



STAFF PHOTOS: STEVE SCHOLFIELD)

Benifactor Joel Opatut (left) is congratulated by acting Gov. Codey Monday as Codey signed open-space legislation. In background are (from left) state DEP Commissioner Bradley M. Campbell, state Sen. Martha W. Bark, R-Burlington, Freehold Township Committeeman Anthony Ammiano and state Sen. Ellen Karcher, D-Monmouth.

Open-space bill signed

Measure part of \$365M for preservation

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FREEHOLD BUREAU

FREEHOLD TOWNSHIP — In a public ceremony Monday at the township municipal building, acting Gov. Codey signed into law a bill allocating \$16.6 million to buy open space and develop parks in Central Jersey.

The bill was part of a \$365 million package of 12 bills for open-space and farmland-preservation grants. The other bills were signed in private.

"We're always glad to see any efforts to save open space," said Ben Forest, a Red Bank resident who is a leader in the Monmouth County Friends of Clearwater environmental group. "It's probably the most worthwhile issue we face in the state — land use."

Freehold Township, which hosted Monday's approximately 35-minute ceremony, receives \$500,000 of the package, part of which will go toward the completion of Opatut Park.

The ceremony was attended by various state, Monmouth County and local officials, along with community and environmental activists. Two of the legislation's sponsors, state Sen. Ellen Karcher and Assemblyman Michael Panter, both D-Monmouth, were there.

Open space in New Jersey disappears at the rate of 50 acres a day, "an incredible figure," Codey said.

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Chapter of the Sierra Club environmental organization, called the legislation putting "our money where our mouth is."

"This is one of the largest amounts (of open space money) put together at one time," Tittel said.

Open-space spending in recent years has increased from \$200 million per year to the \$365 million in these bills, Tittel said. "As the most densely populated state in the nation, we have a responsibility to preserve open space for future generations," said Codey, a Democrat. "These bills provide the funding needed to ensure New Jersey's future will include abundant open space, plentiful parks, clean drinking water and green, productive farms."

"There are issues that cross party lines, and this is one of them," said Assemblyman Richard A. Merkt, R-Morris.

Of the \$365 million, \$223 million is for open-space purchase and development, while the remaining \$142 million is for farmland preservation.

a community group involved in protecting open space. "We should all be proud to live in the great Garden State."

Freehold Township Administrator Thomas E. Antus said \$400,000 of the money the township will receive is for future land acquisition and \$100,000 will go toward developing athletic fields at Opatut Park at the corner of East Freehold Road and Route 79.

Members of the Opatut family, which donated the 136 acres about three years ago, were at the ceremony.

"The family felt we ought to give something back to the township," where the Opatut family settled in 1950, said Abe Opatut, 58, who still lives in Freehold Township.

Abe Opatut's father, Joel, 81, a native of Poland who survived the Holocaust, immigrated to the United States in 1949.

"I came to America without anything," said Joel Opatut, who lives in West Long Branch. "America was pretty good to me. It was payback time."

"The fact that you have given back to the community is tremendous," Panter told the Opatut family.

The bill-signing ceremony was held in Freehold Township because of the 12th District legislators — Karcher, Panter and Assemblyman Robert Morgan — and their work with open-space activists in the township, said Jessica M. Cohen, Karcher's chief of staff.

"I have made it a top priority to raise awareness about the importance of open space and to introduce legislation that will preserve our land for future generations," Karcher said. "If we don't act now to protect the few traces of open space and farmland left, we could be doing an extreme disservice to future generations of Monmouth County residents by depriving them of our county's once-rural heritage."

"I think it's a great day to celebrate money for open space, farmland and parks," Tittel said. "New Jersey is running out of open space faster than any state. People want to see open space preserved."

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