

Municipal Candidates' Responses to Sourland Conservancy's 2013 Candidates' Questionnaire

Every year, the Sourland Conservancy asks the candidates in the five Sourland municipalities to take a few moments to respond to a questionnaire focused on current Sourland issues so that our members may know where all our municipal candidates stand on the issues of significance to the Sourlands.

The Questionnaire

1. With regard to the county and municipal Open Space dedicated taxes approved by voters, do you believe that these funds should be expended solely and specifically for the purchase of developments rights and fee simple land:, or would you support allowing a percentage of those funds to be allocated to maintenance and development of existing open space lands?
2. Do you feel the current level of Open Space funding in your county or municipality should (a) be increased; (b) stay the same; or (c) be decreased? How is this funding derived- from an Open Space tax, from your capital funds, or other?
3. Briefly describe your attitude and past involvement with the preservation of open space, wildlife habitat, natural resources, and/or places of historical significance in your Township.
4. The current overpopulation of white-tail deer poses a serious threat to the Sourland ecosystem. We are in the process of developing a site-specific deer management plan. Can you support such a plan, and, if so, what are the important issues we should consider?

The Candidates

Hillsborough: Frank DelCore (Rep); Arthur "Art" Skaar (Dem)

Montgomery: Ed Trzaska (Rep); Patricia Graham (Rep); Sarah Roberts (Dem); Ernest J. Willson (Dem)

Hopewell Township: Horatio "Ray" Nichols (Dem); Raymond E. Disch (Dem); John R. Hart (Rep); Todd Brant (Rep)

West Amwell: Zachary T. Rich (Rep)

East Amwell: Tim Mathews (Rep); Peter Miller (Rep); Peter Taft (Dem); Charles Van Horn (Dem)

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The Responses

Peter Taft, East Amwell:

1. The latter. In fact, in the late 1990's the voters of East Amwell overwhelmingly approved a municipal Open Space tax to be used not only for the acquisition of farmland for preservation purposes, but for the acquisition, development and maintenance of lands for recreation and conservation purposes. I supported, and continue to support, that measure.
2. For more than 30 years the East Amwell Democratic Association has led the charge to preserve farmland and open space in East Amwell. As a result, we're now one of the most beautiful townships in the state, with more than 40% of our lands preserved. As a former township committeeman (1998 -2004) I am proud to have played a critical role in that achievement. Based on that experience, my judgment is that our current funding for open space is just about right. We employ an open space tax - which enjoys widespread support among township voters (see first question) - and use an intelligent blend of matching funds from the state, the county and non-profit organizations to further our goals. We're one of the most pro-active township in the state in regard to maximizing the formulas to preserve open space — and I want to keep it that way.
3. As indicated in the foregoing question, I spent six years on the Township Committee (three of them as deputy mayor) deeply engaged and extremely active in the cause of open space and farmland preservation. At perhaps a turning point for our community, I voted to re-zone the township to avoid unnecessary development. Before that, I was an active member of both the township's planning board as well as the recycling committee. Regionally, I chaired the board of the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association and chaired the successful Princeton-based drive to preserve 240 acres at the Institute for Advanced Study. Statewide, I have also served as a board member of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.
4. I learned an awful lot about "deer thinning" as chair of the Watershed, where we struggled with this issue every year. Simply put, I support any intelligent and humane plan to thin the deer herds in the Sourlands. That means sound planning, the selection of a humane method of control, and the engagement of all stakeholders - residents, hunters, conservationists and the like - in the development of such a plan. So the issues are thoughtful planning, humane execution, and community buy-in. As a committee person I would be happy to participate in such a discussion and support such a solution.

