

SOURCE: Township of Morris Application to County Open Space

Project Narrative:

Trust Fund - July, 2007

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 growing 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 sectors. S/K Properties has agreed to consider the sale of this property for recreation and open space, as well as the use of the corporate parking lot when the fields are being utilized at night and on the weekends. This would eliminate the need for new parking lots on the acquired parcel, maintain the current low levels of impervious coverage, and contribute significantly to the cost effectiveness of the project. As land prices have soared in the area the Township has been actively negotiating with the landowner to achieve a price point that reflects fair market value; updated appraisals show a higher value than what we expected last year.

Morris Township plans to build 2 multi-purpose, lighted playing fields in the center area of the property. Forested sections of the parcel will provide an effective light buffer for the residents of Frederick Place. A walking path on the perimeter of the fields will provide additional recreation opportunities. The forests and wetlands surrounding the complex would become permanently 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 on this parcel, which allows for minimum lot sizes of less than one acre.

The Recreation Program in Morris Township has been steadily growing. Recent annual increases in participation include: football - 62%, softball - 25%, lacrosse - 14%, soccer - 10%. These four sports also represent the most critical field space need with participant/field ratios between 550 to 377 players per field. Additionally, Morris Township bears regional responsibilities, providing field space to neighboring Morristown and Morris Plains, as well as two very active adult sports leagues and three non-profit camps for summer programs.

Morris Township has secured approval for this project in the form of resolutions from both the Harding Township Council and their Open Space Committee. Harding recognizes the need to protect the sensitive environmental values of this area, especially given the severe adverse effects such intense development would have. 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'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 NJSCORP). 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 for the region's watershed.