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Lt. Gov. Dr. Dale G. Caldwell

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Garden State Preservation Trust



Saving New Jersey's Open Spaces, Historic Places and Farmland

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CERTIFICATION OF CHAIRMAN OF GARDEN STATE PRESERVATION TRUST

I, Alex Rivera, certify that the attached copy of the minutes of the Garden State Preservation Trust is a true and correct copy of the substantial minutes of the May 28, 2026, meeting of the Trust.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex Rivera".

Alex Rivera
Chair

May 28, 2026, GSPT Meeting Minutes

- **Chairman Rivera called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM.**

- **Reading of the Open Public Meetings Act Notice**

- **Roll Call**

Greg Romano - present
Laurie Sobel - present
Ryan Feeney - present
Elizabeth Dragon - present
Charles Roohr - present
Glenn Ceponis – present
Alex Rivera - present

- **Review of Executive and Closed Session Minutes of October 28, 2025**

Glenn Ceponis made the motion to approve. Seconded by Charles Roohr.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes
Laurie Sobel - yes
Ryan Feeney - yes
Elizabeth Dragon - yes
Charles Roohr - yes
Glenn Ceponis - yes
Alex Rivera - yes

Motion passes.

- **Chairman's Report**

Chairman Rivera said he has been very pleased with the communication between DEP and GSPT under Commissioner Potosnak's leadership. And that to his understanding, Executive Director Everett has also had very productive conversations with SADC regarding some of the legislative activity towards the end of Governor Murphy's term. In essence, things are going pretty good right now at the GSPT.

- **Executive Director's Report**

Mr. Everett mentioned the need to keep the report brief to get the minutes to the Governor's Office and a funding package together before the end of the fiscal year. He mentioned that in terms of housekeeping, he wanted to thank Dan Harris for his service on the GSPT after his recent resignation. Mr. Everett said that he wasn't exactly sure when Mr. Harris started on the GSPT as he was here before Mr. Everett got here. Mr. Everett mentioned that Mr. Harris has a pretty robust day job, which probably factored into the resignation, and perhaps he had some conflicts. But Mr.

Everett wanted to publicly thank Mr. Harris for his service to GSPT and noted there were now two open board seats.

Mr. Everett wanted to introduce Azeem Chaudry, who is an associate counsel with the Governor's Office and GSPT's new GAU rep. He's done a fantastic job communicating with us on various ongoing issues. So welcome, Azeem. And sitting in for DAG Jeff Padgett today is DAG Samantha Guzman, which Mr. Everett said he wanted to thank for filling in today. The other housekeeping item Mr. Everett mentioned, based on the last GSPT meeting in the Fall, is with respect to Greg Romano's idea of having multiple resolutions so that Laurie Sobel, who has a conflict, can participate in voting. So regarding Middlesex County matters, you'll now see an "a" and a "b" resolution. The "a" in the resolution denotes those projects outside of Middlesex County, meaning the rest of the state other than Middlesex County. And the small "b" designation on the resolutions relates to all of those projects within Middlesex County and/or its municipalities. Not every resolution requires a bifurcation because some of these projects go directly to the landowner, such as the case with SADC stewardship grants. So that's why the agenda looks pretty robust in terms of number of resolutions.

Lastly, Mr. Everett wanted to make note of the state auditor's office agreeing to take on an audit, stating that when he first got to the GSPT, he noticed there hadn't been an audit of CBT funds since they commenced in 2016. Mr. Everett stated that when he met with the state auditor's team last week, they promised to be very thorough in looking not just at the financial components, but also the performance components. Mr. Everett noted he provided them with every audit that had ever been done of GSPT and its agencies going back in time. It's been so many years since Green Acres was audited but SADC did have an audit in 2023. He mentioned they're going to get started next week and hoped that the agencies will work with them because they are going to contact them and perhaps request a desk in the agency offices to facilitate conducting their file review.

- **Open Session**

- A. Resolution #26-001(a): Green Acres Local and Nonprofit Open Space Acquisition, Park Development, and Stewardship Project Funding for FY 2026 (for counties and municipalities located outside of Middlesex County)

Cecile Murphy, Chief of Local and Nonprofit Assistance for Green Acres, gave an overview of their FY 2026 funding round. She provided some highlights of some changes they've implemented since the previous round, such as applicants now being able to apply for both an acquisition and a development project instead of having to pick between the two. Also, it used to be that there was only certain parts of the state nonprofits could do park development projects in. Now it's statewide. She said they also adjusted their development grant percentages. In response to feedback that they received from rural areas of the state that struggle to fund park improvements, they increased the grant percentage so that all municipalities now get 25%.

