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Local Planning Group Notes Great Benefits of Land Conservation to Property Owners

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A group of representatives from six municipalities have recently concluded a comprehensive examination of the multiple environmental, political, and economic costs and benefits of land conservation in our area, and their conclusion is striking. Not only would open space conservation be good for the environment and local economy, it could be a boon for local property owners. The *Crosswicks Creek/Doctors Creek Regional Greenway Planning Group (CCDC Greenway Planning Group)*, as the group is known, has identified numerous ways that conservation can benefit local homeowners, including income for landowners that might choose to sell a portion of their property for open space preservation, fees paid to landowners who hold onto their land but place development restrictions on all or a part of their property, state and federal tax deductions for local homeowners, and significant tax incentives for property owners who choose to donate all or a portion of their land. In addition, the broader research indicates that open space preservation reduces the strain on municipal budgets, and so can reduce property tax pressures, while potentially increasing local property values.

In particular, the group has been examining the feasibility of a ‘greenway’, a sort of corridor of protected land, along the Doctors Creek-Assunpink Creek. The proposed greenway would link parks, preserves, and historic sites, and potentially provide a nature trail that could rival some of the most attractive trails in the state.

The report, entitled *The Doctors Creek-Assunpink Creek Trail Feasibility Study*, will be completed soon, and is the result of two years of extensive research, evaluation and discussion with local landowners and officials. Suzanne Forbes the project consultant, is quick to point out that the report is only meant to examine the “feasibility” of such a project, it’s in no way a done deal. And the conclusion so far is that this project is not only feasible, it should be strongly desired by naturalists, environmentalists, and homeowners in the area.

According to Forbes, “In a time where natural communities are disappearing, people are having a harder time experiencing the outdoors and obtaining the numerous benefits associated with communing with nature. We are looking for ways to preserve the natural and cultural features in the project area”.

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Betsy Poinsett, the group chairperson, agrees and has worked hard with the CCDC Planning Group to educate landowners and elected officials about the ecological, social and economic benefits associated with greenway conservation. According to Poinsett, “there are so many ecological, economic and social benefits associated with conserving greenways. Our goal is to identify the conservation efforts that are most beneficial to our local landowners”. Professor Patrick Hossay, a Professor of Environmental Policy at Stockton College who has advised the group, puts the point strongly, “This is one of those win-win-win situations. The environment wins from the preservation of the critical natural habitat, the local communities win from the development of natural and recreational opportunities in the area, and local landowners can win from the multiple economic benefits a project like this can offer.”

For more information about the Doctors-Assunpink Greenway Feasibility Study, to attend monthly meetings, or to obtain information about local land conservation programs, please contact Betsy Poinsett, Regional Greenway Planning Group Chair at (609) 259-7502 or betsypoinsett@verizon.net. Additional information may be obtained from the CCDC website at www.ccdcgreenway.org.



**Red Valley Road, Doctors Creek,
Millstone Township
Photo: Millstone Township Resident
Dillon Torno, Age 14**