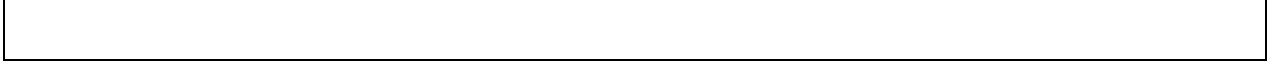


**A Comprehensive Plan and Legislative Agenda  
for Supporting Smart Growth and Open Space Preservation  
in Whitemarsh Township**

**Recommendations to the Whitemarsh Township  
Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission**

**Submitted by  
Whitemarsh Township Residents Association  
August 14, 2001**

For further information concerning this Policy Brief  
contact  
Dr. James G. McGann, President  
Whitemarsh Township Residents Association  
mcgann1429@aol.com



### **Whitemarsh: A Natural Haven Close to the City**

Anyone traveling through Whitemarsh Township can easily appreciate the extraordinary natural resources we are surrounded by and enjoy daily. These open spaces, parks, woodlands, historic sites and buildings, streams, and farmland provide a welcome antidote to the residential developments and commercial strip malls that make up the rest of our region.

As a community, we benefit in many ways from these natural resources and open spaces:

- They make an important contribution to our quality of life by providing recreational areas and scenic viewsheds.
- They distinguish our community from surrounding townships and give Whitemarsh a “competitive edge” in attracting potential residents and businesses seeking a more quiet, country atmosphere.
- They help reduce noise and air pollution and traffic congestion.
- They help control flooding by providing critically important recharge areas.
- They keep taxes lower and prevent additional burdens on emergency and other public services that come with development.

However, these assets which make Whitemarsh such a desirable place to live and work will rapidly diminish in a climate of expanding, unrestrained land development. On behalf of our members, who are residents of Whitemarsh Township, the WTRA presents this Policy Brief as an expression of our concern regarding what we believe are deficiencies in the vision and structures guiding planning and growth in the Township. But we also present this document in a spirit of cooperation, believing that only through the active participation of the community in the planning process, will the Township be able to mobilize the necessary support to address the challenges ahead and realize the kind of future we all want for ourselves and those who follow. Of all the resources available to us in Whitemarsh, the most threatened is our open space because so much of it still lies in private hands and can therefore be sold for development. Once commonly considered “land that hasn’t yet been developed,”

open space is now understood by communities across the country, including the citizens of Whitemarsh, as a primary asset – a precious, non-renewable resource that needs to be preserved and protected or it will be lost forever.

Over the past few years, the real value of open space to communities has been demonstrated by the number of innovative tax appropriation strategies and bond issues that have been approved around the country, and here in our region as well, to raise public funds for its preservation. In November 2000 alone, at least 140 open space initiatives passed in 31 states, creating more than \$6 billion in new funding to purchase or otherwise protect open space.

### **Time for a New Paradigm**

The current draft of the Township's Comprehensive Plan (CP) is a good starting point, but it offers few resources to help the community withstand the pressures that are likely to be exerted on our remaining open space over the coming years. Although the CP does incorporate certain strategies recommended in the 1996 Open Space Plan, it falls short of embracing what is needed: a strongly visioned, well-integrated, implementable system for managing growth and preserving open space. Simply put, the current draft lacks the proper emphasis, specificity and proactive orientation that is needed to assure that open space preservation – not development – is a major priority of the Township. Unfortunately, the draft CP is based on an outdated paradigm that focuses on planning for growth rather than planning for quality of life and preservation.

This is not to say that the WTRA is endorsing a no-growth policy for the Township. That would be unrealistic and not in the long-term interests of the community. However, growth should no longer be viewed as an unalloyed good or inexorable force that cannot be controlled. Yes, it is a fact and we must be prepared to deal with it. But through a clear vision, proper planning, and proactive legislative action, we can ensure that our Township controls the forces of change, making them work for us rather than against us. The WTRA believes the Township needs to adopt a more rigorous approach to managing growth whose *first and foremost* objective is to sustain our community's quality of life. Recent national polls and market surveys by developers indicate that the public's notion of what constitutes quality of life has changed. Quality of life is no longer

predominantly associated with convenient access to shopping, entertainment and transportation. Instead, it is associated with uncongested traffic flow, reliable and effective public services, and access to open space and recreational areas. And each of these issues is directly impacted by how well a community manages its growth and protects its natural resources.

