

**Springfield Township  
Farmland Preservation Plan Element**

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# Springfield Township Farmland Preservation Element

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# Springfield Township Farmland Preservation Element

## Preservation Rationale and Philosophy

The primary planning “mission” of Springfield Township has consistently been to safeguard its rural agricultural character in a manner that is reasonable, achievable, and equitable to farmers and landowners. Preservation of agriculture and rural character is not merely a planning goal. To the citizens of Springfield Township, it is reality. As of this writing, four thousand one hundred fifty six acres (4,156) representing nearly 25% of the lands within the Township have been permanently preserved for agriculture.

Comprehensive planning, environmental analysis and aggressive preservation efforts have thus far enabled Springfield Township to resist mounting development pressure. Springfield’s farmland base is seriously threatened by explosive residential growth in neighboring municipalities to the north, south, and west. Competition for the remaining open lands is growing ever more intense. Time is of the essence. Springfield must act decisively to acquire State, County and Municipal funds to permanently protect large contiguous tracts of farmland before conflicting suburban development encroaches.

Springfield Township grew slowly but steadily since World War II, increasing its population by an average of 10% each decade. However, the last 20 years has averaged 8.5%. The residential development pattern to date in Springfield has been a combination of traditional ribbon development along the frontage of existing roadways and a few small residential developments scattered throughout the community.

Despite the relatively significant residential growth, the Township of Springfield has maintained its notable rural agricultural character. The primary reason that Springfield Township has maintained its rural agricultural character is that most of its lands are not merely “undeveloped,” but are actively used for bona fide agricultural purposes. The natural suitability of Springfield Township for farming is one of its prominent features; the USDA Soil Conservation Service rates approximately 75% of its land as prime farmland (Class I or Class II) in its Burlington County Soil Survey.

In addition to the excellent soils, the natural climate and adequate annual rainfall have kept Springfield Township an integral part of the productive heart of the farmbelt in Burlington County. Agriculture has always characterized the “Garden State” but few places in the rapidly developing central portion of New Jersey have Springfield Township’s remaining wealth of viable agricultural enterprises.

The citizens of Springfield Township have acknowledged and accepted agriculture by committing two million dollars in bond issues and a dedicated two-cent tax to participate in Burlington County’s aggressive farmland preservation program. Burlington County is clearly in the forefront, posting nearly one quarter of all the acreage preserved in New Jersey. \$15,049,257.16 in state, county, and local funds has been invested in Springfield Township alone. Strong financial commitment, innovative easement purchase options, and solid strategic plans have placed Springfield Township and Burlington County among the statewide leaders in preserving agriculture.

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## Value of Viable Agriculture

Agriculture is a valuable source of tax revenue to the community. Springfield Township has approximately five million dollars worth of land enrolled in farmland assessment and another twenty eight million dollars worth of assessed appurtenant structures on farms. Since agriculture requires few municipal services, it contributes positively to the revenue stream of the township.\*

Statewide, agriculture is a multi-million dollar industry, which creates jobs and provides food, fiber and flowers to the one eighth of the nation's people who live within an hour of New Jersey's farms.

Agriculture's value to the community goes far beyond its commodity output. Food, fiber, flowers and family entertainment are the tangible products of viable agriculture; but actively farmed lands provide for ground water recharge, storm water management, superior air quality, and natural wildlife habitat. Additionally, the aesthetic value of open countryside shapes the character of the entire community. Agriculture, as part of its routine ongoing activities, maintains the open spaces of our state. Without farmers tilling the soils, mowing the meadows and clearing the weeds, our open spaces would quickly become overgrown.

*\*Leonard W. Hamilton, Ph.D. and Paul B. When, Ph. D., The Myth of the Ratables (New Vernon, NJ, Great Swamp Watershed Assoc. 1992); Adesoji O. Adelaja, Ph.D., The Importance of Farmland Preservation (New Brunswick, Rutgers U. Dep't of Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics, 1998); Melissa Adams and Julia Freedgood, The Cost of Community Services in Monmouth County, New Jersey (Northampton, MA., American Farmland Trust, 1998).*

## Statewide Support for Agriculture

The New Jersey Legislature, in order to protect the economic, social and environmental benefits of agriculture, has enacted a series of legislation enabling the farmland preservation program.

The Farmland Preservation Bond Act of 1981 authorized the initial expenditure of fifty million dollars (\$50,000,000) to purchase development easements on farmlands. It was 1985 before the first farm in the state was deed restricted. Springfield Township preserved its first farm in 1988 and was among the first municipalities in the state to participate in the program.

