

# **“What Makes a Good Application”**

Notes & Presentation Text (slides 16-19)

Thomas Kline, Chairman

2006 Morris County Open Space Trust Fund Committee

## **Introduction**

I have been a member of this Committee for three terms. During these terms, the Committee has presided over a hundred applications, so I have some insight into the process from the committee’s perspective. As Kinnelon Councilman I also submitted five applications on behalf of the borough, so I have some insight from the sending side of the equation. Of those five applications, three were funded and two were not, so I have a little experience on what not to do as well.

## **Successful Applicants**

Being positive is perhaps the single greatest trait of successful applicants. Positive applicants exude enthusiasm and their enthusiasm becomes infectious to the Committee. Be careful though, enthusiasm is like drinking champagne, a little bit is OK, too much and it begins to get sloppy. Being positive is being sure! Positive applicants also exude confidence in their responses to the questions that will be put to them during the grant process.

Being positive is being so committed to your open space proposal that you yourself are convinced that the project you are proposing is the best open space project...ever.

As we have learned, there are three parts of the process where an applicant can be positive. The first part is the application itself. The second part is the site visit. The third and final part is the Final Presentation to the Committee.

Positive applicants start with a plan. Neutral applicants make up the plan as they go along. Negative applicants have no plan.

A starting plan does not need to be complicated or voluminous. It does not need to contain maps, or graphs, or engineering studies. You will need some of that later. A very simple plan can be put together on a single letter size

sheet of paper. In order to map out your plan you need to ask and answer these 8 critical questions:

- 1.) What is it? (Example: lot and block and total acres to be preserved.)
- 2.) Why do we want to buy it? (Example: how does it address a specific need or fit into a larger open space plan)
- 3.) Who owns it? (Example: H & G Construction Corp)
- 4.) Is the owner willing to sell it?
- 5.) How will the land be used? (Example: Passive Recreation, Active Recreation, Nature Preserve)
- 6.) How will the structures (if any) be used? (Example: Structures will be removed, preserved, converted to restroom facilities)
- 7.) How will we pay for it? (Example: where is the funding coming from)
- 8.) When will we close it? (Example: The estimated date the real estate closing is expected)

Once you are able to put an answer towards these questions, then you are ready to start on the application. There may be other questions that come up along the way and your answers to these critical questions may change during the process, as new information becomes available. Positive applicants will focus on these questions throughout the process. Neutral applicants will focus on some of these questions. Negative applicants will ignore some or all of these questions.

The next step is to complete the application:

Positive applicants know to answer all the questions and fill out all the information as best you can.

Positive applicants ask questions in advance of the due date. If you are stuck on how to answer a question, Barbara or Frank is there to answer your questions.

Positive applicants provide complete and concise financial information on their open space trust funds. The committee is trying to get a snap shot of funds that may be available for use on this application.

Positive Applicants are so convinced that their project is great that they are willing to make a financial commitment towards the projects. Typically, a municipality will use funds from a local open space fund or bond to make this financial commitment. Charitable conservancies will seek funding from the State and/or the private sector. The trust fund committee looks to see that local funds are going towards a project to insure there is local support.

Finally, Positive applicants use the County Grants as a portion of the total project cost. When the trust fund was devised it was not intended to be the sole source of funding for open space projects in the county. Rather, it was envisioned to be used to leverage local funds with county funds, or better yet, local funds with county and state funds. The best possible scenario is to leverage local, county, state and Federal funds. Positive applicants understand that funding partnerships are key to the overall success of open space preservation through out the county.

I want to draw upon some facts to emphasize the point of funding partnerships. During the past 13 years the total cost of preserved open space has been \$164,000,000 and change. Note that the total amount of county grants has been \$64,000,000. The average funding the county has provided is just under 40 %.

My first open space application for the Borough was for approximately \$500,000 to buy a 60 acre critical link between 3,000 acres of parkland on the east with 3,000 acres of parkland on the west. This one tract of land was the only available parcel that could provide this link. The owner was willing to sell it. I asked for 100% funding from the County. This became my first open space failure. I came back the following year with a scaled down proposal and funding partners. That then became my first open space success.

Here are a couple of more points on the application. Try to avoid getting too caught up in the environmental information. A little information is useful, but remember, the committee members need to sift through many applications. Most of us read all the information you provide. Submitting a

treatise of the benefits of upland aquifer recharge, although important, deflects our attention away from the 8 critical questions.

Positive applicants save trees by limiting the amount of paper used. Negative applicants submit the rain forest to the committee for review.

## **Site Visits**

The best method of getting a show of the property is to try to drive around it or through it if it is large. Finding a spot that has the greatest visual impact is also useful. Some applicants have used aerial lifts to showcase their open space applications. Others find the most unique aspect of the property and focus on that.

Whatever you do, try to avoid the negative. If the property is dirty, littered or otherwise unkempt, try to avoid bringing the committee to those spots. We had one application two years ago for a piece of the Morris Canal. The applicants brought us to a spot in the canal that was heavily littered and an old 1,000 gallon oil tank was sitting in the waterway. It was very disheartening. If you cannot avoid it, then try to get your local DPW, Scouting Organization or environmental group to spruce up the land prior to the site visit. Make sure you have owner consent before you start such activities.

Please call it what it is. If you are interested in preserving a 70 acre swamp, that is perfectly acceptable. But keep in mind that almost all the committee members have served in some municipal or county function and therefore are familiar, to some extent, about land development issues. Positive applicants will not tell us the 70 acre swamp is going to be drained and developed into 150 condominium units.