Given the growing public desire to preserve open space and the innovative preservation strategies being pursued by townships near and far, it is evident that Whitemarsh has fallen behind the curve in responding to what is clearly a sea change in public priorities. Simply stated, the land policies of this Township need to be re-evaluated and updated to reflect a new, more relevant paradigm – one that aggressively endorses and systematically implements the principles of smart growth and proactive preservation. Therefore, the WTRA strongly urges the Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission to take immediate steps to incorporate this new paradigm into the current draft of the Comprehensive Plan and the legislative agenda.

### **Open Space: Whitemarsh Township's Competitive Edge**

Maintaining high standards when it comes to managing growth and protecting a community's quality of life has real economic as well as environmental and lifestyle benefits. Poll after poll has tracked the public's growing dismay over suburban sprawl and the desire to keep their communities safe from it. Those communities that successfully keep sprawl in abeyance will be the ones that become increasingly attractive as time goes by and precious natural resources are lost elsewhere. We have nothing to fear from taking a strong stand against uncontrolled growth and implementing the necessary policies to preserve and protect the quality of life that first attracted us to Whitemarsh. A recent issue of *Planning Commissioners Journal* includes the following quote from Edward McMahon, one of its regular columnists:

*The best places to live, work, and visit are those places that are willing to uphold their standards in the face of pressure to allow lowest common denominator development... Successful communities understand that when they say no to development that is contrary to the long-term health*

*of their community, they will almost always get better development in its place.*

A community that offers its residents access to open space is not only more attractive, it is also more likely to enjoy enhanced property values. And not just for the old stately homes on large properties. According to a study cited in *Growing Greener*, a publication of the Natural Lands Trust, new homes on smaller lots in clustered developments with views of open space often command as much as homes on larger lots boxed in on all sides by other houses. A monograph published by the National Recreation and Park Association, entitled *The Impact of Parks and Open Space on Property Values and the Property Tax Base*, documents the findings of research conducted over a period of 150 years, nearly all of which confirm the economic benefits of parkland and open space to homeowners and municipalities.

As Whitemarsh becomes ringed by larger and larger circles of commercial and residential development, the competitive advantages that accrue from preserving our open space will become increasingly clear.

### **Strategies for Smart Growth and Open Space Preservation**

On behalf of our more than 1,200 constituents, the WTRA recommends that the Board of Supervisors pursue strategies aggressively and simultaneously on several fronts to ensure that the assets we enjoy today will survive well into the future. Some of these strategies were presented in the 1996 Open Space Plan but have yet to be implemented. Others are missing entirely from any public planning documents. The ramifications of not having these safeguards in place have been made readily apparent in the recent surge of development projects in our Township, including Eagle Lodge, The Masonic Home, Miquon, Wainwright, The Hill at Whitemarsh, and Creekside Commons. The absence of proper regulatory and institutional instruments has left the community with little or no recourse to control these forces. This must change.

The WTRA strongly urges the Township to move as quickly as possible to implement the following recommendations so that Whitemarsh residents can be assured that future growth in the Township will be the kind our community welcomes – not the kind we have to endure.

The strategies set forth below reflect a comprehensive, systematic approach to advancing our community goals. They underscore the need for Township officials – and the public – to think in larger, more interconnected terms. Growth and preservation are the two sides of the coin of quality of life. We need both, but they must be kept in balance by a larger vision.

However, vision by itself will not get us where we want to go. We must give feet to our vision by creating and rigorously upholding a comprehensive, practicable set of laws and standards that support our long-term goals. The recommendations that follow incorporate and give proper emphasis to many ideas that have been advanced in the past, by the Township's Open Space Committee and by local organizations such as the Miquon Area Preservation Society, Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association, Morris Arboretum, and Natural Lands Trust. Valuable time, money and energy have already been expended in devising practical strategies for preserving open space. We make no claim to inventing the wheel. There are many good wheels available to us; it is time we made use of them.

It is our expectation that the Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission will move quickly to respond to and act on these recommendations because they represent the expressed desires of the community and the best long-term interests of the Township.

