



2022

ANNUAL REPORT

SOMERSET COUNTY

OPEN SPACE

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

JANUARY 2023



SOMERSET COUNTY
2022 BOARD OF
COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

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Gregory Pasquale, Esq.
DEPUTY COUNTY COUNSEL

Sarah Fitzpatrick, Esq.
DEPUTY COUNTY COUNSEL

SOMERSET COUNTY

OPEN SPACE
ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Background & Membership

The Open Space Advisory Committee was organized under and authorized to exercise the authority of the Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders by resolution in May, 1991. The committee provides bi-partisan representation on recommendations to the Somerset County Board of County Commissioners for the expenditures of funds from the Somerset County Open Space, Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund. This includes open space acquisition projects, acquisition grants through the Special Projects Grant Program and County Flood Mitigation Funding Program, and development grants through the County Recreation Grant Program. All acquisition and grant projects are evaluated based on consistency with the Somerset County Preservation Plan.

The Open Space Advisory Committee consists of ten voting members, one member and one citizen appointee each from the Board of County Commissioners, County Planning Board, and County Park Commission and two citizen appointees each from the Democratic and Republican parties. The term of each voting member is one year. The Office of Planning, Policy and Economic Development Preservation Section oversees the administrative responsibilities of the committee.



Summary of Meetings

The Open Space Advisory Committee met on ten occasions via Zoom Conference:

2022 CALENDAR

January 19, 2022
February 9, 2022
March 9, 2022
April 13, 2022
May 11, 2022
July 13, 2022
August 10, 2022
September 9, 2022
November 9, 2022
December 14, 2022



Open Space Preservation Highlights

The County acquired parcels from four property owners totaling **67.29** acres. The total Open Space Inventory is now **14,922.95** acres.



NJWSA PROPERTY

**NJ WATER SUPPLY AUTHORITY
FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP**

A parcel totaling 29.13 acres located on Canal Road was acquired from New Jersey Water Supply Authority (NJWSA). The majority of the property is comprised of open farmland with perimeter wooded areas and is adjacent to other preserved County open space. NJWSA acquired the property from William Stavola for the purpose of utilizing the open portion as the dewatering site for the Delaware and Raritan Canal dredging project. The property was also targeted for preservation by Somerset County as an integral addition to the County’s Millstone Valley preservation initiative. The entities entered into an agreement and the County acquired the property for \$796,833.18 after the dredging project was concluded and the site restored to its original condition. The preservation of this property advances the goal of the Open Space Preservation Plan to continue the acquisition of land in the Millstone River Valley to preserve its rich geological, botanic, cultural, and historic significance. This acquisition will advance the expansion of the Millstone Valley by further facilitating the development of a network of trails that link to local and nonprofit preserved land and the Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park.



DELAWARE AND RARITAN CANAL



THOMAS KAZARY PROPERTY



**THOMAS KAZARY
BRANCHBURG TOWNSHIP**

A small but significant parcel totaling 0.33 acres was acquired from Thomas Kazary for \$240,000. The property is located adjacent to the County’s historic John/Gilbert Van Camp Farmstead and the Neshanic Valley Golf Course maintenance facility on Opie Road. The property sustained significant damage from flooding during Hurricane Ida and the owner chose to relocate. The preservation of the property has advanced the goal of the Somerset County Preservation Plan by eliminating a flood prone residential property and removing a resident from potential danger in future flooding events. The property will be placed it into open space where it can serve as flood storage during significant flooding events. The acquisition also allows for possible future improvements around the John/Gilbert Van Camp Farmstead to make the site more accessible to the public.





(L-R) OSAC MEMBER SUZANNE OCHSE, SELLER'S ATTORNEY ERICA EDWARDS, FORMER OSAC MEMBER WALTER RUSACK, OSAC MEMBER KERRY HASELTON, OFFICE OF PLANNING, POLICY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR WALTER LANE, OSAC CHAIR CHRIS KELLY, COMMISSIONER MELONIE MARANO.

