

WARREN COUNTY BOARD OF RECREATION COMMISSIONERS

500 Mt. Pisgah Avenue, PO Box 179
Oxford, NJ 07863

February 11, 2025 Reorganization Meeting Minutes

CALL TO ORDER:

Mr. Tierney called the reorganization meeting to order at 5:01pm.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

ROLL CALL:

Bill Hann has resigned from the BORC and Jane Bullis has joined the BORC.

Members Present: Mike Helbing, Charles Fineran, John Trontis, and Tom Lizzi

Members Not Present: Michael Margulies and Jane Bullis

Staff Present: Corey Tierney, Kim Barnes, Justin Tibbetts

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT:

Mr. Tierney read the Open Public Meeting Notice.

REORGANIZATION:

Mr. Tierney opened the floor for nominations for Chair. Mr. Fineran nominated Mike Helbing to remain as chair, seconded by Mr. Trontis. All voted in favor. Motion carried to have Mr. Helbing as Chair of the BORC.

Mr. Helbing opened the floor for Vice-Chair nominations. Mr. Trontis nominated Mr. Fineran to remain as Vice-Chair, seconded by Mr. Lizzi. All voted in favor. Motion carried to have Mr. Fineran as Vice-Chair of the BORC.

Mr. Helbing nominated Mr. Trontis as Board Secretary, seconded by Mr. Lizzi. All voted in favor. Motion carried to have Mr. Trontis as BORC Secretary.

The 2025 Meeting Dates were discussed. Mr. Fineran made a motion to approve the 2025 BORC meeting dates as the 2nd Tuesday of each month at 5:00 PM, except for November which conflicted with Veterans Day, so that will be Wednesday, November 12 at 4:00 PM. Mr. Trontis seconded the motion. All voted in favor. Meeting dates were approved as noted.

MINUTES:

The meeting minutes from December 10, 2024 were reviewed (the January meeting was cancelled). Mr. Fineran motioned to approve the minutes, seconded by Mr. Lizzi. All voted in favor. Minutes approved.

In response to inquiries from the board, Mr. Tierney shared information on the 2025 preliminary budget and goals for Parks and Recreation. Mr. Tierney first reviewed last year. Three Municipal and Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund (MCCTF) grants were awarded in 2024, totaling \$324,000. Two farms and 609 acres of farmland were preserved. Three properties were preserved as open space, expanding our parkland by 109 acres. The county's cost share was low because we were able to work with our state agency and nonprofit partners.

The county also continues to make improvements to our parks and park operations. We rely heavily on our partnerships with volunteers from the WC Parks Foundation and the NJ Youth Corps to provide routine maintenance. Our Park Naturalist has also done a great job running environmental education programs this past year for over 1,300 people.

History grants and arts grants continue to be administered to municipalities and nonprofits, as well as hosting summer concert series, performances in assisted care facilities, the senior citizen art show, and bicentennial events. Last year we made 11 history grants to local groups totaling \$25k. We also made 34 arts grants to local groups totaling about \$165k. We expect to do the same in 2025.

For 2025, we are proposing to keep the Open Space Trust fund tax flat at 2 cents. This would collect about \$2.9m. After admin, maintenance, and other overhead, under the current allocation formula, 55% (or \$730k) would go to farmland preservation, 45% (or \$332k) would go to MCCT, and 25% (or \$265k) would go to BORC.

For farmland preservation, while we have seen a drop in applications recently, the state is developing a new formula, which is expected to increase the amounts paid to landowners. We have generally paid an average of \$5k/ac., but we expect this will increase under the formula to an average of \$6k-\$7k per acre, which may encourage more applications. We aim to preserve 1,000 acres each year, so the total cost would increase from about \$5m to \$6m-\$7m per year.

Currently, we receive between 50 and 60% cost share from the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC), so we could see our cost share rise from about \$2.5m per year to \$3m - \$3.5m per year. However, the SADC is considering increasing the cost share percentage and preserving more farms 'state direct' where they absorb 100% of the cost. The formula has not been finalized and it remains to be seen how many more applications it will help generate. While total costs may increase, Mr. Tierney thinks it will be manageable over the next few years given the balance accrued in the farmland preservation program. With increased cost, we can continue to draw down that balance.

Under the MCCTF program, we have been allocating about \$500k per year. This year, for 2025, we have about \$250k in funding that came back from canceled projects. When added to the \$330k allocation, we could make a total of \$580k available.

Under Parks and Recreation, for open space preservation we can receive up to 50% cost share from Green Acres (GA). We recently received about \$600k in reimbursements for past projects and submitted a supplemental funding request in the amount of \$665k for future projects. Over the past ten years, we've been averaging about 3 to 4 projects totaling around 75 acres per year, at a total cost of between \$500k to \$750k per year. After GA reimbursement, our costs are around \$250k to \$375k per year, but sometimes more when we need to preserve properties without state participation.

We continue to focus on the Morris Canal Greenway, expanding existing parks, and select areas having high environmental and recreational importance. Mr. Tierney has been working closely with the Nature Conservancy, Land Conservancy of NJ, and other nonprofits to secure additional funding and land donations. Although the total cost of preserving the three properties last year was \$876,000, he was able to work with the Land Conservancy and have them donate a 37-acre property valued at \$398k, and we will receive 50% \$239k reimbursement from Green Acres for the other two. This will make the county's actual cost only \$239k across 109 acres last year.

