

LONDON GROVE TOWNSHIP
OPEN SPACE RESOURCES PLAN

1. Introduction and Purpose

The prime purpose of this plan is to provide London Grove Township decision-makers with criteria and procedures for identifying land that might be considered for permanent protection as open space, and then to apply those criteria to properties within the Township and thereby establish a universe of candidate parcels. In essence, this plan represents the next step in an evolutionary planning process that began with the Township's 1993 *Open Space, Recreation, and Environmental Resources Plan*. Building on that plan's comprehensive identification of environmental resources found in London Grove, a 2002 update of the 1993 plan included a map of all parcels with frontage on the East or Middle Branches of the White Clay Creek. This focus on specific properties was extended in the 2006 *Open Space Plan* update, in which the White Clay Creek parcels were listed in terms of their level of protection, relationship to already protected lands, and the existence of sensitive features.

Simultaneous with the most recent *Open Space Plan* update, the Township Board of Supervisors created the Open Space Committee in 2005 for the primary purposes of coordinating and executing Township initiatives to protect open space parcels. The Committee drew from the predecessor planning processes to establish a framework for evaluating candidate parcels. Early attention also was paid to gaining enactment of an Open Space Earned Income Tax, achieved in 2006. **[and preparing for creation of the London Grove Township Land Trust.]**

This *Open Space Resources Plan* is compatible with the *London Grove Township Comprehensive Plan*, currently being updated, and with *Landscapes*, the land use policy element of the Chester County comprehensive plan. Both plans emphasize the protection of critical natural features and natural landscapes. Chester County's *Linking Landscapes* plan element also advocates greenway and trail connections. The objectives and purposes of this *Open Space Resources Plan* are in accord with the broader Township and County land use goals, and the ongoing pursuit of protecting identified open space parcels should prove to be an important implementation mechanism.

As part of the Open Space Committee's Mission and Objectives, it formulated the following Goal Statement:

To secure the maximum feasible amount of permanently protected open space land within London Grove Township through a variety of public and private mechanisms, in concert with the future plans and policies of the Township and its landowners

Since its inception in 2005, the Committee has been in contact with a number of landowners interested in taking stewardship actions to protect their properties. A variety of tools to accomplish this have been explored, including the purchase of agricultural easements, the donation of conservation easements, and the purchase of open space parcels in fee simple. With voter approval of the Open Space Earned Income Tax and its subsequent adoption by the Board of Supervisors, the Open Space Committee has taken the necessary steps to include those funds among the resources available to interested landowners. This *Open Space Resources Plan*, upon adoption by the Board of Supervisors, serves as another prerequisite in the Township's ability to expend those funds for open space protection purposes.

2. Criteria for Parcel Evaluation

a. Map of 10-acre or greater parcels: criteria for inclusion

The Township Open Space Committee has developed evaluative criteria that can be applied to any property proposed for permanent open space protection through Township action. The results are presented on Map 1, London Grove Township: Parcels Greater than 10 Acres with Priority Open Space Characteristics, and by the description of those characteristics and related evaluation factors and procedures presented below. Any property under consideration for open space protection should now be examined in relation to these criteria and factors.

Map 1 displays a subset of parcels 10 acres or greater in the Township. From that starting point, properties already developed to the extent that they do not offer meaningful open space opportunities have been deleted. Also, properties that already fall within the "protected lands" category are identified and shown as such, but are not included among parcels for which open space protection strategies are still appropriate (i.e., the numbered properties on the map). Protected lands include those subject to conservation easement, those in public (e.g., Township or School District) ownership, and selected areas of development-related common open space owned by a homeowners' association. Finally, the map excludes properties that do not contain any of the priority open space characteristics.

As the residual of this selection process, Map 1 depicts approximately 130 parcels of at least 10 acres that are essentially open and undeveloped, contain one or more of the desirable open space attributes, and do not have any permanently protected status. Each is identified by a number listed in **[Appendix]** the roster of parcels that is appended to the plan; this listing also contains the tax parcel number, acreage, and open space attributes that characterize the property. A more detailed roster of the numbered properties is maintained by the Open Space Committee.

Map 1 also shows the full extent of the priority characteristics, both on and adjacent to the identified properties, and also shows the already-protected lands, as this information

can offer an important context for the evaluation of an unprotected property. Indeed, adjacency to protected land is an explicit evaluation factor.