FRANK & LILLIAN SERINA WARREN TOWNSHIP

Somerset County's Passaic River Greenway is a patchwork of municipal and county owned preserved land within Warren and Bernards Townships. As with the other County greenways, preservation within the Passaic River Greenway provides both environmental and recreational benefits. The preserved land allows for public access to and use of the Passaic River for hiking, fishing, and boating. During storm events, land within the greenway provides much needed flood storage. The acquisition of the 33.74-acre property from Frank and Lillian Serina advances the goal to preserve land within the Passaic River Greenway and provides an opportunity to create an access point to the river for canoeing and kayaking. The public will have the ability to paddle seven miles downstream from the Somerset County Environmental Education Center to the Serina property. Possible future improvements to the property include a boat launch, parking and trails that connect to other preserved County and municipal open space along the river. The existing residence and outbuildings will be removed, and the areas restored. The County has applied to the NJ Department of Environmental Protection Green



VIEW OF PASSAIC RIVER - SERINA PROPERTY

Acres Program to help offset the \$900,000 acquisition cost. Green Acres funding assistance allows the County to maximize its Open Space Trust Fund for future preservation projects.



DEDICATION SIGN - PEKARSKI PROPERTY



PEKARSKI PROPERTY

MICHAEL PEKARSKY MONTGOMERY TOWNSHIP

The County was fortunate to receive a donation of 4.23 acres of vacant, wooded land from the Estate of Mary Pekarski. The family wished to see the land, known as "Wayfarers' Woods", preserved as open space for all to enjoy. Preservation of the property continues the protection of a portion of Back Brook corridor and its buffers, expands the existing 6,000-acre Sourland Mountain Preserve and provides additional road frontage and access to the Preserve from Dutchtown-Zion Road.



Recreation Grant Program

The Recreation Grant Program provides County Open Space Preservation Trust funds to municipalities to assist with the development of active and passive recreational facilities within municipal parks and open space. The Program had another successful year in 2022 with grants awarded to Bedminster, Bernardsville, Hillsborough, Montgomery, and Somerville totaling **\$1,525,000**. Since the inception of the Program the County has awarded a total of **\$3,590,000** to eleven municipalities.





EXAMPLE OF A COMMUNITY GARDEN.

BEDMINSTER TOWNSHIP

RIVER ROAD PARK COMMUNITY GARDEN

Due to population growth in the area of the Hills Development and River Road Park, the Township determined that there was a need for interactive passive and active recreation uses. The Township performed a needs assessment in 2020 for facilities and programs and the top need identified was a community garden. The project will be located within River Road Park adjacent to the Jacobus Vanderveer House and along the existing bike/walking trail. The location was chosen for its walkability from a densely populated portion of the Township and its proximity to the recreational and historic resources within the park. This location is consistent with the recommendations of Walk Bike Hike Study for location, accessibility from major roads, and walkability. Plots will be available for all County residents on a first come, first serve basis.

The plan proposes a total of 480 garden plots to be constructed in 2 phases with 240 plots to be constructed in Phase 1. The Township's goal is to make the garden fully organic. Amenities will include potting benches, tool sheds, water service with spigots, fencing, composting area, and parking, and the site will be ADA accessible.

The community garden proposal includes elements of all 3 County Preservation Programs (open space, farmland and historic preservation). The garden provides recreational and agricultural opportunities while its location within the park provides more visibility and access to the adjacent historic Jacobus Vanderveer House.

GRANT AWARD – \$300,000



BEDMINSTER COMMUNITY GARDEN CONCEPT PLAN



FINISHED PICKLEBALL PROJECT AT THE POLO GROUNDS, BERNARDSVILLE.

BERNARDSVILLE BOROUGH

PICKLEBALL COURT AT THE POLO GROUNDS

As part of its recently completed Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Bernardsville Borough identified the needs of underserved demographics in the Borough which is adult and senior outdoor fitness opportunities. This need was reinforced by a resident survey conducted during the Master Plan process. The Borough believes that the emerging pickleball trend will begin to address the needs of active adults and seniors. The project was constructed within the Polo Grounds adjacent to other municipal recreational activities including the Borough's pool, existing basketball courts, and synthetic turf multipurpose field.

