A regular meeting of the Northampton County Council was held on the above date with the following present: John Cusick, President; Margaret L. Ferraro, Vice President; Thomas H. Dietrich; Bruce A. Gilbert; Kenneth M. Kraft; Lamont G. McClure, Jr.; Scott Parsons; Barbara A. Thierry, Robert F. Werner; Frank E. Flisser, Clerk to Council, and Philip D. Lauer, Solicitor to Council.

Prayer

Mr. Cusick led County Council in prayer to open the meeting.

Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. Cusick led County Council in the pledge of allegiance.

Approval of the Minutes

Mr. McClure made the following motion:

Be It Moved By the Northampton County Council that the minutes of the February 21, 2013 meeting shall be approved.

Mrs. Thierry seconded the motion.

The minutes were approved by voice acclamation.

Courtesy of the Floor

As no one signed in under Courtesy of the Floor, he asked if there was anyone from the public that wished to address County Council.

There were no respondents.
Mr. John Stoffa, County Executive, advised the new Archives Building in Forks Township will be dedicated at 4:00 p.m., on April 5, 2013.

Mr. Stoffa read a letter he received from a Northampton County retiree, dated February 26, 2013:

Dear Mr. Stoffa

Thank you for your letter of February 14th. Also thank the retirement board for their kindness.

I am probably the oldest member on the retirement list. I was 101 years old on Nov. 4th 2012. Quite a feat. I surprised myself. Hope you can duplicate the effort.

Mr. Stoffa stated in researching this, he found the woman worked for the Treasurer’s Office for 12 years and retired in 1964 with $50.69 a month and now received $300.40.

Mr. Stoffa advised he asked Ms. Maria Bentzoni, Farmland Preservation Administrator, to appear before County Council to discuss an important issue not only regarding farmland preservation, but open space in particular. He further advised in November of 2004, the voters of Northampton County in a non-binding referendum approved a bond be floated for $37 million to preserve open space that was to go into effect in December of 2004.

Mr. Stoffa provided a document entitled, “County of Northampton Open Space Initiative Funding and Expenditures 2004-2013” (see Attachment #1). He stated the $37 million was to address environmentally sensitive, farmland preservation, County parks and municipal parks. He stated the bond was never floated, but taxes were raised .5 mill instead and as Ms. Bentzoni’s presentation would show the County had done very well under her leadership and that of her co-worker, Ms. Barbara Martucci and the Farmland Preservation Board.
Mr. Stoffa advised he was looking for clarification as to whether the County should stick with the specific numbers of the referendum or continue to preserve as much farmland as possible.

Mr. Stoffa stated he wanted to remind County Council that with the sale of the property on Route 33, there would be an additional $2 million that Mr. Ron Angle negotiated for the County for farmland preservation.

**Discussion and Review of the Northampton County Farmland Preservation Program**

Ms. Bentzoni provided a summary of the funding from the County prospective for farmland preservation (see Attachment #2). She also provided a copy of her power point presentation (see Attachment #3).

Ms. Bentzoni advised when she was putting this presentation together, she went through all her files from the 11 years that she had been in her position and she was amazed how far this program had come, which spoke volumes to the support they received from the County, as well as the past and present Administrations. She further advised if someone approached her and was able to provide her with where, what, when, why, who and how, she could guarantee them some kind of result.

Ms. Bentzoni stated without the consistent funding and support from County Council and the Administration, this program would not be where it was today. She further stated funding for this program started out very small because there was uncertainty as to whether it was going to work. She noted as the interest in the program increased and they began to have success, the County began to continue its support.

Ms. Bentzoni advised during the first 13 years of the program, there was only a part-time Administrator who preserved 30 farms and approximately 3,000 acres. She further advised during year 13 when she began, the County made the Administrator position full time and that was significant in helping the County get to where it was. She noted they have preserved 93 farms and 9,392 acres.
Ms. Bentzoni stated the seven municipalities that enacted a .25 Earned Income Tax were doing great things. She further stated Bushkill Township was leading this effort by preserving farms on their own and open space at a large rate.

Ms. Bentzoni advised the goal was to preserve as much farmland and acreage as possible to keep agriculture stable not only as an economic driver, but as a way to sustain the County’s rural character. She further advised preserving land kept taxes low and required less in services than it used. She noted one in seven jobs in the Commonwealth were in agriculture or related to agriculture.

Ms. Bentzoni stated right now the County had the largest window of opportunity to capitalize on the downturn of the real estate market. She further stated she had more calls from developers wanting to preserve land than in the past, noting some were trying to recoup their losses and some were trying to get rid of their inventory.

