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2006

Recommended Updates
And Guidelines for
The 1991 Parks, Recreation and
Open Space Plan
Radnor Township



2006
Recommended Updates and Guidelines
**Parks, Recreation and
Open Space Plan**

Radnor Township
Delaware County, Pennsylvania

Prepared for:

Radnor Township Board of Commissioners

Prepared by:

Radnor Conservancy

Radnor League of Women Voters

Open Space Citizens' Advisory Committee:

- *Gayla McCluskey, Radnor LWV and Chair of EAC*
- *Phil Wallis, Radnor Conservancy, Keystone Conservation Trust*
- *Ginny Kreidler, Radnor Conservancy and Radnor LWV*
- *Elaine Schaefer, Radnor Conservancy and Radnor LWV*
- *Cheryl Tumola, Radnor LWV, Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee*
- *Dottie Ives Dewey, Planning Commission and Radnor Open Space Committee, Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee*
- *Steve Paolantonio, Radnor Conservancy and Radnor Open Space Committee*
- *Kathy Bogosian, Radnor Conservancy and Zoning Board*
- *Al Murphy, Chair of Planning Commission*
- *Bob Higgins, Chair of Parks & Recreation*
- *Katrina Ogilby, Radnor LWV and Radnor Parks and Recreation*
- *Dave Bashore, Radnor Township Manager*
- *John Fischer, Radnor Conservancy, Open Space Comm. and Comprehensive Plan Committee*
- *John McMeekin, Radnor Township School Board*
- *Nelson Dayton, Wayne Business Association*
- *Bob Pucci, Main Line Chamber of Commerce*
- *Ryan Richards, The Suburban and Wayne Times*
- *John Galloway, Wayne Presbyterian Church*
- *Jim Riley, Long-time Radnor resident and community activist*
- *George Aman, past Commissioner and municipal law attorney*

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I. Introduction and Statement of Purpose

Background

This document, developed by the Radnor League of Women Voters and the Radnor Conservancy, was prepared as a suggested update to the Township's Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan. The last open space plan, prepared in 1991, set forth a set of programmatic objectives, defined criteria for open space acquisition, and identified top parcels to be considered as sites for future public parks and open spaces.

Since the time that the 1991 plan was prepared, a number of pertinent changes have altered the Radnor landscape, literally and figuratively. These changes included the establishment of a Radnor Open Space Fund and the Township's acquisition of several properties using the proceeds of this fund. Other lands which were still open fifteen years ago are now fully developed under current zoning. Other key changes during this period have included important policy developments, updated municipal plans and ordinance changes, land use changes, and ongoing public input on open space and subdivision issues.

In view of these many and significant changes, it seemed timely to revisit the Township's Open Space Plan, updating Radnor's open space mission and priorities, and providing a contemporary framework to guide future decision making on open space protection. This document provides the results of the thoughtful input of members of the Radnor League, Radnor Conservancy, members of several Boards and Committees within our municipal government, and the Open Space Citizens' Advisory Committee.

Changes in Radnor Open Space and Parks

Since the 1991 plan was written, Radnor Township passed its first open space bond, allocating ten million dollars for acquiring open land and making improvements to our township parks facilities. From this bond and supplemental funding provided through the real estate transfer tax, the Township has purchased 51.4 acres of land. This includes two sites used to create three athletic fields and two walking circuits, two pocket parks (one with a playground), expansion of an existing sports site, and several sites for passive uses such as habitat protection, visual buffers to the multipurpose trail, etc. During that same period other amenities were created supplementing the accomplishments of the Open Space Fund. The wildly popular multipurpose trail was opened, and a skate park created. Most recently, one of the District's athletic fields was converted to artificial turf allowing for increased athletic usage.

Elsewhere throughout the township, open space has diminished. Despite the township's efforts, 28 acres of land were developed for every acre protected through the open space program. Overall, the rate of development has exceeded 1200 acres per decade. The

increasing density has substantially altered the look and feel of the township, driven up land values, and placed increased development pressure on the remaining open lands.

For Radnor, this fifteen year period was one of solid improvements in active recreational amenities and more moderate accomplishments with respect to protecting passive open space for its habitat, watershed and scenic values.

Changes in Public Priorities and Governmental Policies

In the fifteen years since the last plan was written, a number of priorities have risen to increased prominence. Among these are an increased level of focus on creating trails and recreational corridors for public use, a growing necessity for open space protection efforts to be led from the local level, increased recognition of public support for the protection of passive open lands and habitat areas, and a recognition of the value of reserved lands in addressing stormwater management problems and meeting new mandates. Looking to the future, it will be important that Radnor's open space planning reflect these newer circumstances and objectives, adapting our municipal open space strategy to the evolving physical and political context which shapes our Township.