Ms. Murphy also highlighted ongoing efforts to improve responsiveness and outreach and shifted their

timing this year in response to local government requests. Green Acres held five well-attended information and Q&A sessions.

Ms. Murphy mentioned two premium categories of grant funding. The first is completely inclusive playgrounds (CIPs), the pilot program for which ending last year. Starting this round, the CIPs were folded into the regular park development application. The second premium category is Green Acres' ongoing focus on environmental justice; they continue to provide additional grant funding for projects located in or easily accessible from overburdened communities subject to adverse cumulative stressors, and that's the "ACS-OBC term." She stated that as you can see from the map, ACS-OBCs, which are shown in the dark blue, are found in every county in New Jersey so Green Acres tends to get projects in ACS-OBCs all across the state. They're proud that 56% of our awards that they're proposing this year are located in those ACS-OBCs, including 60% of their stewardship and 72% of their park development projects.

Ms. Murphy detailed that they received 129 funding requests from 122 applicants, which includes new applications and supplemental funding requests for open projects. She stated 104 of those were local governments and 18 were nonprofits and as usual, the funding requests were much higher than available funding, which led to a funding round cap for projects this year. The funding cap base awards were \$900,000 for acquisition projects and \$750,000 for park development. In total, they are recommending over \$90 million in awards to 102 projects and their awards cover every county in the state, which is exciting.

Chairman Rivera thanked Cecile and applauded Green Acres for their efforts to make the application process easier, move along a little bit faster, and increase public engagement. He asked about unfunded projects - if there were a particular reason they didn't receive funding. Ms. Murphy stated that there were two main categories of unfunded projects - projects that were ineligible and some were incomplete, likely due to time constraints.

Glenn Ceponis stated that he was pleased to see grants specifically dealing with historic properties and would like to see more moving forward.

Laurie Sobel mentioned he is still new to GSPT meetings and had a question about matching vs. non-matching grants. Ms. Murphy stated that the vast majority of their grants are matching grants, but for urban aid projects, which normally get a 75% grant, if they qualify under one of the premium categories - either they're doing a completely inclusive playground or the project is located in an ACS-OBC - then the grant percentage gets bumped up to 100%; those 25 percentage points bring it into the realm of a non-matching grant at that point.

Greg Romano made the motion to approve. Seconded by Glenn Ceponis.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes
Laurie Sobel - yes
Ryan Feeney - yes
Elizabeth Dragon - yes
Charles Roohr - yes
Glenn Ceponis - yes
Alex Rivera - yes
Motion passes.

B. Resolution #26-001(b): Green Acres Local and Nonprofit Open Space Acquisition, Park Development, and Stewardship Project Funding for FY 2026 (for Middlesex County and municipalities therein)

Greg Romano made the motion to approve. Seconded by Charles Roohr.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes
Laurie Sobel - abstain
Ryan Feeney - yes
Elizabeth Dragon - yes
Charles Roohr - yes
Glenn Ceponis - yes
Alex Rivera – yes

Motion passes.

C. Resolution #26-002: State Agriculture Development Committee State Direct Easement and Fee Simple Acquisition Funding for FY 2026

Matt DiStaulo, Fiscal Manager for SADC, presented SADC's Fiscal Year 2026 appropriation request. He stated they always like to start with a slide showing their preservation progress over time; they've reached 250,000 acres and 2,900 farms, which is halfway to their goal of 500,000 acres. He noted the total public investment between all levels of government has been \$1.95 billion, and the state itself has contributed \$1.28 billion of those funds. He said progress had slowed down prior to the adoption of the statewide formula value, which has doubled the number of applications submitted this past year. The formula has led to an average of 74% of unrestricted market value, which is up 21% up from what they were able to offer under the traditional process. [The additional value is attributed in large part to the] natural resources value.

He said while the SADC is in the beginning stages of this new era, they're also looking towards future initiatives on the horizon, the obvious one being the Woodlands Program. The legislature provided the

agency a tight deadline and they're working towards developing the regulations as quickly as they can but are still figuring out how that program will fit in the bigger puzzle alongside farmland preservation.