Be organized. Maps and plans are helpful in highlighting what is important. Also important, however, are the 8 critical questions. Positive applicants know to highlight that information. Positive applicants know that the Committee will ask questions during the site visit and will anticipate those questions. Someone from the Committee will ask if the project does not receive the full funding from the county, how the applicant will make up the difference.

Positive applicants will answer that the money will be obtained and the project completed. Neutral applicants will answer that short funding could compromise the project. Negative applicants will state if they do not receive full funding, the project will not be completed. This last answer is akin to application suicide.

The committee typically gets requests for more funding than is usually available. This question is important in trying to plan out how many positive applications will get funded.

If there are structures on the property, the Committee is very interested in how those structures will be used.

Positive applicants will have a plan for those structures. Neutral applicants will be making up the plan or list a number of options. Negative applicants will state they have no idea how the structures will be used.

I actually heard that negative statement on a site visit.

The site visit is a time to show case your open space application to the committee. Keep in mind that the time you have to present is limited. Also keep in mind that the Committee has anywhere from 3-4, or possibly up to 8-9 site visits scheduled for one day. Go easy.

A brief fairly neutral walk is appreciated. An alpine hike down the gorge, at 8 in the morning may seem like a great idea, but trust me, around 4 in the afternoon, the committee begins to ponder the wisdom of such an expedition.

Positive applicants will have one lead person giving the on site presentation and fielding the questions. Neutral applicants will have two or more persons giving the presentations. Negative applicants will have their entire group presenting. This is very confusing for the committee as not all members are getting the same information. This leads to the same question be asked over and this cuts into your presentation time.

Try to avoid having helpful neighbors putting in their two cents. I had an onsite meeting in Kinnelon one day with Green Acres appraisers. The helpful neighbor came out to put his positive spin in by telling the appraisers that the property was a good open space project since it was all steep slopes

and wetlands. Positive applicants anticipate problems and resolve them before hand. Telling the neighbors what is going to happen and when can keep the curios at bay.

If you are a municipal applicant, it is very reassuring for the committee to see some of your local government officials there during the site visit. The mayor or a councilperson helps solidify the local commitment to the project.

Above all else, whoever is giving the site visit should be thoroughly familiar with the property. We had one application in recent memory where the person presenting to the committee had never set foot on the property until the day of the site visit. It really left a very negative impression.

### **Committee Presentations**

Now that you have made two positive presentations, the application and the site visit, you are ready to make your final convincing (read positive) presentation on your open space application. This will be a limited time frame as well. You will have a number of minutes to present and a number of minutes to field questions.

Positive applicants will have studied the 8 critical questions and memorized their answers.

- How likely is closing?

This depends on a lot of factors. If you have had any success with open space projects in the past you know that anything and everything can cause a delay. What the committee is looking for is a time frame.

Positive applicants will answer (very briefly): “Closing is anticipated for March of next year.” It could be December of next year; the point is that the answer is a best estimate and answered with conviction. Neutral applicants will point to a number of factors and give reasons why closing may not be eminent. These reasons usually are tied to the next question. Negative applicants have no idea when closing will take place. It sends a signal to the committee that this project may not be ready for funding.

- Is there a willing seller?

- Is there a signed contract?

These are also key questions. Land negotiations are complicated. If the applicant has a willing seller and a signed contract, the Committee deems these as two very positive attributes of the application. However, as I said, land negotiations are very complicated. If you have had significant discussion with the landowner and an agreement is eminent, then state it. The committee is trying to allocate funds for projects that we believe have the best chance of closing quickly. Projects where there are protracted discussions and even thoughts of eminent domain are not excluded from funding. However, positive applicants know that they need to state, with conviction, where the project is going and approximately how long it will take to get there.

- Status of other funding partners

This is also another key point to stress during your final presentation. Many applicants have applied to Green Acres or have other funding partners, such as New Jersey Conservation Foundation, or local partners. Positive applicants will report their success in getting these funds allocated, or in the alternative, when these funds will become available.

Make sure you have your ducks in a row when it comes to funding partners. We saw one application recently, where the applicant was planning to obtain part of the funds from the Army Corp of Engineers. However, the funding was not going to be available until 2007. The applicant planned to have the local municipality bond the ACOE's contribution until the funds were available. Then the applicant planned to sell an interest in the property to the Corp. The Committee rejected the application, because under the law, once a project has received funding, no further interest in the property can be sold to third parties. So you could have all your funding partners attend the closing. You just cannot sell an interest in the property once the closing has taken place.

- Intended use of the property

This is another great opportunity to demonstrate how your open space project is going to benefit the town, region and county as a whole. Positive applicants will state the proposed uses of the property. Neutral Applicants will give several uses of the property. Negative applicants will list every possible use for the next 200 years.

Try to be brief, and concise. Remember the Committee is receiving anywhere from 8-10 presentations that evening. Don't try to cloud the waters with giving more information than may be useful. Focus on the 8 Critical Questions and you should be in a positive position.

Finally, what happens when you have listened to and followed everything I have said, and your grant application is not approved?

What does a negative applicant do? Gives up!

What does a neutral applicant do? Looks to place the blame.

A positive applicant, who is so committed to their project, does not give up or look to place the blame elsewhere. A positive applicant will analyze what went wrong, will repackage, re-apply and in all likelihood, be a successful grant recipient in the next round. Positive applicants are so committed to their projects that they never give up!

Thank You all for your attention.