

WHITEMARSH TOWNSHIP OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE
OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION 2006-2023
January 24, 2024

After public hearings and input, and favorable comment by the Montgomery County Open Space Committee, the current Whitemarsh Township Open Space Plan was formally adopted by the Board of Supervisors on December 21, 2006. The Plan noted that, unique among inner-ring Philadelphia suburbs, Whitemarsh enjoyed an unusually large amount of undeveloped open space. This consisted of State, County and Township parkland; six golf courses; state owned historical properties; and privately owned farmland and large estates. These open space resources totaled about 4,000 acres, nearly a third of the Township's 15 square miles.

In the introductory section, the Plan stated:

"Looking ahead 20 years, Whitemarsh envisions itself as an oasis of green amid the predominant suburban development of southeastern Montgomery County. The Township will be appreciated for its high quality of life, the result of its large expanse of open space and comprehensive network of trails and greenways connecting the region's parks, recreational facilities, natural areas, and social and cultural resources."

The Goals section provided:

- 1. Preserve 75% of the Townships remaining open space ...***
- 5. Establish a permanent substantial dedicated revenue stream to support the Township's open space vision.***

The Comprehensive Plan Update, approved by the Board of Supervisors in November 2020, reaffirmed the goals and objectives of the 2006 Open Space Plan.

So called "Act 153" originally adopted by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1968, authorizes municipalities to impose special real estate or income taxes to be used solely for acquiring "open space benefits" which includes, among other things, preservation of undeveloped land, provided that the tax is authorized in a referendum approved by the voters. In the November 2006 election, 62% of

those voting approved a ¼ of 1% tax on earned income, and In December 2006 the Board of Supervisors enacted the tax effective January 1, 2007. In 2013 Act 153 was amended to authorize the expenditure of up to 25% of current open space taxes for the maintenance of properties acquired or protected with Act 153 funds. Thereafter the Board of Supervisors has set aside up to 25% of current tax collections for maintenance, although such funds may be used for acquisition of open space benefits at the discretion of the Board.

In the 16-year period between January 1, 2007, and December 31, 2023, over \$33.2 million in Act 153 taxes has been collected by the Township. During this same 16-year period, the Township has spent \$28.7 million to acquire the fee or easements protecting 350 acres in the 15 transactions described in Appendix "A". In addition, the Township's action has leveraged protection of approximately 200 additional acres funded from other sources. Two of these transactions have also supported the preservation of historic Township properties, advancing historic preservation goals set forth in the Updated Comprehensive Plan.

These completed transactions, including those leveraged with Township funding, have protected over 550 acres within the Township, about one sixth of the initial goal set forth in the 2006 Open Space Plan. In addition, about \$350,000 has been spent on the maintenance of preserved properties.

All of this has been accomplished without any impact on the Township's operating budget, and Act 153 is generating nearly \$3 million additional open space funds annually, to be used for future open space purposes.

The most significant open space transactions completed to date, with Township Open Space Funds, are summarized below.

Erdenheim Farm, 2008: Angus Tract, 98 acres, \$2,073,269. 2009: Sheep Tract, 90 acres, \$7,881,365 (plus \$16 million of other public and private funds)

Both Tracts were purchased by the Whitemarsh Foundation, with the Township and other public funders holding conservation easements protecting both tracts from development. The Township contributed less than 40% of the \$26 million purchase price, with the Whitemarsh Foundation raising the balance and transaction fees from other public and private funders.

450-acre Erdenheim Farm is the centerpiece of 2000 acres of nearly contiguous open space from Fairmount Park in Philadelphia to Fort Washington State Park in Whitemarsh. It has been in continuous agricultural use since the days of William Penn. It has been described in the Township's Update Comprehensive Plan as:

“the jewel in the crown of Whitemarsh Township. These 450 acres, with its inspiring vistas and glimpses into life of a working farm, offer residents and passers-through alike a moment of respite and connection to simpler times.”

The Foundation's purchase of the Angus and Sheep Tracts leveraged the protection of all of the remainder of the Farm from all but the most limited development, as required by some of the parties to the complex transactions. The remainder of the Farm was purchased by the McCausland family who continue to operate the property as a working farm.

The 14-acre Dixon Meadow Preserve, a nature preserve and stormwater retention facility constructed by the Foundation on the Angus Tract, is open to the public with parking provided by the Foundation. It features an 800' boardwalk built by the Township and is widely regarded as a birding “hot spot”. Although daily visitation varies depending on the season, weather, and bird sightings, according to the electronic monitoring system installed by the Foundation, an average of 63 people visited the Preserve every day in 2022, for a total of nearly 23,000 visits by Township and area residents.

In addition, the Foundation, with private funding, has restored and repurposed a 19th century farmhouse on the Angus Tract which features educational programs, including those sponsored by the Townships Park and Recreation Department and other local institutions. Furthermore, Montgomery County is planning to construct public trails on the Sheep Tract and other portions of the Farm, to provide critical linkages with the Green Ribbon Trail along the Wissahickon Creek and the in- process Cross County Trail.