Mr. DiStaulo said that another component [of a more robust SADC acquisition initiative] is offering 80% cost share for the nonprofit partners, which is already offered for county and municipal partners. Two bills were introduced in May that should provide parity with the other partner programs allowing the same for the nonprofits. And they think they're going to see an increase in acquisition similar to the other programs that they've been seeing since the beginning of the formula.

He said SADC would also like to expand the stewardship program by increasing its scope. They've put some small changes in motion already and others are being thought up and developed. They've recently amended the [soil and water conservation] grants to increase cost share eligibility across the board. And they've also leveraged new agreements with soil conservation districts for them to provide technical support to the landowners. And they're focusing on ag viability with regards to equipment and facility improvements, and are thinking up other ideas as well. So nothing's set in stone yet, but they are trying to figure out the best way to support the industry in ways that they haven't in recent years.

Mr. DiStaulo mentioned the primary drivers of non-ag development tend to be warehousing, renewable energy projects, housing, and AI data centers as they look to expand within New Jersey and he highlighted some examples where farmland was lost in these areas. But Mr. Roohr said that with the formula value, they are often able to compete with developers. Mr. DiStaulo also mentioned SADC's fee simple acquisition program [as yet another way to compete with developers].

Mr. DiStaulo mentioned that since the GSPT was created, their funding has increased. The early corporate business tax years were a little bit more meager than the previous bond funding but SADC did average \$89 million in CBT funds between 2022 and 2025. And then that dropped down to \$66 million for this year's request. But we did want to mention that they withheld \$54 million to have enough money to allocate towards the Woodlands program once those rules are ready and will better be able to anticipate need. Mr. DiStaulo then summarized their current funding request, which includes money for acquisition as well as a full allocation of stewardship funding of 4%. And they also have \$5.5 million in admin funding that was separate from this request and not part of the GSBT approval. With the GSPT, they're asking the number highlighted in yellow, which is \$72.76 million, which includes \$60.89 million in new funds and a reallocation of prior year funds totaling \$11.87 million. When you include the admin funding, the total appropriation would be \$78.26 million. And just mentioning again that an additional \$54 million is withheld for the Woodland program. So this year's approach for allocating funds included a focus on reprogramming older money from the municipal PIG program, and part of that justification was, as Jeff mentioned, the audit that we had from the Office of Legislative Services. They made some observations on some SADC balances that were sitting with limited activity, and they recommended for us to move that money to areas with more activity.

Chairman Rivera asked a question about the stewardship request, stating that it's been in the news about how the fluctuations in temperature have affected crops. He wanted to know if there is there anything that would that would have supported protecting these crops and the role of stewardship projects generally in supporting the resilience of farmers to climate change.

Chuck Roohr mentioned that there's [currently] not a practice in there that would directly mitigate frost protection. But he heard from Rutgers that apparently one of the best, if not the best way to protect for tree fruit and blueberry protection from frost is overhead irrigation. And that irrigation in general is one of SADC's main projects in the soil and water cost share program. Climate change wasn't something the rules had in mind when they were developed but the stewardship grant program on the books is something we can refine with Jeff's help - different forms of equipment and practices that would benefit agriculture and also benefit the environment.

Chairman Rivera asked if there were any questions or comments from the Board and Elizabeth Dragon asked about amending the nonprofit program to include 80% cost-share, wondering if currently only have local governments have this authority to which Chuck responded in the affirmative.

Greg Romano asked about the revitalized the fee simple program noting that in New Jersey, if farmland goes up for sale, it's very rare for a farmer who's just going to buy it for ag purposes to be able to afford that. So the fee simple program is an important part of keeping those kinds of properties in farming but he was wondering if the formula value might reduce the need for the fee simple program. Chuck noted that it would probably reduce the number of applications due to the formula potentially being a better deal financially. Mr. Romano also inquired about the 3% administrative component being awarded to non-profits and asked how that was calculated and Mr. Roohr responded it was based off of the total project cost (i.e. land value).

Laurie Sobel asked if the woodland management program is anticipated to be a state acquisition program without county and local contributions to which Chuck Roohr responded that they have to write the rules but are anticipating that at least in the first year or it is going to be primarily a direct easement program so that we can work out the kinks before the towns and counties decide if they want to jump in and take on their own woodland applications.

Elizabeth Dragon made the motion to approve. Seconded by Greg Romano.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes

Laurie Sobel - yes

Ryan Feeney - yes

Elizabeth Dragon - yes

Charles Roohr - yes

Glenn Ceponis - yes

Alex Rivera – yes

Motion passes.