The plan proposes the construction of 3 pickleball courts with optional court lighting, court fencing, gravel parking, and on-site drainage which will include a rain garden within a swale along the parking area.

GRANT AWARD – \$250,000



BERNARDSVILLE PICKLEBALL CONCEPT PLAN.



MERDINGER PARK HIKING TRAILHEAD

HILLSBOROUGH TOWNSHIP

MIKE MERDINGER MEMORIAL PARK PAVILION AND TRAILS

Mike Merdinger Memorial Park is an existing 227-acre Township park with 1.5 miles of hiking trails and is the location of the former Township Police Department building. It is in close proximity to the Foothill Acres senior facility and near the local YMCA. The trails within the park are the only hiking trails in the area and are heavily utilized by the Hillsborough High School cross country team, avid hikers & bird watchers, cross country skiers in the winter, and local Boy Scout & Girl Scout troops. The project's location will provide future access to the County's proposed "Cross County Trail" that proposes linking the County's Sourland Mountain Preserve, Mountainview Park, South Branch Greenway and Raritan River Greenway. The Township plans to develop new cross country and nature programs within the park and future development plans include rehabilitating the former police building for indoor activities and additional restrooms.

The plan proposes the construction of a new 24'x34' pavilion, benches, picnic tables, updated signage, and an ADA accessible bathroom facility with compostable toilets.

GRANT AWARD – \$250,000



PROPOSED PAVILLION, COURTESY OF CORNERSTONE ARCHITECTURAL GROUP, LLC.

MONTGOMERY TOWNSHIP

INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND AT THE MUNICIPAL COMPLEX

An inclusive playground is a playground that allows children of all ages and abilities to play together. It is wheelchair accessible and helps to develop physical, cognitive, sensory and social skills. Inclusive playgrounds provide a platform for social equity and allow entire families and children of all ages to enjoy time together. The Township determined a need for such a playground and residents expressed a desire for children to play locally and not need to travel away from their friends. It is believed that the playground will be the first all-inclusive playground in the County. The playground will be located at the new municipal complex adjacent to the municipal library and located across the road from an inclusionary housing development and Rock Brook School, a special needs school.

The plan proposes the development of a completely fenced playground approximately 10,500 s.f. in size with a barrier-free surface. Components include a 2-5 year old structure, 5-12 year old structure, 11 freestanding pieces including musical instruments, three exercise stations, accessible swings, shade structure, and benches.

GRANT AWARD – \$350,000



PROPOSED PLAYGROUND FOR AGES 2-5, COURTESY OF BURKE PLAY THAT MOVES YOU.



PROPOSED PLAYGROUND FOR AGES 5-12, COURTESY OF BURKE PLAY THAT MOVES YOU.

SOMERVILLE BOROUGH

MICHAEL LEPP PARK POOL IMPROVEMENTS

At one time, the Borough had four active pools. With the closing of the Michael Lepp Park Pool, only one municipal pool is operating, which is Walck Pool in the northern portion of the Borough. Two of the pools were permanently closed which has increased the need to reopen the Michael Lepp Park Pool. The pool was constructed in the early 1900’s and has been maintained on a regular basis. However, time and use have taken their toll and the pool could no longer be kept up with regular maintenance. The Borough then determined that a full upgrade was necessary. The Borough’s adopted Master Plan reinforces the need for the existing pools to serve the community. Michael Lepp Park Pool is located in an area that is walkable to a large, underserved portion of the community and provides a location for summer camps from within and outside of the Borough. The pool complements the other recreational uses within the park including a spray pad and basketball courts.

The plan proposes to refurbish the pool liner, install a permanent accessible pool lift, replace and expand the concrete pool decking, construct a rain garden to address runoff, and add tables, chairs, umbrellas, and a new shade structure. There will also be upgrades to the pool equipment and restrooms with more energy efficient equipment and fixtures including low flow toilets and LED lights.

GRANT AWARD – \$375,000



PROPOSED RECTANGLE HIP SHADE, COURTESY OF SUPERIOR RECREATIONAL PRODUCTS.



PLAN OF PROPOSED POOL IMPROVEMENTS.