At the Township level, the updated Comprehensive Land Use Plan articulates the broadest and most thorough consideration of open space and recreational priorities for Radnor. In addition to recommending an update of the 1991 Open Space Plan, the Comp Plan also recommends developing proactive and strategic approaches for acquiring priority open space parcels, developing plans for a Township-wide network of trails, and creating greenway linkages which can also address stormwater management problems by protecting riparian corridors.

County, state and regional efforts are also placing increased emphasis on land protection, creating greenways, and integrating sound land use practices. Watershed protection and greenway creation are receiving high levels of attention from officials at the state and county levels. Recent developments have created new funding and conservation opportunities in sections of the Township within the Darby Creek watershed.

Public opinion also suggests growing support for policies to preserve open lands. Focus groups and public input at Board meetings repeatedly demonstrate the degree of concern of Radnor residents over the consequences of growth. Residents are seeking better solutions to the problems of increased traffic, congestion, rising school enrollments, stormwater run-off, dwindling open spaces, and the loss of community character. Survey results have demonstrated that Radnor residents desire an open space program focused on acquiring land for undeveloped conservation and green space areas.

In sum, since the time that the last Open Space Plan was prepared, there are many factors pointing toward a need to re-examine the guidelines for open space protection in Radnor Township. Toward that end, this document puts forth a set of suggested priorities and criteria for open space protection efforts in the years to come.

II. Background

Parks, recreation and open space are prominent priorities for the residents of Radnor Township. As stated in the Township's 2003 Comprehensive Land Use Plan, Radnor's outstanding park system and many recreation programs evidence the importance Radnor residents place on open space and recreation. In addition, Radnor has long recognized the value in acquiring passive, undeveloped land that preserves green space and has ecological benefits for the Township's ecosystems.

In 1991 the Township commissioned a study and subsequently approved a Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan. This Plan set forth goals and objectives for the creation and improvement of both Radnor's active recreation facilities as well as the acquisition and preservation of open space. Although Radnor has since updated its Comprehensive Plan, it has yet to update the Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan.

In 1994, Radnor voters approved a bond referendum that authorized the issuance of up to 10 million dollars in bonds for land acquisition and parks improvements. In addition, in 1995 Radnor earmarked an increase in the real estate transfer tax of 0.25% for park improvements and open space purchases. Of the total revenues of over \$18 million dollars raised from these two sources since 1995, approximately \$3 million remains in Radnor's Park Improvement and Open Space Fund.

In 2001, the Parks and Recreation Department sent out a township-wide survey on recreational services and facilities provided by the Township. Seven Hundred surveys were mailed randomly to Township residences – 100 in each of the Township's seven wards. One hundred and sixty two completed surveys were returned. When asked which of the following actions they considered the most important, respondents replied as follows:

- 38%: Acquiring new land for undeveloped conservation and green space areas
- 14%: Acquiring new land for passive park activities
- 14%: Constructing a multi-purpose indoor recreation center
- 10.5%: Developing new facilities on existing park land
- 9.8%: Maintaining existing facilities with no growth
- 7.4%: Improvement and replacement of existing facilities in parks
- 5.5%: Acquiring new land for active park development

Additionally, 86% of the respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Would you support the Township to develop bicycle/walking trails in the community?" According to this survey, it is clear that the priority for future open space planning for a majority of our residents is acquisition of open, undeveloped land to be considered as green space and passive parkland.

In late 2005, the Radnor League of Women Voters hosted a community forum to determine the level of Radnor residents' continuing desire to preserve and protect open space in Radnor, and whether they supported issuing another open space bond to that end. The consensus of this forum's participants was support for continuing to pursue the goal of open space preservation, but several residents voiced concern about issuing another open space bond without first having some structure in the manner in which the funding is spent. As a result, it was decided to revisit the Township's 1991 Open Space Plan, a move that was recommended in the 2003 Comprehensive Plan.

Accordingly, a broad-based community group consisting of members of the Radnor Conservancy, the Radnor League of Women Voters, and the Open Space Citizens' Advisory Committee have compiled these recommendations and suggested guidelines for future open space planning. It is our hope that the Board of Commissioners will adopt these recommendations and guidelines and enable our community to move forward in preserving what quickly diminishing open space we have left in Radnor.

