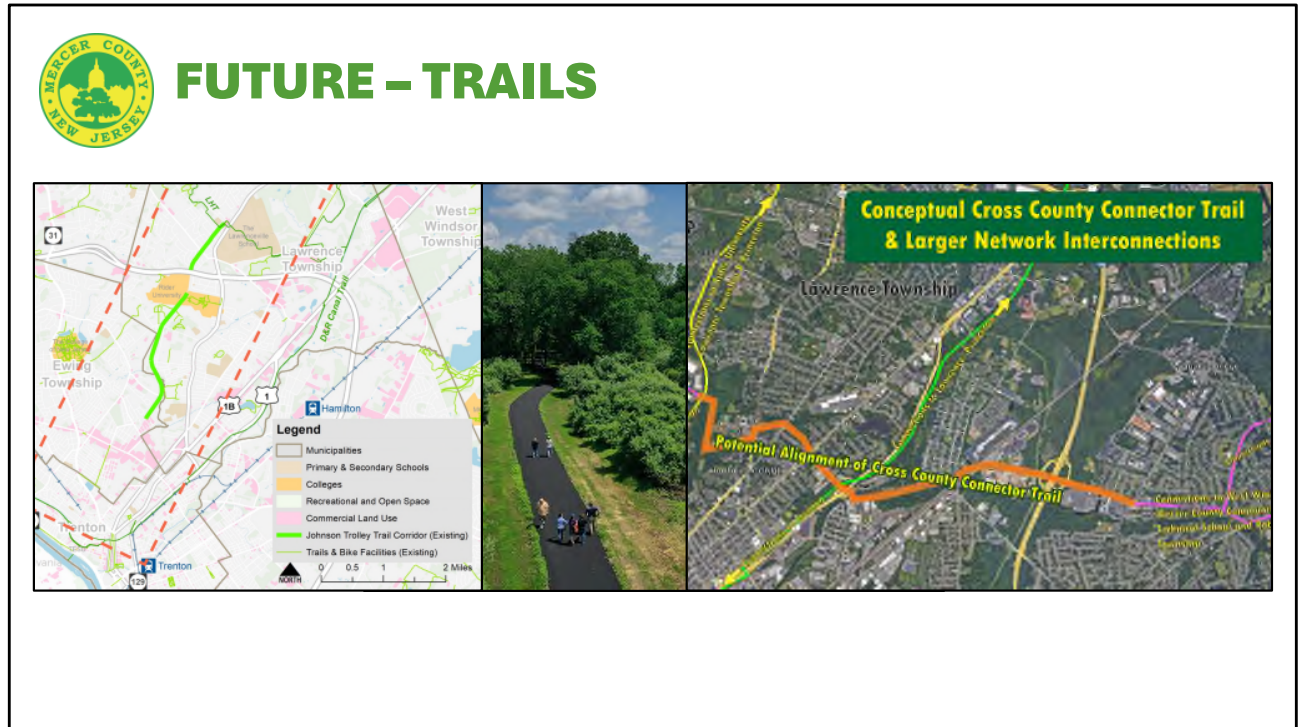


FUTURE – INCREASING STEWARDSHIP



Increasing stewardship

- As less lands are available to preserve and more land is under County management, the County will continue to invest its resources in stewarding protected land to ensure what has been set aside will remain a healthy, diverse ecosystem.



Trails in the Works

- Johnson Trolley Trail project funded by DVRPC is just underway (Public Information Center kickoff 6/12/24) and funding is expected for a 'Cross-County Connector' trail from Ewing to Hamilton and West Windsor along county roads and once-proposed Whitehead Road Extension. The Johnson Trolley Trail will connect Trenton, through Ewing and Lawrence, to the Municipality of Princeton.
- A 'Cross-County Connector' will be explored to connect the Johnson Trolley Trail to the D&R Canal Towpath and on to Hamilton Station and beyond. At the west, it will run along ROW of Whitehead Road Extension, across US 206 and US 1B, then along Whitehead Road under US 1, up Sweetbriar and Sloan to Hamilton Train Station, then to bike lanes on Flock and bike lanes proposed on Old Trenton Road. Grant application to DVRPC for concept development is awaiting DVRPC Board approval.

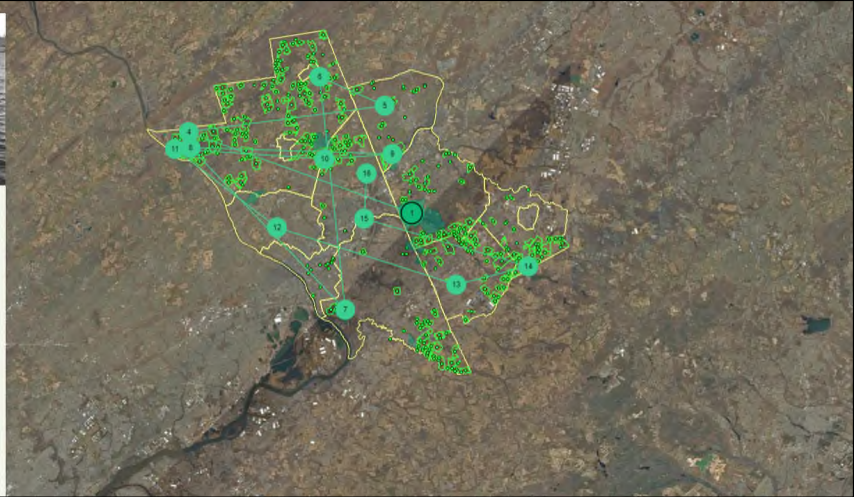


Questions & Discussion

Story Map



Foundations: Prior to 1989, the County contained 4,530 acres of open space. County residents were served by a handful of County park facilities including Mercer County Park in Hamilton/Lawrence/ West Windsor; two County golf courses - Mountain View (Ewing), and Princeton Country Club (West Windsor/Princeton); and both Howell Living History Farm and Rosedale Park in Hopewell.



Link to online interactive map:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/72bc93ab24ac41f9b1cee0fa6d382257>