Somerset County Preservation Plan

The Somerset County Preservation Plan was completed and adopted by the County Planning Board in May, 2022 as part of the County’s Master Plan. The plan includes updated Open Space and Farmland Preservation Plans, a new Historic Preservation Plan and a companion document that outlines how the plan can promote economic development and tourism. Preparation of all plans together allowed for the coordination of all programs and identified common goals. The overall plan is a single document, but the Open Space, Farmland and Historic Preservation Plans are also stand-alone documents that will serve the individual programs.

The Open Space Preservation Plan is an update of the 2000 Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan Update. The 2000 Plan set an acquisition goal of 20,500 acres.

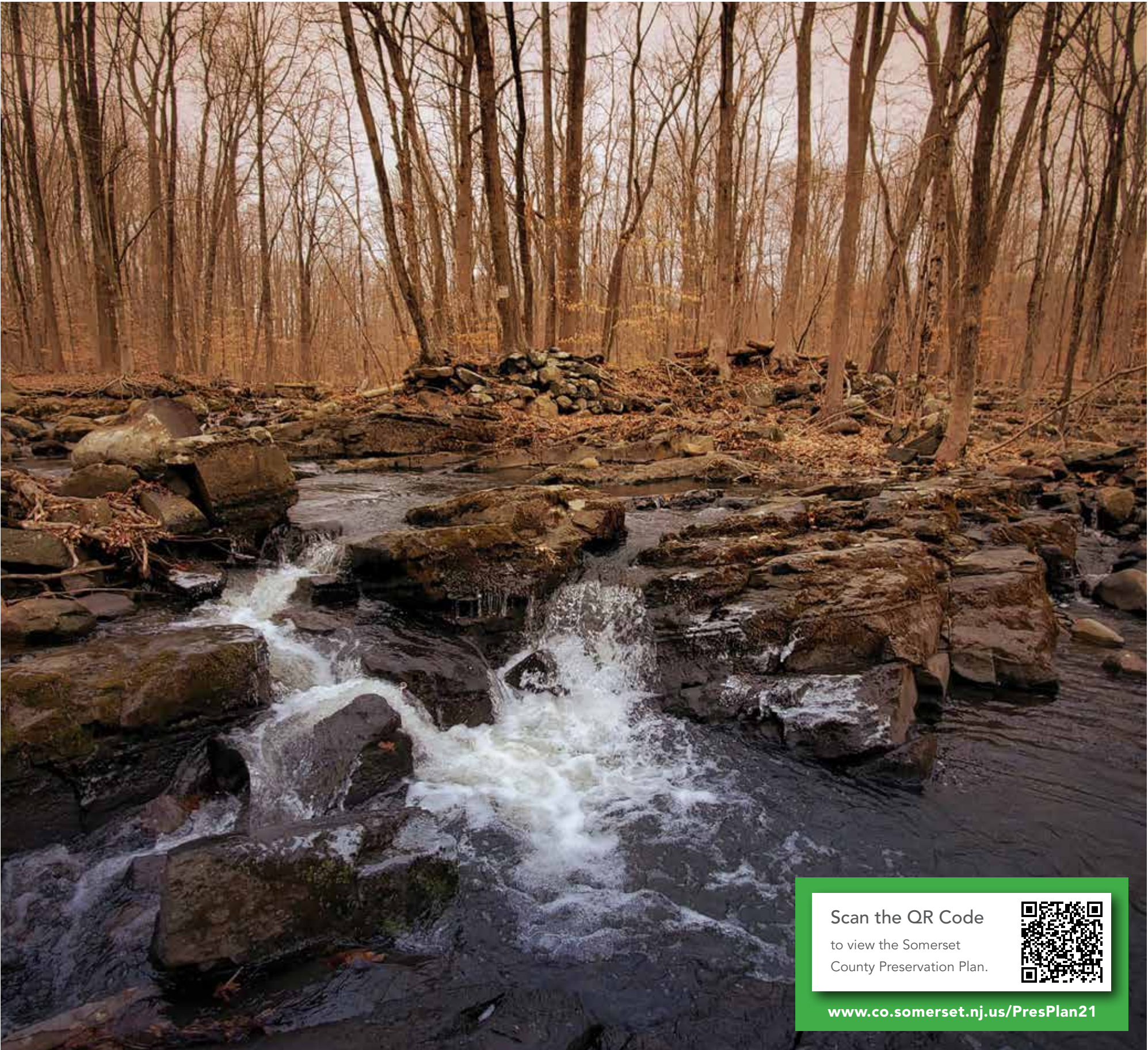
GOALS OF THE 2000 PLAN

-
Create an open space system preserving lands of county-wide significance.
.....
-
Preserve open space to protect critical environmental resources of Somerset County.
.....
-
Provide open space for a diverse mix of quality recreational experiences appropriate for a County Park System.
.....
-
Provide County parks where they will most easily serve the greatest population concentrations in Somerset County.
.....
-
Provide open space which enhances the quality of life in Somerset County.
.....

