



## Morris County touts \$10M tax cut from open space land funds

By Ben Horowitz/The Star-Ledger

April 29, 2010, 6:04PM



Christopher Barth/For The

Star-Ledger Members of Conservation Resources at the wetlands area that is part of the McVickers Brook Preserve in Mendham in this October 2008 photo. Morris County taxes are expected to decrease by \$10 million after the open space fund was cut for the second year in a row.

**MORRIS COUNTY** -- Morris County officials are touting that they will collect \$10 million less to purchase open space to prevent county taxes from increasing for 2010.

But the cut has angered spokesmen for three environmental groups, who say the freeholders are making a huge blunder by not taking advantage of low land prices and preserving as much open space as possible.

The county's operating budget for 2010, adopted earlier this month, sets total general appropriations at just over \$308.1 million, including \$209.9 million to be raised in county taxes. That compares with a budget of \$299.7 million with \$201.4 million raised in county taxes for 2009, a tax increase of \$8.6 million, or 4.28 percent.

With the open space levy falling from \$30 million to \$20 million, the county's total tax levy is expected to drop by about \$1.4 million.

County Treasurer Glen Roe said county taxpayers will pay an average of \$22.50 per \$100 valuation in 2010 — the same as in 2009 — for the operating budget and open space tax combined. That includes a drop from 3 cents to 2 cents per \$100 for open space and a 1-cent increase for the general budget.

Despite the drop in the tax levy, the tax rate isn't expected to drop because of "declining real estate values," Roe explained.

Freeholder James Murray praised the open space tax cut as a win-win situation for the county. "We're still meeting the need for open space because land values are down a bit," Murray pointed out.

The New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, the New Jersey Highlands Coalition and the Montville-based Land Conservancy of New Jersey said dropping real estate values are precisely the reason why Morris County should increase, and not decrease, its open space funding.

**Elliott Ruga, program coordinator for the Highlands Coalition, pointed out that New Jersey voters have supported all 12 public questions for preservation funding that have been on the ballot from 1961 through 2007.**

**"There's no question that taxes are high, but some issues are more important to the citizens of New Jersey than others," Ruga said. "We're approaching total build-out."**

Freeholder Jack Schrier, who is also acting chairman of the Highlands Council, initially favored a smaller reduction in the open space tax — a half-cent rather than 1 cent. But he wound up voting for the 1-cent cut because there was little support for his position and he agreed on the need to cut taxes.

Also, Schrier said, applications for open space preservation have decreased. Last year, there were just 14 applications for open space preservation, and the county was able to fund all of them, Schrier said.

The budget also includes, once again, a \$20 million surplus. Roe, the treasurer, said the surplus is needed "to give us flexibility to address cash flow needs" and to help towns and school districts borrow money at low interest rates.

Roe pointed out that the budget reflects a cut of 53 employees through attrition. Still, the budget includes an increase to \$104.3 million, or 1.64 percent, for employee salaries. Roe said that includes raises ranging from 3 to 4 percent for county employees represented by 22 union contracts.

Another area of increase in the budget is for employees' group insurance, which will cost the country \$33.1 million this year, an increase of 13.5 percent.

On the revenue side, the county clerk is expected to receive \$7.3 million this year, a drop of \$1.7 million, or 18.6 percent. Roe attributes this drop to the "downturn in the real estate market," as the county is receiving less money in fees for property sales and refinances.

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