
Chapter 3
Public Participation

Public Participation Program Components

Land Partnerships is rooted in public participation and outreach. Determining the needs, concerns, and ideas of the community was the foundation for the Plan's vision. The public participation and outreach process to develop *Land Partnerships* was comprised of multiple components:

1. **Open Space Preservation Steering Committee** – was formed consisting of 20 members representing the Cumberland County Planning Commission, community organizations, farmers, land conservancy, conservation organizations, municipalities, parks and recreation organizations, as well as business and development interests. The committee provided guidance, direction and insight throughout the planning process.
2. **Key Person Interviews** – were conducted with approximately 30 individuals and organizations to identify their ideas and needs. They represented stakeholders with an interest in open space preservation and smart growth in Cumberland County and the region.

The interviews included a standard list of questions as well as customized questions tailored to the specific groups or individuals involved. Issues discussed covered a host of topics such as farmland preservation, stream access, parkland, greenways, growing a local conservancy, geographic issues, public education and outreach and many others. The common findings were the need for swift action in open space preservation, the need for further planning and the development of a county funding program to spur open space preservation, and the need for public outreach. Key person interview questions are provided in the Appendix.

3. **Public Meeting** – an initial public meeting was held in the spring of 2003 to introduce the planning project and determine the key issues and concerns of citizens regarding open space in Cumberland County. Approximately 40 individuals attended the meeting. Four key issues emerged from the discussions. These issues lead to topical forums for further exploration of the subject.
4. **Public Forums** – were dedicated to specific topical themes that emerged from the committee and the public meeting. Four forums were held in the fall of 2003 which addressed the topics of agricultural preservation, natural resources, livable communities, and parks and trails. About 100 citizens and organizations participated in the four forums. The themes of the forums became the organizing framework for *Land Partnerships*. Four forum fact sheets and a forum summary are provided in the Appendix.

Agricultural Preservation Forum Findings

- Review the existing ranking system for the County/State farmland preservation program. Explore developing a separate “County-only” agricultural preservation program. The program’s criteria should align with the goals of Land Partnerships.
- Involve municipalities in the County/State farmland preservation program design and review process. Encourage municipal financial contributions to the program.
- Address zoning issues and land use regulations to the benefit of the agricultural land preservation goals. Educate local officials and the general public on zoning issues and provisions. Implement zoning where it does not exist. Eliminate anti-farming regulations and restrictive farm requirements.
- Consider the goal of preserving 25 percent of the County’s remaining prime farmland within 10 years.

Natural Resources Conservation Forum Findings

- Participants stress that natural systems and resources are interconnected and must be considered and protected.
- Education on the importance of natural resources (for water quality, wildlife habitat, flood control, etc.) is critical to effective protection.
- The mountains and forestlands are valued for their visual aesthetics from the valley.
- Create a consortium organization at the County-level to coordinate environmental education, public outreach, and conservation initiatives.

Livable Communities Forum Findings

- There is a disconnect between retaining boroughs as desirable living areas and open space preservation.
- It is important to involve representatives of both borough and developed townships in the planning process.
- The open space plan initiatives should not duplicate existing programs such as Main Street and beautification projects.

Parks and Trails Forum Findings

- Use the County as a facilitator and coordinator of park resources.
- Buy-in from each area of the County is critical to the success of the open space plan. Use a variety of outreach methods to involve municipalities, school districts, and citizens.
- Include something for everyone in the open space program.

5. **Growing Greener: Conservation by Design Technical Assistance** – In the spring of 2003, the County sponsored an educational workshop in coordination with the Natural Lands Trust. Approximately 40 participants attended the event and the purpose of the workshop was to introduce the principals of *Growing Greener: Conservation By Design*. *Growing Greener* is a statewide community planning initiative which is designed to help communities use the development regulation process to their advantage to protect interconnected networks of greenways and permanent open space. Following the workshop, several municipal representatives also participated in a tour of several conservation subdivisions in Chester and Delaware counties.

In order to further assist municipalities, the County offered to fund a community assessment for any municipality wishing to explore the conservation design approach to land use planning. A community assessment entailed a thorough review of the local Comprehensive Plan, Open Space Plan, subdivision and zoning codes by the Natural Lands Trust staff. Eight municipalities took advantage of the County's offer of funding for *Growing Greener* community assessments. Additionally, the Natural Lands Trust offered \$5,000 grants to implement recommendations of the community assessment findings.

6. **Countywide Public Opinion Survey** – was conducted in the winter of 2003 as a direct mail survey of 1,500 random households in Cumberland County. The goal of the survey was to assess the opinion of the general public regarding open space preservation.

The survey was conducted according to accepted survey methodology. The survey produced 659 completed questionnaires and yielded an overall return rate of 47 percent with a confidence level of 95 percent +/- three percent. The full survey methodology and results are reported by County and by region in the Appendix.

A Note on Surveys...

Surveys are a tool to gather relative and comparative data. Survey results should never be viewed as literal descriptions of objective facts. The survey results presented in this chapter provide a generalized view of county residents' awareness and support for open space preservation. The results are not intended to represent the absolute opinion of all 213,000 residents of Cumberland County.