As a first and immediate step, we urge the Township to establish a Smart Growth and Open Space Task Force to (1) oversee the integration of the proposed recommendations into the Comprehensive Plan and to (2) guide development of a legislative agenda for enacting the recommendations contained in this Brief.

**Recommendation # 1: Incorporate Proposed Recommendations into the Comprehensive Plan.**

Revise the draft Comprehensive Plan (CP) so that the spirit and letter of that document communicate that preserving open space and promoting smart growth are major priorities of the Township. Furthermore, the WTRA urges the Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission to incorporate the specific recommendations contained in this Policy Brief and attached analysis of the current draft CP as they formulate the final draft of the Plan. The WTRA stands ready to work in partnership with the Township to see that these recommendations, and those submitted by other concerned organizations, are addressed in the final Plan. *(Editor's note: the WTRA's Comprehensive Plan Analysis is available on the website.)*

**Recommendation # 2: Adopt a Set of Land Development Principles for the Township**

The prevailing paradigm reflected in the current draft of the CP and guiding planning in the Township is seriously outdated and presumes that development is always good for a community. It gives deference and emphasis to the rights of developers and landowners at the expense of the citizens of the township. It is the position of the WTRA that this paradigm does not represent current public sentiments about development or the preservation of open space, nor does it serve the long-term economic and social interests of our community. We are not suggesting that the rights of landowners be denied, but we are saying that these rights need to be balanced by the community's interest in preserving its quality of life and open spaces.

As we have stated earlier, the WTRA believes a new paradigm is called for -- one that views development as a force that needs to be carefully managed and thoughtfully guided so that it advances, not impedes, the township's long-term goals and quality of life. As a first step in shifting paradigms, we suggest that the Township adopt a set of development principles that reflect the community's goals and provide a new framework for land use and zoning decision-making. Offered on the next page is a set of principles developed by the WTRA. We urge the Board of Supervisors to incorporate these principles, or their equivalent, into the Comprehensive Plan and all relevant policy frameworks.

***DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES***

For a development project in Whitemarsh Township to be approved, it must meet the following standards.

*The Quality Of Life Principle*

A developer must demonstrate that its project will not cause the deterioration of any element of the Township's existing infrastructure, its natural environment, or its historic resources. When seeking special exceptions, conditional use and/or changes to zoning, the developer must demonstrate the compelling public benefit/purpose to be derived from said exceptions, variances and changes to the Township zoning code.

*The Public Good Principle*

A developer must demonstrate that the project addresses the perceived needs or goals of township residents as articulated in the Whitemarsh Township Comprehensive Plan, Township-approved community surveys or community needs assessments, or public referenda.

*The Open Space Principle*

A proposed development must be designed to realize the maximum percentage of contiguous open space and where possible add to the ribbons of open space in the township.

*The Smart Growth Principle*

A development proposal must include an analysis of the project's impact, not only on the immediate surrounding area, but also on the Township as a whole, and on the Township's neighboring municipalities.

*The Precedent Principle*

A project seeking exemption from existing Township zoning or ordinances must not set a precedent for subsequent development proposals that will adversely affect the Whitemarsh community.

**Recommendation # 3: Establish an Environmental Advisory Committee and Impact Assessment Process**

The Miquon, Wissahickon, and Whitemarsh Valleys contain a bounty of natural resources that require careful monitoring and stewardship. Local and regional developments threaten this fragile and vanishing ecosystem. Failure to properly manage the impact of development on the environment can have a direct and devastating impact on a community, as the tragic loss of lives and massive property damage from recent flooding remind us.

Communities have addressed this issue in a number of ways. Some require environmental impact assessments when major subdivisions or other kinds of land developments are being proposed. We feel that such a requirement provides a crucial element of checks and balances that must accompany thoughtful growth – a way for developers to assure communities that residents’ core values are respected and addressed.

Other communities have formed Environmental Advisory Committees (EACs) to advise township officials “on matters dealing with the protection, conservation, management, promotion and use of natural resources” within the municipality. Currently, more than 30 townships have EACS. Lower Merion’s has been in place for more than 15 years.