Ms. Bentzoni advised the interest in farmland preservation was probably at the highest she had seen it since she started with this program. She further advised the fact the backlog list had been vacated two years running spoke volumes to the program and the dedication of those involved.

Ms. Bentzoni stated when they cleared the list for 2012, she was concerned there would be no applicants for 2013, but when the 2013 application round closed on December 15, 2012, they had 33 applications, 23 of which were new ones.

Ms. Bentzoni advised some reasons for preserving farms were to keep agriculture strong and as a driving force for the local economy, to maintain development as a smart growth option, to lessen the impact on schools, community and infrastructure and to keep the rural character that everyone liked to see and enjoy.

Ms. Bentzoni stated people think that farms were disappearing, but there were more farm stands, more farmers markets and more locally grown produce at the supermarkets. She further stated as larger tracts of farmlands were being lost to development, smaller farmers were rising to the challenge to meet the demands of people who want to buy their food locally.
Ms. Bentzoni advised not only farmers benefitted from this program, but landowners, taxpayers, cities, boroughs, townships, conservancies and other State and Federal agencies.

Ms. Bentzoni stated by promoting something that worked, by taking chances, by forward thinking, always striving to being better and accomplishing more and by keeping the lines of communication open not only with the landowners, but with potential partners was what made this program a success.

Ms. Bentzoni advised in 2010, they began a partnership with municipalities that adopted an Earned Income Tax for open space preservation and those municipalities that contributed funds to the County to preserve farms within their townships, received matching grant monies, but there had to be enough County funds.

Ms. Bentzoni stated in 2011, two municipalities participated providing $1.7 million with the County match being $608,600 and that allowed them to preserve an additional six farms. She further stated in 2012, four municipalities participated providing $1.89 million with the County match being $812,700. She noted this was how the County was able to vacate the list the past two years.

Ms. Bentzoni advised in 2012, when the municipal funds were added to the County’s allocation and sent to the State to be matched, it allowed the County to have a return of $6.6 million which was the largest return in the State.

Ms. Bentzoni stated the half mill tax for open space was what was sustaining farmland preservation at this time so she was urging County Council to keep that money there because they have proven they could use that money.

Ms. Bentzoni showed some photographs of farmers and farms that were taken by Mr. Rick Smith from Nazareth and indicated he would be having a showing of his photographs at the Sigal Museum in the Spring of 2014, which would feature some of the preserved farms.

In answer to Mr. Stoffa’s question as to how many farms have been preserved, Ms. Bentzoni advised to date, there were 133 farms totaling 12,392 acres. She further advised once they preserved the remaining farms that were still on the list
for 2012 and the potential farms for 2013, it would be a little more than 14,000 acres.

Mr. Dietrich stated there had been discussions about putting a cap of $2,000 an acre on farms and since farms were being preserved for approximately $1,400 an acre, he wondered if a cap would harm the program.

Ms. Bentzoni advised it would deter people from preserving farms in the future when rates recover. She further advised the cap was not a fair number because land across the entirety of the County was not equal. She noted when the cap topic came up, the Board discussed it, but opted to take away the second appraisal option which brought the values down significantly.

In response to Mr. Dietrich’s question as to what defined a qualified farm versus an unqualified farm, Ms. Bentzoni stated there was a set criteria that was established by the State.

In answer to Mr. Dietrich’s question as to how many potentially qualified farms, based on the State qualifications, were not benefactors of this program, Ms. Bentzoni advised it was difficult to give a number because it depended on whether the farm was recorded in the local agricultural security area. She further advised if they were, that gave them the eligibility to apply and if they were not, it did not mean it was not a good farm, but the steps were not taken to come into the program process.

In response to Mr. Dietrich’s question as to how many farms were registered in the agricultural security area, Ms. Bentzoni stated she could not give an exact number, but believed there could be at least 900 farms.

In answer to Mr. Dietrich’s question as to whether she was asking for $132 million for these farms, Ms. Bentzoni advised she was asking for consistent funding because they have proven the demand was there.

Mr. Cusick stated he noticed that a large portion of natural features from the $37 million had not been expended so he wondered if the properties that did not meet all the qualifications for farmland preservation could be redirected to the natural features program.
Ms. Bentzoni advised there was a potential for that, but one of the four land trusts had to bring them in or townships could bring in properties that were marginal or borderline on their own. She further advised one of the things they were trying to do because they were not getting large blocks of farms was to look at properties that were in between farmland, open space or natural areas.

In response to Mr. Cusick’s question as to whether the Open Space Coordinator position would be filled soon, Ms. Bentzoni replied they hoped to have a candidate by next week.