III. Inventory and Analysis

The 1991 Open Space Plan stated that land acquisition would be a critical issue over the next decade as the then current economic slump ends and the pressure for growth reasserts itself. We have seen this prediction come true with a major acceleration of land value in recent years. The economic pressures are evident as the rate of subdivision throughout the Township has exploded.

In addition, much of the perceived open space in the township is under institutional ownership. The addition of dormitories and classrooms at the universities will continue to eat away at the view sheds that residents take for granted. The possibility of selling off highly valued real estate, which is currently occurring at American College, could result in the additional loss of open space.

The following section provides a brief summary of both open space and the natural features in our Township as of 2005. This information was derived from research conducted for the 2003 Radnor Township Comprehensive Plan as well as current research on open space acquisitions and conservation easements procured since the publication of that Plan.

Public Open Space

Radnor Township owns and maintains 24 parks with a total acreage of 352.5 acres. The Radnor Township School District owns and maintains six properties (five schools and one passive open space) that cover 184.4 acres. The combined acreage of Township and School District lands is 536.9 acres, or approximately 6.6% of the Township.

During the last fifteen years, since the last open space plan was produced, the acreage in public parks and municipal open space has increased by 51.44 acres. The bonds that were issued in 1996 and 2002 were used to purchase the following thirteen properties, three of which have been transformed into parks.

- Forbes Tract (now Dittmar Park)
- Levin Tract
- Huggler Tract (now St. Davids Community Park)
- 107 Petrie Avenue (now Petrie Park)
- Chew Tract
- Young Tract
- Leaming-Talucci Tract
- Myers Tract
- D'Antonio Tract

- Walker Tract
- Goff Tract
- 112 Woodland Avenue
- 304 Liberty Lane

The Radnor Multi-Use Trail was opened in May 2005 and has become a heavily used recreational facility. It is a 2.2 mile long, publicly accessible off-road trail that connects two existing Township-owned parks, the Levin Tract and Encke Park, and is adjacent to the D'Antonio tract. This trail has had a significant impact on the notion of parks and open space use in Radnor. In addition, the Township has a very active trails committee that continues to work on developing a series of connected walking paths throughout the Township.

Private Open Space

Privately protected lands can be defined as lands that are currently in open space or conservation use and will continue to be used in this manner for the foreseeable future. However, these lands for the most part do not have permanent open space easements nor is there a definite commitment to keep these lands in open space. These lands, taken as a whole, comprise a significant portion of Township lands (slightly over 1000 acres, or 12.6% of the Township). Many of these lands are in high visibility locations and positively contribute to the special visual character of Radnor Township.

These lands include the following sites:

- Villanova University
- Cabrini College
- Valley Forge Military Academy and College
- Eastern University
- Archbishop Carroll High School
- Notre Dame Academy
- Radnor Valley Country Club
- Overbrook Golf Club
- Chanticleer Gardens
- St. Edmunds Home
- Presbyterian Children's Village
- American College

In addition to institutional land, there are many privately held residential parcels – over 100 – that are currently at risk of further subdivision and development. The five largest privately held parcels alone represent over 400 acres of land that is currently open, but could be subdivided and developed. Some privately held land that is currently open is indeed protected from further development, as there are 21 conservation easements in place in Radnor, protecting over 300 acres of private open space.

In all, over 1200 acres of open space privately owned, by individuals and/or institutions, is currently at risk of further subdivision and development.

The map that is included as an Attachment to these Guidelines shows the current status of open space in Radnor. Publicly held parcels are highlighted in green, privately held parcels that are permanently protected by easement are highlighted in yellow with red striping, and all land that is currently open, but privately held and subject to further subdivision and development, is highlighted in yellow.

Because the Township has limited open space available, the remaining natural resources are threatened by encroaching development and redevelopment situations. For this reason, the Comprehensive Plan includes the goal of protecting the Township's vital environmental values, including water resources, wetlands, floodplains and riparian areas, balancing the needs of development with environmental values. The objectives include directing development to areas of minimum environmental sensitivity, prohibiting development in sensitive areas such as steep slopes and riparian areas, preserving the natural remaining woodlands, and preserving remaining open space through direct acquisition as well as by means of less direct regulatory programs (e.g. ordinances).

IV. Recommendations for Acquisition and Preservation

In this section, recommendations for guidelines governing the future acquisition and preservation of land in Radnor are set forth. First, a set of criteria that would be applied to all land acquisition decisions is presented. Secondly, recommendations as to specific parcels to target are made. Finally, guidelines for the method and the mechanics of purchase are offered.

