

Centre Documenters

Meeting: Open Space Preservation Board
Township: Halfmoon Township
Documenter name: Will Bond and Gabriela Baez
Date: Nov. 8, 2023
Start Time: 6:58 p.m.
End Time: 8:38 p.m.

In attendance: Nine board members, no community members, two documenters

The open space board discussed the lease land rating system and permanent easement rating system

- The board was slated to review the lease land rating system and suggest changes to the board of supervisors annually.
 - Is there a reason to have two rating systems as opposed to merging?
 - Yes. The lease system is a state regulated program for leasing property, the permanent one is used as a tool to factor in partnerships with people that aren't a factor with the lease rating system.
 - The criteria for each is different, so there's a benefit to keeping these rating systems separate even though the content is fairly similar.
 - "Does size matter?" asked Reed Moyer. Is there any objection to using the permanent system size criteria for land on the lease system?
 - Simplify it and if the floodgates open, revise it and come up with a complicated formula.
 - Current formula for allocating points per acre was put in place when larger properties were more valued (about 20 years ago). Now, smaller properties are more common, so the system in place is outdated.
 - There is a standard criterion for what constitutes steep slopes and hydric land (or, wetlands), respectively, which would lose points for a parcel of land.
 - "I don't think we're gonna get them [rating system revisions] in front of the supervisors this year, but we'll get them early next year," said Reed Moyer.
- Language for denying applications
 - Amy explained, if an application comes to the open space board and they want to deny it, they use this denial policy which currently needs revising.
 - Some applicants have expressed confusion around the language used to discuss title insurance policy. Specifically, where does one get this? How much does it cost?
 - A title insurance policy, they explain, ensures applicants that the board's lawyers draft a good lease.

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- Once signed and recorded, the lease is enforced.
 - First Lien Position: In a bankruptcy, the Board's interest takes priority.
 - No changes to language necessary until further discussion.
- Ron Hoover's open land presentation
 - Centre County's Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Program only allows for the purchase of land that's tillable (ie. farmland, not wetland).
 - The program seeks to ensure a stable food supply for generations to come.
 - Lots of land in the county is productive farmland. PACE will help those that are seeking preservation of that land.
 - The program is funded almost entirely from the state as opposed to the county. Centre County pays some of the staff salary, but most comes from Harrisburg.
 - There's a long list of variables, including location, class of soil and land size, that determine whether a property can be entered into PACE.
 - The board will look at properties they're interested in and consider what has production potential and is worth their investment.
- Joanne Fisher presents permanent conservation easement trials and tribulations
 - Fisher continued the board's conversation around conserving land. She presented two years of trials and tribulations around her attempt to preserve her farm and others by applying for federal funds.
 - Federal funding is a bonus but not a requirement. She recommends not applying for federal funds when trying to preserve a farm like hers.
 - This process added a lot of unnecessary overhead, said Fisher, that could've gone through quicker without the extra funding.
 - Joanne Fisher now needs to get an independent appraisal done for the woodland portion of her farmland that she donated. The appraisal they did didn't meet IRS requirements.
 - "Don't do federal funding because you'll need to do what the county wants you to do," explained Joanne Fisher to the board.
- Centre County doesn't pay for wetlands. They can pay for the land around it, but not the undevelopable wetlands themselves.
- "Rights of way are interesting little entities that deserve a great deal of attention," said board member Ron Hoover.

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Summary

- REAP is a tax benefit Pennsylvania provides when someone is looking to approve land for preservation application, which could otherwise cost upwards of \$900.
- Centre County's Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) Program only allows for the purchase of land that's tillable (ie. farmland, not wetland). The program seeks to ensure a stable food supply for generations to come. Lots of land in the county is productive farmland. PACE will help those that are seeking preservation of that land.

Questions

- What effect do points have on a land parcel?
- What benefits would come with receiving federal funds for preserving one's property?

Top Quote

- "In most years, Harrisburg has funding available so that when these partnerships become available, they can [...] get more acres preserved, which is what the program is all about" – Ron Hoover, Halfmoon Township Open Space Preservation board member.

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