

# THE FRIENDS OF WORCESTER

P.O. Box 545, Worcester, PA 19490  
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Spring 2008



## Message from the President

On behalf of Friends of Worcester, I want to thank all who responded to our annual appeal. The significant increase in your support this year tells us that you rely on FOW to preserve open space and protect Worcester's historic heritage. In response, we are starting a new section in our newsletter, called "Eyes on the Issues." In it, we will spotlight issues of particular interest to township residents.

Many of you also responded to FOW's survey (on the web at friendsofworcester.org). You told us your concerns about the loss of open space and historic buildings in our township, and about the increase in development and its attendant traffic, noise, and lights. FOW was founded 12 years ago by Worcester residents to address the threat of inappropriate development in our community. This is not a new trend for Worcester – over the years, residents have come together at various times in our township's history to support planned growth and open space in keeping with our rural heritage.

Around Montgomery County, Worcester is referred to as the "hole in the doughnut." Maps of the county show an area in the center that is much less developed than its neighbors -- this is Worcester Township. While adjacent townships have been overbuilt with housing projects, strip malls, and office or industrial parks, Worcester continues to be a community distinguished by farms and woodlands. This condition is no accident. Worcester has always been committed to retaining its rural heritage. Former supervisor Russell Place is fondly remembered by long-time residents for constantly defending Worcester against proposals that threatened the character of our community.

Development pressures are not new to Worcester. What has changed is the limited number of building possibilities elsewhere. This fact has intensified developers' interest in the remaining available space – "the hole in the doughnut." However, Worcester's residents have made it clear that we don't favor an increase in development. In 2003, when the county-wide open space bond issue was on the ballot, 83% of Worcester's voters approved this initiative.

Worcester has grown from about 3000 residents in the late 1960s to approximately 9000 today. The majority of these residents still want to live in a green, rural community, whether they are long-time residents or newcomers who moved here for the "country" atmosphere. FOW is committed to supporting this vision and to preserving our working farms and historic landscape, for this generation and for the generations to follow. 🌱

## The Choice Is Yours!

If you are reading this newsletter, you are probably keenly aware of the degree to which development and commercialization are changing the face of our community. In 1992, Worcester had 3535 acres of developed land (44% of the township) and 6021 acres of undeveloped land (56% of the township). Since the founding of Friends of Worcester in 1997, our population has grown from approximately 5000 to about 9000, an increase of 80%. During the same time, the amount of wooded and agricultural land (undeveloped land) has fallen to 3831 acres. This means that of the 10,773 total acres of land in the township, only 38% remains undeveloped. Only 1344 acres, or 12.5% of the total acreage, are protected open space and public lands.

Since 2000, 416 new homes have been built on 600 acres, adding 1121 new residents to our community. This makes Worcester Township one of the fastest growing municipalities in Pennsylvania and one of the most threatened remaining "green" townships in the 40-mile radius of Philadelphia. The resulting pressure on our roads is apparent to any driver, especially during rush hour traffic.

In response to residential growth in this township and Lower Providence, the Methacton School District has had to build two new elementary schools and renovate another. It has made major additions to the high school and is proceeding with plans to build a new middle school and renovate another. [The effect of this development is still being measured on groundwater for wells and runoff for storm-water.](#) Ironically, this wooded, country setting and its associated quality of life are one of the main reasons for the appeal of the township to people seeking to live here. Our ongoing challenge is to balance the demand for housing with the protection of our now semi-rural environment.

Throughout our organization's history, Friends of Worcester has tried to walk the narrow line between economic growth and preservation of our rural heritage. Our efforts have been directed at monitoring township planning and

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educating our residents on issues that we believe threaten the larger **issues** of long-term quality of life. FOW has argued forcefully for thoughtful, planned development within the guidelines set by the Worcester Comprehensive Plan and has actively sought funding sources in the community, county, and state which could provide support for the protection of open space.

Several years ago, Worcester residents were invited to a public forum to identify important resources in our community. Open space and scenic, rural views were two areas of great importance to residents. In November 2003, Worcester’s voters approved a county-wide referendum to finance a \$150M, 10-year open space program by a margin of 83%, one of the highest in the county. It is clear that Worcester residents consider open space to be an integral part of our community.