Between 1981 and 1998, two hundred million dollars (\$200,000,000) were allocated through four separate bond issues in New Jersey for farmland preservation. The Governor's Council On New Jersey Outdoors, a two year study commission, developed an acreage goal for farmland and open space in New Jersey and recommended that a stable source of funding replace the uncertainties associated with repeated bonding. Fifty million dollars (\$50,000,000) was targeted for farmland protection annually. The Garden State Preservation Trust Act of 1999 was enacted in response to the overwhelming support of New Jersey's voters for a stable source of funding for the preservation of farmland, open space and historic sites. Approximately fifty million

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dollars (\$50,000,000) per year will be allocated from the general revenue to be used to purchase development easements on farmland over the next ten years.

The Right to Farm Act of 1983 established a policy of protecting commercial farms that use recognized agricultural management practices from nuisance actions. The revised 1998 Right to Farm Act further strengthened these protections and prescribed a path for out of court mediation of conflicts. Springfield Township's long standing right to Farm Ordinance was already more stringent than the State Law and wholeheartedly embraces the concept of protecting careful farmers from groundless court actions.

### Local Support for Agriculture

Residents of Springfield Township have a long history of support for agriculture as demonstrated by authorization of a one million-dollar bond issue to purchase development easements on farmland in 1989 and another one million dollar bond issue in 1997. Additionally, the citizens approved a dedicated two-cent tax for open space and agriculture in November 1999.

A strong Right to Farm ordinance (22-20.4) has been in effect since 1989 protecting Springfield Township farmers against nuisance actions. Additionally, the Township of Springfield Land Use Plan and Periodic Reexamination Report of 1996 includes the following goals and objectives:

“4 b. The “Right To Farm” ordinance should be required to be shown on all approved subdivision maps and should be communicated to all prospective home buyers within the township.”

Springfield has consistently supported and sustained its rural character since the inception of formal land use planning in the municipality. The 1967 Master Plan Studies for Springfield Township included the following statement:

The function of planning in a rural community such as Springfield can best be summed up by the word “guidance.” By this it is meant the guidance and control of developments so as to provide for an orderly and appropriate pattern of community growth and to insure the maximum retention of community resources.

The 1987 Master Plan Studies for Springfield Township includes the following goals and objectives:

1. To maintain the rural character of the township
2. To preserve farmlands... that presently characterize the township.

On December 21, 1993, the Springfield Township Planning Board adopted a “Master Plan Reexamination” report including the following important “Goal Statement”:

“The central goal of the Springfield Township Master Plan is to preserve and promote the viability of the local agricultural economy and the rural character which farms and farming lend to the township as a whole and to insure that future development in Springfield Township is consistent with the goals and objectives of the State Development and Redevelopment Guide Plan.”

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The 1996 Springfield Township Land Use Plan Periodic Reexamination and Update Report objective 6 states:

“The Master Plan should adhere to the policy objectives of the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan which basically states that Rural Planning Areas such as the Township of Springfield should maintain existing low density development patterns that compliment the rural character of the landscape by using creative land use design techniques to ensure that any future development does not conflict with agricultural operations, does not exceed the capacity of the natural environment to support such development and protects those areas of the township where past public investments in farmland preservation have been made.”

## Challenges to Agriculture

### Equity

Farmlands are farmers' most valuable assets. The value of his land, or equity, may be the only asset against which a farmer may borrow to maintain business operations. Low profit margins, high capital investments, worldwide economic events and unfavorable weather patterns make agriculture a risky and volatile business. Agricultural operations are crippled by reduced borrowing capacity caused by diminution of equity. If agriculture and its associated farmlands are to be preserved in Springfield, all township policies and policy initiatives should be reviewed to relieve possible negative impacts on landowner equity.

### Zoning Changes

Rural communities, in an effort to resist the conversion of farmland to suburban development, often lower the permitted zoning density for residential development. The result of increasing minimum lot size is complex and contradictory. First, building industry demand for land is diminished and lower per acre prices are offered because it is less profitable to build at lower densities and because the housing market is slow to absorb large residential lots. Pressure to develop is reduced. Ironically, a greater amount of farmland is sacrificed for each housing unit that is actually built.

Even if a township is successful in slowing the pace of development within its borders by increasing minimum lot sizes, the impact on agriculture and rural character is severe. Farmers lose equity in their land and sprawling development consumes the rural countryside.

Alternative land use policies such as cluster development and density transfers protect landowner equity while controlling the pace and character of new development in rural municipalities. All planning tools should be considered before a reduction in lot density is used to control growth if agriculture is to survive.

### Suburbanization and Competition

Agriculture must remain rural to remain competitive. Springfield Township lies entirely within the Rural Planning Area, PA 4, as outlined by the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan. Conflict erupts when suburban residential development and commerce intrude into the agricultural lands. Farm

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machinery and equipment, pest management programs, and hours of farm operation are all issues ripe for complaint from new non-agricultural neighbors. Conflicts between suburban uses and farms force farmers to waste scarce time and resources resolving issues or justifying actions. When profit margins are small, any waste or impediment can be critical. Many farm operations have been abandoned or moved as a result of right to farm complaints.

