

New Paltz | open space

A tithe for Mother Earth

New Paltz plans real-estate transfer tax to fund open-space preservation

by Erin Quinn

LAST THURSDAY, NEW PALTZ'S town board took preliminary legislative steps toward the continued preservation of natural resources, open space and working farms by voting to adopt the proposed Community Preservation Plan (CPP) and the Community Preservation Fund. The board did not adopt the real-estate transfer tax levy last Thursday, but said it would do so within the next two weeks so that it can go to public referendum in November.

New Paltz has long been valued by locals and visitors alike for its iconic landscape that includes the Shawangunk Ridge, the Wallkill River valley and flats, the rich local farms and inventory of cultural and historic landmarks like Historic Huguenot Street, the Testimonial Gatehouse and the Skytop Tower. These landscapes are central to New Paltz's identity and community character. So are the abundance of wetlands, woodlands, watersheds and forests that are natural mechanisms for the frontline defense from flooding, air and water pollution. Increasing development pressure and rapid climate change. Townspeople believe the preservation of these natural resources is critical to the health and well-being of residents.

During this period of social distancing due to Covid 19, many residents have a renewed appreciation for outdoor opportunities for walking, hiking, biking, exercise and other uses of trails and carriage roads that past and current generations worked to preserve for public use, like the Wallkill Valley Rail-Trail, River-to-Ridge Trail or the Mohonk Preserve and Minnewaska State Park Preserve.

Coming up with a plan

The CPP task force, made up of local volunteers, took all existing open space preservation plans, wetlands and water-course surveys, tapping into 35 different databases. Using this information, they then inventoried all undeveloped parcels and rated them based on preservation criteria, with one point assigned to each parcel that had existing water resources, scenic vistas, open space, agricultural lands, cultural and/or historical significance. The points varied from one to 23.

This plan was presented to the town board and residents during a virtual public hearing last week as "a tool to guide open space and historic preservation activities in the future."

Several mechanisms are available to protect undeveloped lands: a transfer of development rights, a conservation easement or a purchase outright. Cara Lee, a member of the CPP Task Force, reiterated that these options were only for "willing landowners." The CPP also calls for an advisory board that can reach out to willing landowners.

Coming up with the money

While the landowners have the opportunity to ensure that their property is



CARA LEE

The Nyquist Harcourt Sanctuary on the boardwalk overlooking the Oxbow.

preserved in perpetuity and receive fair market value for their parcel or parcels, the question becomes: How does the town afford it?

In 2007 residents voted overwhelmingly in favor of a \$2-million open-space bond that would allow the town to leverage funds to purchase environmentally sensitive parcels where landowners were willing. The CPP Task Force is proposing a real-estate transfer tax, paid by the buyer, for a fund earmarked for open-space preservation. The town can enact this levy of up to two percent. The CPP is proposing that the two percent tax levy be enacted, with an exemption on the first \$245,000 of the purchase price on a residential home, the current median price of a home sale in Ulster County. The exemption protects the lower end of the market, particularly first-time homebuyers.

Here's how the exemption and levy work: If someone purchases a \$300,000 home in New Paltz, the first \$245,000 of that sale is exempt, and they would pay a one-time levy of two percent on the remaining \$55,000 of the home, which would equal \$1100. That could be financed into a mortgage and escrow account as well.

"With mortgage rates at 50-year lows, this tax is a small payment to help protect the very attributes that motivate a person to choose to move and live in a community," argued the CPP Task Force. "This approach enables a community to conduct open-space protection and historic preservation without increasing taxes for residents. The fee would be limited to new purchases of homes or properties."

Implementation is subject to a local referendum authorizing a real-estate transfer tax at the November 2020 elections.

Several people spoke in favor of the plan and the funding mechanism, including representatives of the town's Environmental Conservation Board, the

Wallkill Valley Land Trust, and real-estate agents.

Coming up with the tax level

Town-board member David Brownstein said that he supported the plan, but wanted to see the transfer tax reduced to 1.5 percent to make it more palatable to the voters. Town supervisor Neil Bettez concurred with Brownstein.

Councilperson Daniel Torres said that he respectfully disagreed. "We're looking at significant voter turnout with a presidential election in November, and this community has consistently illustrated that this is something they strongly support."

Red Hook, which enacted a similar plan a decade ago, has raised \$2.8 million through its real-estate tax fund, which has enabled the town to protect 1800 acres of agricultural land, 60 percent of its existing working farmlands.

Development pressure seen

Members of the CPP pointed out that there are still 7000 acres of New Paltz land that could be developed. With the assistance of land-preservation groups like the Wallkill Valley Land Trust and the Open Space Institute, the town has been able to protect some parcels such as the Millbrook Preserve, the Taliaferro Farm and the Two Farms Project on Huguenot Street. But "a lot of very vulnerable properties that are not protected deserve to be protected."

The current public-health crisis is putting heavy residential development pressure on New Paltz from metropolitan dwellers who want out of New York City.

Arielle Curtin, a local real-estate agent, thanked the CPP and Lee for the presentation, and said that she "fully supports" the plan and the fund. "Homebuyers are not going to balk at a two-percent tax levy over the exemption you've built in," she said. "Almost everyone who moves here and purchases a home here is doing

so because of the very things you're trying to protect and preserve."

These sentiments were echoed by representatives of Scenic Hudson. Planning consultant David Gilmour said that he applauded the efforts being made. In his estimation, the town board should be doing much more to protect our natural resources. "I'm alarmingly concerned about the Earth and believe that we're far more advanced in terms of planetary collapse than most people realize," Gilmour said. "I'm urging you to run as fast and as far as you can to do whatever we can to protect our ecological resources, to adopt smart-growth zoning to complement these efforts."

Cara Lee summed up. "New Paltz consistently has a good track record of protecting important places, but we need to do more to ensure that our most precious open spaces and historic resources are here for future generations," she said.

Supervisor Neil Bettez reported that the town board had received many comments on the proposed local laws and encouraged any residents who would like to weigh in to continue to do so. The board did not move to adopt the real-estate transfer tax levy last Thursday, but said it will do so within the next two weeks so that it can go to public referendum.

To learn more about the plan, the task force, the transfer tax or how to comment on the initiative, visit the New Paltz Community Preservation Plan website.

Matt's Landscaping
518-231-9652

- ◆ Hedge Trimming up to 50' Tall
- ◆ Tree + Shrub Planting