Worcester Township (dashed outline) is the “hole in the doughnut” in an otherwise heavily populated area. Gray-shaded areas represent higher residential population.

With the forward-looking leadership of our Township Supervisors and the support of committed local landowners, here are some of the results of our efforts over the past 15 years:

- Heebner Park
- Zacharias Creek Trail connecting Evansburg State Park and Heebner Park
- Over 700 acres of permanently preserved farmland, woods, and fields
- Over 600 acres of publicly owned land (the majority in Evansbug State Park and Peter Wentz Farmstead)
- Coming soon – a township park at Heyser Field in Fairview Village

One thing to keep in mind as you consider this information — by the time you see the surveyor transits on a piece of land, it’s already too late. The time for action was when the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors approved the builder’s plans. The results of decisions made a year ago are being seen now.

As citizens, we don’t often get a chance to have a direct impact on the decisions that our elected representatives make and which ultimately affect our lives. This is one of those opportunities. You can strongly influence the unique quality of the community in which you live now and in which your children will grow up. You can pay close attention to the issues that confront your home town.

Attend and speak out at Board of Supervisors’ public meetings. Support organizations that seek to continue community traditions, such as the Worcester Historical Society, Peter Wentz Farmstead, the Farmer’s Union Horse Company, and the Friends of Worcester. Make sure your voice is heard at this critical time in Worcester’s long, 275-year history. Look at the communities around us and witness the consequences of unplanned growth. **It’s your choice!** 🌱

## What Worcester Residents Want To Know About Property Taxes

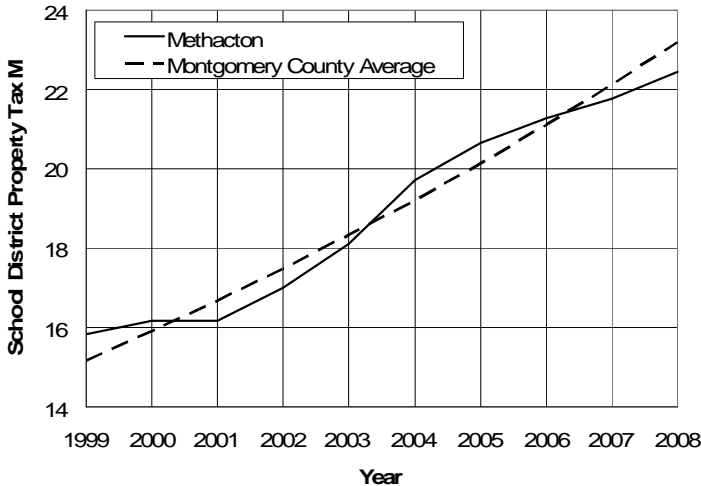
It’s a safe bet that property owners everywhere are thinking: “My property taxes are too high!” And here’s their next thought: “What are my elected officials doing about it?” We would all like some relief from high property taxes. And what can be done? Let’s look at how property taxes are set.

Our “property taxes” are really three separate taxes – Worcester Township taxes (municipal taxes), Montgomery County taxes, and school district taxes. Property taxes are based on an assessed value that is set by the Montgomery County Board of Assessment; assessed value is currently around 50% to 60% of market value.

Townships can set their own property tax rates. Worcester Township’s property tax rate is 0.05 mills, which is lower than 58 of the 61 municipalities in Montgomery County. The county-wide average for township property taxes is 2.8 mills, and the rates in neighboring townships – Whitmarsh, Whitpain, Lower Providence, Skippack, East Norriton, Towamencin, and Upper Gwynedd – are **all** higher than Worcester’s. Worcester Township property taxes on a home assessed by the county at \$300,000 are only about \$15 a year!.

Montgomery County’s property tax rate is set by the county and is the same rate for all property owners in the county. The county tax is about 10% of total property taxes in Worcester, so a house assessed by the county at \$300,000 pays \$750 to the county.

