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## Open-space resources pulled together



Written by

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Over its 37 square miles, Millstone Township has approximately 6,500 acres of protected open space.

It is under various jurisdictions — municipal, county, state and private. It is in various forms — municipal and county parks, the state's Assunpink Wildlife Management Area, privately owned farms.

In recent decades, the township has transformed from rural municipality, where various officials kept home offices and stored records, to a wealthy suburban-rural community with more centralized offices at the municipal building.

In 2003, township officials began centralizing Millstone's open space records — deeds with easements, documents showing land dedicated to preservation and so on — said Pat Butch, chairman of the township Open Space and Farmland Preservation Council.

"We slowly started to (centrally)

accumulate," said Butch, adding township officials were educating themselves in the process. "That was our rough beginning.

"Every once in awhile, something shows up we didn't know we had. We keep our eyes open for what's out there."

On Tuesday, Butch and Pam D'Andrea, the township land-use administrator, brought what they learned to a gathering of the Monmouth County Greentable, a loose network of government officials, organizations and members of the public interested in open-space issues.

Tuesday's topic was "Putting the 'Ease' Back in Stewarding Your Municipal Easements," a 90-minute program attended by about 30 people at the Freehold Township municipal building.

Easements, where property is privately owned but has a public use, falls into various categories — drainage, conservation, utilities, wildlife corridor, trails.

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D'Andrea said it is important to properly track these properties, such as noting tax-map block and lot numbers and other information from deeds. The properties are checked initially, then every two to three years, D'Andrea said.

"Stewardship is an involved process," according to Butch, "that works best" with various offices in government being involved. The work also involves volunteers, such as Butch.

"Our volunteers are precious, because they spend hours and hours walking our (open-space) properties," Butch said.

Using volunteers and in-house staff as much as possible saves money being spent on outside professionals, according to the Millstone Township representatives.

D'Andrea said it is important to accentuate the positive, emphasizing an easement could help protect natural resources. On the other hand, easements could bring tax-savings to private owners, according to two of the Greentable organizers, Harriet Honigfeld of the county Planning Board and Fran Varacalli of the Monmouth Conservation Foundation.

"We're trying to work with people," D'Andrea said.

Of Millstone Township's 6,500 acres of protected open space, more than 500 acres are conservation easements, Butch said. The remaining protected open space is 4,850 acres owned by the state, county

or municipality and 1,150 acres of privately owned farmland, Butch said.

A municipal master plan and ordinances - perhaps for such things as tree-clearing, steep-slope disturbance or protecting jeopardized species - should support the concept of easements or open space.

Millstone Township has had little problem with landowners following the rules of their easements.

"Everybody is pretty much keeping in line with what they've got," D'Andrea said.

Tom Chenal, a member of the Marlboro Agricultural Advisory Committee, attended the seminar to perhaps apply what Millstone Township is doing in his town.

"I was aware Millstone had a very good group of people," Chenal said. "They're well-organized. It certainly was instructive."

Ray Nichols, an Environmental Commission member from Hopewell Township, Mercer

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County, said his town “is very interested in its rural heritage and open space preservation.”

Nichols said Hopewell Township has the problem Millstone Township had, records scattered, rather than at a central site. So, Nichols said he is working on bringing the records together.

“We’re all stewards of the natural resources,” Nichols said. “We can only do that if we know the history of the property and what was considered a special value.”

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