Although the Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan Update is 20 years old, the goals and objectives remain valid. The Open Space Preservation Plan proposes updates to the prior goals and new goals that address the effects of climate change, focus attention on the historic resources within the County parks, and propose park areas within a 10 to 15-minute walk from all County residents. With the expanded and new goals, the plan increased the preservation goal to 24,000 acres.

ADDED GOALS

-
Leverage the Somerset County Preservation Trust Fund
.....
-
Preserve Historic sites on Somerset County-owned open space land.
.....
-
Cultivate partnership.
.....



Scan the QR Code
to view the Somerset
County Preservation Plan.



www.co.somerset.nj.us/PresPlan21

Open Space Trust Fund

The County Commissioners continue to support the Open Space Preservation Program through the allocation of funds from the County Open Space Preservation Trust Fund. Allocations are made for County open space acquisitions, funding for municipal and nonprofit preservation projects, funding for municipal acquisition of flood prone properties, and funding for municipal recreational development projects.

In an effort to continue the cultivation of partnerships and maximize the benefits of open space preservation, the County Commissioners have committed to expand local funding to nonprofits for the preservation of open space. The first such commitment was made to provide funding to the Sourland Conservancy and Stoutsburg Sourland African American Museum to preserve the 5.2-acre True Farmstead in Montgomery Township. The preservation of the property will allow both agencies to continue the promotion of open space and historic preservation.