Without the critical Township financial support afforded by Act 153, it is probable that the Farm would not have been preserved and likely would have been lost to residential development. Although the purchase price paid for the remainder of the Farm is not a matter of public record, the Committee estimates that the total cost of preserving the Farm was not less than \$50 million, so the Township's \$10

million investment effectively leveraged at least \$40 million of additional funding from other public and private sources.

Wells Street & Cedar Grove, 2011: 23.1 acres, \$1,819,231

The 23.1-acre Wells Street Open Space and Trails property (formerly the Gambone property) was purchased in 2011 for \$1,819,231 as open space for the community, and is currently being used for passive recreation, with trails and meadow areas in the Whitemarsh Township parks system. It is generally located between Cedar Grove Road to the east, Hillcrest Avenue to the west, Butler Pike to the north, and Hector Street to the south. Additionally, Wells Street traverses through the northern portion of the Property; a PECO powerline borders its entire western boundary; the eastern boundary includes three residences and Cedar Grove Road; and the southern property boundary is shared with PQ Chemical Company. The Property is accessible from a parking lot in the adjoining Cedar Grove Park and a pull-off area on Wells Street. Nearby parks include Cedar Grove Park, Kline Park, and Leeland Park, owned by Whitemarsh Township, and Spring Mill Park owned by Montgomery County.

Historically, the property was maintained as an arboretum. By 1958, the property transitioned from the formal arboretum structure to a less manicured state. Roads/ trails through the property increased, and a sewer line was installed running northwest to southeast across the property. In the early 1970's there was a transformation of the property to a more natural state, with areas of woodlands, scrub/shrub, meadows, and lawn, and the construction of Wells Street. Today, the natural resources, water resources, and scenic landscape within the Wells Street Open Space provide excellent opportunities to connect the community to their natural surroundings, with outdoor recreation and meaningful volunteer and educational experiences with the environment.

Joshua Hill, 2016: 12 acres, \$2,009,675

This parcel is near the 50-acre Kline Park dedicated to the Township by National Label, as well as the 7.5 acres of open space being dedicated to the Township as part of The Oaks at Lafayette Hill Townhouse development.

The Highlands, 2021: 28 acres, \$3,010,000

In December 2021, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania transferred title to this 40-acre site, featuring the Georgian mansion outbuildings, garden and grounds constructed by Anthony Morris in 1796, to the Highlands Historical Society. At the same time, the Township purchased a conservation easement on the 28 acres of the undeveloped portion of the Highlands Estate, providing for public access to the entire Estate, and subject to the condition that use of the proceeds be restricted to the maintenance, repair and restoration of the historic mansion, outbuildings, gardens, and grounds. The Township, by use of Act 153 Funds, not only preserved 28 acres of open space, but assured that the proceeds would be used for advancing the Township's historic preservation goals set forth in the Updated Comprehensive Plan, thus doing in effect "double duty." A member of the Township Board of Supervisors serves as a member of the Highlands Historical Society's governing board.

Haub Parcel, 2022: 2.7 acres, \$817,301

The Haub parcel holds a strategic location and a historically interesting past. Along its eastern boundary, it shares approximately 88 linear feet with a 10-acre open space parcel acquired by Whitemarsh Township in 1991. To the south, it is contiguous to a portion of the Abolition Hall/Corson tract (see below). When combined, these three adjacent parcels (two of which were acquired with Act 153 Funds) contain just over 23 acres. Into the middle of the 20th century, the Haub parcel had been owned by the Corson family. The subdivision and conveyance that created this lot was one of several that began as early as the 1830's, when some of the former Samuel Maulsby lands, which reached from Germantown Pike north to Flourtown Road, were subdivided and sold. The blending of the Maulsby and Corson families began with the marriage of Martha Maulsby to George Corson in 1832.

Abolition Hall, Hovenden House, Stone Barn (Corson Tract), 2022: 10.45 acres, \$2,021,522 (plus \$2 million of private funds)

This property is one of the most significant sites in Whitemarsh Township, for its roles in both Abolitionist history and art history in the United States. Abolition Hall, the adjacent Maulsby (Stone) Barn, and the Hovenden House are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as contributing to the significance of the Plymouth Meeting District. Abolition Hall is further celebrated as a noteworthy

site by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which, in 2000, approved the installation of one of its commemorative blue and gold markers. Following the 2012 passing of Nancy Corson, great-granddaughter of Underground Railroad conductor George Corson, Whitemarsh Township amended its Open Space Plan, making acquisition of this homestead a priority. The property contains just over 8 acres of open fields, including delineated wetlands.

In 2022, the Township acquired the property with Open Space funds, in combination with the generosity of Whitemarsh residents and philanthropists Nicholas and Athena Karabots, who contributed a \$2 million gift. Under the terms of the gift agreement, they delivered the gift to the nonprofit Whitemarsh Art Center, which will occupy a portion of the property following its move from another Township-owned building at Cedar Grove Park. The Township and the Whitemarsh Art Center each own a 50 percent interest in the homestead as tenants in common.

