

Bucks County  
Municipal Open Space Program

**Municipal Open Space Plan  
Guidelines**

2008





# *Municipal Open Space Plan*

## GUIDELINES

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### **BACKGROUND**

Under the Bucks County Open Space Program, \$26 million has been allocated to the Municipal Open Space Program (MOSP), which provides financial assistance to municipalities for open space planning, acquisition, and improvements. To become eligible to receive MOSP funding, municipalities are required to re-examine and where necessary, update existing open space plans according to the guidelines presented within this document. Each of the county's 54 municipalities has an open space plan outlining local conservation priorities and strategies. However, to be relevant, planning documents must be responsive to emerging needs and opportunities.

### **OPEN SPACE PLANNING**

An open space plan articulates a community's vision and strategy for protecting open space and natural resources. In addition to identifying and prioritizing land available for preservation, the local open space plan provides officials and residents with a common rationale for decision-making. Open space plans can also help municipalities assess financial resources needed to pursue open space acquisition and improvement projects.

Municipalities are strongly encouraged to build on the framework provided in existing planning documents including open space, comprehensive, and park and recreation plans. Local plans should also seek consistency with appropriate open space and recreation policies of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

Citizen input should be a key consideration throughout the planning process, especially in the development of community needs and priorities. Residents and community stakeholders are important sources of information for identifying major issues and establishing a shared vision of the future. Open space plans should include a discussion of the public participation process (e.g. surveys, workshops, public meetings) used to gather citizen input.

Municipalities need to consider neighboring boroughs and townships that have shared interests in protecting open space, farmland, trails, greenways, and parks. Coordinated planning among municipalities can generate significant open space benefits – both environmental and financial. A multi-municipal perspective can plan for natural resources, such as watersheds, woodlands, and stream corridors, as entire systems rather than isolated fragments. While funding agencies such as DCNR, favor multi-municipal grant applications. At a minimum, municipalities should distribute open space plans among neighboring communities for review and comment.

Municipalities may choose to hire planning consultants, appoint a committee, or organize a combination of both to prepare an open space plan. It is recommended that members of local open space committees, planning commissions, park and recreation boards, environmental advisory councils, etc., actively participate in the planning process. Likewise, input should be sought from other municipal officials, boards and personnel.

#### ***What is Open Space?***

The Bucks County Open Space Program defines open space as land that has not been developed for intensive human use; that has no (or very few) buildings, roads, or other structures. Open space can also perform many important ecological, economic, aesthetic, recreational, and agricultural functions. The Bucks County Open Space Program distinguishes three types of open space: ***Natural Areas***, ***Farmland***, and ***Parkland***.

## **OPEN SPACE PLAN CONTENT**

This document provides general guidance for preparing a local open space plan. The organization of the open space plan and level of detail given to each section are at the discretion of the municipality. Municipalities may choose to incorporate revisions as addendums or supplements to existing open space plans. Given the unique needs and resources of each municipality, county review of individual plans will be flexible.

### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Open space plan updates must include a concise summary of significant findings demonstrating that each of the following sections has been adequately considered.

### **2. COMMUNITY BACKGROUND**

The Community Background is an opportunity to describe how the municipality got to where it is today. Consideration should be given to the municipality's regional context, history, demographic makeup, and land use characteristics. Understanding current population and development indicators will assist municipalities anticipate and plan for future demands. This can be a brief summary of information already covered in a municipality's existing planning documents. A municipality's comprehensive plan may contain much of the information needed for the Community Background section of the open space plan. Municipalities may opt to include relevant sections of the Comprehensive Plan by reference. Use of the most recent U.S. Census data is required.

### **3. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

Establishing goals and objectives provides a sound basis for assessment and implementation of open space planning strategies. Defining goals will also help municipalities clearly express their own philosophy on development, open space, natural resource and farmland protection, and recreation needs. For each stated goal, corresponding objectives should describe the ways the goal will be achieved. The goals and objectives of current planning documents should be reviewed and incorporated, where appropriate.

### **4. INVENTORY OF PROTECTED LANDS**

One of the main functions of an open space plan is to present a current account of permanently protected lands within the municipality. Mapping areas or properties protected via deed restriction or conservation easement will illustrate patterns of protected open space as well as future opportunities for connectivity and preservation. These lands may include private lands under conservation easement, as well as county and state, and municipal parks, or common land within residential developments (e.g. homeowners associations). At a minimum, the following information must be offered for each site:

- Tax Map Parcel Number(s)
- Site name (if applicable)
- Form of ownership (public, private)
- Degree of public access
- Level of protection (conservation easement, deed restriction)
- Size (acres/square feet)
- Description (recreation/natural area/farmland)
- Description and condition of any recreation facilities

Open space plans must include status reports on the current use and condition of all properties preserved by the municipality with funding from the Bucks County Municipal Open Space Program (See Appendix A).