TRUE FARMSTEAD RESIDENCE



2022 Commissioner Allocations, Expenditures and Awards

County open space acquisition costs in 2022 totaled **\$1,936,833.**

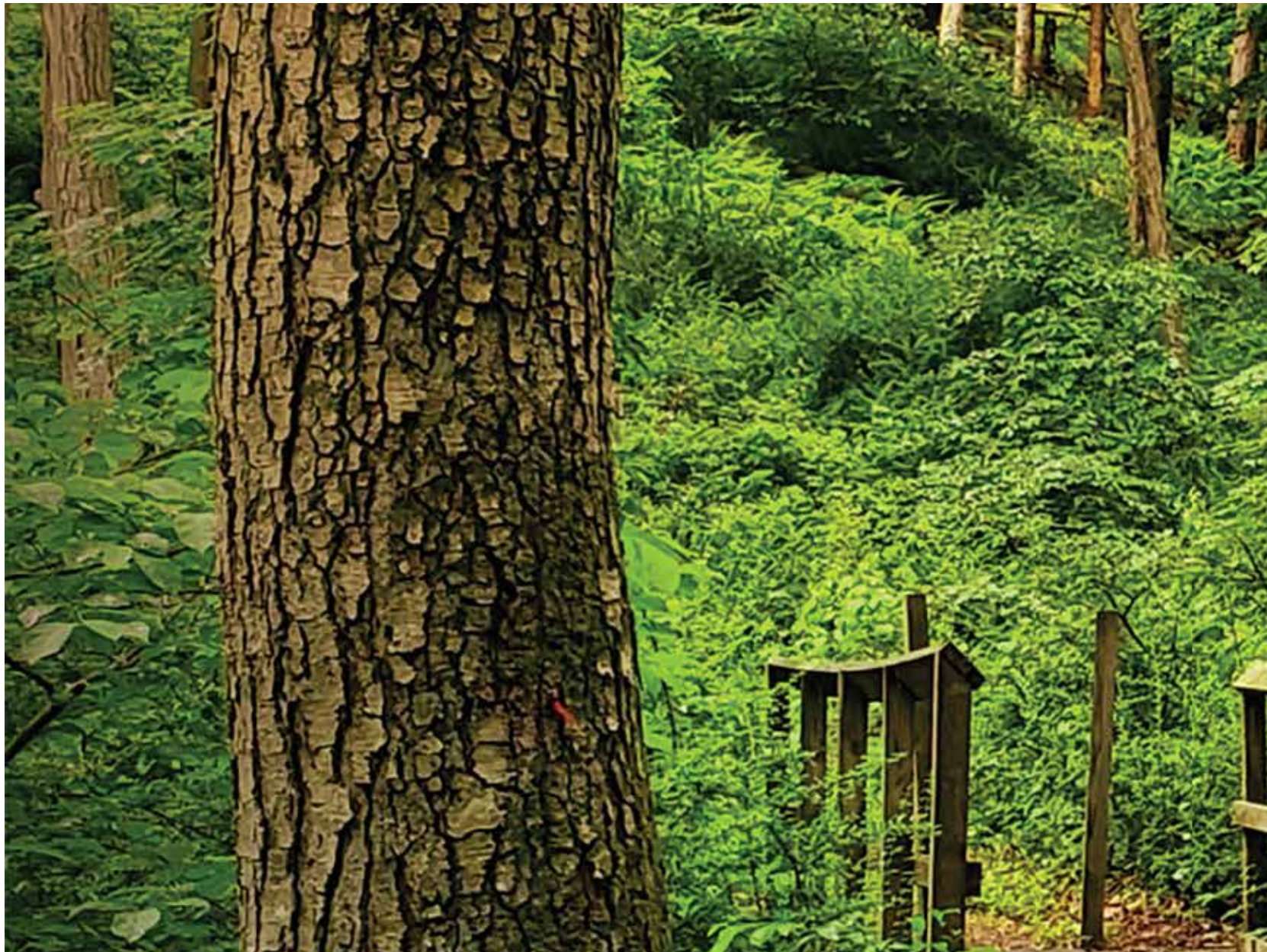
County Recreation Grant awards totaled **\$1,685,000.**

In 2022, the County Commissioners allocated **\$2,932,666** to the County Open Space Preservation Program

