



## The League of Women Voters of Delaware

### **POSITION STATEMENT: We support full funding of \$9 million for open space and \$10 million for farmland preservation.**

State law enacted in 2001 requires that \$9 million be budgeted annually for open space preservation and \$10 million for farmland preservation, the money coming from the Realty Transfer Tax Fund. These amounts are investments, not hand-outs. For fiscal year 2016 the Governor requests \$3 million for each department. Last year these two departments received only \$2 million each for land preservation.

The Open Space program is administered by DNREC. DNREC usually prefers to buy open space outright so that the public can use the land. Prospective properties are graded on a scale based on location, utility, value, likelihood of development, etc. So far over 56,000 acres of open space have been preserved by DNREC in this manner, mostly purchased fee simple.

The Farmland Preservation program is administered by the Department of Agriculture. If a farm meets certain farming standards the farmer may offer his development rights for sale to the state. The greater a discount he agrees to offer on these rights, the greater likelihood that the state will purchase them. Since 1997 116,223 acres of farmland have been preserved; this acreage comprises 808 easements.

Economic benefits of preserving open space and farmland:

- Community services for **agricultural land** cost the community **\$.35** for every tax dollar which farmers pay to the community. Community services for **residences** cost **\$1.16** for every tax dollar which the homeowner pays to the community. Costs for providing public services continue over time, usually increasing, overwhelming the short-term benefit of the realty transfer tax.
- U.D. study shows that 80% of money expended for farmland preservation goes back into local economy for purchase of farms and farm equipment.
- Farmland easements purchased last year from farmers by the state were just 30% of the appraised value of those easements in the state's farmland preservation program. Delaware has a backlog of farmers applying but has limited funds for acquiring development rights.
- Tourism is state's 3rd largest employer. Recreational hunting, fishing and boating in 2011 directly & secondarily generated a combined contribution to Delaware's economy of \$1.16 billion and supported 9,684 jobs that year. (See *Outdoor Delaware, winter, 2014, p.5*)
- Agriculture is the largest industry in Delaware. In 2008 the total economic contribution of all categories of agriculture in Delaware was \$7.95 billion and supported 30,000 jobs that year. <http://ag.udel.edu/deagimpact/AgInDeEconB.pdf>
- Because State funds have diminished over the last few years, fewer federal matching funds go to Delaware. Matching funds from the Feds leverage state dollars. All the federal grants these folks apply for are done on a competitive basis. If state dollars are lacking our Natural Resources and Agriculture Departments can't even apply for federal funds.

Other important benefits of preservation:

- We must save the land now or it may be forever lost to development.
- Treasured "viewsheds" are preserved.
- In the case of open space, opportunities to recreate are increased.
- Preserving farmland preserves a way of life.
- Natural lands adjacent to waterways serve as buffers from storms and help protect land from flooding.