Recommended Criteria for Acquisition or Other Preservation Methods:

In general, site selection for land acquisition for preservation (i.e. land that would not be developed) should be judged on a site by site basis. Due to the fluidity of the real estate market, it is impossible to foresee which parcels may become available for protection, and open space spending guidelines should contain the flexibility to respond to an unpredictable market and changing conditions. Conversely, Radnor Township can, and should, proactively target priority parcels for protection, should they become available. For both of these approaches, involving both reactive and proactive decision-making, the application of a predetermined set of criteria is critical.

Set forth below are such criteria recommended for future open space site selection. In terms of priority, parcels that meet several of these criteria should be acquired over parcels that only meet one or two criteria.

Recommended Criteria for Selection of Open Space:

Criteria based on character of the land:

- Parcels that would create linkages to already existing on-road and off-road trail and greenway systems for pedestrians and bicyclists, such as the Radnor Multi-Use Trail and the Skunk Hollow and Willows Trail systems
- Critical environmental areas including stream corridors, steep slopes, wetlands and floodplains
- Parcels adjacent or contiguous to parks, schools, or public lands
- Parcels adjacent or contiguous to privately held land that is protected by conservation easements
- Woodlands
- Farmland, pastures and meadows
- Parcels with agricultural heritage

- Lands with significant visual character, including, but not limited to, lands with historic features
- Parcels that are located in the view shed of our Township's Scenic Roadways, as designated in both the 1988 and the 2003 Comprehensive Plan
- Level of threat of immediate development of parcel, and type of threatened development
- Cost of the parcel
- Opportunities for restoring degraded habitat or re-establishing green space amenities in developed areas
- Equity of open space preservation in all areas of the township

Specific Acquisition Targets

Given the great quantity of privately held open space (over 1200 acres – amount equivalent to the acreage that has been developed in the last decade) that could conceivably come on the market for development in the future, we feel it would be inadvisable to single out and specify particular parcels in these guidelines. Instead, each parcel should be carefully evaluated in terms of the criteria listed above as it comes into play -- either when it goes on the market or becomes a target through proactive landowner outreach. This approach allows for the requisite flexibility in a fluid market. It should be noted that in order for this approach to be successful, it is imperative that the decision-makers remain steadfast in the application of the criteria.

The Ardrossan Exception

However, there is one significant property in Radnor that is immediately at risk of further subdivision and development, the protection and preservation of which is a high priority for Radnor residents. The Montgomery-Scott-Wheeler family's Ardrossan Farm consists of approximately 320 mostly open acres located on Darby-Paoli Road and Newtown Road.

On the basis of its size alone, it is clear that Ardrossan is a rare property in the suburban Philadelphia region. As the largest remaining estate on the Main Line, perhaps the largest remaining private property in all of Delaware County and certainly the largest remaining property in Radnor Township, there is no comparable sweep of open space in the Township. The land's adjacency to three of Radnor's municipal parks makes it a key priority for protection at the local level.

Culturally, Ardrossan's importance to the community is linked to both the history of the estate manor and to the continuous farming use of the land. The last working farm in our area, the pastures here provide the only operating example of cattle and crop farming for miles around. The western side of this property includes the oldest standing schoolhouse in the Township as well as the oldest standing home, pre-dating the Revolution. The cherished estate house is an architectural and historic asset of great value, designed by

locally renowned architect Horace Trumbauer. The entire property is eligible for listing on the National Register, was the iconic inspiration for *The Philadelphia Story*, and provides a last witness to the former agricultural heritage of this area.

Radnor Township has long been interested in the permanent protection of this land to augment the existing parkland system of Saw Mill Park, Skunk Hollow and the Willows. Should this land, or a portion thereof, be acquired, it would be suitable for the following uses:

- Walking and/or biking trails
- Picnic groves
- Community Supported Agriculture
- Bridle trails
- Dog walking
- Protected scenic viewshed
- Fishing access
- Community Gardens
- Birdwatching
- Restoration of wildlife habitat and riparian cover

It is our recommendation that this one parcel be designated as the top priority for acquisition and preservation.

Large Parcels

Although we are not recommending that the Township assemble a list of targeted properties for preservation, as explained above, we do recommend that a majority of future open space funding be earmarked for parcels of significant size. This recommendation directly addresses the prevalent concern among our residents that they want to be assured that future open space funding they approve will go toward a substantial property.

Hence, we recommend that a minimum of 75% of any open space funding raised in the immediate future – through an open space bond or otherwise – be specifically earmarked for parcels over 10 acres, should any of these parcels come on the market and an agreement be reached with the owners.