Not surprisingly, school taxes account for the bulk of the property taxes we pay – they are almost 90% of the total property taxes in Worcester. Townships have no direct control over school taxes, which are set each year by the local school board. Property taxes are the chief source of funding for public education; state and federal contributions are relatively small. You can see from the chart that Methacton School District’s taxes have consistently been near the average for Montgomery County. We are far from having “high” school taxes relative to other communities in our area. To name a few, Skippack, Cheltenham, Springfield, and Lower Salford all have higher school taxes than Worcester.



Property taxes are calculated by multiplying the total property tax rate (school taxes, county taxes, and township/municipal taxes) times the assessed value of the home. Remember, the township does not set assessed values — this is done by Montgomery County. A 3000-square-foot house on 2 acres in another township may be assessed lower than a 3000-square-foot house on 2 acres in Worcester due to the perceived difference in **desirability**. This is simply the reality of a basic principle of real estate – Worcester is a **desirable** location, and Methacton schools are consistently among the top performing schools in the region.

***New development in Montgomery County has consistently failed to make property taxes go down!***

Clearly, townships have no direct control over the school taxes we pay. Nevertheless, some may claim that encouraging more high-end residential and commercial development will “increase our tax base” and thereby lead to lower property taxes for everyone. They argue that in Worcester, high-end houses will generate more dollars in property taxes than it will cost to educate the children who will live in those houses. They also claim that attracting more commercial development will generate “free” tax dollars because there are no additional school children to educate. These arguments might sound attractive, and they might seem to make sense. However, **data**

**collected by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development show that new residential and commercial development in Montgomery County communities has consistently failed to make property taxes go down!**

Why? Why does the appealingly simple argument that increasing the tax base will lower property taxes prove to be false? The reason is clear: new residential development places additional demands on our schools. **Larger populations require more schools.** A new 4-bedroom house in Worcester adds 1.5 students to our school system, and a 5-bedroom house adds 2 new students, according to guidelines followed by school districts and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Every time 15 new high-end homes are built in Worcester, another new classroom is needed! Where will we find these additional classrooms? Our schools are already operating at or near capacity; some are already using modular classrooms to handle the demand.

In recent years, Worcester has approved several new residential subdivisions with high-end homes that sell for prices far higher than the average for Montgomery County. Some people argue that these expensive properties actually pay more in school taxes than it costs to educate the children who live there, and therefore this “desirable” development should be encouraged. But what has actually happened? Despite the construction of many high-end homes in Worcester, our school district has just approved building a new middle school to handle this “desirable” growth!

The cost of building new schools is not included in the annual cost to educate a student in the Methacton School District. When our schools run out of classroom space, every taxpayer in the district ends up paying for the necessary new construction for years to come, with higher property taxes. **When new schools need to be built, property taxes will be increased to cover that cost .**

***What about commercial and office/ industrial development?***

It might seem that nonresidential development can increase our tax base, and therefore reduce our school property taxes. School taxes in every school district in Montgomery County have risen an average of almost 5% every year over the last 10 years, even though some of these communities have aggressively increased their commercial and industrial development during that time. The municipalities with more commercial and industrial development than Worcester also have a much higher municipal tax rate than we do, to pay for all of the additional services required by those developments. **Commercial development has never been successful in lowering property taxes in Montgomery County!**

This is not to say that we should not encourage an appropriate scale of commercial and office development in our existing villages. The Comprehensive Plan provides for controlled non-residential development in our existing villages. These strategies are intended to manage growth in our community, not to provide property tax relief.

Township officials cannot control school taxes. However, it has been demonstrated many times that preserving land saves taxpayers money in the long run. This is something that our elected officials can act on. The costs of new development, whether residential or commercial, have far-reaching effects on a community. Attracting more commercial and residential development in the hopes of lowering our property taxes will actually have the opposite effect and should have no place in Worcester Township's policies. With uncontrolled development, what was once a peaceful, rural community becomes congested, noisy, polluted, and unappealing. At some point, residents realize that the place they chose to live no longer exists. 🌱

## Once it's gone, it's gone forever!

### Eyes on the Issues



As our President has promised, FOW will be keeping an eye on the issues in the township which can affect open space and our rural heritage. Many of these issues are updated regularly on our website, [friendsofworchester.org](http://friendsofworchester.org). Proposals for most subdivisions and land developments activities are shown on the "Township Maps" page of our website.