Finally, it is important to note two other factors that may bear on open space protection priorities and the properties shown on Map 1:

[1] One additional criterion for the consideration of, and possible action to protect, an open space parcel is the opportunity it may represent apart from the articulated characteristics. Such an opportunity could come in the form of an interested landowner, a strategic, noncommercial location (e.g., adjacent to a public park), or the availability of open, noncommercial land south of Rt. 1, among other factors.

[2] It is the policy of the Board of Supervisors that properties zoned for commercial use under the London Grove Township Zoning Ordinance shall not be included in the Open Space Resource Plan, nor considered as an open space candidate. However, a commercial property owner who wants an open space preservation easement purchased by or donated to the Township may work directly with the Township in this regard upon written request to the Township.

b. Priority open space characteristics

[1] Agricultural productivity and/or capability

These lands are of principal importance due to their agricultural productivity, although their protection generally yields the additional benefits of an open, scenic landscape and the retention of traditional community character. On Map 1, the parcels shown in this category are those included in the Township's Agricultural Security Area, as that is a prerequisite for the sale of an agricultural conservation easement to the Chester County Agricultural Lands Preservation Board. A number of agricultural properties in the northern part of the Township have permanently protected status through participation in this program.

[2] Contiguous to protected land, or part of a group of adjacent properties that are candidates for protection simultaneously

An aggregation of adjacent protected lands presents a variety of natural, scenic, and land use benefits to the community. By adding to a core of already protected parcels, the Township can minimize the fragmentation of potentially important landscapes that can offer important environmental and economic benefits in their current condition. Intact greenways and similar natural corridors can serve as critical wildlife habitat. Extended protection of natural systems and features, such as wetlands, riparian buffers, and woodlands, to newly protected adjacent properties is a continuing objective of this plan. The same advantages apply to contiguous agricultural lands, where the farming economy can be more readily sustained without the intrusion incompatible land uses. Priority also should be given to working with groups of adjacent landowners whose properties are not

now protected but whose combined actions could produce a meaningful core or corridor.

[3] Frontage on East or Middle Branches of White Clay Creek

London Grove contains very substantial segments of both the East and Middle Branches of the White Clay Creek, as well as numerous tributaries. The importance of the entire watershed, and even more so of the actual stream channels for which it is named, has been recognized by its federal designation within the Wild and Scenic Rivers Program. London Grove Township placed a priority on properties containing White Clay Creek frontage in both the 2002 and 2006 *Open Space Plan* updates; in the latter, these properties are mapped as potential greenway corridors.

The federal Wild and Scenic River status has been attained even though the water quality of the White Clay Creek is termed as "stressed" in some locations. Land use decisions that can contribute to improvements in water quality are continuously sought, and permanent open space status for lands adjacent to the creek is a clear benefit. Map 1 identifies parcels that include frontage on either branch of the White Clay as protection priorities.

[4] Forested riparian buffer

Forested riparian buffers are well recognized as important contributors to water quality in the streams they front, in terms of water temperature, bank and soil stability, and moderation of flooding events. These areas also present wildlife habitat benefits. The Township currently protects riparian buffers in the land development process and seeks enhancements in riparian areas that are not well buffered. Map 1 shows areas along the East and Middle Branches of the White Clay Creek that contain forested riparian buffers; these represent a priority for open space protection actions. And, while not shown on Map 1, properties containing tributaries of the White Clay Creek that include forested riparian buffers also should be considered valuable resources warranting protection.

[5] Wooded

London Grove's remaining woodlands have received recent attention through a Planning Commission inventory that is intended to produce regulatory incentives and site design criteria aimed at long-term protection. Woodlands offer a variety of environmental benefits – e.g., air quality, stormwater management, soil stability, and buffering of wind impacts. In many instances, they are a scenic amenity and a key element of London Grove's traditional landscape character. In areas undergoing substantial land development, woodlands can provide a welcome break in the conversion process. Permanent and absolute protection of woodlands can be achieved much more effectively through private open space

initiatives than regulatory measures. Map 1 identifies areas of woodland across the Township, as inventoried in the recent planning process.