Charles Van Horn, East Amwell:

1. In the late 1990's the voters of East Amwell overwhelmingly approved a municipal Open Space tax to be used for the acquisition of farmland for preservation purposes, as well as the acquisition, development and maintenance of lands for recreation and conservation purposes. East Amwell has been using a small portion of our Open Space tax for development and maintenance of preserved land for several years to the benefit of our entire community.
2. East Amwell has been a leader in farmland and open space preservation for nearly 3 decades, resulting in over 40% of our township being preserved. Voters overwhelmingly approved referendums for an Open Space tax, which seems to be about the right amount for current needs. Our funds are matched at the county and state levels. We have been successful in recent years in attracting foundation funding and partnering with local non-profit organizations to fund open space on the Sourlands and other areas of our community.
3. I have been a long-time advocate for conservation and open space preservation. Concerned with maintaining safe drinking water supplies on the Sourland Mountain, good septic systems and healthy living conditions for all residents, I joined the East Amwell Board of Health in 2010. By continuing to combine our resources, we can preserve more farmland and open space while supporting local, sustainable agriculture and maintaining the quality of our natural resources.
4. I would be happy to review and comment on the plan which is being developed. I support deer management plans that educate the public on the need for site-specific management and encourage safe humane hunting to thin the herds, increasing the limits and culling does combined with allowing hunters to sell venison (after processing by FDA certified butchers) or donating the meat to local food banks would be important considerations for a comprehensive plan.

Tim Mathews, East Amwell:

1. The Open Space taxes should be used for the specific purpose that the voters approved. My understanding is that the current voter approved Open Space levy allows for limited maintenance of preserved property. The term "development" would require further clarity before I could comment.
2. East Amwell Township has been very active and successful with Farm and Open Space Preservation projects. The current Open Space levy in our municipality is insufficient to cover current accumulated open space debt payments, maintenance of current preserved

properties and future acquisitions. General tax revenue is redirected to fill the gap. Any increase in the current levy must be derived from a thorough strategic review of the Open Space objectives, program and plans and include a transparent and public dialog.

3. I am passionate about the environment and preserving the rural character of East Amwell Township . I own and live on ten beautiful acres within the Sourland forest canopy. I adhere to a State approved Forest Management plan and actively focus on Oak regeneration and native hardwood growth. I was an early adopter of clean and green Geo-Thermal heating and air conditioning that has eliminated the burning of more than 20,000 gallons of fossil fuel oil. I have and will continue to support quality preservation opportunities that are strategic and financially sound.
4. Generally speaking, I support comprehensive deer management strategies that are natural and do not impact the environment. Although I do not hunt, I do support licensed, legal and safe hunting.

Peter Miller, East Amwell:

1. I believe that the Open Space Taxes should be used in the way that they were originally approved by the voters of East Amwell. To the best of my knowledge at this time, that funding already allows for limited maintenance of the identified lands. I feel that any “Development” related these lands should be again reviewed and voted upon by the citizens of East Amwell.
2. My understanding at this time is that approximately 40% of East Amwell township is currently preserved lands. There is currently a 4 cent/ per \$100 of assessed value, Open Space Tax that is insufficient to cover the costs of the bonds used to purchase these lands. This requires that funding for the open space property debt come from the General Tax revenue. I believe that this deficit is generally not known to the tax payers of East Amwell. I feel that the tax payer has a right to know this and should be a part of an open dialog with the voters regarding the strategy and cost of Open Space in East Amwell.
3. We love the rural community of East Amwell. We own and live on 12 acres, which we have continued to actively farm since moving here 11 years ago.
4. I’m encouraged that there is a recognition by conservancy groups regarding the serious problem related to the overpopulation of white-tail deer in our area. I would encourage and support a well-developed plan which is supported by Study data that addresses both the near term problem and the long term effects of implementing such a plan.

Arthur “Art” Skarr, Hillsborough:

In 1996 I ran for Hillsborough Township Committee and the main issue was the proposed 12,000 unit housing development in the western part of the Township, near the Sourlands. My running mate and I opposed that development, which had been approved by the local Republican Party. We lost the election. That was a case of losing the battle and winning the war. That land now is preserved open space.

In approximately 2001 or 2002, I donated two lots to Hillsborough Township; 5 acres in the aggregate, both located on Zion Road in the Sourlands.

A ballot question as to diverting 20% of our open space tax to development and improvement is before the Hillsborough voters this year. I will be voting against the ballot question. It is premature in Hillsborough to curtail the acquisition of land in favor of development or improvement. I do not favor increasing the open space tax, but if funding sources can be found other than by raising taxes, those funding sources should be explored so we can buy as much land as possible.

As to controlling the deer population, I have no opinion as to how to achieve that. I do not own a gun, never have owned a gun and never will own a gun. However, I have friends and family who are hunters and I respect their particular love of the outdoors. I leave that debate to others.