In answer to Mr. Cusick’s question as to how the State’s preliminary budget was going to affect farmland preservation, Ms. Bentzoni stated during the last budget cycle, all farmland preservation funding was going to be cut, but the Governor received a backlash from the agricultural and open space communities and the funding was restored. She further stated the funding for this year was increased.

In response to Mr. McClure’s question as to what percentage the 14,000 acres would be of the farmland that was able to be preserved in the County Ms. Bentzoni advised she could not answer because she did not know what was enrolled in the agricultural security area.

In answer to Mr. McClure’s question as to what the percentage would be in relation to the number of acreages of farms in the County, Ms. Bentzoni stated she would have to get back to him.

In response to Mr. McClure’s question as to what would be the ideal percentage, Ms. Bentzoni advised they would like to see 25% preserved throughout the County.

In answer to Mr. McClure’s question as to what dollar amount the County contributed by freezing the property tax rate for preserved farmlands, Ms. Bentzoni stated the Assessment Office would be the entity to provide that information.

Ms. Bentzoni advised she would like to take this opportunity to introduce Mr. Andrew Thierry, who was Chairman of the Farmland Preservation Board and was an integral part of what has been accomplished.
In response to Mr. Cusick’s request for an update on the sale of the Wolf and Bechtel Buildings, Mr. Daniel Spengler, County Solicitor, stated an Agreement of Sale had been drafted for the Wolf Building. He further stated Mr. Ken Mohr, Mohr Management Resources, was reviewing it and then it would be sent to the buyer.

Mr. Stoffa advised the agreement was close to being final and Mr. Mohr was working on a package for the Bechtel Building, noting they have received some inquiries regarding it.

In answer to Mr. Cusick’s request for an update on the Human Services Building, Mr. Stoffa stated Bethlehem Township was going to discuss the County’s request for a designation change at their next meeting, noting they did not foresee any problems.

Guaranteed Energy Savings Act (GESA) Projects

In response to Mr. Cusick’s question as to whether all the GESA projects have been completed, Mr. Steve DeSalva, Director of Public Works, advised the only thing remaining was the installation of the sewer line at Gracedale. He further advised the ground conditions were being assessed and then a schedule would be established.

Refinancing of Bond Issue

In response to Mr. Cusick’s question as to whether a timetable had been established with regard to refinancing the bond issue and adding other projects, Mr. Stoffa stated there was a timetable that he would provide to County Council tomorrow and the plans would be presented within the next three months.

County Morgue

In answer to Mr. Cusick’s question as to whether there had been any discussion with Mr. Zachary Lysek, Coroner, regarding the relocation of the County morgue, Mr. Stoffa advised they have discussed different sites, but there were no final plans.
Authorities, Boards and Commission

Mr. Parsons stated he recently learned there were 26 authorities, boards and commission consisting of approximately 180 members. He further stated he was impressed by the number of people who were taking an active role in County government.

Farmland Preservation/Open Space Advisory Boards Liaison Report

Mr. Parsons advised he attended his first Farmland Preservation Board meeting and it was refreshing to see how they worked together.

Mr. Parsons stated the Open Space Advisory Board will be meeting on Thursday.

In response to Mr. Cusick’s question as to when the applications for the Municipal Parks were due, Ms. Bentzoni replied they were due back by the end of business on March 31, 2013. She further stated they already had five applications for a total request of $460,000.

Lehigh Valley Planning Commission Liaison Report

Mr. Cusick advised the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission population, job and employment survey came out and it was estimated that the Lehigh Valley would gain 200,000 people over the next 30 years.

County Council Clerk’s Report

Mr. Flisser stated the Right-to-Know request for the minutes of the 1996-2006 meetings had been completed, noting it consisted of more than 11,000 pages. He further stated it was done electronically so there were no out-of-pocket expenses.

In answer to Mr. Dietrich’s question as to whether these minutes would now be placed on the County’s website, Mr. Flisser advised since all the documents had been converted that could be accomplished.
Ms. Jocelyn Burroughs, Nazareth, PA – stated she had already spoken to the Nazareth Area School Board about this issue, but she wanted to bring it to the attention of County Council.

Ms. Burroughs advised with the recent gun shootings in the country’s schools, she would like to see the County hire retired or off-duty police officers as security guards at all main entrances to the schools, as well as volunteers to be security guards.

Ms. Burroughs stated the County should take some action to stop children being traumatized or taken to Court because of possessing a toy gun, having a drawing of a gun, pretending to shoot a gun or talking about a gun.

Adjournment

Mr. Gilbert made a motion to adjourn.

Mrs. Ferraro seconded the motion.

The motion to adjourn passed unanimously by acclamation.

Frank E. Flisser
Clerk to Council