

A MEMO ON SKILLMAN VILLAGE FROM TOWNSHIP COMMITTEE TO SOMERSET COUNTY

Below is a January 7th memo sent from the Montgomery Township Committee to the Somerset County Board of Freeholders, following up on their stated interest in purchase of the Skillman Village property for development as a county park.

As of the date of this newsletter printing, Somerset County has authorized an appraisal to be conducted for the Skillman Village property but has not yet stated their intent to purchase or their desired criteria for purchase.

TO: Somerset County Freeholders
FROM: Montgomery Township Committee
SUBJECT: County Park at Skillman Village
DATE: January 7, 2009

The Montgomery Township Committee is very pleased that the Somerset County Open Space Committee has recommended that the Board of Chosen Freeholders proceed with planning and negotiations to establish a county park at the Skillman Village property in Montgomery.

We think this idea is in the best interests of both county and Montgomery residents, and we respectfully request an expedited decision process. Somerset County has the opportunity to help create a place that will be attractive and valuable to residents throughout our county, and indeed to residents throughout our region.

As you know, Montgomery took ownership of the former North Princeton Developmental Center in January 2007 following more than a decade of negotiations with the State. Since then, the township undertook a large environmental clean up effort which is now nearly complete, conferring additional value to the land while also providing important public safety benefits.

After a public planning process and economic/market analysis, Montgomery settled on a redevelopment plan for Skillman Village that preserves most of the property for open space and passive recreation. Indeed, we believe the Skillman Village project is highly consistent with key goals and objectives of the Somerset County Parks, Recreation and Open Space Master Plan, specifically:

- Preserving lands of county-wide significance
- Preserving unique sites with unusual botanic, cultural or historic qualities
- Providing for a diverse mix of quality recreational experiences
- Acquiring sizeable, intact properties with a minimum area of 100 to 200 acres
- Creating parks with a balance of solitude and relaxation with a variety of compatible recreational activities
- Adding recreation and educational facilities that have proven popular with residents
- Enabling the County to create/host memorable events such as festivals and concerts that distinguish Somerset County as a special place and engender pride and community spirit.

A county park is also consistent with Montgomery's vision of creating a place of regional significance -- a vibrant community gathering place that serves as a cultural, educational, recreational and civic hub, where every aspect and use of the site contributes to its being a model of environmental sustainability and design integrity. An important parallel objective is to recover costs associated with environmental clean-up and demolition, and ensure that the property does not become a long-term financial burden for Montgomery taxpayers.

While the national recession has made it difficult, over the short term, to obtain private sector funding to offset Montgomery's recent investment, we need to move forward quickly with the planning and design work that is a prerequisite for pursuing other sources of public grant money. In this economic environment, we are sure you can appreciate the urgency we feel, on behalf of Montgomery taxpayers, to apply for such grants as quickly as possible. For this reason we urge the Board of Freeholders to declare its intentions as soon as possible, and to begin discussions on financial and other terms as quickly as possible.

Right now, we have an offer on the table from one of the finalist redevelopment teams to undertake, at their expense and with broad community involvement, a more detailed master plan for Skillman Village. Once this planning is done, we believe we will have an excellent opportunity to obtain additional public and non-profit open space and preservation grants, qualify for a second grant from the Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund (HDSRF).

Montgomery has effectively placed this planning offer, and the various outside funding opportunities it would open up, "on hold" while the county considers whether or not to establish a county park at the site.

In terms of timeline, our suggestion is that the county work toward making an expression of intent by the end of February, with a specific financial proposal by the end of March. Our hope would be for the county and township to reach an agreement on the major terms of a deal by the end of May.

Montgomery Administrator Donato Neiman has been designated as Montgomery's point person on this matter, and he is the person through whom all formal communications should flow. We understand the Freeholders have designated county counsel Tom Miller to be your primary point of contact for Mr. Neiman.