There are some significant open space acquisition projects in the pipeline, but given the balance accrued in the open space account, we can manage this year with the current 20% allocation. However, were the county to allocate more funding towards this, we could preserve more open space at a faster rate in the years ahead.

Also under Parks and Recreation, we have been working with Public Works on developing plans to create a nature center and future office space at Bread Lock Park. We have seen increased visitation to our parks and a growing demand for outdoor recreation and nature-based programming. As we plan ahead for the next 5, 10, 15 years, we currently have two existing structures at Bread Lock Park which can be repurposed, to provide a nature center and future park headquarters (additional office space is needed before hiring additional staff). This would be a good long-term investment for the growing park system and our county residents and the County Commissioners have expressed their support.

For 2025, the Dept. of Land Preservation wants to preserve more farmland and open space; continue offering MCCTF, history, and arts grants; celebrate the county's bicentennial; continue to offer environmental education programming; and continue to improve the county's parks. Additional goals include updating the trail maps, expanding hunting areas, updating park rules, and updating a number of leases and agreements.

We will be moving ahead with the Nature Center and new office space. New lighting will be installed in the barn at Bread Lock Park and new gutters on what is referred to as the Youth Corps farmhouse. We will install a number of new gates, fencing, and other parking improvements at Richline Road. We will advance the Port Warren / Plane 9 turbine repair and bridge replacement projects. We will advance the three NJTPA grant funded projects at Port Warren. With volunteer help, we will complete and open the Cafaro Morris Canal trail, along with some parking area improvements. If time and resources allow, we may also begin clearing the MC trail section between Millbrook Rd & Halfway House Rd, as well as begin work on the Warren-Highland trail section in Oxford. Our Park Naturalist continues planning various environmental talks and programs.

There was agreement to schedule a workshop(s) with subcommittees for board members to better grasp the acquisition plan, discuss park rules, hunting and deer drives, etc.

In the interest of time, they skipped ahead to

NEW BUSINESS:

Special Use Permits – OK4WD submitted an application for a special use permit for their Trucks & Coffee event at Bread Lock Park on 4/5 (8:30am-12pm). Mr. Lizzi made a motion to approve the permit application, seconded by Mr. Fineran. Mr. Trontis abstained, but all others voted in favor. Permit approved.

The First United Methodist Church of Blairstown submitted an application for a special use permit for their Easter Sunday sunrise service at White Lake on 4/20 (6:15am-7:30am). Mr. Trontis made a motion to approve the permit application, seconded by Mr. Fineran. All voted in favor. Permit approved.

MCCTFC Representative – Mr. Fineran's term as the BORC liaison member of the Municipal & Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund Committee is expiring. Mr. Trontis nominated Mr. Fineran to

continue as the BORC liaison member of the MCCTFC, seconded by Mr. Lizzi. All voted in favor. Motion carried.

Deer Drive on Franklin Twp. Property – Mr. Tierney granted permission for the gentleman to walk the county property without firearms. This needs further discussion by a subcommittee, as it is an issue for future rules and policies. This particular property will probably allow hunting in the future and it is next to state hunting property.

Administrator's Reports – Mr. Tierney shared the following reports with the board, most of which was already discussed:

- ACQUISITIONS
- MAINTENANCE & IMPROVEMENTS
- PARK PROGRAMS

PUBLIC COMMENT (related to agenda items): Mr. Helbing introduced Emilio Lois, the Allamuchy Open Space Director.

CORRESPONDENCE: None

REPORT OF COMMITTEES:

Morris Canal Committee – Mr. Fineran and several others visited the new Museum at Meadow Breeze Park and agreed that it is a better site and building for the museum. Mr. Helbing is giving a presentation in Clinton on 3/5 on the Musconetcong which ties in to the Morris Canal. Mr. Fineran will be presenting to senior citizens of Allamuchy on Thursday about the history of the county and the different groups they could join and places to visit.

Warren Heritage Scenic Byway – Mr. Trontis thanked the Warren County Planning Dept. for drafting the RFP to hire a firm to revise the master plan for the entire Scenic Byway. However, there is no funding available right now to send the RFP out. They'll need to look elsewhere for funding, possibly the North Jersey Regional Plan Association. The Scenic Byway Committee will meet virtually in early March.

Warren Highlands Trail – Mr. Helbing reported the Merrill Creek section of the Warren Highlands Trail is closed due to the bird flu. All of Merrill Creek is currently closed to the public. There are concerns of it spreading to the bobcat population. There was an inquiry from the board asking if White Lake needed to close because of the bird flu. Mr. Tierney has been communicating with the Warren County Public Health Officer. Mr. Tierney relayed the guidance he provided to the White Lake land steward. The Health Dept. has not yet recommended that signs need to be posted at White Lake.

Mr. Tierney will make a call about scheduling a multi-agency meeting that could be hosted here at the Dept. of Land Preservation.

OLD BUSINESS: None

PUBLIC COMMENT: None

NEXT MEETING: The next Board of Recreation Commissioners meeting will be on Tuesday, March 11, 2025 at 5:00 PM.

ADJOURNMENT: There being no further business, Mr. Fineran motioned to adjourn the meeting, seconded by Mr. Lizzi. All voted in favor. Meeting adjourned at 5:56 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kim Barnes, Clerk
Warren County Land Preservation Dept.