Here are the issues so far this spring—

#### ***Haines Conservation Easement on Hold***

In December, long-time resident Cindy Haines donated a conservation easement on her 14-acre farm to the Conservancy of Montgomery County. The easement is intended to preserve two historic buildings on the property, a circa-1718 house and a pioneer fort that may date from the 17th century. It will also protect the water quality of the headwater stream and pond on this small farm, which was once part of one of Worcester's large, productive farms for which our township was locally famous.

In recognition of the value of this easement, Worcester Township pledged its financial support toward the cost of the donation. However, the township was forced to put this action on hold in response to complaints from neighbor Jim Phillips, whose wife, Mary Grace Sparango, vice president of Sparango Construction Company, has filed a lawsuit to overturn the easement, claim-

ing that the company's right of first refusal to purchase the property prevents the donation of a conservation easement on the land. A pre-trial conference for this lawsuit is scheduled for early April.

#### ***Worcester Farms Land Development (Worcester Golf Course)***

Proposal: By conditional use, develop 24 homes clustered on the golf course's 55.9 acres on Green Hill Road, with approximately 28 acres of open space; private water and community sewer.

The February 20<sup>th</sup> monthly meeting of the Board of Supervisors marked the conclusion of the conditional use hearing for this proposal. Under Worcester's conditional use ordinance, if the applicant proves that the proposal meets all requirements, the Board of Supervisors must grant approval. The meeting was well attended by many residents who will be both directly and indirectly impacted by this development plan.

At the March 19<sup>th</sup> Board of Supervisors meeting, the board explained several reasons why the applicant had failed to meet the requirements of the conditional use ordinance. First, the proposal called for a community-wide sewage treatment system (also called a package plant), which is not consistent with the township's DEP-approved Sewage Facilities Plan. That Plan calls for on-lot sewage systems in this portion of the township. To modify the Sewage Facilities Plan would require a lengthy and expensive (to the township) process that would require both county and DEP approval.

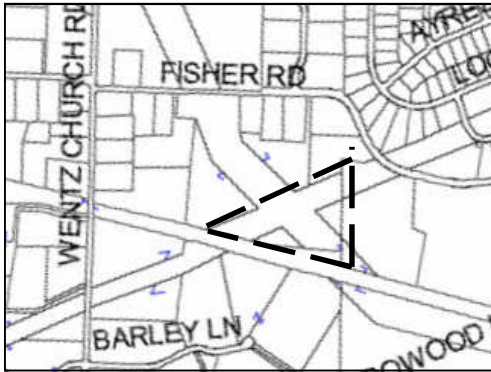
Second, the proposal did not meet the ordinance's requirements for layout of the open space. For these reasons, the Board of Supervisors denied the conditional use application. The landowner has the option to appeal this decision, submit a new development proposal under the current ordinance, or leave the golf course as is.

#### ***PECO Generating Substation***

Proposal: Build an electricity routing substation, including two "ring buses" (a rectangular cluster of poles 20 to 30 feet high), three transformers (three-sided enclosures with approximately 30-foot-high concrete walls), clusters of circuit breakers (approximately 20 feet high), a control building, and four to six lightning masts (approximately 60 feet high). A security fence will surround this equipment.

Last November, after months of public involvement, PECO announced that it had chosen Site A for this substation. This is the 9-acre area owned by PECO and located between Wentz Church and Fisher Roads, where

several PECO lines already intersect. The construction of this substation is not subject to township zoning and land development ordinances, but it must meet DEP and township requirements regarding wetlands and stormwater management.



Site of proposed substation off Fisher Road.

PECO has begun the process of evaluating the site to determine issues such as road access, screening, stormwater management, and the appearance of onsite buildings. Site plans and elevations are posted on FOW's website as they are released by PECO. PECO has formed a Community Advisory Group to solicit feedback on these types of issues from impacted residents. FOW was invited to send a representative to this committee.

The project is now in the design and engineering phase, with construction targeted to begin early in 2009, pending approval by the Pennsylvania Public Utilities Commission. PECO anticipates filing its application with the PUC later this spring.