Public Opinion Survey Findings

- **Respondents are interested in open space preservation and feel it is an important for the county to preserve open space.** 91 percent of the respondents indicated they are interested in preserving open space in Cumberland County. Similarly, 91 percent of respondents agreed that it was important for Cumberland County to preserve open space. *Land Partnerships* proposes a variety of actions that respond to this demonstrated interest.
- **Respondents do not believe the county has too much open space.** When asked to describe the amount of open space in the county, only 2% of respondents indicated there was too much. Half of the remaining respondents indicated that the county needs more open space while the other half of remaining respondents indicated that the county has about the right amount of open space. Although respondents indicated that we currently have enough open space, projected increases in population and employment will require *future* open space preservation to maintain the current open space to developed area balance that respondents found acceptable. This finding points to the need for *Land Partnerships* to be forward looking and balance future growth projections with associated open space needs.
- **Low response rates in the western part of the county indicate a decreased sense of urgency for open space preservation in that region.** Only 10 open space surveys from the municipalities west of Carlisle were returned. Targeted follow-ups in the western part of the county yielded the finding that those sampled in the western region were less concerned about open space preservation because adequate open space still exists. These finding points to the need for *Land Partnerships* and the programs promoted herein to be visionary and proactive. While the western part of the county currently has abundant open space, development will occur in the future in these areas. The programs promoted in *Land Partnerships* can help to assure that future growth occurs in a logical, planned manner and does not compromise the rural character and quality of life that is valued in this region of the county.
- **Respondents are willing to pay for open space preservation.** 72 percent of respondents indicated they would be willing to pay some additional amount annually ranging from \$10-\$50 for open

Just One Thing...

In addition to opinions on the importance and priorities for open space preservation, the survey asked:

“If Cumberland County could achieve one thing to improve quality of life for our residents through open space preservation, what would you like that one thing to be?”

The most common answer: Of the 412 responses, 94 (23%) respondents wrote in that they thought that **more parks were needed in Cumberland County.**

space preservation. Although a high percentage of respondents are willing to pay an additional amount, *Land Partnerships* promotes numerous, cost-effective open space preservation methods and tools that decrease reliance on public funding.

7. **Draft Open Space Preservation Plan Review** – The draft Cumberland County Open Space Preservation Plan was presented at two public meeting and distributed to all 33 municipalities in September 2004. Following the formal presentation, the draft Plan was placed on the Cumberland County website and made available for review at the County Planning Commission office. Additionally, County Planning staff made dozens of small presentations regarding the plan to municipal officials, community organizations and special interest groups throughout the County. The County received over 75 letters regarding the plan during the public comment period, both in support and in opposition. The majority of the letters are in general support of the Plan.

Public Participation Findings

The findings of the citizen participation efforts are classified into seven main categories as follows:

1. Importance of Open Space Preservation in Cumberland County

Open space preservation is important in Cumberland County. All segments of the public participation process found strong interest and a sense of urgency to move ahead in preserving open space before more land is consumed through unplanned development and the county's rural heritage is forever lost. The findings of the public meetings, forums, and interviews were supported by the countywide survey in which ninety-one percent of the respondents indicated that it is important for the County to preserve open space.

2. Interest and Support for Open Space Preservation

The level of interest is high for open space preservation. Nine out of ten survey respondents indicated that they were interested in preserving open space in Cumberland County. The Steering Committee, forum participants, and key stakeholder interviews supported the concept of an open space program. Concerns revolved around how fast the County could get the program up and running in order to win the battle to protect open space. The Steering Committee was especially interested in establishing a start-up program that would include a mix of methods for preservation including financial support, planning tools and education.

3. Elements of the Open Space Preservation Program

Consensus on the nature of this open space preservation program was for farmland preservation, natural resource preservation, greenways and trails, and parkland. But the open space program should not be just about buying land. Rather, a full array of measures needs to be put into place. These may include: partnerships; improving local land use planning through Conservation Subdivision Design; easements and programs such as the transfer of development rights if feasible; leveraging potential county open space funds; landowner education about alternatives to selling to developers; public outreach and documenting the economic benefits of open space preservation.

4. Farmland and open space preservation should not infringe upon private property rights.

Residents expressed concerns about private property rights through letters of concern and public meetings. All programs that grow out of *Land Partnerships* will be voluntary for landowners and conceived to promote land preservation while respecting private property rights. *Land Partnerships* does not encourage the use of eminent domain as a method to preserve open space and farmland.

5. Smart Growth

While this Plan will focus on preservation, the other side of the coin is smart growth initiatives. Techniques such as mixed use development, conservation subdivision, low impact development, transfer of development rights and traditional neighborhood design should be explored. The County should partner with municipalities to update local ordinances to improve the quality of development while simultaneously achieving open space preservation goals.

The Plan should also encourage implementation of the Tri-County Regional Growth Management Plan. Investment in the targeted growth areas will make developed communities more desirable places in which to live; thereby helping to reduce pressure to develop new housing in outlying rural areas. To achieve support from the boroughs and their first ring suburbs, the open space program should focus on making these areas pedestrian friendly through walkable and bikable community improvements, greening the town centers and close-to-home “walk-to” parks. The concept of investing in urban areas as a way to preserve open space needs to be a component of the public education and outreach program.

6. Attitudes Towards Growth and Development

The public and key stakeholders indicated that the rate of growth is too fast, especially in eastern and central Cumberland County and the Shippensburg area. They were concerned about

losing the farmland, access to streams, and the county's character. About 61 percent of the survey respondents felt there is too much development in Cumberland County. But conversely, open space preservation should not stop development. The County should continue to promote a sensible balance of development and preservation. Future development is the engine of the County's successful economy and must be balanced with preservation objectives.

7. Financing an Open Space Program

Participants in the public forums and interviews were aware of county open space programs elsewhere in Pennsylvania and frequently cited them as funding models for Cumberland County. There appears to be support for the County to establish a financing program for open space preservation. In the countywide public opinion survey, respondents stated that spending money on the following is an appropriate use of public funds: natural resource protection (79%), open space preservation (72%), parkland (71%), farmland (63%), trails (60%) and greenways (54%). Furthermore, 72 percent stated that they would be willing to pay some additional amount annually ranging from ten to fifty dollars to preserve open space in Cumberland County. Those willing to pay some amount more outnumbered those who were not, by three to one.