

# The Value of Landscape Conservation in the Mid-Hudson Valley

An introduction to the full report, to be released December 2017

**The problem** Nowhere in the New York metropolitan region have conservation efforts been as successful over the last century as in the Hudson Valley, arguably the birthplace of the modern environmental movement. Over time - and through the efforts of numerous committed groups and concerned citizens - hundreds of thousands of acres have been permanently protected as farmland, forest and other natural habitats.

The conservation of open space and the protection of natural resources, such as drinking water, reliably rank near the top of priority lists for the region's citizens. As recently as 2015, a survey of New York voters overwhelmingly indicated support for enhanced conservation funding prior to Governor Cuomo's and the New York State Legislature's steps to increase the budget of New York's Environmental Protection Fund in 2016.

But the general feeling of goodwill around open space protection conceals a multi-faceted tension between supporters and local municipalities, whose strapped budgets leave them fighting to protect every remaining source of revenue. This tension is certainly felt in the New York metropolitan region and specifically in New York State where a property tax cap limits the amount that municipalities can increase tax revenues. Against the backdrop of fiscal crises at the municipal level, some municipalities have gone so far as to review and question the tax-exempt status for land conservation-focused nonprofit property holders in their communities. Some local officials regard these organizations as placing demands for services on communities without offering commensurate support for providing them.

Land-preservation nonprofit organizations, however, maintain that their property-tax exemptions are essential to their ability to succeed and continue acquiring more land and managing it. They also argue that the preservation of land has positive effects on the local economy, on communities and on natural ecosystems that outweigh any lost government revenue.

In addition to tension between local land trusts and municipalities, a historic "town-country" divide between the Hudson Valley and New York City persists today, largely rooted in past and current issues of open space and land use development including land ownership and limits to growth in drinking watershed areas, rights to drinking water, and concerns about overuse of protected land, amongst others.

Each of these tensions threaten to undermine efforts to effectively manage and protect open space and reflect an underappreciation of its value, including the numerous and synergistic local and regional benefits.

Open space protection should not be viewed as a cost imposed on one part of the town or region for the benefit of the other. Rather it is a shared commitment to clean air and water, healthy lives, beneficial habitat, local sources of food and

region-wide economic activity. And as the effects of climate change worsen, open space protection also translates to stored floodwaters, captured carbon and cooler communities. Put another way: 1) local communities and their residents benefit from protected open space in and around their community, protected and maintained by government and non-profit managers; 2) New York City benefits from the open space and farmland protected in the Hudson Valley; and 3) the Hudson Valley benefits from its proximity and relationship to New York City. All of these interrelationships serve to form a virtuous cycle that should be invested in and promoted.

To date, open space protection in the Hudson Valley has largely been a story of success. But with more people and jobs in the region over the next 25 years, there will be increased pressure on land, air and water. If we are to continue to benefit from the synergies of protected open space and ensure future lands are protected, we will need to raise awareness of the value of protected open space and make and improve state and local policies and practices that ensure that protected land improves the sustainability and quality of life of the region's residents.

**About the project** This project was an in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis carried out by Regional Plan Association and The Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz. Together, the team took an independent look at the costs and benefits of open space protection, including the costs of tax exemption and reductions of preserved land, while researching the direct and indirect environmental, economic, quality of life and stewardship benefits that land protection provides to surrounding communities and the greater region. To help consider the value of open space, a series of build-out scenarios were conducted in three communities in the study area.

The project examined both benefits and costs of preservation. In particular, the costs of tax exemption and reductions of preserved land were measured, resulting in recommendations for local municipalities and New York State to ensure that the benefits and costs of preserved land are balanced with the fiscal needs of the communities.

The project and its results inform Regional Plan Association's Fourth Regional Plan as a subregional analysis of the importance of protecting open space, critical to the entire region's health, prosperity, equity and sustainability. It also aims to present a new way for land trusts, local and state government, parks managers, businesses and average citizens to measure the benefits that protected open space provides, to help inform decisions around additional open space protection, management and use