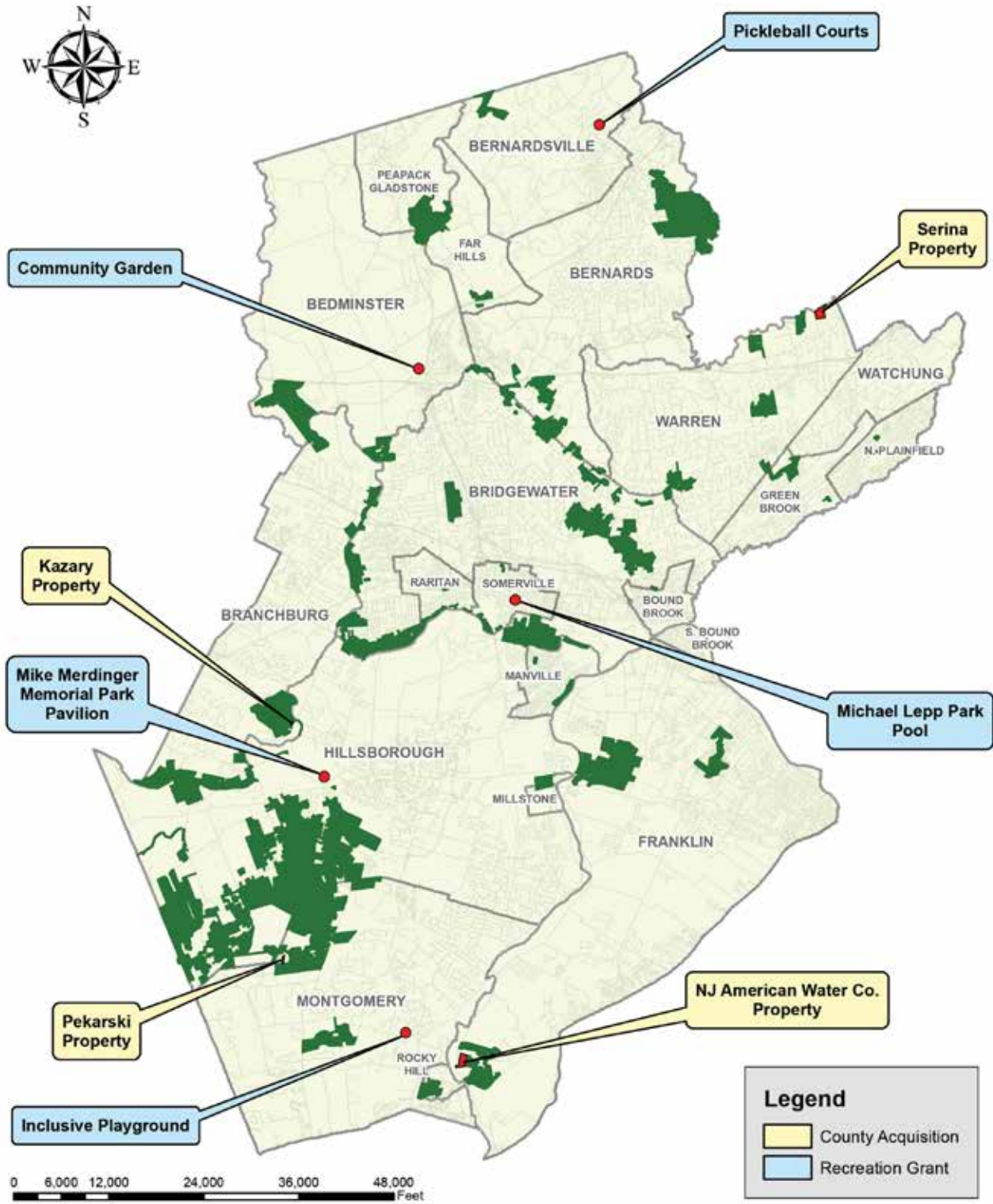
- **\$2,235,000** to fund all active Recreation Grant projects
- **\$500,000** for future flood mitigation projects.

As of December 31, 2022, a balance of **\$9,505,470** was available for County open space acquisitions.

The County is currently in negotiations or under contract for approximately **425 acres** at an estimated value of **\$10,000,000.**



2022 Acquisition and Grant Award Locations





**2022 SOMERSET COUNTY
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COUNTY ENGINEER ALTERNATE

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Maria Tapia Birch
2ND ALTERNATE

**2022 STATE
PRESERVATION PARTNERS**

NJDEP GREEN ACRES
PROGRAM

NJDEP BLUE ACRES
PROGRAM

Moving Forward ...

As Somerset County has matured, the stewardship of county open space is also maturing beyond providing traditional regional-scale recreation opportunities. The opportunity now exists for the county to enhance its open space system and maximize benefits for county residents through creative planning, partnerships, and coordination with the county’s Historic and Farmland Preservation Programs.

With the recommendations of the Open Space Advisory Committee and support of the County Commissioners, the County continues to implement the goals of the Preservation Plan with many new initiatives and partnerships moving ahead.

Partnerships are critical to the success of the County Open Space Preservation Program and preservation as a whole. With the Commissioners’ commitment to provide funding to nonprofits for the preservation of open space through the Special Projects Acquisition Grant Programs, as well as the ongoing support for the County’s Recreation Grant Program, municipalities and nonprofits have continued to take advantage of these programs and the County anticipates funding several projects in the coming year.

The top priority of the Open Space Preservation Program continues to be the preservation of land to address the recreational needs of county residents, preserve the historic resources within the county parks, and preserve lands that are critical for wildlife habitat, flood storage, and the mitigation of the impacts of climate change. With negotiations ongoing for approximately 425 acres and the continued support of the County Commissioners through allocations to the Open Space Trust Fund, the County envisions another successful preservation year in 2023.



OFFICE OF PLANNING, POLICY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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