

SOURCE: Township of Morris Application to County Open Space

Project Narrative:

Trust Fund - July, 2006

Using this page **ONLY**, please explain why this project is a high priority for your town. This is an opportunity for you to make a case for your project and to convey special features/factors of the site which may not be adequately conveyed elsewhere in the application.

Creation of the Mt. Kemble Recreation Complex by acquiring the 15.59 acre S/K Properties parcel in Harding Township is an innovative method for Morris Township to address their burgeoning active recreational needs, while also preserving valuable open space. Accessed via Mt. Kemble Road, behind a corporate building held by the same owner, this property is bounded by Route 287 to the south, Mt. Kemble Avenue to the west and Frederick Place to the east.

Our discussions with S/K Properties (current owners) represent a unique coalition between the public and corporate sector. S/K Properties has not only agreed to the sale of this property for recreation, instead of the more lucrative housing development option, but will also allow the township use of the corporate parking lot when the fields are being utilized at night and on the weekends. This eliminates the need for new parking lots, maintains the current low levels of impervious coverage, and contributes significantly to the cost effectiveness of the project.

Morris Township plans to build 3-4 lighted playing fields in the center area of the property. Forests of the parcel will provide an effective light buffer for the residents of Frederick Place. A walking/biking path on the perimeter of the fields will provide additional recreation opportunities. The forests and wetlands surrounding the complex would become protected open space. This parcel has always been a point of interest for developers, given its proximity to major roads and highways, and its unusual high density zoning allowances. Currently, a developer is aggressively pursuing the construction of 20 homes on the site; taking advantage of a unique gap in Harding's zoning code on this parcel, which allows for minimum lot sizes of less than one acre.

This parcel resides within the Great Swamp watershed, in Planning Area 5-Environmentally Sensitive (State Planning Commission). It is also in the Highland Planning Area, is a Tier 1 Well Head Protection Area, and contains state threatened forests (2002 NJ DEP Landscape Project). Additionally, this property contributes to the health of nearby flood plains, wetlands, and a wood turtle habitat in Great Swamp Watershed Association preserved lands.

Morris Township has met with Harding Township's mayor, John Murray, and their Open Space Committee Chair, Sally Dudley. Neither object to this project, even though it will take ratable land off their township's tax rolls. They recognize the need to protect the sensitive environmental values of this area, especially given the severe adverse effects such intense development would have.

The Recreation Program in Morris Township has grown exponentially in the last 4 years; in particular the soccer program which has grown by 25%. The current fields are experiencing such heavy use that they have literally worn bare. The township has had to rent fields from private schools, or cancel games and events altogether. This year's the annual Labor Day tournament, the biggest fundraiser for this program, was cancelled due to lack of field space.

Morris Township's population density is 1,308 people/square mile; 31% higher than the county average of 1,000/square mile. Morris County itself has grown at a rate 11.6% in the past decade, the 6th highest in the state (2003-2007 NJSCORE). In the housing market there has been a dramatic shift in demographics as "empty nesters" sell their homes to young families with greater recreation needs, thus putting a larger strain on the current number of playing fields.

Purchase of this parcel would allow Morris Township to provide critical additional recreational opportunities for Morris Township and neighboring towns, while also preserving a valuable ecosystem.