Vote "No" on Ocean County ballot question 1

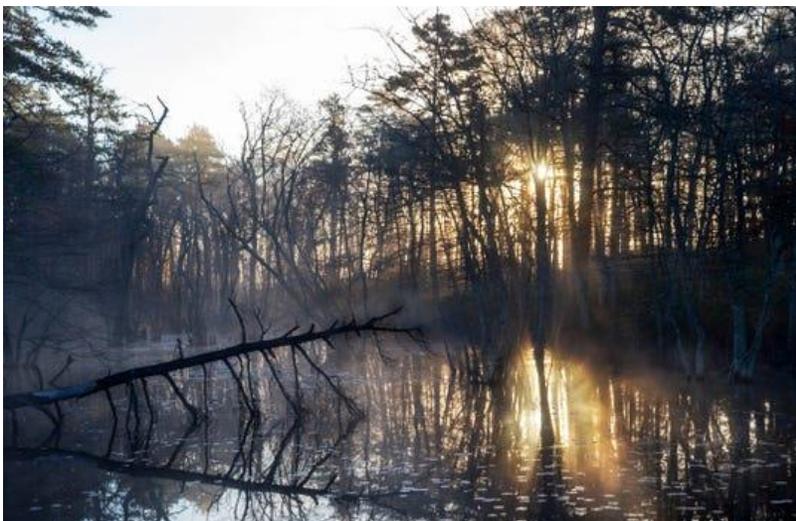**Wiliam deCamp Jr.** Published 5:20 p.m. ET Oct. 11, 2019

On Election Day, Tuesday, Nov. 5, the ongoing effort to restrain overdevelopment and conserve natural open space in Ocean County needs protection in the form of a "No" vote on Ballot Question 1 by county voters.Ocean County has been among the fastest-growing counties in the United States for decades. The county's taxpayer-funded Natural Lands Trust Fund Program has been one of the few effective tools for restraining excessive growth. It is threatened.

In my capacity as president of Save Barnegat Bay, I served on the small committee led by the late Freeholder John C. Bartlett that in 1997 created this successful program. To date the Ocean County Natural Lands Trust Fund has saved more than 32,000 acres of land in its natural state as well as farmland at 300 localities from destruction by developers in towns throughout Ocean County.

The key language in the ballot question proposes that the program be expanded to "also allow for the acquisition, development and maintenance of lands for recreational and Historic preservation purposes."

While that may initially sound laudable, this ambiguously worded ballot question leaves open to future political interpretation what the words "maintenance" and "recreation" actually mean.

In short, the fund's founding purpose of conserving only land in its natural state, as well as farmland, would be abandoned and its monies made vulnerable to raids by other programs. The very purpose embodied in the name "Natural Lands Trust Fund" would be undone. Less land would be saved.

The 80-acre Cloverdale Road Farm tract in Barnegat is among the 32,000 acres purchased by the Ocean County Natural Lands Trust. *(Photo: Peter Ackerman)*

One change that this unwarranted proposal could bring about is especially alarming: The county park system would be able to raid the Natural Lands Trust Fund for monies for routine maintenance of dozens of county parks. This could literally exhaust the program.

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When we submitted the Natural Lands Trust Fund to the overwhelming approval by county voters in

1997, it was with the specific intent of exclusively protecting land in its natural state, which is essential to protecting water quality and our quality of life in Ocean County. Recreation was carefully considered and deliberately excluded as a praiseworthy goal that should be independently funded.

The 80-acre tract of land known as Cloverdale Road Farm in Barnegat is a haven for nature lovers. *(Photo: Peter Ackerman)*

If the Natural Lands Trust Fund is diverted to fund other programs such as maintenance of county parks, it will become increasingly difficult to save natural lands from development as various political establishments lobby to drain the fund for purposes contrary to its founding.

Save Barnegat Bay sought to discuss this matter with the Ocean County freeholders prior to its being placed on the ballot, but the freeholders — who in most other situations make themselves accessible to us — did not follow through on our request to meet with them. This is a particular disappointment since we might have worked together to craft mutually acceptable wording restricting the proposed changes to historic preservation only.

It is a further worrying sign that the citizens' Advisory Committee that officially oversees each purchase and manages the program through formal votes was never consulted prior to the question being placed on the ballot.

Ocean County voters brought this simple, effective program into existence with overwhelming support in a Ballot Question in 1997. They can save it — and the conserved open space that results from it — by voting "No" on Ballot Question 1 in 2019.

William deCamp Jr. is president of Save Barnegat Bay.