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Somerset looks to link its green areas

Planners welcome environmentalists' input on building corridors

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Somerset County officials yesterday found themselves on the same path as environmentalists, enthusiastically endorsing the extension of "greenways" along waterways, ridge tops and rural areas.

The county planning board welcomed Garden State Greenways, a collaborative effort of environmental agencies and nonprofit groups showing how existing parks, preserved farms and historic sites could be linked by more of the corridors.

Eileen Swan of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, who led the joint venture, demonstrated an interactive database that allows

counties and municipalities to map opportunities in their areas.

Building greenway corridors already is a priority for Somerset's park commission and county planners as they target properties with the county's open space tax fund, said Planning Director Robert Bzik.

The initiative infuses current data from digital geographic information systems to "produce a fresh look" at where the county could or should protect land, he said.

"This is going to be an invaluable tool" because live mapping data is available on the Green State Greenways Web site, www.gardenstategreenways.org, Bzik said.

"The best type of preservation is connected, because the more you fragment it, the less useful it becomes from a human perspective and for biodiversity," Swan said.

A member of the Highlands Council and former Lebanon Township mayor, Swan said the initiative doesn't intend to tell towns or counties what properties to preserve, but merely to provide comprehensive information. But by working together, communities can increase the effectiveness of their preservation efforts, she said.

She demonstrated features such as maps showing Somerset County's development from 1972 to 2001. Numerous data layers — everything from wetlands to prime

soils, species habitat and sand dunes — can be added or subtracted to provide varied composite maps.

For example, Swan said she already has worked with Duke Farms in Hillsborough to identify bird habitat around the 2,704-acre estate, as well as a logical greenway connection to the Sourland Mountain Preserve several miles to the south.

Zeroing in on another farm area in Hillsborough, Swan displayed information about the property, then an instant map showing possible corridors connecting it to other open space.

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