

Opportunities for Municipal Open Space Preservation Programs

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Open Space Preservation Overview

Nearly all of York County's 72 municipalities have a Comprehensive Plan, and many of these plans emphasize the importance of natural lands, agricultural lands, and outdoor recreation opportunities for their communities. Yet today, only 15% of York County is protected open space. Preserved open space helps protect drinking water supplies, minimize flood damage, provide recreation and aesthetic values, conserve wildlife habitat, and grow our outdoor recreation and agricultural economies. Open space preservation is primarily achieved through two primary mechanisms. A "fee simple" acquisition preserves the property outright, usually transferring its ownership to a county or state park agency or a land trust or conservancy for use as a public preserve. A conservation easement permanently protects land from development, but keeps the land privately owned/operated and on the tax rolls. Both mechanisms are used within York County by a range of government and nonprofit partners.

County-Level Program

The [York County Open Space and Land Preservation Program](#) has been active since 2020, a result of the County Commissioners' decision to use a 1/10 mil increase in property taxes to invest in the scenic beauty, recreational opportunities, and agricultural heritage of our County, helping to sustain our quality of life. The Program Partners received dedicated funding toward their work to protect natural and agricultural land. Funds are also designated to support the York County Open Space and Land Preservation Grant Program which provides funds to nonprofits and municipalities. The impacts of this county-based open space funding have been pronounced. In the six years since the Program's inception, 18,819 acres have been preserved in York County. In the preceding six years, there were 8,155 acres preserved. This represents a 130% increase in land preservation success because of the availability of the funding.

State-Level Funding

Much of the land conservation across the Commonwealth is supported by the state's Community Conservation Partnerships Program (C2P2), which requires a 50% match from nonprofit or community partners. Over the past four grant rounds (2023-2026), local governments received an average of \$3.1 million, state-wide, for land conservation. This large state investment flows most readily to communities positioned to meet that 50% match requirement. In the Philadelphia ring counties, that commonly comes in the form of joint match between county funds and municipal funds. York County, with its already successful county-level fund, is poised to do the same and better capitalize on state- and county-level investments.

State C2P2 funds are primarily used for “fee simple” land acquisitions, as opposed to conservation easements, for purposes such as township parks, county parks, and conservancy preserves.

Municipal Open Space Programs

The Open Space Lands Act provides an opportunity for municipalities to establish analogous dedicated open space preservation funds through voter referendum. A 2023 report by WeConservePA analyzed local municipal open space referendums from 1996 through 2023. The report demonstrates that municipal open space referendums are exceedingly popular, when attempted. Of the 157 referendums offered to voters from 1996-2023, 80% of them passed. The average vote across all 157 referendums was 62% in favor and 38% opposed. Despite these referendums having raised nearly \$900 million for open space preservation, they are exceedingly rare in southcentral Pennsylvania. In fact, just four municipalities west of the Susquehanna River have enacted open space referendums (Silver Spring Township in Cumberland County being the nearest). Dedicated municipal open space funds are far more prevalent in the Philadelphia ring counties, where government leaders and residents, alike, were seeing rapid buildout of their agricultural and natural lands – and took action to stem the pace of development and protect quality of life.

Working to establish a municipal open space preservation program usually involves the following steps:

- Analysis of tax records and financing options to decide what type of tax change could be proposed to support the program.
- Public opinion polls, surveys, public meetings, and other outreach to explore support for the idea from residents.
- Careful design and planning for placing the measure on the ballot.
- Landscape analysis to examine the on-the-ground opportunities where local funding could make a difference.
- Program design and establishment to ensure procedures and systems are in place to manage the new funding source effectively.

A municipal open space tax may be placed on earned income or real property. The municipality may use funds from such open space taxes in a variety of ways to support its own open space and recreation priorities:

- full or partial purchase price to acquire conservation easements or property for open space benefits;
- pay back funds borrowed for open space protection;
- cover various expenses incurred in the process of preserving land, such as appraisals, legal services, and title searches;
- prepare resource management, recreation, or land use plans for preserved open space;
- improve and maintain properties acquired for open space benefits.

Opportunity for Action

With the pressures of housing developments, warehouses, and now data centers on York County lands – and the resulting attitudes of many residents – the time could be right to consider an open space referendum in your municipality. WeConservePA recently released a draft [Open Space Program Handbook: Considerations, Practices, and Pointers for Pennsylvania Local Government](#), and they are planning a Municipal Open Space Summit for fall 2026. Business allies, funders, and nonprofit partners, such as the Farm and Natural Lands Trust of York County, stand ready to assist municipal leaders in evaluating and planning open space preservation initiatives. Dedicated municipal open space funds can be a valuable tool for seeing your community's plans come to fruition.

Grow Conservation LLC is a conservation consultancy based in York County and serving nonprofit and public sector clients throughout the Commonwealth. Ryan serves on the Land Protection Committee of the Farm and Natural Lands Trust of York County, the Board of the Cumberland Conservation Collaborative, and the Policy Committee of WeConservePA.