## 5. INVENTORY OF VULNERABLE RESOURCES

The purpose of the resource inventory is to identify, map, and evaluate all significant open space resources within the municipality. An inventory of natural features will assist municipalities in identifying the most suitable lands for protection in terms of ecological significance. At a minimum open space plans must include maps and inventories of the municipality's natural features. Municipalities may elect to inventory additional features (e.g. scenic roads and vistas, historic and cultural sites, etc.) as they relate to stated open space goals. Where applicable, maps of the following natural resources should be included:

### Soils

- Agricultural Soils
- Hydric Soils

### Surface Waters

- Water Bodies (streams, lakes, ponds, etc.)
- Floodplains (100-year)
- Watershed Boundaries
- Special Protection Waters (PA Chapter 93)
- Scenic Rivers Status

### Topography

- Geologic Formations
- Slopes of 15 – 25%
- Slopes greater than 25%

### Vegetation and Wildlife

- Bucks County Natural Areas Inventory Sites
- Wooded Areas
- Wetlands (National Wetlands Inventory)
- Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Index Sites

## 6. OPEN SPACE LINKAGES

A connected system of open space allows for the movement of wildlife, plants and people throughout the region. Linked trails and greenways provide greater recreational, environmental, and scenic values than isolated parcels of land. These connections are vital to the survival of many plant and animal species, especially as the natural landscape is increasingly fragmented through development.

According to DCNR's *Pennsylvania's Greenways: An Action Plan for Creating Connections*, greenways are linear corridors of public and private land that serve as the linkages between specifically identified natural resource based or manmade features. These corridors often follow canals, rivers, stream valleys, or ridgelines. Earlier assessment of the municipality's natural resources will aid in developing greenway priorities.

Open space plans must map and analyze existing and potential linkages within the municipality as well as connections among neighboring communities. Effort should be made to link local and regional points of interest such as high-use park and recreation facilities, schools, libraries and downtowns.

### **Mapping**

Trails are consistently cited among the top open space and recreational amenities desired by residents. However, implementation can be challenging and requires cooperation and coordination at multiple levels of government. In an effort to develop a countywide inventory of existing and proposed trails, the Bucks County Planning Commission will provide mapping assistance to all municipalities as part of their open space planning process. Contact the Bucks County Open Space Coordinator for more details.

## 7. ANALYSIS OF RESOURCES

Development and careful study of the preceding sections will guide municipalities in identifying open space needs and priorities relevant to stated goals. Attention should be given to the location, distribution, balance and types of open space that may meet the needs of the community. Analysis should include linkages within the municipality as well as connections to neighboring communities.

*Prioritizing Open Space for Acquisition* — The level of detail that can be provided on potential open space projects depends upon a number of factors. Municipalities may choose to prioritize specific parcels within the plan, or include a ranking system and defer parcel identification and scoring to a later time. Criteria commonly used to identify and prioritize properties for protection include:

- consistency with goals and objectives of the local open space plan
- potential risk of development
- linkage potential
- availability of funding
- willingness of landowner to sell at fair or below market price

*Applications for acquisition and improvement grants under the Municipal Open Space Program will be evaluated on how well the proposed project fulfills the identified goals and objectives of the municipal open space plan, not on whether the specific project is recommended for acquisition.*

### **RESTORATIVE OPPORTUNITIES**

In some communities, large areas of green fields are not available for protection. Where fitting, municipalities are encouraged to consider restoring environmental quality to otherwise underutilized and/or blighted properties. The Bucks County Open Space Program supports the reuse of such properties into vibrant, productive open space uses.

## 8. NON-ACQUISITION TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Local governments in Pennsylvania have primary responsibility for land use planning under Pennsylvania Act 247, Municipal Planning Code (MPC). The MPC authorizes municipalities to plan and zone for the protection of natural and agricultural resources. Given this power, municipalities have a unique opportunity to incorporate open space preservation into their overall land use planning efforts.

Open space and its role in defining the character of a community should be an integral component of a municipality's comprehensive plan and land use regulations. A comprehensive plan represents the community's goals and policies for managing growth within the framework of current and future demographic and land use trends.

Municipalities are encouraged to incorporate regulatory techniques such as zoning and subdivision provisions that aim development away from important natural resources. By coordinating open space planning with broader community planning decisions, municipalities are better able to accommodate development in a way that preserves, protects, and enhances the environment.

## 9. GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION AND FINANCING

Sufficient staffing and financial resources must be available in order to implement open space goals and recommendations. Accordingly, local open space plans must describe and assess the municipality's organizational structure responsible for open space planning, acquisition, monitoring, and long-term maintenance and stewardship. Key persons may include appointed officials, boards and commissions, and employees, as well as volunteers. An overview of finance mechanisms in place or needed to fund land protection within the municipality should also be included.

