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February 3, 2011

Attn: Master Plan Comments  
Nassau County Planning Department  
100 County Seat Drive  
Mineola, NY 11501

Dear Planning Committee Members:

The North Shore Land Alliance(NSLA) is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit land trust formed *to protect and preserve, in perpetuity, the green spaces, farmlands, wetlands, groundwater and historical sites of Long Island's North Shore for the benefit of future generations and the protection and enhancement of quality of life.* We have had the pleasure of working closely with Nassau County on both the development and implementation of the 2004 and 2006 Environmental Bond Programs. Lisa Ott, NSLA President and Executive Director, served on the Environmental Bond Advisory Committee for both the 2004 and 2006 Environmental Bond programs and represented Nassau County on the DEC Region 1 Advisory Committee for the 2005 and 2008 New York State Open Space Plans.

The issues facing Nassau County today, as outlined in the Draft 2010 Nassau County Master Plan (Plan), are indeed serious. North Shore Land Alliance very much appreciates the thoughtful analysis provided in this Plan as well as the substantial effort taken to define a path for moving forward toward sustainable economic recovery.

We share the County's concern that *" If the current trend of dispersed development based on uncoordinated land use decision making throughout the county continues, Nassau's potential for a sustainable future may be in serious jeopardy. Unprotected open space areas, which account for approximately 6,000 acres across the County, down from 15,000 acres in 1997, will remain vulnerable to development and the potential of underutilized land in downtowns, along strip malls and on brownfield sites may not be realized."*(Plan Chp.3, p.17)

NSLA is deeply involved with and committed to the protection of the most important open spaces in our community—the natural areas that protect our drinking water, the wetlands that filter pollutants from our beaches and bays, the trees that clean our air and the agricultural lands that nourish our bodies and spirit. We fully acknowledge that a growing economy is a healthy economy and believe that the protection of our natural resources is intrinsically linked to achieving sustainability.

To demonstrate how closely Nassau County's economy is tied to its open spaces, we would like to cite several findings from the recently published [The Economic Benefits and Fiscal Impact of Parks and Open Space In Nassau and Suffolk Counties, New York \(2010\) \(Benefits Study\)](#) authored by the Trust for Public Land, a national conservation organization.

This study demonstrates that Long Island's parks and protected open space are major economic drivers that contribute at least \$2.74 billion annually in economic benefits (\$785 million annually to Nassau County). These benefits are delivered in the following ways:

#### 1) Reduced Cost of Government Services

- *Protecting parks and open space reduces the demand for costly public services. Parks and open space cost local government far less than residential development and vacant lands.*
- *Parks and protected open space add \$5.18 billion in market value to nearby homes, resulting in additional property tax revenues of \$58.2 million a year for Long Island.*

#### 2) Recreation and Tourism

- *Out-of-town visitors to Long Island parks spend \$615 million in the local economy, generating \$27.3 million in sales tax revenues each year.*
- *Residents of Long Island visit parks a total of 464 million times each year, resulting in \$1.48 billion in use value.*
- *Parks yield \$164 million in medical savings costs each year for LI residents by providing opportunity/ access to engage in physical activity.*

#### 3) Government Cost Savings

- *Drinking water can cost ten times more in Nassau and Suffolk Counties where groundwater recharge areas are not protected.*
- *Parks and protected open space reduce storm water management costs by \$23.0 million each year in LI.*

- *Vegetation in parks and protected open space provides \$18.9 million in air pollution removal services each year in LI.*

<b>ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO NASSAU COUNTY</b>	
<b>Enhanced Property Value from Parks and Protected Open Space</b>	
Additional Property Value	\$1,141,100,000
Additional Property Tax	\$17,230,000
<b>Recreation and Tourism</b>	
Direct Use Value	\$691,000,000
Human Health Value	\$73,300,000
<b>Government Cost Savings</b>	
Drinking water protection	Water treatment costs for protected drinking water supplies can be 10x less than unprotected supplies
Stormwater Retention value	\$2,051,000
Air pollution removal value	\$1,555,000
<b>Total Annual Value to Nassau County</b>	<b>\$785,000,000</b>

(Benefits Study – Table 1 page 12)

Parks and protected open space provide a variety of additional benefits which were not measured in this study. Benefits like boosting local economies by attracting businesses and residents, supporting commercial fishing and shellfishing, sequestering carbon, mitigating hazards from hurricanes and storms, stimulating community cohesion and saving energy – all of which will be integral to a healthy, sustainable future for Nassau County.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Plan.

COMMENTS/RECOMMENDATIONS:

INTRODUCTION,

**Statement:** “The large number of properties owned by institutions, non-profit organizations and governments that are not on the tax rolls also contribute to the County’s high taxes.”  
(Plan, Intro. p.3).

**Recommendation:** We suggest that this statement be omitted or corrected to read “The large number of properties owned by institutions, non-profit organizations and governments that are not on the tax rolls have helped to hold taxes in line”.