D. Resolution #26-003(a): State Agriculture Development Committee Municipal Planning Incentive Grant Funding for FY 2026 (for municipalities located outside of Middlesex County)

Laurie Sobel made the motion to approve. Seconded by Greg Romano.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes

Laurie Sobel - yes

Ryan Feeney - yes

Elizabeth Dragon - yes

Charles Roohr - yes

Glenn Ceponis - yes

Alex Rivera – yes

Motion passes.

E. Resolution #26-003(b): State Agriculture Development Committee Municipal Planning Incentive Grant Funding for FY 2026 (for municipalities located within Middlesex County)

Greg Romano made the motion to approve. Seconded by Elizabeth Dragon.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes

Laurie Sobel - abstain

Ryan Feeney - yes

Elizabeth Dragon - yes

Charles Roohr - yes

Glenn Ceponis - yes

Alex Rivera – yes

Motion passes.

F. Resolution #26-004: State Agriculture Development Committee Nonprofit Grant Funding for FY 2026

Glenn Ceponis made the motion to approve. Seconded by Elizabeth Dragon.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes
Laurie Sobel - yes
Ryan Feeney - yes
Elizabeth Dragon - yes
Charles Roohr - yes
Glenn Ceponis - yes
Alex Rivera – yes

Motion passes.

G. Resolution #26-005: State Agriculture Development Committee Farmland Stewardship Grant Funding for FY 2026

Elizabeth Dragon made the motion to approve. Seconded by Greg Romano.

Roll call vote:

Greg Romano - yes
Laurie Sobel - yes
Ryan Feeney - yes
Elizabeth Dragon - yes
Charles Roohr - yes
Glenn Ceponis - yes
Alex Rivera – yes

Motion passes.

- **Board Member Comment**

Chairman Rivera asked if there were any more board member comments and Chuck Roohr had a question for Jeff about the audit, asking what kind it would be. Jeff responded it would be both a performance and a financial audit and would recommend areas for improvement that the agencies could respond to.

- **Public Comment**

Chairman Rivera asked if there were any comments from the public. Julia Somers, Executive Director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, just wanted to thank Jeff, who invited her today, which is the first time she ever attended a GSPT meeting and found it absolutely fascinating. She wanted to receive copies of the two presentations today if possible.

Frank Pinto, a consultant to landowners, noted that he's never seen more landowner interest in farmland preservation in the 30 plus years he has been involved with it than with the new formula value and wanted to congratulate everyone. He also wanted to know if the Green Acres project list was public information and Cecile Murphy said it was, that they would post on their website in the coming week.

Jason Howell, Public Lands advocate with the Pinelands Alliance, noted that there is a 1,900-acre property in Atlantic County, Mullica Township, that was essentially blocked by DEP from becoming a Green Acres application because of some concerns about unexploded munitions from it being a former military facility. He noted there's a similar facility that existed at what is now Estelle Manor County Park in Atlantic County, which is a very popular county park. He'd like to see DEP and Green Acres re-engage on the 1,900 acre site since there is a willing seller.

David DeFrange, member of the State Board of Agriculture and Chairman of the Urban Agriculture Committee, talked about the challenges of urban agriculture related to Green Acres and wanted to ascertain if Green Acres is amenable to some possible rule changes. For example, their stance on not permitting agricultural structure on urban parks. Elizabeth Dragon said that she would be happy to have that conversation. Cecile Murphy noted that Green Acres' mission is recreation and conservation and community gardening definitely falls under that definition. And they have funded community gardens for years. Urban agriculture, that is a profit-making enterprise, it's a commercial enterprise, and therefore does not fall under the definition of conservation and recreation. So that is not something we would fund, but we are happy to talk about the details anytime.

Ashley Kerr, State Policy Director for the New Jersey Farm Bureau, said she wanted to chime in on urban agriculture. She mentioned the Farm Bureau has a subcommittee of urban ag. producers and wanted to note that the majority of them are not-for-profit. What they're seeing as the main distinction is that a lot of them run on grants and most of what they do is food security and education type of work. So a lot of the discussions that have evolved over the last year is the difference between more traditional producers who are farming for profit versus their urban agriculturists who really are doing so in the nonprofit space. So she wanted to clarify that and also wanted to thank everybody at GSPT and SADC for their hard work.

- **Closed Session**

Chairman Rivera noted there were no closed session items.

- **Adjournment**

Charles Roohr made the motion. Seconded by Greg Romano. All in favor - motion passes. Meeting adjourned at 2:13 PM.