

The Burnham Park Association

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December 16, 2000

Mr. Joseph Weber, Chair, and
Members of the Morris Township Planning Board
Township of Morris
50 Woodland Ave.
P.O. Box 7603
Convent Station, NJ 07961-7603

Re. Master Plan Review / Jones Woods

Dear Mr. Weber and Members of the Planning Board;

As we review and consider aspects of the draft reexamination of the Master Plan for 2001, we wanted to commend the Township on its proactive open space initiative since the 1994 Master Plan and for the corresponding shifts in much of the language and tone of the Master Plan draft.

There have been many positive changes in the intervening years and chief among them has been the acquisition/preservation of several substantial properties (the state property on Hanover Ave. and Jockey Hollow Top VI, etc.), active programs to promote conservation of natural resources (in conjunction with Great Swamp's Ten Towns and the Whippany Watershed Committees, etc.), the establishment of the Open Space Inventory (under guidance of the Morris Land Conservancy) and the implementation of new, more stringent steep slope and tree ordinances. Such initiatives have done much to protect our fast dwindling open spaces, historic and sensitive areas and to maintain the quality of life in Morris Township and its surrounding larger community. In November, results on the Open Space Tax question reveal the ongoing and overwhelmingly strong support by Township residents for these initiatives.

Along with Township-initiated changes there have been other changes in the intervening years. On a local and specific level, Jones Woods (Block 4101, Lots 3 and 7), a 38acre parcel off Picatinny Rd. and adjacent to Fosterfields land, has become a invaluable *area* resource for scientific study. Currently, it is being used as an ecological laboratory by students from kindergarten through college – both within and beyond our community's borders.

In 1999, Hillcrest School (K-2) received the prestigious Dodge Foundation "What is Your Ecological Address?" Grant which engages all of the students and faculty in ecological activities designed to be age appropriate and directly related to the N.J. Core Science Standards. Hillcrest School personnel work closely with the Audubon Society and with Morris County's Wildlife Rehabilitator and have been monitoring and exploring natural habitats in Jones Woods. The students are even using the school's digital camera to photograph their nature walks for use on a future educational website.

In a similar vein, the Friends of Jones Woods along with partners in The Burnham Park Association are working closely with forest ecology expert, Dr. Sarah Webb of the Department of Biology at Drew University. Under Dr. Webb's guidance, we've initiated a plant inventory of the woods and have worked with Drew students to construct a deer "enclosure" at a carefully chosen site. The deer enclosure is 20 meters by 20 meters, with 10' high fencing and a gate – designed to keep deer out of the fenced area. Exotic invasive plant species have been removed from half of both the enclosure and an adjacent control area. The enclosure and control area are then monitored regularly by Drew students (and by members of the community) and will continue to be monitored over a 10 year period to assess what factors contribute to deer population, to forest health, to regeneration of the "understory", to maintenance of native plant and animal species, etc., etc.. This is one of three enclosures included in the ongoing experiment, the other two being located at Drew's campus arboretum. The scientific data gathered in Jones Woods could be a significant contribution to broader forest ecological studies in the scientific community.

On another front, Boy Scout Troop 513 has "adopted" Jones Woods as its ongoing community project. The troop conducts regular cleanups of the woods. Along with their parents, these scouts have hauled truckloads' worth of debris and garbage out of the woods, and have learned about the history and natural features of this special preserve.

In addition, the Unity Charter School has also conducted field studies in Jones Woods – incorporating onsite exploration into their ecological/ natural resource preservation curriculum.

Area residents have applied their volunteer efforts and training with the Morris County Park Commission's "Free a Tree" program to the arduous and ongoing task of removing invasive exotic plants from Jones Woods. Hikers, joggers, birdwatchers, etc. all continue to use the woods – as a place of beauty and restoration. All of these efforts and uses enhance the value of Jones Woods.

On a broader level, things have also changed with regard to Jones Woods. The former Mt. Laurel Court Settlement mandating affordable housing is no longer applicable, disappearing when the Township was granted substantive certification by the New Jersey Council on Affordable Housing in 1996. COAH acknowledged that Morris Township not only met but considerably exceeded its quota of 324 affordable housing units and, at last count, was listed as having provided 396 units (quoted in *The Daily Record*, October 30, 2000), a net surplus of 72 units.

Moreover, as the Master Plan draft states on p. 26, "At the County level, new initiatives in resource protection, recreational and open space planning and farmland preservation have occurred since 1994." Efforts on the County, Regional and State levels are directed towards minimizing non point source pollution and looking at the larger picture relating to Watershed planning – stream health, erosion, flooding, health of plant and animal species, wetlands protection, sediment control, wastewater management and the like.

On the State level, the State Development and Redevelopment Plan officially recognizes and identifies parts of the western segment of the Township (Washington Valley) as a Tier 7 /Planning Area 5 Environmentally sensitive area worthy of protection. And, finally,

more stringent state regulations and “orders” regarding wastewater service renders potential sewerage of such land even more difficult.

What has NOT changed are the substantial environmental and historical constraints affecting Jones Woods’ possible use as a building site. If anything, those constraints are even more keenly understood and reinforced by intervening studies and observations.

Therefore, in an effort to reconcile existing designations applied to Jones Woods with all of the above changes, as well as with the draft Master Plan’s *Open Space Targeting and Acquisition* listing (pages 24 and 25) and its *Goals #1-4* (articulated on pages 34-35), we feel it is appropriate and timely to remove the existing subdivision and “set aside” of the 20 acres of Jones Woods (put in place in Nov. 1995) and instead to designate the *ENTIRE* parcel officially as Open Space. This would have the additional benefit of reducing the risk of higher future COAH allocations which would perhaps target “set aside” areas but definitely exclude dedicated, inventoried open spaces from future allocation calculations. Moreover, the Township would incur *no* additional cost to securing additional “dedicated” open space since it already owns the land. Merely modifying the designation on Point 1 on p.15 to read:

“Jones Woods, Block 4101, Lots 3 and 7, 38 acres has been changed from RH-5 multi family housing to open space “

and including the same parcel in the official Open Space Inventory, would be a win-win situation for all parties concerned.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this matter.

Sincerely,

Dr. Lynn L. Siebert,
President

Cc:

Richard Watson, Mayor
The Morris Township Committee
Fred Rossi, Township Administrator
Morris Township Open Space Committee
Morris Township Environmental Commission
Morris County Park Commission
Washington Valley Association
Jockey Hollow Historic Preservation Association
Whippany River Watershed Association