I am a cyclist and my favorite place to ride my bike is in the Sourlands. (Yes, I rode in your event this year, the weekend before I was asked to run for office!) I am happy to do what I can to draw attention to the importance of preserving the Sourlands and educating the public. What we do today by way of setting aside money for land preservation is not something we do for ourselves. It is something we do for our grandchildren and for generations beyond that.

Patricia Graham, Montgomery:

1. With its local open space tax revenues and funding from the State, County and other sources, over one-third of the land in Montgomery has been preserved. This is a tremendous accomplishment that will benefit Montgomery residents for generations to come. I believe that our primary focus should be the acquisition or preservation of land. While Montgomery’s local open space tax does permit the use of open space funds for maintenance of open space lands, such expenditures should be limited so they do not unduly hinder our ability to continue to acquire or preserve open space. As for “development” of open space, I believe that any consideration of developing preserved lands with open space tax revenue, assuming such development is legally permissible, should be made only after the issue has been thoroughly presented to the voters, and perhaps only by referendum.

2. The sources of Montgomery's open space funding have included its open space tax, various State and County sources of funding, partnership with private organizations like Montgomery Friends of Open Space and, in past years, the township's bonding ability. The prior Democratic leadership's near depletion of Montgomery's surplus funds while vastly increasing the township's debt, together with the current fiscal crisis, severely restrict the township's ability to commit any additional funds -- over and above open space tax revenues -- for open space purchases. Nor can Montgomery residents bear the burden of any increase in the current local open space tax. I believe that Montgomery's open space tax should not be increased and the township should continue work with the current level of open space tax revenues, while also vigorously seeking State, County and private funding for open space acquisitions.
3. One reason my family and I chose to live in Montgomery is because of the town's rural character and beautiful natural areas, including the Sourlands. And, while I personally enjoy trail riding on horseback, I believe in wilderness preservation, regardless of whether or not the areas are intended for active or passive recreation. Serving on the Somerset County Open Space Advisory Committee, I worked to preserve wilderness and farmlands throughout Somerset County. I also fought hard to bring about the County's purchase and creation of Skillman Park, which preserved nearly 250 acres. And, for the past three years, I have served as the township committee's liaison to Montgomery's Open Space Committee, actively supporting the township's expansion of the Cherry Brook Preserve and acquisition of properties, including the Potter, Pariso and Howard properties. I am grateful to be a part of the preservation of Montgomery's scenic beauty and rural character.
4. It is unfortunate that the natural beauty of the Sourlands and other open spaces in Montgomery also bring challenges like the current overpopulation of white-tailed deer in central New Jersey. I would support a site-specific deer management plan for the Sourlands in addition to the successful deer management plan that Montgomery already has in place. But, any deer management plan must be carefully crafted to preserve, but not to substantially alter, the Sourlands ecosystem. In addition, public safety must always be a paramount concern; the implementation of new hunting regulations, for example, must be handled so as to best ensure the safety not only of the hunters, but also of all people (and their pets) residing in, or using, the Sourlands.

Ed Trzaska, Montgomery:

1. Montgomery voters approved our local open space tax in 1998, which does allow for funds to be spent on maintenance and development of existing preserved land. Overall, I am supportive of this provision since encouraging public use of open space is the best "advertising" method to keep support high for additional purchases. However, I believe such spending should be modest and the overwhelming majority of the funds should be used for preserving additional tracts of land. Montgomery's conservation and farmland

preservation plans include many additional targets for open space. Spending on maintenance and development should never prevent a purchase from being made.

2. I believe the current level of open space funding in Montgomery and Somerset County should stay the same. Montgomery was one of the earliest towns in NJ to aggressively pursue open space preservation and create its own open space tax. I am proud to say that over one third of our town is preserved as either private or public open space. This record of success will benefit residents for many years to come. We have made several recent purchases and many in partnership with the county: expansion of the Cherry Brook Preserve, Skillman Park, Potter Tract, Pariso Farm, Howard Farm, etc. And most importantly, we have the resources to make more significant deals in the future.
3. I grew-up in a nearby town that was full of open space and farmland. Sadly, this changed during the development explosion of the 1990's and it is now a much different place. I moved to Montgomery after graduate school because it reminded me of what my old hometown used to be. The beauty and openness of this area must endure for future generations. My proudest accomplishments over the past three years have been the open space preservation deals we have finalized. Municipal budgets come and go, some are easy, some are hard, but open space remains and it embodies what Montgomery truly is. I look forward to preserving more land in the future.