### ***Pennsylvania Turnpike Expansion***

Proposal: Widen the 10.5-mile section of the Northeast Extension between Lansdale and the Mid-County Interchange, from four lanes to six lanes, plus a 26-foot median strip.

Punxsutawney Phil may have prognosticated 6 more weeks of winter; however it is just a rumor that it was the sight of bridge construction that helped cast a shadow for him on February 2nd. Revised design plans for the Northeast Extension Total Reconstruction and Widening project from the Mid-County to the Lansdale Exchange are still being finalized.

The Kriebel and Bethel Road bridge replacement projects were started earlier this spring. The Turnpike Commission is expected to release revised design plans later this spring. FOW and Worcester Township have raised concerns over stormwater runoff, access roads, sound barriers, and property takings. In particular, FOW has been vigilant about asking questions to insure that the proposed emergency access roads will not be a precursor to slip ramps in a later design phase. 🤖

### **Why Does FOW Ask for Your E-Mail?**

When we communicate with you via e-mail, we can reach you faster and also save on postage costs. This allows us to direct 100% of your contribution toward our outreach and education programs.

If you give us your e-mail, here's what you get —

- E-alerts of important issues to be addressed in public meetings, such as the Zoning Hearing Board
- Announcements of events that are of interest to Worcester residents
- Agendas and minutes of all FOW meetings

We will not give, lend, or sell your e-mail to any other individual or organization, or use it for any purpose other than FOW communications!

## ***SUPPORT* FRIENDS OF WORCESTER**

FRIENDS OF WORCESTER is a non-profit organization made up of new and long-time residents of the township. All involved residents share an appreciation for the rural quality of Worcester and a common concern for its future. FOW seeks to influence that future. All funds received are used to support our efforts to preserve open space, maintain the rural lifestyle of the community and keep our neighbors informed through our minutes and newsletters. All contributors receive our monthly agenda and minutes as well as notification of important township events.

|          |               |                |                    |       |
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**All residents, contributing or not, are always welcome at FOW monthly meetings.**

**Please send your tax-deductible contributions to:**

**FRIENDS OF WORCESTER  
P.O. BOX 545  
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The official registration and financial information of The Friends of Worcester may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll-free, within Pennsylvania, 1-800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.



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### Farmers' Union Horse Company Events

#### Horse Shows

Saturdays — May 17 & Sept. 13

Heyser Field, Fairview Village 8 am—3 pm

#### Flea Markets

Saturdays — April 12, June 7, July 19, Aug. 9, Sept. 13

Worcester Township Community Hall

1031 Valley Forge Rd, Fairview Village

8 am—2 pm

Info for Horse Show/Flea Market 610-222-0171

### **FRIENDS OF WORCESTER OFFICERS**

Kim David - President (610-584-1805)

Rob Hayes - Vice President (610-584-0371)

Wini Hayes - Treasurer (610-584-0371)

Barbara McMonagle - Secretary (215-257-1436)

### **Join us at these upcoming meetings and events**

Meeting: Wednesday, May 14  
7:30 p.m., Bean Road Nursery, corner  
of Bean & Whitehall Rds

Horse Show: Saturday, June 7, 8 am – 2 pm  
Heyser Field, Fairview Village

### Worcester Township Public Meetings

**Community Hall, 1031 Valley Forge Rd, Fairview Village**

#### Board of Supervisors

Monday 8 am: May 5, June 2, July 7, August 4

Wednesday 7:30 pm: April 16, May 21, June 18

#### Planning Commission

Thursday 7:30 pm: April 10 & 24, May 8 & 22,

#### Zoning Hearing Board

Tuesday 6:30 pm: April 22, May 27, June 24, July 22

#### Supervisors/Planning Commission Joint Meeting

Monday 9:30 am: June 2, September 8



## **68<sup>th</sup> Annual Farmers' Union Horse Show Saturday, June 7<sup>nd</sup>**

**All Day ~ Heyser Field**

**Valley Forge Road, Fairview Village**

**behind Worcester Township Community Hall**

**Featuring FOW's fabulous Food Tent!**

Info for Horse Show/Flea Market 610-222-0171