Specifically, EACs identify environmental problems and recommend appropriate solutions and programs to protect and conserve the municipality’s open space and natural resources. An advisory group comprising legal, environmental and policy professionals, community members, public officials and other relevant experts could serve as a valuable resource in helping the Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission fulfill these important public responsibilities.

#### **Recommendation # 4: Create Public Mechanisms and Encourage Private-Sector Strategies to Preserve Open Space**

Whitemarsh is both blessed and challenged by the comparatively high value of its real estate. This situation is favorable for the Township's homeowners but not so favorable for the Township itself if it wants to purchase land in order to preserve it.

- Establish an Open Space Fund. One strategy that municipalities have pursued to help them acquire endangered land is an Open Space Fund. Having such a fund enables a municipality to attract federal, state and local resources currently available for open space initiatives and to respond quickly when opportunities arise to purchase land for which other resources may not be available. Creating an Open Space Fund would be an essential step in enabling Whitemarsh Township to address its preservation agenda. It would also underscore the seriousness of the Township's commitment to open space – both in the eyes of the community, who may be asked to contribute toward it, and in the eyes of other government entities who may be approached to provide matching funds.

The WTRA recommends that the Township take the necessary steps to create an Open Space Fund so that federal, state and local money can be earmarked for preserving critical land.

Since 1987, according to data provided by the Greenspace Alliance, 30 townships in the five-county Philadelphia region have raised nearly \$408 million in public money for open space preservation through bond referenda and various tax assessment mechanisms. In the past three years or so, New Britain Township in Bucks County has been able to protect 1,500 acres using public monies raised specifically for open space. There are a number of mechanisms for financing the acquisition of open space. Among these are:

- Bond Issues: The municipality asks voters to approve a special bond to raise money for open space preservation. This has been done successfully in many nearby townships, including Lower Makefield (\$15 million in 1/98 and 11/98), Doylestown (\$3.75 million in 6/91) and Whitpain (\$10 million in 10/99). Depending on the size of the community and the term of the bond, the average household assessment is usually quite affordable. In Upper Makefield Township, the amortization costs on a \$15 million, 20-year bond issue amounted to \$400 per household per year.
  
- Tax Appropriations: Many communities have approved increases in their real estate taxes, sales taxes or earned income taxes to raise open space funds. Others have dedicated real estate transfer taxes. Aspen, CO, for example, approved a sales tax increase over the next 25 years totaling \$57 million for open space acquisition. In April 2000, New Britain Township approved a 0.125% earned income tax estimated to produce \$345,000 per year. In November 1997, Milford Township approved a 2-mill increase in the real estate tax, which will produce around \$40,000 per year. Other townships, including some on Long Island, have even borrowed against anticipated income from these new taxes to purchase land that has become unexpectedly available.

While the burden falls differently on different members of the community depending on which kind of tax is levied, and this would have to be carefully considered before Whitmarsh moved forward with such a plan, the point is, communities are not resisting such initiatives because they understand that protecting open space works to their long-term economic, social, and environmental benefit.

- Tap Other Public Resources for Preservation Funds: There are an increasing number of government resources that will provide support to local municipalities for open space preservation. Many townships in our area have received grants from the Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and

Natural Resources' Community Conservation Partnerships and Growing Greener Programs to purchase land or obtain technical assistance to help them with planning. This Spring, the Natural Lands Trust received more than \$2 million from the state's conservation program to protect more than 1,585 acres of land in Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery Counties. Two other state resources, the Farmland Preservation Program and the Bureau of Farmland Protection, are resources for funds to acquire important agricultural areas.

- Encourage Estate Planning, Donations of Land, Conservation Easements and Other Private-Sector Strategies to Preserve Land: A good portion of Whitemarsh's open space rests in private hands. By taking a more proactive role in educating landowners about charitable and other techniques for setting aside funds, land, conservation easements, or insurance bequests, the Township could achieve the preservation of many acres without having to expend public funds. The WTRA recommends that the Board of Supervisors examine various ways to design Township policies regarding open space so that they support and encourage residents to make creative use of existing estate planning techniques. We also urge the Township to be more proactive in informing landowners about the options available to them for preserving or donating land by distributing and otherwise making available materials and resources that can assist residents interested in pursuing such options.