Methods of Funding and Mechanics of Acquisition

Methods of Funding

A variety of methods exists for the Township to raise additional funding for open space acquisition. Radnor's Open Space and Park Improvement Fund has been funded by (1) a \$10 million open space bond authorized by voter referendum in 1994, and (2) an increase of the Realty Transfer Tax on all property sold in Radnor Township by .25%.

Funds collected from those two sources since 1995 have totaled over \$18 million and allowed for the purchase of 13 properties, preserving over 51 acres, and the construction of three new parks.

Approximately \$3.3 million remain in that Fund today. With land values in the Township exceeding half a million dollars per acre, in fact, in some cases approaching one million dollars an acre, the challenges of stretching the remaining fund to meet future demands is daunting. The problem posed by today's limited resources is plain should Ardrossan or any other significant parcels become available for purchase or protection.

There are several options available to municipalities for open space protection efforts. Funding tools that Radnor might consider using to replenish the Open Space Fund include:

- *Issuing another open space bond authorized by voter referendum.* This option would allow the community to raise a substantial amount of money, providing the flexibility needed up front to fund a large-scale open space project, such as the purchase of a large parcel of land. Of course issuing debt would involve incurring financing charges and long term debt service, but like many other communities, Radnor has dealt with this by paying all debt service for our open space bond from the revenues raised by the Real Estate Transfer Tax. Moreover, debt authorized by voters would not count towards the Township's legal debt limit, leaving open the Township's ability to issue bonds to fund other necessary capital improvements.
- *Raising the Real Estate Transfer Tax:* As Radnor has done in the past, a community can raise the real estate transfer tax levied on all real estate sales, and then earmark that increase in revenue for open space preservation. State law generally limits this transfer tax, and there is some question as to whether Radnor can raise its Transfer Tax any higher than it currently is.
- *Earned Income Tax:* Many communities use an earned income tax to raise revenue for open space protection. Historically, this has not been a well received option in Radnor Township. We understand the Township and School District last visited this issue in the early 1990s.
- *TIF Financing:* Tax increment Financing (TIF) is an economic development tool whereby all or a portion of the new taxes generated by a development over a limited term can be used to pay for costs related to that development or for the costs of protecting associated open lands.
- *Applying for Grants:* Many townships have leveraged local dollars by applying for grants such as those available through Pennsylvania's Growing Greener II initiative.

Once funding is procured for open space protection, Radnor has many options in structuring the acquisition of parcels. The most common method used in Radnor to date has been the outright, fee simple purchase of property for protection. However, another useful and cost-effective method for the protection of open space is becoming more prevalent – the placement of a conservation easement on the property. This method involves the purchase (or, in certain cases, the donation) of development rights only, leaving ownership with the private landowner, simply without the right to develop the land further. This tool is especially useful in protecting parcels whose primary benefit to the public are its viewsheds and/or natural features, which do not require public access for the public to receive benefit from the purchase.

Mechanics of Site Selection

All decisions as to which parcels should be purchased and preserved in Radnor are made by the Radnor Township Board of Commissioners, a board of seven elected officials, each representing one of the seven wards of Radnor. The Township's Open Space Committee, an advisory committee to the Commissioners, reports on and makes recommendations regarding potential acquisitions and other preservation options. The Open Space Committee is comprised of three Commissioners, and one representative apiece from the Planning Commission, the Radnor Conservancy, the Parks and Recreation Board, the Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee, and the Environmental Advisory Committee.

The Open Space Committee has, in recent years, met on an adhoc basis whenever specific parcels have become available for sale. It is our recommendation that the Open Space Committee should continue to promote the preservation of open space, and, working with the Radnor Conservancy, actively target and seek parcels that meet the criteria for preservation listed above.

V. Summary

We are presently at a crossroads in open space protection in our community, faced with dwindling open space, skyrocketing land values and increased development. Historically, Radnor has taken a proactive and bold approach to open space protection, and Radnor residents have recognized the value of protecting our green spaces and been willing to pay for it. Our community has recognized that protecting open space eliminates the costs of sprawl, including increased government services such as schooling, trash removal, sewers, policing, and fire protection. Further, residents have demonstrated their desire for an open space program focused on protecting our natural resources and our community character, for the benefit of those of us living here today and for future residents of the Township.

These guidelines and recommendations have been assembled to assure that these long standing values and goals are incorporated in future open space spending decision-making. It is our hope that the Board of Commissioners will adopt these recommendations and guidelines and enable our community to move forward in preserving what quickly diminishing open space we have left in Radnor.