

2/24/05 SADC Meeting Highlights

Program News

Secretary Kuperus announced the formation of a Farmland Preservation Process Review Committee to make recommendations to the SADC on ways to streamline and improve processes to make the Farmland Preservation Program more predictable, efficient and effective, while continuing to ensure accountability to the public. The review committee will examine the county easement purchase, direct easement purchase, planning incentive grant, fee simple and nonprofit programs. Members of the review committee are SADC members Lisa Specca and Andrew Borisuk; Frank Pinto, director of the Morris County Agriculture Development Board, and Kris Alexander, administrator of the Salem County Agriculture Development Board. The review committee is expected to make recommendations within 90 days. Counties will be kept updated on the progress of the committee throughout its review.

Policy/AMP Development

A timeline was outlined for addressing policy issues and the development of agricultural management practices (AMPs). On policy, the Farmland Affordability/Availability Working Group is expected to reconvene in March and identify recommended actions; the Impervious Cover Subcommittee is expected to reconvene in April and identify recommendations for implementation; and SADC staff is expected to recommend a proposed interpretation of residential opportunities on preserved farms at its March meeting, and afterward circulate the proposal for public comment. In AMP development efforts, the equine working group is scheduled to meet in March and recommend AMP changes, with a draft proposal expected to be circulated in April or May. The Agri-Tourism Council is expected to provide final comments by the end of March on an agri-tourism AMP, with an amended proposed rule expected to be re-circulated in April. Rutgers has provided a draft AMP, which SADC staff expects to amend to address municipal site plan concerns and present to the SADC as a pre-proposal in April. Additionally, the SADC is awaiting a revised draft greenhouse AMP from Rutgers.

Funding News

The SADC is required to formally apply to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service for up to \$4.5 million in grants available to New Jersey in 2005 under the federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. SADC Executive Director Susan Craft discussed development of a policy for spending federal funds that would reinforce other federal and state objectives. Priorities, for example, could include using federal funding in the Highlands preservation region, where impervious coverage triggers already exist; in the Pinelands, where landowners have voluntarily accepted such limits; as well as in airport hazard areas, for military installation buffers and for environmentally sensitive properties. The federal funds would be used to fund 20 percent of the easement acquisition cost per farm. The SADC voted to support this policy proposal in concept.

At the SADC's request, the Attorney General's office reviewed the Garden State Preservation Trust Act to determine if language in it precluded the use of federal funds if farms were appraised using other than current zoning. The Attorney General's office provided advice that the intent of the Act appears not to preclude the use of federal funds. This will allow federal funds to be used on farms appraised using zoning, state environmental laws and DEP regulations in effect as of January 1, 2004, as provided for under the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act.

Ralph Siegel, Executive Director of the Garden State Preservation Trust, gave a presentation to the SADC explaining the importance of ensuring timely expenditures of bond funds for open space and farmland preservation – within 36 months of receipt of funding – to retain the tax-exempt status of the bonds.

Secretary/Executive Director Announcements

As part of an ongoing series of meetings with counties, Executive Director Susan Craft met with staff of the Morris and Cumberland County Agriculture Development Boards to discuss their farmland preservation efforts and solicit ideas on ways to improve the program. She also had a similar discussion with the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

Staff has reviewed comments received regarding the TDR Bank Board's proposed new rule that would set forth procedures and standards for granting planning assistance grants, as well as amend the standards for purchasing development potential, issuing matching funds for the purchase of development potential and guaranteeing loans. As part of this review, staff consulted with the Office of Smart Growth to ensure compatibility with its rules. A new proposal is soon expected to be presented to the TDR Bank Board for its consideration.