According to the Benefits Study, residential development (except in second home communities), representing 60% of Nassau County’s land use, requires more in government services than it brings in property taxes – on average \$33,000 per acre per year for Long Island.

If Nassau County was “built out” to maximum density the cost for community services like education, fire, etc. would result in a greater tax burden than we experience today. For more detail please see full Benefits Study.

### **Chapter 3 Land USE, Year 2030 Goal 3**

**Statement:** “Single-family neighborhoods and open space: Increase the total land area designated as open space, parks, natural area or preserve by 1,000 acres (or (1/5 of remaining unprotected open space and environmentally valuable lands).”(Plan, Chp.3, p.1).

**Recommendation:** Increase land protection goal to 2,000 acres or 1/3 of remaining unprotected open space.

While NSLA commends the intention of this statement, we do not consider the proposed goal to be large enough to achieve the sustainability objective set out in this Plan. NSLA would like to challenge the County to increase their protection goal to 2,000 acres or 1/3 of remaining unprotected open space. There are inconsistencies throughout the Plan regarding the amount of open space that actually remains ranging from 5,000 to 6,000 acres. Those inconsistencies should be corrected.

Nassau County residents have long valued their parks and open space, yet until now, we have not understood how much these natural resources are worth to our local economy. The Benefits Study shows that our parks and protected open space are major economic drivers that contribute at least \$2.74 billion to Long Island annually in economic benefits. While no study has been done to calculate the cost of what happens to the natural value of Long Island as private open space and farmland are developed, we can assume the costs will be great, long term and irreversible.

**Statement: Sixty percent of Nassau County's land use is residential, eleven percent institutional, seventeen percent represents open space, parks and recreation and four percent is vacant. (Plan, Chp. 3, Table 3-1, Existing Land Use, Page 4,).**

**Recommendation: Expand the definition of open space to include threatened lands that may not have been considered "open space" previously like golf courses and large lot residential (over 20 acres), many of which lie in Special Groundwater Protection Areas (SGPAs) so key to Nassau County's future sustainability.**

The Benefits Study states "much of the land focus on Long Island has been on the remaining acres of land that are not committed to preservation or development (i.e. open space and farmland). Left out of this discussion are those large tracts of lands (e.g. large estates and golf courses) that potentially could be subdivided and developed. These lands will become increasingly important for land conservation on Long Island as the last remaining undeveloped open spaces are developed or protected." The Benefits Study identifies 9,480 acres of publicly-owned land and 52,100 acres of privately-owned land in Nassau County that fall into this category. While this estimate is not exact as some landowners may not be interested in conserving, developing or subdividing their property it does create a whole new dynamic in planning for a more sustainable future.

Many large lots, golf courses and municipal and vacant lands are located in the SGPAs responsible for the quality and quantity of Long Island's drinking water.

Statement: As the number of acres suitable for development becomes more limited, there is great risk that environmentally sensitive areas such as deep aquifer recharge zones, agricultural lands, barrier beaches, wetlands and marshes will become more endangered. P.51

Nassau County planning policies should make it a priority to preserve the remaining open space in the Special Groundwater Protection Areas (SGPAs).

All of Long Island depends on the underground aquifers for drinking water. It is essential that policies to protect the aquifer are the foundation of all land use decisions. Loss of open space due to development makes it more difficult for rainwater to flow into the ground to recharge the drinking water aquifers and also greatly increases the risk of contamination. It is essential that industrial run-off, pesticides, septic waste and other toxic substances not contaminate the groundwater in these aquifers. The County should use incentives and tax abatement to encourage local practices and zoning that protects critical open space in these areas, as well as encouraging local municipalities to adopt overlay zoning, ordinances protective of natural resources such as steep slopes, wetlands, and trees, and watershed areas.

#### **Chapter 4 Infrastructure: Retrofitting Nassau**

**Statement:** Based on present County-wide ground water withdrawal and recharge conditions, the water demand for a large-scale development is not expected to significantly impact water supply. (Plan, Chp.4, pg. 24)

An average of 44 inches of precipitation falls within the County each year. This amounts to approximately 660 million gallons of precipitation within the County each day. Approximately 341 million gallons of precipitation, slightly more than half, recharges the groundwater system either by infiltrating through the soil in unpaved areas or through recharge basins. Based on an estimated average of 190 million-gallon per day demand in 2010, recharge to the aquifers is significantly greater than the amount of groundwater withdrawn. (Plan, Chp.4, pg. 26)

**Recommendation:**

**The county should use data from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to produce comprehensive water quality reports for Nassau residents and individual water districts. Projections of future water needs and supply must be based on real science, not hypothesis Land use decisions must be based on up-to-date information on water supply and availability, using regional water experts.**

**Statement:** Landscape interventions may greatly reduce water usage and harmful emissions as well as provide shade and buffering for more comfortable and less energy demanding environments. (Plan, Chp. 4, Pg. 47)

