



Pennsylvania Land Trust Association



presents

Buckingham Township

with the

2013 Government Conservation Leadership Award

As a result of a long history of leadership, Buckingham Township has been able to preserve a significant portion of the community's agricultural and rural heritage, despite being in the heart of densely-settled central Bucks County. The Township also has three excellent municipal parks that contribute to the community's high quality of life.

For the last forty years, Buckingham has been the focus of a struggle between two groups with opposing agendas: developers eager to take advantage of its prime location by building on the Township's extensive and easy to develop farmland, and residents determined to preserve the township's rural and historic legacy. The Township became a real development hotspot within Bucks County in the mid-1980s. Buckingham addressed this challenge by establishing a voter-approved open space program early on, and renewing the program through two subsequent bond measures. This has enabled the Township to have significant funds available on a consistent basis in order to seize opportunities to preserve large and key parcels of lands when they become available.

In 1995, Buckingham residents went to the polls and approved a referendum that permitted the Board of Supervisors to borrow \$4 million to establish a township land preservation program-making Buckingham the first municipality in Bucks County to do so. In 1999, residents approved a second referendum in the amount of \$9.5 million to continue the program. In 2008, with a vote of 82% in favor, voters overwhelmingly approved a third referendum which allowed the township to borrow up to an additional \$20 million to fund the next great push to preserve Buckingham's historic heritage of farmland and open spaces.

The Board of Supervisors had the courage and foresight to launch the 2008 referendum despite the sinking economy. The Board's insights paid off not only in the successful passage of the referendum, but the ability to buy out a developer who already had an approved plan in the principal agricultural zone, as well as a major land owner (Hiland) who had been marketing his large holdings to developers in the same area. The Hiland property is several hundred acres surrounding the historic village of Wycombe. While many communities scaled-back or suspended open space preservation efforts during the recession, Buckingham forged full speed ahead to capitalize on low interest rates for borrowing and opportunities that arose as a result of the slowed real-estate market.

In 1989, the first Bucks County farm preserved through the then new Pennsylvania/Bucks County ag preservation program was a Buckingham farm. Soon after, the township offered to contribute its own funds as needed to state-county monies for Buckingham farms selected by the county for preservation. Neither the state nor the county had anticipated that kind of cooperation so that Buckingham became

the first township in the county. Buckingham continues to seek county and federal funds to leverage local funds. In October 2009, the Bucks County Open Space Review Board approved Buckingham Township's Revised Open Space plan; as a consequence, the township received \$880,000 in county preservation funds. Moreover, the township successfully obtained a grant from the Federal Farmland Preservation Fund for \$500,000.

The Township has an active Agricultural and Open Space Preservation Committee, comprised of community residents. This committee has mailed information and a survey to owners of properties larger than 20 acres in the Township, and held informational meetings for landowners and the community. The Committee has developed an information packet for landowners on the advantages of land preservation, including potential tax savings, and visits each proposed preservation site to provide written commentary to guide the Supervisor board.

Buckingham still has bonding authority available under the 2008 \$20 million bond measure. There are still several large parcels of farmland that are priorities for preservation. Outreach will continue to these landowners in hopes of finding the right time and opportunity to preserve these parcels. The renewal of the enhanced easement incentive will be discussed with these landowners as a reason to consider preservation.

The Township is also improving the monitoring of conservation easements, and will be partnering with the Heritage Conservancy in their Land Trust Beneficiary program to strengthen the defense of current and future conservation easements.

Buckingham's Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1991. The Open Space Plan was adopted in 1999, and updated in 2009. A primary objective of the Open Space Plan has been to preserve parcels of farmland larger than 20 acres. As noted below, over 3,500 acres of farmland have been preserved to date, and there are numerous large and active working farms in the Township. Several of these farms support local farm markets where residents can purchase healthy produce and "pick your own" veggies, fruit and pumpkins. The Open Space Plan also emphasizes the protection of scenic Buckingham Mountain, the limestone valley, stream corridors and several historic villages.

The Township's Comprehensive Plan is in the process of being updated. The Future Land Use Plan emphasizes concentrating future development in areas best equipped to handle growth, while preserving agricultural and natural resource lands as open space.

Buckingham voters approved three bond measures providing a total of \$33.5 million for preservation and has preserved an impressive 3,770 acres of farmland. In addition, the Township has 220 acres of parkland and has preserved an additional 468 acres of open space. With an additional 678 acres preserved by land trusts, 477 acres of open space within developments, 181 acres owned by schools, a total of 5,793 acres of land are in public ownership or protected status. This represents over 25% of the Township.

On behalf of Pennsylvania's 75 leading conservation organizations, the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association honors Buckingham Township for its demonstrated leadership and vision in the conservation of our special places and landscapes.