### **Transportation Corridors**

The rural roadways become increasingly hazardous when suburban development patterns emerge. Commuter automobiles and highway development interfere severely with large, heavy, slow moving farm vehicles and tractors, making movement of farm goods and equipment inefficient and difficult. In Springfield Township, most farmers work multiple non-contiguous fields. The ability to safely and efficiently move equipment between these fields is essential to a farmers' ability to maintain an economically viable amount of productive acreage. A congested highway with many traffic lights and curb cuts presents physical danger to all drivers but is a difficult and extremely dangerous barrier to agriculture. Farms divided by such roadways are effectively isolated and at risk for conversion to non-farm uses. Especially where farms have been preserved in perpetuity, all policy decisions affecting the traffic and congestion along the agricultural transportation routes must be reviewed for negative impacts upon agriculture.

### **Public Access and Trespass**

With the increase of suburban neighbors, farmers may experience detrimental affects of trespassers and vandals. Farm equipment must be locked and safeguarded, or stored centrally each evening, making the next day's workload more cumbersome. Many thousands of dollars are spent and hours of productivity are lost annually repairing what vandals destroy. Public access is not a right granted through the farmland preservation program, yet many trespassers intrude on farms in ignorance. Farmers are forced to take extra safety precautions and carry larger insurance umbrellas to protect themselves from lawsuits.

### **Competition for Land Base**

The price of land goes dramatically up and availability of land goes drastically down as the rural countryside develops into a suburban landscape. Farmers who rent land find less and less rental acreage to maintain their crop base. Any expansion of an existing farming business involving land acquisition becomes cost prohibitive. Crop rotation becomes burdensome and many farmers must travel farther and farther through the congested roadways to get to their fields.

The rapidly suburbanizing areas of the state have witnessed skyrocketing housing prices. The entire economy of a region can be artificially inflated due to rapid residential development. A farmer caught in the midst of a suburbanizing region may find it no longer makes economic sense to continue farming valuable, developable land. A farm sale may be forced due to industry fragmentation, isolation and inefficiency.

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### **Lack of Support Infrastructure**

As more farms are lost to suburban encroachment, agricultural support businesses lose their customer base and may close or relocate. Farmers are forced to travel several hundred miles to obtain parts or make repairs. Suppliers become scarce and cost of goods increase while prices are static or falling.

Markets for agricultural commodities, especially grains, also suffer from conflicts with rapid suburban development. Local grain elevators and port or rail access points often close, forcing costly long distance truck transportation of farm products. When the agricultural industry becomes fragmented and interrupted by dense suburban residential development, a downward cycle begins where farms are sold due to lost support and market access. The remaining agricultural operations become further stressed leading to additional losses of farms and farmland.

### **Impermanence Syndrome**

A lack of confidence in the future of a farm operation leads to neglect of the buildings and even the soils of the farm. Growers are unwilling to invest in the land or improvements if there is little expected return on investment.

On leased farmland the impermanence syndrome is most acute. Many farmers, especially in the grain and hay commodities, rent the bulk of their land for agricultural operations. A typical lease is short term, often year to year. Investment in soil and water conservation projects such as irrigation, erosion control, manure management, and riparian buffering does not make economic sense on lands where the future use opportunities are uncertain. Even routine soil stewardship practices such as crop rotation, liming, and cover cropping may be abandoned on leased property to boost the bottom line of the operation. Land owned by speculators and kept in agriculture solely for tax purposes is the riskiest of all investments to a tenant farmer. Policies to encourage long-term leases would provide stability to the farming community and encourage investment in the land, soil and structures.

## **Inventory of Agriculture and Available Land Base**

Seven maps are included which graphically represent the existing available land base and land characteristics in Springfield Township:

- Existing Land Use
- Farmland Inventory Map
- Farmland Preservation Project Area Map
- Wetlands
- Agricultural Soils Characteristics
- Depth to Seasonal High Water Table
- Suitability for Field Crop Production



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Additionally, **The Burlington County Farmland Preservation Map** depicting the County's strategic plan for farmland preservation of the Burlington County farmbelt is included for reference.

### **Identification of Preservation Project Areas**

The criteria used in determining the location of regional protection areas critical to agriculture include environmental characteristics such as soil type, topography, watersheds, and natural buffers. Four specific evaluative maps are included as a reference.