Another experience that I have been enjoying is a new one for me. A few months ago, I was appointed to the Delaware and Raritan Canal Commission. This allows me to get involved beyond Montgomery to help protect our region's natural resources and water supply.

4. Yes, I would support a deer management plan that focuses on the entire Sourland ecosystem. Montgomery has a township-specific plan, which has been safe and reasonably successful for over a decade. However, more needs to be done. Any regional plan needs to be endorsed and enforced by each municipality (and approved by the county). Ultimately, each community is responsible for ensuring the safety of hunters and nearby residents. Everyone needs to feel safe or the public will not support the operation.

Ernie Wilson, Montgomery:

1. I cannot support allowing the use of these funds for purposes other than to preserve open space. The money was earmarked for open space acquisition and preservation, and should only be used for that until approved for other uses by the voters. In my opinion, using

open space taxes for maintenance or to develop recreational facilities does not make sense.

2. Montgomery's open space preservation program is paid for from a 4 cent per \$100 levy on real estate assessed value. The money raised pays the debt service on the open space land and an administrator's salary. Funding for open space preservation should not be decreased. Preserved open space helps define our township's rural character, provides recreational activities, and increases our property values.
3. As you know, Sarah Roberts is my running mate, need I say more. On these issues she simply has no equal.

In my capacity as a member of the planning board and the Economic Development Commission I have always supported environmental issues, including strict stream corridor buffers, water quality protection, solar power installations in the Twp., control of business and residential growth, and development of efficient traffic patterns. As an avid cyclist I have long been an advocate for bike paths here in Montgomery, and enjoy pedaling through the back woods of Montgomery, viewing the scenery and breathing the clean air.

I am particularly interested in the environmental issues surrounding the new pipeline.

4. Montgomery has an excellent hunting program on its open space, and I would enthusiastically support any additional plans which responsibly and cost effectively controls the size of the deer herd, while providing for the public safety. I believe that controlling the deer population, is a necessity not only to protect the forest ecosystems, prevent agricultural losses, and reduce the incidences of Lyme disease, but also to prevent a major deer starvation kill, which might occur during severe winter. I cannot comment more specifically on a plan that I have not yet seen.

Todd Brant, Hopewell Township:

1. I believe open space is vital to the township, and would support a percentage of funds to be allocated for the maintenance of existing open space lands as it relates to its ecological rehabilitation and, where allowable, the preservation/creation of non-invasive trails for passive recreation. By this, I mean encouraging activities such as hiking, birding, and teaching our children the importance of a sustainable ecosystem.

2. The current level of funding in Hopewell Township is based on an Open Space tax, currently at 0.03 cents per \$100 valuation based on the 2008 referendum which raised it from 0.02 cents. I believe given the current economic climate we should be able to maintain this level. In addition, I would encourage collaboration between the municipalities and organizations such as the Sourland Conservancy, to assist in prioritizing the purchase of lands.
3. I treasure the fact that my family lives in an environment like the Sourland region. When my family decided to move to the township from a congested, city atmosphere, we did so in large part because of the open space and agricultural community that Hopewell Township had to offer. I grew up working on farms, hiking through woods, exploring what lived below the surface in creek beds, and want a similar experience for my children. To that end, my children have been part of the Hatchery Program at Howell Living Farm, participate in the Watershed education programs at Hopewell Elementary, hike through the Sourlands, and much more. My goal is to teach my children to respect and appreciate the natural world around them, and hope they too cherish and protect it.
4. The white-tail deer has grown in population, and pose a real risk to the ecological balance as they browse on the forest understory, negatively impacting the habitat for other wildlife. I fully endorse putting in place a deer management plan. Additionally, I would encourage collaboration with the surrounding municipalities to ensure alignment of goals and strategy, ensuring there are no duplicative efforts which would needlessly incur costs.