

# Environment Commission to research open space tax for residents



The Environmental Commission has proposed conducting a survey of residents to see if they would back a tax for more open space funding.

PHOTO BY JAIMIE WINTERS/STAFF

**By Jaimie Julia Winters**

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Would you pay \$38 a year to create and maintain more open space in Montclair?

The Montclair Environmental Commission is seeking to create a referendum that would ask residents if they would back an open space tax. If that tax was set at three-quarters of a penny, a

resident owning a home assessed at \$510,000 would pay \$38 a year toward open space, said MEC co-chair Lyle Landon.

The group would like to embark on a feasibility study, which would entail calling every household in Montclair to survey residents on whether they are for the tax, and if so what would they like to see the money go toward.

The survey would cost \$18,000, Landon told the township council at its July 9 meeting.

Although council members seemed in favor of more open space in the township, some were concerned with the cost of the survey.

In 2001, Bloomfield created a half-cent open space tax, which generates about \$200,000 annually for green space. Maplewood's tax, set at one cent, adds up to about \$305,000 a year. Montclair could be the next to create an open space fund through taxation; in 2007, 65 percent of voters here said yes to the Essex County open space tax.

If a tax is created, a Montclair Open Space Trust Fund Advisory Committee would be appointed and typically would have the duties of conducting assessments to determine the needs of the township as they relate to the Open Space Trust Fund, soliciting residents' input concerning the best use of the Open Space Trust Fund, conducting open public hearings related to the creation of recreation and open space, and assisting the township in acquiring funds for the acquisition of open space.

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Putting the open space tax on the November election ballot could be done without a survey, as it would require only a resolution passed by the township council. The Trust for Public Land, which would help with Montclair's survey,

suggests the it be used as a way to educate the public on an upcoming referendum. The Trust for Public Land is a national not-for-profit that helps communities raise funds, conduct research and planning, acquire and protect land, and design and renovate parks, playgrounds, trails, and gardens.

Fourth Ward Councilwoman Renée Baskerville suggested that the \$18,000 might be better used as start-up money for the fund.

The initiative probably would not make the November election, as the deadline to file a referendum to be placed on the ballot is Aug. 17. A resolution would have had to be passed at the last council meeting. If the town decides to do the survey, it would take a few months to complete.

The funds could already come to good use, Baskerville said, noting that a vacant lot on Orange Road is up for sale for \$231,000. She suggested it be made into some sort of passive park for the Fourth Ward, possibly a bird sanctuary. Township manager Tim Stafford said he would investigate, along with chief financial officer Padmaja Rao, about a possible purchase.

Other towns have used Open Space Funds to purchase old rail lines for rails-to-trails projects. Montclair is looking to be part of the creation of the 11-mile Ice & Iron Greenway, also known as the Essex-Hudson Greenway, which could hold a bike and pedestrian trail running along the former Boonton Line train tracks into Jersey City.

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## **Third-quarter tax payments**

now due by Sept. 5



FILE PHOTO

The township has given property owners another reprieve on paying their third-quarter tax bills, extending the grace period to Sept. 5 from Aug. 25.

“The grace period was extended because of a delay in Essex County certifying the 2017 tax rate,” the municipality announced on its website Thursday.

Property owners may use their “advice only” bill to make tax payments, according to the township.

In the first reprieve, in July the Township Council passed [a resolution](#) that allowed Montclair property owners to have until Aug. 25 to pay their third-quarter taxes without facing any penalties.

Typically, property owners would have only a 10-day grace period from when a quarterly tax bill is due to pay it without being considered delinquent, so for the third-quarter bill due on Aug. 1 the leeway would have been until Aug. 10.

But this year the township had to delayed mailing out the bills because Montclair’s school district, like others statewide, received its revised state-aid figures late. That, in turn, delayed the county from calculating the tax rates.

A township property owner’s tax bill goes toward municipal, local school district and county services and uses.

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**Township gives residents  
until Aug. 25 to pay taxes**



Township Chief Financial Officer Padmaja Rao explained why local property will have until Aug. 25 to pay their third-quarter bills. Rao is seen here at a Township Council meeting in April. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

**By LINDA MOSS**

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Montclair property owners will have until Aug. 25 to pay their local third-quarter taxes without facing any penalties, almost a month past the normal due date, according to a resolution passed by the Township Council last week.

Typically, property owners would have only a 10-day grace period from when a quarterly tax bill is due to pay it without being considered delinquent and the town adding interest to it. So for the bill due on Aug. 1, the leeway would have been until Aug. 10, the resolution says.

But this year the township won't be mailing out the bills for the third-quarterly installment of property taxes until on or before July 21, according to the resolution adopted at the council's conference meeting. A township property owner's tax bill goes toward municipal, local school district and county services and uses.

Under the resolution the third-quarter bill will not be considered delinquent if the township receives payment on or before Aug. 25.

Part of the reason for the bills being delayed is that Montclair's school district, like those across the state, didn't receive its revised state-aid figures until last Friday, according to Padmaja Rao, the township's chief financial officer. She added that Bloomfield also had to delay sending out its tax bills.

"Generally, towards the end of May or beginning of June, we get our tax rate certification from the county," Rao said. "Once we get this certification, we go ahead and send the third-quarter actual bills for printing and mailing. Alternatively, we can send out the estimated bills but administratively we prefer to do actual bills for the third quarter and not wait to do the reconciliation in the 4th quarter. Most municipalities do the same as us.

Even though the Essex County Board of Taxation certified the township's tax levy July 6, the municipality "was immediately notified that very day to hold off on sending the bills," Rao said.

The county tax board declined to comment, referring questions to the state Department of Community Affairs. In response, the department forwarded a letter that it sent to municipalities July 14 saying that with final action being taken on the state's fiscal 2018 budget, additional school aid was being given to many school districts throughout the state.

“Boards of education in these communities are being permitted to reconsider their 2017-2018 budgets and may elect to reduce their property tax levies in an amount not to exceed the increase to their state aid,” the letter said.

“District boards of education/boards of school estimate that are receiving increases in aid and seek to apply additional aid toward reducing the school tax levy are being instructed to immediately contact their municipal tax collector and county tax administrator and confirm whether or not the revision and reissuance of tax bills would be fiscally prudent in light of any additional printing and mailing costs borne by the municipality,” according to the letter.

“For those municipalities that have not yet issued final third-quarter property tax bills, if your school district(s) seeks to apply additional school aid toward reducing the school tax levy, the Division of Local Government Services encourages delaying the issuance of tax bills if it is fiscally prudent for the municipality to do so,” the letter says.