## 10. ACTION PLAN

The open space plan should outline the required tasks or actions needed to implement the stated goals and objectives. Both short- and long-term implementation strategies should be considered along with a suggested timeline or prioritization schedule. Actions ought to consider the municipality's fiscal and administrative abilities.

## COUNTY APPROVAL AND LOCAL ADOPTION

To establish a municipality's eligibility for MOSP funding, its local open space plan must be approved by the Bucks County Open Space Review Board. Municipalities shall submit a final draft of the open space plan, to the Open Space Coordinator. Following County endorsement, the open space plan must be adopted by municipal resolution (See Appendix B). Two copies of the adopted open space plan and resolution must be submitted to the Open Space Coordinator.

Up to \$10,000 of a municipality's allocation may be applied toward the update of its local open space plan. Municipalities may prepare open space plans at any time. However, to be eligible for a MOSP Planning Grant, plans must be submitted to the Open Space Coordinator by **December 31, 2010.**

**For more information, please contact:**

Kristine S. Kern  
Open Space Coordinator  
Bucks County Planning Commission  
Neshaminy Manor Center  
1260 Almshouse Road  
Doylestown, PA 18901  
*Phone: 215-345-3430*  
*Fax: 215-345-3886*  
*Email: [kskern@co.bucks.pa.us](mailto:kskern@co.bucks.pa.us)*

# Appendix

## Property Status Report

Property Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Municipality: \_\_\_\_\_

Property Owner Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Tax Map Parcel#(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Visit \_\_\_\_\_

**Are there any changes in the property?** (e.g. construction, dredging or filling, trails, timber harvest, evidence of trespass, trash, flooding, fire, etc.) Attach current photos with sites marked on a map.

**Are these changes consistent with the terms and conditions of the easement?**

**Any changes/improvements planned for property by municipality?**

### RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

Monitor name and affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of monitor \_\_\_\_\_

# Sample Resolution for Municipal Open Space Plan Update Adoption

Township/Borough of \_\_\_\_\_, Bucks County, Pennsylvania

RESOLUTION # \_\_\_\_\_

WHEREAS, the Board of Supervisors/Council of the Township/Borough of \_\_\_\_\_ recognizes that the Township/Borough contains open space and natural areas that contribute to the quality of life and economic health of our community which are worthy of preservation; and

WHEREAS, the Bucks County Commissioners have renewed funding of the Bucks County Open Space Program through a referendum overwhelmingly passed by voters on November 6, 2007, the purpose of which is to protect in perpetuity those natural resource areas and farmlands deemed essential to preserve the unique character of Bucks County; and

WHEREAS, the Bucks County Open Space Program provides an allocation of funding for protection of open space resources by municipalities provided that the municipality first prepares an approved municipal open space plan; and

WHEREAS, the Township/Borough of \_\_\_\_\_, wishes to participate in the Municipal Grant Program; and

NOW, THEREFORE, the Board of Supervisors/Council of the Township/Borough of \_\_\_\_\_, Bucks County, Pennsylvania hereby resolves that the Township/Borough Open Space Plan, dated \_\_\_\_\_, prepared in compliance with the Municipal Open Space Plan Guidelines distributed by the Bucks County Open Space Program, has been discussed at a public meeting and is hereby adopted in its entirety in the form attached hereto, as the official Open Space Plan of the Township/Borough of \_\_\_\_\_; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that a certified copy of this Resolution to be attached to, and made part of said Open Space Plan, and furthermore, that the Township/Borough of \_\_\_\_\_ intends to take actions as appropriate to implement the goals of the Open Space Plan.

This Resolution has been duly prepared and adopted by the Governing Body of the Township/Borough of \_\_\_\_\_ in public meeting held this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_.

ATTEST: \_\_\_\_\_

By: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chairman/President

## **BUCKS COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

James F. Cawley, Esq., *Chairman*

Charles H. Martin, *Vice Chairman*

Diane M. Ellis-Marseglia, LCSW

*David M. Sanko*

*Chief Operating Officer*

## **BUCKS COUNTY OPEN SPACE REVIEW BOARD**

Anthony Belfield, *Chairman*

George Dranginis

Joshua Feldstein

Frederick S. Groshens

Marilyn Jacobson

Robert Moffett

William Hart Rufe III

Andrew L. Warren

Robert Wharton

Kristine S. Kern

*Open Space Coordinator*

*215-345-3430*

*kskern@co.bucks.pa.us*



Neshaminy Manor Center  
1260 Almshouse Road  
Doylestown, PA 18901  
Phone: 215-345-3400  
Fax: 215-345-3886  
Email: [bcpc@co.bucks.pa.us](mailto:bcpc@co.bucks.pa.us)