The Board of Supervisors in Pennsbury Township, Chester County, did just this in 1995 when it took the innovative step of publishing and distributing a guide for landowners describing the benefits of conservation planning and limited development. This guide encourages landowners, if they are planning to develop their land, to consider developing it in a conservation-minded manner. It describes the principles of limited development and the steps that need to be taken to achieve it, and it points out the advantages of such a strategy for both the landowner and the community.

The WTRA believes that there is enormous untapped potential within our community that could help the Township achieve meaningful preservation of open space. The current issue of *Greater Philadelphia Regional Review*, published by the Metropolitan Philadelphia Policy Council, lists Whitemarsh as one of the lowest-taxed municipalities in the region. According to the most recent census from which such data is available, Whitemarsh is also an affluent community, ranking in the top five Montgomery County communities for residents making over \$100,000 per year.

In addition, the large public turnouts at recent Planning Commission and Supervisors meetings, and the recent zoning petition signed by more than 700 residents are all indications that there is a rising groundswell of concern to save what open space remains in Whitemarsh Township. While Whitemarsh is not an exclusively affluent community, all the facts cited above point to the likelihood that a large portion of residents, given adequate information and education on the issues, would support an initiative to raise public funds for land preservation.

### **Recommendation # 5: Create a “Green Infrastructure” to Guide Land Use Planning**

Pennsylvania’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) in collaboration with the Natural Lands Trust, Inc. (NLT) developed a conservation process that strongly advocates a strategic approach to planning for growth, beginning with a number of “visioning” strategies to help guide communities and their public officials in future decision making.

- Community Growth Audit: In its book on community planning entitled *Growing Greener*, the NLT and DCNR recommend that communities begin future planning by creating a map that projects the impact of current zoning laws. The map provides the public and township officials with a graphic visualization of the future they are creating under their present land use policies and encourages them to consider whether this is the future they want. It also helps the community identify particular areas that may require priority attention and different zoning so as to deflect undesired consequences.
- Establish a “Green Map”: The Whitemarsh Township Comprehensive Plan contains only the most basic environmental mapping, which is presented piecemeal, making it difficult to get a sense of the full scope of our environmental resources.

The DCNR and NLT recommend that communities develop a Map of Potential Conservation Lands to help with future planning. Such a map would identify our primary natural resources (parks, woodlands, open space, etc.) and areas that need to be permanently protected or “green lined,” e.g., wetlands and slopes over 25%. It would also identify secondary conservation areas such as groundwater recharge areas, animal habitat and travel corridors, greenways, trails, and scenic viewsheds. This map would then serve as a visual guide for future zoning and future development decisions.

Furthermore, we strongly recommend that the Township incorporate the standards and principles outlined in the *Growing Greener* handbook into the Comprehensive Plan.

## **Recommendation # 6: Strengthen Zoning to Support Smart Growth and Open Space Preservation**

Whitemarsh Township's land use regulations, zoning ordinances, and land development and subdivision ordinances do not reflect the most current thinking in development, nor do they incorporate the principles and standards recommended by the NLT and DCNR. While several of the specific ordinances described below are recommended in the 1996 Open Space Plan and in the current draft of the Comprehensive Plan, to our knowledge, none have been enacted.

As an illustration of what can be achieved through progressive zoning, we attach the plans for two Realen Homes developments, one in Bethel Township, Delaware County, and the other being constructed now in Whitemarsh. Bethel Township's ordinances governing what they term R-3 Residential Development Districts incorporate many of the DCNR's *Growing Greener* principles. In the Bethel development, called Garnet Hill, Realen achieved full density allowed under the zoning while preserving over 50% open space simply by reducing lot size to 10,000 - 12,000 square feet. Despite the denser clustering, more than two-thirds of the homes abut some portion of the development's wooded, open space areas, enabling the residents to experience a sense of privacy normally associated only with larger lots.

By contrast, Wainwright, the Realen development off of Flourtown Road, includes almost exactly the same number of houses but, to meet the minimum requirements of Whitemarsh's AA-residential zoning, they are on 30,000 square-foot lots. The Township's current ordinances governing AA-residential subdivisions do not allow clustering or include requirements for open space. As a result, this property is being developed in conventional fashion, with "wall-to-wall" lots covering nearly every square foot of available space and only one entrance and exit for the entire development.

