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Barnegat Bay watershed plan will focus on inland locations

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An emerging land conservation plan for the Barnegat Bay watershed shifts attention from the bay's shoreline and tidal marshes — targets of many open-space preservation efforts in the past decade — to focus on stream corridors and other areas far inland, where the bay's pollution problems originate.

Early draft mapping by researchers with the nonprofit Trust for Public Land suggests the next rounds of land acquisitions should happen on the upper reaches of the Toms and Metedeconk rivers, which not only provide the biggest freshwater flows to the bay but will become increasingly important as public water supplies to a fast-growing population.

But several advisers involved with the project warned that land protection is only a kind of damage control, and said there needs to be major public infrastructure spending to control storm water pollution, and planning and zoning reform to reduce the acreage being consumed every year for new housing.

"Unless that happens, this (land conservation) is going to be completely offset" by population growth, said Michael Kennish, a Rutgers University research professor who leads the institution's Barnegat Bay research.

"Clearly it's a policy issue," added Chris Jage, New Jersey Conservation Foundation assistant director. "Land conservation only helps keep it from getting worse."

On Monday, the state Senate Environment Committee voted to release a bill that would allow the creation of storm water authorities. Like sewerage authorities, these would be local boards to oversee the building and maintenance of a new generation of pollution controls.

State Sen. Robert Smith, D-Gloucester, the committee chairman and a sponsor of the bill (S-1166), describes storm water pollution as a final frontier. The state did well cleaning up sewage pollution in the 1970s and '80s, and storm water is the foremost problem now, he says.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, was the sole committee member to vote against the bill, warning that local government and citizens don't want to see any new spending and "layer of regulation."

Frustration over the pollution issue was evident among the Trust for Public Land advisers.

"This cannot just be about land conservation," said Steven Atzert, manager of the Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge.

Trust workers are limited in their new project, but "one of our goals with this is to reinvigorate the conservation movement," said Kathy Haake, the trust's coordinator for Barnegat Bay efforts.

About 40 advisers, ranging from parks workers to longtime citizen activists, met at the Jacques Costeau National Estuarine Research Reserve education center Wednesday in Little Egg

Harbor to review the trust's work as it prepares a draft of its forthcoming Barnegat Bay 2020 report. Organizers plan to have a complete draft ready in May and release a final version June 25.

In some ways, the report will be a reprise of the trust's landmark Century Plan for Barnegat Bay, issued in 1995, which identified 100 sites for acquisition based on values including recreation and wildlife habitats. Like that project, the next report is premised on the principle of seeking deals with willing sellers, stressed Kelley Hart of the trust.

"Land conservation is an opportunistic endeavor," Hart told the group, explaining that's one factor in listing which properties to seek first. "Just because a property is high priority (with ecological value) doesn't mean the owner wants to sell it."

On draft maps shown by moderator Brenda Faber of the trust, maintaining water quality and quantity looms large in the goals of the plan. In the decade since the Century Plan, a long-running construction boom led to a full one-third of Ocean County's land mass being developed. Meanwhile, scientists have watched a sharp downturn in the bay's ecological health, a trend they link to fertilizer overuse and other sources of nutrient pollution related to suburban growth.

The Trust for Public Land is using its "Greenprint" process to develop a complex map of lands that should be preserved, Haake explained. Large areas on the draft maps outline ground water recharge areas, where rainfall sinks through sandy soils of the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer. Stream corridors that snake through northern Ocean County's suburban landscape are high on the list, because experts say preserving native woodlands along the streams helps keep pollution out of the bay tributaries.

Even some cleared areas near the banks of the Metedeconk and Toms rivers could be acquired and replanted to make a positive improvement to the river water quality, suggested Scott Haag, a Rutgers researcher who worked on a recent study of those lands, called riparian zones.

"There are properties you can buy and repair," Haag said.
