

Now is time to restore funding for open spaces

By MARCIA VERPLOEGEN LEWIS

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For more than 35 years, Maryland has stood out as a national leader in protecting our valuable working lands and open spaces. Whether to create local parks and playgrounds, preserve agricultural lands, protect natural areas or safeguard scenic vistas and historic places, Maryland has led the way. But all of this is at risk just when development pressures are at an all-time high.

Why is Maryland in such a precarious position?

For the past four years, funds dedicated to protect open spaces have been taken by the administration of Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and the legislature and diverted to unrelated purposes. As a result, about 107,600 privately held acres that should have been preserved are at risk of being bulldozed.

Once-valuable farmland that grew crops is now growing houses, shopping centers and other poorly planned developments. The loss of these funds has seriously undermined the ability of state and local government to provide parks where our children can play, to maintain programs that save productive farmland from development and to acquire land to protect drinking-water supplies and maintain vital wildlife habitat.

In 1969, the state passed the Program Open Space law, which created the program and funding dedicated to land preservation. The source of the funds is the state real estate transfer tax, and they are allocated to local and state land conservation and park development programs.

It is a simple but artfully crafted concept: As real estate values increase, funding for land conservation increases to allow the state and counties to keep up with the rapid pace of development and rising costs of preserving land.

Program Open Space has been a remarkable success through the protection of 1.1 million acres from development and the creation of more than 4,350 parks and recreational areas that serve millions of Marylanders. These are accomplishments for which every citizen should feel proud.

In a poll conducted a year ago, more than 88 percent of Marylanders said they support Program Open Space. Seventy-two percent said they would support a law that would protect this funding from future diversions to unrelated purposes.

These issues are important to Marylanders, who also believe that the current rate of development threatens our quality of life. In a recent poll conducted by The Sun, 60 percent of Howard County and Anne Arundel County voters said that growth was happening too fast. Statewide, 51 percent of voters said that growth was happening too fast or a little too fast. The bottom line is that uncontrolled growth and land preservation are important issues to Marylanders.

The diversion of land conservation funds must stop. It appears that with a strong and growing economy, state revenues have increased to the point at which there will not be budget constraints in the coming fiscal year. It is clearly time to resume 100 percent funding for Program Open Space and the other land conservation programs funded through the real estate transfer tax.

In order to restore the public trust, Mr. Ehrlich and the legislature need to use these funds for their intended purpose, and as the law requires, to protect natural areas, working farms and natural habitats.

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