The Hovenden House, dating to 1767, with numerous expansions and additions, thereafter, was once known as the Maulsby House for its original owners. During the 1800's this was the home of George and Martha Maulsby Corson, and it functioned as both a welcoming stop on the Underground Railroad for enslaved people, and as a domicile for traveling Abolitionist speakers of the period. Since the 1880s, it has been known as the Hovenden House, so named for the nationally acclaimed artist Thomas Hovenden, who married Helen Corson, daughter of George and Martha Corson.

The Maulsby Barn was constructed by Samuel Maulsby in 1811. It likely played a role in the Underground Railroad as a place where freedom-seeking enslaved persons would be hidden in wagons for their trip north to the next safe house. In the late 1940s the barn was converted to a residence by Livingston Corson (grandson of George and Martha Maulsby Corson) and his wife, Dorris Fowler Corson.

Abolition Hall (originally known as Anti-Slavery Hall) was constructed by George Corson in 1856 by converting a one-story carriage shed into a two-story Abolitionist meeting space that could accommodate up to 200 anti-slavery activists and members of the public. After the Hovenden marriage, the couple,

both artists, converted the hall to a painting studio. It was here that Thomas Hovenden completed *The Last Moments of John Brown*, a large painting depicting the ardent Abolitionist just moments before his death by hanging in a field a few miles west of Harpers Ferry, site of the famous raid. This work is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. Another of Hovenden's well-known paintings completed in the studio, *Breaking Home Ties*, was acclaimed nationally, and is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Until her death in 1941, the Hovendens' daughter, Martha Hovenden, used Abolition Hall as her sculpture studio.

7111 Sheaff Lane 2023: 51 acres \$6,095,000 plus \$7,280,000 of other public and private Funds.

The owner of a 51-acre tract of open space adjacent to the 40-acre Highlands Estate filed an application for a 46-lot residential subdivision. The Highlands Historical Society, after extensive negotiations with the developer, purchased the entire tract in December 2023 for \$13,375,000.

The 51 acres has been subdivided into four separate lots, consisting of three 10+ acre lots totaling 32 acres and one 19-acre lot. The three 10 acre lots have been resold by the Highlands Historical Society to conservation buyers subject to easements held by the Township, limiting development to one residence per lot. The remaining 19-acre lot will be retained by the Highlands and added to its 40-acre estate and is subject to an easement held by the Township preventing any development, and providing for unrestricted public access.

This 19-acre tract is contiguous with both the Highlands estate and Wissahickon Trails' Willow Lake Farm and its extensive trail network. This will create a 170 acre privately owned public park extending from Sheaff Lane to Broad Axe, with ample trailhead parking at the Highlands.

Funding sources included \$6,095,000 of Township open space funds; \$500,000 of County open space funds; \$5,500,000 from the resale of the three 10 acre lots; and the \$1,800,000 proceeds of a broad-based public fundraising program initiated by the Highlands, which also included funds to cover transaction expenses and a small endowment to cover maintenance expenses on the 19-acre lot. Contributions were received from 104 donors, with the largest being \$500,000 and the smallest \$25. This broad-based public support evidence the

importance which residents attach to protecting open space and open space amenities, including public trails.

Conclusion

With Act 153 revenues now approaching \$3 million annually, the Township has the financial capacity to accelerate the acquisition, protection and maintenance of open space and open space amenities. This will enable the Township to build upon the significant progress accomplished in the 16 years since the Open Space Plan was adopted. Not only will Act 153 provide cash flow to fund open space and open space benefits, but to provide debt service for borrowings when need or opportunity arises.

The Open Space Committee appreciates and thanks the Board of Supervisors for its vision and leadership in preserving and protecting open space and encourages the Board to accelerate use of the significant financial resources provided by Act 153 to continue to implement the Open Space and Updated Comprehensive Plans.

APPENDIX "A"

OPEN SPACE FUND REAL ESTATE PURCHASE

2006 - 2023

\$28,728,386

(SINCE INCEPTION)

2389 & 2391 HARTS LANE (2006),

\$759,766

ANGUS TRACT (2008), \$2,073,269

32.36 ACRES MANOR RD (EAST 33)

(2008), \$42,879

7111 SHEEP LANE (2023), \$6,095,000

HAUB PROPERTY (2022), \$817,301

ABOLITION HALL (2022), \$2,021,522

THE HIGHLANDS (2021), \$3,010,000

JOSHUA HILL (2016), \$2,009,675

607 STENTON & 6005 W. VALLEY GREEN

(2014), \$769,016

7008 MATHERS LANE (2013), \$393,724

4130 CHRISTIE CIRCLE (2013), \$452,190

WELLS & CEDAR GROVE (2011),

\$1,819,231

7004 MATHERS LANE (2012), \$353,661

4130 BUTLER PIKE (2012), \$229,714

SHEEP TRACT (2009), \$7,881,365

