

# ROCKLAND COUNTY OPEN SPACE ACQUISITION PROGRAM

## Rockland County, New York

Rockland County is the smallest county in New York State outside of the 5 boroughs of New York City totaling 176 square miles. In 1950, there were 406 farms on 17,360 acres, today only 5 active farms, horse stables and greenhouse nursery operations remain on 400 acres. With one-third of the County preserved as parkland, 40 miles of scenic Hudson River waterfront and 600 lakes and ponds, Rockland County is a place of astounding beauty. A land use analysis indicates that just 4% of the remaining land area in the County remains to be developed or protected. A majority of this land is environmentally sensitive including steep slopes or non-designated wetland areas. Preservation of these irreplaceable resources prompted the County to plan carefully, thoughtfully, and cooperatively to preserve open space for the future.

## Open Space Acquisition Program

In 1999, County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef announced the County's first Open Space Acquisition Program to acquire areas of scenic beauty, environmentally sensitive lands, farms and Hudson River waterfront areas. Between 1999 – 2010, the County acquired a total of 1,204-acres of land spending \$17,575,000 and leveraging from partnerships with municipalities and Land Preservation Trusts an additional \$11,576,000.

In September 2019, County Executive Ed Day together with the County Legislature, approved of Resolution No. 406 of 2019 authorizing the creation of a 2020 Capital Project to include \$30,000,000 to acquire Open Space properties.

## Program Objectives

The overall conservation objectives are to preserve open space in this suburban county that is located within 35 miles from New York City. These include the acquisition of land and water resources that preserves open space, protects Rockland's environment and beauty, provides recreation opportunities, and preserves historic sites. The anticipated benefits to the community and environment are numerous. Highest priority is given to properties that preserve open space by enhancing its residents' quality of life while preserving land that can be used for public use and dedicated as parkland or otherwise enduringly protected. In addition, this program can help to safeguard environmentally sensitive resources, save farms, protect historic and cultural places, promote public use and enjoyment of the Hudson River and its shore, limit sprawl, provide for recreation, maintain or improve water bodies in Rockland County, and conserve its watersheds. These acquisitions include parcels that have significant natural beauty, ecological importance, watershed attributes, agricultural value, historical integrity, or other community benefit potential. The acquisitions may also have such collateral proprietary uses as farming, timber forest, cemetery or recreation.

The program also acknowledges the importance of the following:

- ✓ forming a connected system of parklands or greenways
- ✓ preserving and protecting properties that have special natural or scenic resources
- ✓ protecting and encouraging the opportunity to farm
- ✓ protecting or preserving historically or culturally significant properties
- ✓ protecting the Hudson River shoreline for public access, public use and scenic enjoyment
- ✓ encouraging redevelopment that will provide open space
- ✓ promoting opportunities for recreation compatible with the existing natural resources

- ✓ protecting rivers and streams including their banks and floodplains, and
- ✓ protecting the County's invaluable watershed.

Furthermore, the program recognizes the importance of transitory open space such as golf courses, schools, reservoirs, utility easements, or camps, and includes these types of parcels as resources for connecting to open space. Innovative ways in which the program has been successful are in the leverage of funding.

### Open Space Guidelines

The parks and land conservation program objectives were established with guidelines created by the Open Space Guidelines Committee. The committee members assess the most important criteria for preservation in the county and created a list of attributes that is used to determine if a parcel is worthy of preservation. Parcels that have these distinguishable attributes rate higher and are considered for acquisition. The attributes include: Connecting open spaces, preserving environmentally sensitive resources, protecting farms, preserving historic and cultural places, protecting the Hudson River, encouraging redevelopment that will provide open space, promoting opportunities for recreation, protecting rivers and streams, and protecting the watershed. Each year before the program commences, the County Executive also evaluates land use trends and assesses which attribute is most critically in danger of being lost to development pressures. He then places the highest priority on that attribute, thereby encouraging acquisition of parcels that meet those criteria.

### Program Process

In January, the County accepts applications for nominations from the public or elected officials. A letter is then sent to each property owner to determine if they are willing sellers. If the owner is willing to sell, then the Open Space Acquisition Committee members visit each site to evaluate the property based on the Open Space Guidelines. A rating is done for each parcel based on the number of environmental attributes on site. The County Executive's priority attribute is also included in the evaluation. In addition, extra priority points are given to each parcel that has an immediate threat of development, is tax delinquent, is being partially funded through a grant, possesses more than one attribute, adds to adjacent protected open space, is identified for protection in a planning document such as a County or municipality's comprehensive plan, or has support of a public or private organization. Based on the rating, the County Executive then determines which parcels should be proposed to the County Legislature for acquisition.

### Program Successes

Since the program's inception in 1999, 1,204-acres have been preserved and a total of \$23,209,456 in County funds have been expended. An additional \$11,576,000 has been obtained through grants or municipal and not-for-profit donation. The Open Space Acquisition Program has successfully provided access to the Hudson River (27 acres), preserved steep slopes (500 acres), protected wetlands (104 acres), preserved farmland (146) acres, protected environmentally sensitive areas (350 acres), and preserved a valuable historic resource (.5 acres). These parcels are scattered throughout the five Towns in the County and offer a variety of recreational opportunities. The Hudson River acquisition (Haverstraw Bay Park) has provided the County with its first river park that offers a double-wide trailered boat launch complete with a universally accessible floating dock and kayak launch, fishing piers, playgrounds, picnic groves, trails, and scenic views. The 144 acres of farmland preserved have provided open space while maintaining the vitality of a valuable

economic business. An abandoned railroad station originally built in 1890 has been purchased in partnership between the County and Village of Piermont and has been restored. The remaining acreage purchased to date has helped to protect the valuable open space, preserving fragile wetlands, steep slopes, marshland, rock outcrops, scenic vistas while helping to protect the streams and rivers, single source aquifer and watershed, providing habitat corridors and forming greenway connections. In 2008, the County in partnership with the Palisades Interstate Park Commission acquired the largest parcel to date; 497 acres known as Wrightman's Plateau. This acquisition has preserved a federally designated Sole Source Aquifer, which provides drinking water for 2 million residents of Rockland County and northern New Jersey.

#### Public Support

The County will continue to seek grants, obtain land through tax delinquency, subdivision approvals and other funding from Federal, State or partnerships with Land Trusts. Rockland County was first in the region to have such an aggressive open space program. Due to the success of the program and the thoroughness of the guidelines, several of the municipalities within the County have adopted the County's Open Space Guidelines for their own and have passed referendums funding of their own Open Space Program. Since the public has been involved in the process from the beginning with the creation of the guidelines and the recommendation of the parcels to be acquired, the public's trust has been upheld. In addition, it has been and will be the County Executive's policy to only acquire parcels if the owner is a willing seller and the selling price is always based on a market rate appraisal. The residents, government agencies, local politicians, and environmentalists all consider this program very worthy and successful. It has set the way for other municipalities to encourage similar programs. Without this program, many valuable natural resources, scenic viewsheds, river access points, historic resources, and farmlands would have been lost.

#### Future of Program

The County of Rockland has guided an unprecedented level of investment in a variety of Open Space projects often in partnership with local governments. The County will continue to evaluate potential acquisitions of priority properties in the future to protect and preserve our irreplaceable natural, cultural, and scenic resources.

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