

Vote to save land, protect water

COMMENTARY

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New Jersey's voters will have the opportunity on Nov. 3 to vote for clean water, Green Acres, and working farmland, things we cannot afford to lose if we're to make New Jersey more prosperous today and a better place for our children and grandchildren.

Public Question 1 will be the only statewide referendum on the ballot this year.

If the majority of us vote "Yes," we'll be able to continue investing in the things we need: open spaces that refresh our water supplies, particularly in the Highlands which supplies some or all the water 5.4 million New Jersey residents depend upon.

We will limit sprawl, create parks that enhance our neighborhoods' value, and stimulate inner-city revitalization.

We will preserve working farms, like those in the Highlands that give us fresh food and the opportunities to go pick apples and pumpkins with our families, and connect with our land year-round.

By voting "Yes" for this \$400 million investment in our state, citizens will be stating a long-held truth: wise investments pay. With approval of this bond act, we'll be investing in our home state and in our families' futures, at a cost of just \$10 annually per household. A recent study by the NJ Keep It Green coalition, of which the New Jersey Highlands Coalition is a member, demonstrated a 10-to-1 return on the preservation investment we make.

Necessities like clean water may not cheap, but they're a lot cheaper when we preserve our water at its Highlands source, rather than let its forests be clear-cut; they are a lot cheaper when we don't let runoff from over-development force us to spend billions more on water treatment facilities.

In recent years, 50 acres per day have been developed in New Jersey, making it crucial that we also keep preserving the land and clean water needed by our population of nearly 9 million.

Everyone benefits when we preserve the fragile land necessary to our water supply, and these investments also support New Jersey's large tourism industry, natural beauty, and remarkable range of wildlife. This statement is particularly true in the Highlands, source of so much of our drinking water, where eco-tourism is fast becoming a major contributor to its economy thanks to its marvelous park system, abundant wildlife, extraordinary beauty, unmatched revolutionary history, and unparalleled hiking trail system.

By voting "Yes" on Public Question 1, we'll also be helping our working farms so that we can all enjoy the benefits: open spaces, fresh and local food, and economic vitality. Few people realize that we gain significant tax benefits from our farms -- they pay taxes but require much less in costly municipal services.

Beyond these reasons for continuing preservation in New Jersey, we must all answer this question: What kind of legacy do we want to leave for our children and grandchildren? We must continue investing in preservation to create the kind of place where we envision our families thriving for years to come.

And finally, Highlands farmers and landowners still need the opportunity to choose to sell their land to the state.

Our state programs allow us to support the food-producing, agricultural industry of the region and preserve its critical water-producing, forested lands.

Now the timing is right. Thanks to the economy, across the country, land has become temporarily more affordable, and our dollars will go further toward securing a better future for our state.

If we don't approve Public Question 1, we'll be denying the much-needed state matching funds to the hundreds of NJ towns, cities and non-profit organizations trying to preserve open spaces, revitalize areas in need, and help their communities prosper.

Full, public disclosure of all preservation investments made by the state are easily available on the websites of NJ Green Acres, the NJ Farmland Preservation Program, and the NJ Historic Trust.

A brief look at their lists is an instant reminder that many of the places we love most in New Jersey are a result of the preservation investments made in past years.

By voting "Yes" to Public Question 1 on Nov. 3rd, we won't be denying our children those same benefits we enjoy today.

The writer is the executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. Somers, the former executive director of the Great Swamp Watershed Association, leads the coalition's work to ensure effective implementation of the state's Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.