By comparing these two projects – one developed according to the new conservation design principles and the other developed according to conventional design principles – it is easy to appreciate the significant enhancements that can be achieved through enlightened zoning laws and ordinances.

The WTRA recommends, at the very minimum, that the following strategies and standards be implemented to ensure that future developments in Whitemarsh are designed in accordance with the state's recommended conservation guidelines and the community's concern to preserve optimal open space.

- Establish Special Districts to Preserve Critical Environmental Resources: Some of Whitemarsh Township's most valuable open space and natural resources lie along the Schuylkill River, the Wissahickon Creek, and north of Flourtown Road. Establishing a series of special districts and accompanying ordinances governing these areas of prime environmental and historical importance would make it easier to protect them over time and help prevent encroachment by development.

One local example of special districting is Lower Merion Township's "Open Space Preservation District," a zoning overlay created to protect areas of the township deemed of particular significance. Any development over a certain size proposed within the OSPD must set aside 50%-60% for open space. This open space must contain all of the property's significant natural features and cultural landscapes. In addition, the developer must submit a plan for the disposition, use, maintenance, and insurance of all common open space, including any preservation areas.

The WTRA recommends that the Township move to establish special districts or corridors, with the appropriate zoning overlays, to help protect areas with high concentrations of natural resources or open space. At the very minimum, we recommend establishing (1) the Stenton Avenue Corridor, which encompasses Erdenheim Farm, the golf clubs and quarries and (2) a Riparian Conservation Corridor, encompassing the greenways along the Schuylkill River, Wissahickon Creek, and Sandy Run Creek. There are other critical areas in the Township as well that should be evaluated, such as the forested area west of Ridge Pike.

- Increase the Minimum Requirement for Open Space. As a precondition for building to full density, developments should be required to set aside a minimum

of 50% of the project's acreage as open space. Open space set asides are currently only required in clustered developments and these are only permitted in AAA- and AAAA-residential districts. And the current set aside requirement in a AAA-district is only 40%.

- Provide Incentives to Encourage Developers to Exceed the Minimum Set Aside Requirement by allowing increased density for more open space. The WTRA recommends that this be considered as a potential strategy. There should also be a requirement, or incentives or disincentives, built into the ordinance that will motivate developers to create large blocks or corridors of open space rather than small, isolated units, known as "green islands."
- Decrease the Maximum Allowable Impervious Surface Area in New Developments. The existing zoning code should be modified so that the maximum allowable impervious surface coverage is lowered to 40% as a means of addressing the adverse effects of development on the environment and flooding.
- Incorporate a Fee in Lieu Of Rule. A penalty fee should be imposed on developers who do not, or cannot, meet the minimum open space requirement. The monies paid by the developer could then be directed toward the purchase of equivalent open space elsewhere in the Township. Although this strategy is mentioned in the Comprehensive Plan, it is presented simply as something the Township "intends to consider."
- Encourage Developers to Donate Open Space. Develop incentives that encourage developers to donate land to the Township or to designate all or some portion of their project's open space for public use.
- Encourage the Transfer of Development Rights Where Appropriate. If it advances the growth and preservation goals of the community, the Township should encourage and/or permit a property's development rights to be transferred.

Montgomery County, Maryland, has been using the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) as a strategy since the early 1980s. It has successfully preserved 39,000 acres, or nearly 1/3 of its land area, for agriculture and open space, and TDRs were used to protect 75% of this area.

While this strategy is still relatively new and requires careful management to ensure it works to the benefit of all parties involved and advances the community's goals, the WTRA recommends that the Township include it in its inventory of strategies to control growth and preserve open space.

- Incorporate Greater Flexibility into Township Ordinances. The Township should build greater flexibility into its ordinances to allow developers to pursue innovative ways to meet environmental codes and standards. This is an approach encouraged by the DCNR and endorsed in the *Planning Commissioners Journal*. Edward McMahon, a land use planner and regular columnist for this journal, cites a set of guidelines developed cooperatively by developers and environmentalists entitled *Better Site Design: A Handbook for Changing Development Rules in Your Community*. This publication, which can be ordered from the Center for Watershed Protection in Ellicott City, MD, offers more than 20 model development principles endorsed by a wide range of professionals from both "camps."