Existing development patterns in the region dictate other evaluative criterion for farmland preservation target areas. These criteria include:

- Contiguity to other preserved lands
- Roadways, rights of way and other man made boundaries:
- Suburban encroachment
- Transportation infrastructure
- Utility infrastructure
- Imminence of change to non- agricultural uses
- Scenic and Aesthetic value of open lands

### **Mapped Project Areas**

- Jacksonville West
- Hancock's Corner – Rt. 670
- Barker's Brook Watershed
- Arney's Mount
- Juliustown Buffer
- Helis Holdings
- Springfield Meeting House

### **Target Acreage Goal**

There has never been a better opportunity to aggressively preserve farmland and open space in Springfield Township. State, County and local funding has been firmly committed and landowner interest in preservation is high.

The Township would like to increase its target acreage by another 10%. The Township's priority list, of over 1,600 acres, is based upon evaluative criteria, and the municipality's ability to pay its cost share percentage.

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## Status of Preservation Funds

Springfield Township has committed the majority of a two million-dollar (\$2,000,000) farmland preservation bond fund. A two-cent (\$.02) dedicated tax, providing a steady source of funds for preserving open space and agriculture, was approved by the Springfield Township voters in November of 1999.

The Springfield Township Council is exploring options for leveraging dedicated tax funds to accelerate preservation goals.

## Municipal Cost Share Formula

Currently, Springfield Township's cost share portion is 10% of the easement purchase price. Burlington County pays 30% and the State of New Jersey grants the county 60%. The municipal cost share percentage has a sliding scale designed to reduce the cost share of those towns, which have been most active in preserving lands. The percentage is set by the following formula:

**Previous Spending-Municipal Cost Share/Equalized Assessed Value of all property**

**Scale:** Cost share/value < .25 = 20% municipal cost share

>.25 but < .50 = 15% municipal cost share

>.50 but < .75 = 10% municipal cost share

>.75 = 5% municipal cost share

## The Current Preservation Program

Springfield Township has an aggressive ongoing program of farmland preservation. Nearly 25% of the total land available has been permanently deed restricted for agriculture. Springfield cooperates with Burlington County and embraces its strategic plan for targeted acquisition and installment purchase of easements on farmland.

## Going Forward

Springfield Township desires to supplement the County efforts at targeting strategic lands within the township borders. Target project areas grouping relatively contiguous farmlands have been identified and prioritized for acquisition. Alternative mechanisms for funding these projects include:

- Planning Incentive Grants
- Joint Projects with Green Acres and Non-Profits
- Direct/Emergency State purchase
- State Fee Simple Acquisitions
- Donation of Conservation Easements

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- Option agreements

The Township Council, Planning Board and Agricultural Advisory Board should begin to investigate alternative funding sources in order to accelerate the preservation of the remaining agricultural land base in the township.

Any plan to preserve agriculture must be comprehensive in its approach. The industry as well as the land base must be evaluated and strategies for continued viability must be formulated. Some policy directives including but not limited to the following existing programs can be explored in order to continue to protect the farmer as well as the farmlands:

- Equity protection through alternative development patterns
- State Farm Link Program
- Model Farm Lease Agreement
- Model Right to Farm Ordinance
- Agricultural Communications Network
- Agricultural trends and local viability study

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## Appendix I

### Right to Farm Ordinance

#### 22-20.4 Right to Farm

##### a. Findings

1. The Township Council recognizes the benefits to society in general, the community and its neighborhoods, from horticulture, commercial and home agriculture and animal husbandry, hereafter called farming, by the preservation of open space and the preservation of the aesthetics of the rural countryside and the supplying of present and future generations with the bounties resulting from such activities; and

2. The Township Council has determined that such horticultural, agricultural and animal husbandry uses are necessary to humankind and that the right to carry on such pursuits should be protected for the benefit of the residents of the Township of Springfield; and

3. The Township Council finds and determines that farmers must be secure in their ability to earn a livelihood and to utilize acceptable, necessary and recognized farming procedure and techniques; and

4. The Township Council finds and determines that the right to farm all land is a natural right and is hereby ordained to exist as a permitted use everywhere in the township, regardless of zoning designations and regardless of whether specified as permitted uses therein.

b. *Purpose.* It is the intent of this subsection to define and prescribe acceptable, necessary and recognized farming practices herein encouraged, established and preserved.

c. *Definitions.* For the purposes of interpretation of this subsection, the following shall apply.

*Commercial Agriculture.* The production, principally for sale to others, of plants and animals or their products, including, but not limited to, forage and sod crops, grain feed crops, dairy animals and dairy products livestock, including beef cattle, poultry, sheep, swine, horses, ponies, mules and goats; the breeding and grazing of such animals, bees and apiary products, fruits of all kinds, including grapes, nuts and berries, vegetables, nursery, floral, ornamental and greenhouse products.

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## Appendix II

### Maps