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Congress can help Bucks save our special places

By Jeffrey Marshall

When Bucks County was founded in 1682, William Penn noted “the woods yield us plums, grapes, peaches, strawberries and chestnuts in abundance.” The county was named after Buckinghamshire, the Penn family home in England, and by 1790 it had 25,401 residents.

The county has seen dramatic changes since those days, and today Bucks County’s population exceeds 600,000 residents, making it one of the top 100 counties in the country in population. Much of the county’s original woodlands and marshes have been paved or developed to make way for cities, highways and structures. But many important parcels of land, used for hiking, farming, watersheds or just wide open spaces, have been saved through what are known as conservation easements.

Conservation easements have been called the “new face” of conservation, since they offer landowners a limited tax benefit in exchange for donating the development rights to their properties. In 2006, Congress gave conservation easements a needed boost in the form of enhancing the tax credit, a move that saw a 35 percent increase in donations, to nearly 1 million acres a year nationally. Unfortunately, that law expired last year.

Land trust easements have attracted supporters from all sides of the political spectrum because they are a winning deal for conservationists, farmers and average citizens concerned about saving open spaces. Lands donated into conservation easements can be worked in farming or ranching and will continue to contribute to the county’s tax base. They can be passed on to heirs or sold. But they can’t be developed, thus ensuring a legacy for future generations.

Unlike national parks, land trusts are managed by private organizations, often staffed by volunteers, who monitor the easements to ensure that they remain as intended. Land trust easements save land at a very affordable rate, with the cost of federal land purchases for national parks or forests averaging around \$12,000 per acre versus \$400 for enrolling it into an easement.

In Pennsylvania, we have 103 land trusts monitoring more than half-a-million acres across the state. Here in Bucks County, a number of these easements have been in the Cooks Creek Watershed. This watershed is approximately 20,000 acres and over 5,400 acres that includes an exceptional-value stream, woodland and farmland that is still in use today and has been preserved by a collaboration of community partners. Large sections of this special landscape are open to hikers, who can explore an area that is replete with significant natural beauty.

Thankfully, a bill to make the enhanced incentive permanent — sponsored by Pennsylvania Congressman Jim Gerlach and supported by more than 10 members of Pennsylvania’s congressional delegation, including Bucks County Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick (who has actively helped us secure funding in this watershed) — has been approved by committee and is moving onto the floor of the House of Representatives. The bill in the

House, HR 2807, has nearly enough co-sponsors to guarantee its passage. It is a clear demonstration that Congress can come together on some very important issues, such as setting aside some of America's most productive acres and important open spaces for future generations of Americans. But time is running out on the legislative calendar, so Congress must take action quickly.

The United States is losing about three acres per minute to development, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Conservation easements allow us to use and set aside valuable acres for future generations, leaving behind a legacy of open spaces and food security for those who follow us.

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