It is important to remember that developers are not always "bad guys." Many want their projects to have the least impact on the environment as possible. However, the zoning ordinances and regulations intended to protect the environment often end up doing just the opposite. The *Planning Commissioners Journal* cites frequent complaints by developers who have had to default to conventional development designs because township ordinances were too inflexible to accommodate more innovative approaches. Other ordinances seem to work at cross-purposes. According to the *Journal*, one Maryland developer was required to clear seven acres of woodland to mitigate for 3.5 acres of wetland that the development disturbed. Because of strict street

width standards, developers are often required to build wider streets than the development may actually call for or residents even want, thus increasing the impervious coverage and creating more drain-off problems than may be necessary. The same holds true for standards governing road slope or parking lots, which often necessitate the clearing of more land than might be necessary.

The WTRA recommends that, when revising its ordinances, the Township build in sufficient flexibility to allow developers to pursue alternative ideas or approaches that meet the “spirit of the law” and achieve the least environmental impact.

- Enact a Traffic Impact Fee Ordinance. At recent Planning Commission meetings, residents made clear their concerns about traffic congestion in the area. Any development impacting traffic volume on roads and intersections beyond the immediate site should have to pay the Township an impact fee, which could then be used to help fund road improvements throughout the township. Again, while this recommendation is in the Comprehensive Plan, it is presented only as an action that should be “considered” by the Township.
- Implement a Shade Tree Removal and Replacement Ordinance. To control indiscriminate removal and excessive cutting of old growth or healthy trees during development construction, there should be an ordinance that requires developers to account for and protect all critical resources on a site. If for some reason it is not possible to save certain trees, the developer should be required to compensate for them by replanting elsewhere. Such an ordinance will help to preserve the rural character and natural resources of the Township.
- Develop a Greening Strategy for Ridge and Germantown Pikes. Creating the perception of open space is at times the only substitute for open space that has been permanently lost. The negative impact of the significant development along Ridge and Germantown Pikes over the last 10 years can be softened by a

carefully designed and executed landscaping/greening strategy along these important corridors in our township.

### **Summary**

We are mindful that the WTRA is a relative newcomer to the complicated processes of municipal planning. However, we do represent a significant number of Township residents and it is our responsibility to make sure their views are represented to the Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission.

In its Open Space Plan and current draft of the Comprehensive Plan, the Township pays lip service to many of the principles of smart growth and preservation. However, the residents of Whitemarsh want more than static verbal promises. They want action and a plan that proactively and dynamically reinforces their core community values.

Over the past few years, this community has become more aware of the pressures on its remaining resources and the critical importance of protecting them. The Open Space Plan was created five years ago and yet very few of its recommendations have been acted upon. This needs to change. The Comprehensive Plan needs to be revised and realigned to reflect the community's desire to protect its remaining resources and control future growth.

Even more important, the Plan needs to acknowledge the essential role of the public in this revisioning process. It needs to make room for the community at the table, not just in the audience, so that together we can work to shape the framework that will determine the future face and heart of this community.

The WTRA and its membership, among many others in this Township, stand ready and willing to work with the Board of Supervisors or any of its designees to facilitate the completion of a Comprehensive Plan that we can all be proud of, and that will be implemented.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not point out the substantive community benefits that would be realized should the Township adopt a new paradigm for growth and pursue the recommendations proposed herein. Briefly summarized, these are:

- Preservation of open space as well as agricultural and historic resources;
- Reduction of demands on infrastructure and services such as roads, schools, and public safety services;
- More positive response from the community concerning how development is being managed in the township;
- Greater potential for regional cooperation around the preservation of open space;
- Increases in public and private funds from local, state and federal sources for open space initiatives in our township;
- Creation of a innovative public-private partnerships;
- Improved quality of life for current and future residents.

By the very fortune of its location, Whitemarsh is a leader in the diversity and magnitude of its open space and natural resources. By the strength of its commitment and vision, Whitemarsh can also show itself to be a leader in protecting these precious resources for the future.