[6] Forested interiors

Properties with forested interiors will, in actuality, be a subset of the wooded properties described in #5, above. The Township inventory of woodlands includes these forested interior areas, which sit within more extensive areas of woodland. Because they remain relatively free of disturbance in comparison to the woodland edges, these interior settings constitute excellent and nearly irreplaceable natural conditions. Surrounded by a 300-foot woodland buffer, these forested interiors are not prevalent within the Township. As sanctuaries of native vegetation, however, they are relied upon by certain plant and wildlife populations, such as wildflowers and songbirds. Forested interiors are open space protection priorities because of the richness and diversity they bring to the Township's ecosystem.

[7] Places of the Heart

In the fall of 2006, the Open Space Committee, assisted by staff from the Natural Lands Trust, convened a Places of the Heart workshop for Township residents and landowners. One of its purposes was to elicit from those in attendance the designation of lands they would most like to see retained in their current open character, i.e., places of the heart. Participants "cast their votes" by designating parcels that, in their view, met that criterion; the results are included on Map 1. These properties are significant for their public visibility and, generally, their strategic location. They tend to exemplify London Grove's traditional landscape character.

c. **Other Contributing Features**

In addition to the primary criteria presented on Map 1, certain properties may have complementary attributes that will add to their priority status for open space protection. These tend to be less uniform in their significance within the identified feature and/or less susceptible to before-the-fact mapping, but may add weight to the argument for protection on a case-by-case basis. These features include:

- [1] Historic and archaeological resources, particularly as identified by the Township Historical Commission.
- [2] Scenic resources, particularly where included in inventories by Township, County, or non-profit organizations.
- [3] Properties with the potential to add buffer protection to existing public park land or open space owned by the Township or another government entity.

[4] Opportunities to connect and extend the Township trail system.

[5] Exceptional Natural Areas

London Grove Township's plant communities were documented in the Botanical Survey of London Grove Township (2007). The survey recorded 768 plant species, 491 of which are natives. It also identified 21 Exceptional Natural Areas, which are defined as areas "composed of relatively intact species-rich, native plant-dominated communities. ENAs are reservoirs of biodiversity. They may consist of more than one type of plant community, including woodland, meadow, and wetland, and may vary widely in size." The distinct importance of ENAs for open space protection lies in their diversity of plant communities and the unique, historic contributions they make to London Grove's characteristic landscape.

[6] A property that does not fall within any of the above criteria but which, in the judgment of the Open Space Committee, represents an open space opportunity for reasons that may include, but need not be limited to, those presented in Section 3-c, below, and thus warrants positive consideration.

3. Evaluation criteria and implementation procedure

- a. The criteria in #2-b and 2-c, above, should be applicable both to situations where the Open Space Committee reaches out affirmatively to a landowner or where the Committee is responding to the expressed interest of a landowner.
- b. The initial evaluation of a specific property or group of contiguous properties will be undertaken by the Open Space Committee.
- c. Initial screening shall be in relation to the open space characteristics presented in #2, above. On a case-by-case basis, where relevant, additional weight should be given to a property exhibiting one or more of the following factors:
 - [1] Where a property possesses a relatively strong development potential, especially where it is adjacent to developed residential tracts.
 - [2] The property is located south of the Route 1 Bypass.
 - [3] There is demonstrated landowner interest in permanent protection of the open space resource, independent of any Open Space Committee outreach.

- [4] There is demonstrated financial feasibility for the proposed open space protection action, particularly in relation to any competing demand for Township funds and other potential sources of revenue.
- [5] The property has been recommended for open space protection to the Open Space Committee by the Township Environmental Advisory Council.
- d. Upon its creation, the London Grove Township Land Trust will be consulted for its perspective on any potential open space protection action.
- e. The Open Space Committee shall make a formal recommendation to the Board of Supervisors on any proposed open space protection action that requires the expenditure of Township funds or other public monies, or any commitment to manage the property or monitor (through the Land Trust, where applicable) the terms of any conservation easement. This recommendation shall suggest the source or sources of financing, where applicable.

Adopted May 6, 2009

Amended December 2, 2011

Adopted Amended Plan: March 7, 2012

- Appendices: *
- * Map 1: Parcels Greater than 10 Acres with Priority Open Space Characteristics
 - * **[List] Roster of Numbered Properties on Map 1**
[*Protected Lands Map]
 - * Township Trail System Map
 - * London Grove Township Ordinance # **[173-2012] 07-143**, adopting Open Space Earned Income Tax

