



## 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*

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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.