The Plan offers several admirable recommendations for “landscape interventions” such as using pervious surfaces to aid recharge and limit runoff, planting native species reducing lawns and retaining woodlands, in order to reduce the need or watering and chemicals,

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Action Plan**

**Statement:** Regulatory controls are one of the primary tools for implementing many of the recommendations of this Master Plan. While Nassau County does not have the power to regulate land use through zoning, it does act in an advisory capacity under New York State General Municipal Law. (Plan, Chp.5, p.3)

The Plan advocates for directing future growth to downtown hubs and protecting existing private golf courses and open space from development through TDR programs which direct growth to appropriate receiving areas. NSLA supports the development of such programs and urges the County to include in TDR programs open space of sufficient size located in the SGPA's.

## Statement: Single Family Neighborhoods and Open Space

**Goal 11. Sustain in Perpetuity the County's Open Space Acquisition Programs through additional funding. (Plan, Chp.5, p.15)**

**Recommendation: Explore a variety of methods for additional funding sources for protected open space including a dedicated tax, additional public bonding (as the economy improves) and or a line item in the County budget. Work with non-profits and other government agencies to leverage conservation dollars spent.**

It would cost an estimated \$500 million or more to protect 1/3 of what remains (or 2,000 acres). Build out, even with the recent recession, is estimated within the next 10 years. If we are to be successful we must continue to make serious efforts to raise public and private funds for conservation.

The Nassau County Environmental Bond Acts, passed by the public in 2004 and 2006 (with a 77% majority), were an important source of funding to permanently protect our critical, remaining open spaces and parks but our job is far from over. And, if you consider Nassau County's thousands of acres of re-developable lands (including 9,000 acres of golf courses threatened with conversion to residential development) as potential open space, our challenge grows even greater.

It will be increasingly important for Nassau County to advocate for more state and federal funding, particularly programs that leverage matching funds as incentives for local action. Nassau County, with its vast coastal and estuary resources, is uniquely positioned to fit into the general "people-centered" direction evolving in Washington. Programs like America's Great Outdoors (AGO), an expanded Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the most recent Farm Bill provide substantial opportunities for future conservation funding. It is also critical that we continue to advocate at the State level for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) which has been a wonderful partner, to date, investing millions of dollars in local parks, preserves and open spaces.

Our natural areas are our green infrastructure. If they remain unprotected the cost to future generations will be significant. Without open land and trees, the quality and quantity of our drinking water is in jeopardy. Nassau communities like Long Beach, Great Neck and Bayville already experience salt-water intrusion which can only be remediated by expensive filtration. Local municipalities have invested millions of dollars in efforts to protect our beaches and bays. Without wetlands to filter pollution from harmful run-off, those investments will grow even greater impacting both taxes and quality of life.

These are just a few of the problems we will face if do not act now to protect our critical open spaces. And, without their protection it will be impossible to achieve a sustainable future.

## Chapter 5, The Action Plan

**Statement: Regulatory controls are one of the primary tools for implementing many of the recommendations of this Master Plan. While Nassau County does not have the power to regulate land use through zoning, it does act in an advisory capacity under New York State General Municipal Law (Plan, Chp.5 p.3).**

The County has the resources to offer advice and help on implementing many of the Plan's zoning recommendations. NSLA is committed to help the County by advocating locally where appropriate for adoption of zoning to protect sensitive open space and drinking water.

**Statement: Growth Areas: Goal 4, Create and manage a GIS-based vacant and underutilized land inventory for public use. (Plan, Chp.5, p.15).**

**Recommendation: Explore agriculture as an economic growth area and institute planning measures and programs that would result in the creation of agricultural districts and /or a formalized farm plan to assist Nassau residents in expanding the local food source/farming.**

Agriculture is an important industry on Long Island. In 2007, Suffolk County had direct agricultural sales of \$288 million and employed 2,240 people. The Long Island Farm Bureau estimates that "agri-business" activity employs over 10,000 people in our region. Suffolk County's farms also attract tourists who spend additional dollars in their local economy. Suffolk County's successful farm program exists because of their early and progressive land protection efforts protecting roughly 13,000 acres of farmland since 1977.

There are currently 126 acres of land being farmed in Nassau County. While the availability of land in Nassau County would prevent it from achieving Suffolk's level of success, there are abundant opportunities to support small farms initiatives, "re-farming" and community gardens on both public and private land. Twenty or more such possibilities have already been identified by interested parties and the demand for locally grown food is stronger than ever which strengthens the basis for economic opportunity.

Land costs are expensive and the incentives created by a Farm Plan and or a land/lease program for appropriate public lands would add greatly to the County's ability to grow the market and provide its residents with safe, healthy food sources.

While we understand that land use decision making occurs at the local level through zoning, it is important for the County to promote a vision that will lead us toward a healthy, sustainable future.

Respectfully submitted,

North Shore Land Alliance