

# Growth in development and green space should go hand in hand

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 Latest in a series of posts on the environment 

## Second meeting on Bethlehem's Climate Action Plan, October 7

*Maclaine Oskin is a senior at Moravian Academy who hopes to major in environmental science or geology in college. Maclaine presented this essay at the "Speak out!" Sustainability Forum, part of Touchstone Theatre's **Festival UnBound 2020**, September 19. Her interest in the environment was partially inspired by her enjoyment of science in school as well as summer family trips to National Parks when she was younger. You can view Maclaine reading her work [here](#) at min. 57:40.*

### Land Conservation

#### Maclaine Oskin

Development and construction through the years have overtaken our land with asphalt and concrete, making commercial districts and office buildings abundant while the number of trees and open space dwindles. The Lehigh Valley, with an ever-growing population and robust mixed economy, continues to develop. As a result, it becomes even more critical to protect the natural environment that has preceded us through conservation to balance growth and expansion. Conservation of green space is vital to preserving the local ecosystem, increasing environmental resilience, and is advantageous to the local economic and social health of the community.

Land conservation is paramount in maintaining the well-being of the local ecosystem and safeguarding clean water, air, and soil. For example, sheltering land that hosts waterways decreases the



quantity of harmful chemicals, litter, and particulate matter by up to 45%, preventing pollution and the hampering of the cleanliness of local water sources. By protecting the environment, it gives back to the community through ecosystem services, in which humans benefit from organic processes that occur in nature. Vegetation and forestry aids in stormwater runoff and water regulation through drainage, thereby decreasing flooding. Soil and trees absorb and sequester carbon dioxide, reducing carbon emissions contributing to the greenhouse gas effect, making them pivotal players in the fight against climate change. More locally, this ecosystem service offsets local air pollution and cleans the air by reducing emissions. Each of these services has the ability to reduce costs of damage and improve personal health, acting as preventive measures for infrastructure and reducing health care costs long term.

Furthermore, conservation is a preventative solution to get ahead of the curve of a changing climate with increasingly harsh and unpredictable weather. The increase of natural spaces lends itself to a new form of benefit, that of environmental resilience. Resilience can be gained easily by having open habitat and green space as it has a greater ability to adapt and change to such external forces as climate change than set infrastructure. It is an economically beneficial option in the long run as it decreases risk and damage from natural forces and, in turn, saves taxpayer money since they bear the brunt of costs of rebuilding and updating local infrastructure.

Not only environmentally significant, green space is advantageous to the economic and social health of communities. Green space as recreational areas promotes physical and mental well-being as an outlet for stress and overwork. It provides a prospect for social interaction and community building as an area for social gatherings. Economically, it is beneficial since it attracts businesses and residents to communities. The preservation of such resources as parks, forests, farms, and waterways increases the value of houses and the number of residents, which, in turn, increases the tax base and revenue to support local businesses. It decreases government spending through natural provisions of ecosystem services. For example, by protecting water sources, it keeps them cleaner, so there is less cost on the back end to filter or clean that water, additionally saving on health care costs as it is safer for human consumption. Furthermore, land conservation has the potential to save

more money than land development and commercialization because often large lot sizes that are heavily built up increase the cost of water and sewage services since they struggle with stormwater runoff related problems.

In providing these green spaces, it is necessary to implement them equally and fairly throughout the community since environmental health burdens disproportionately affect people of color and the lower income classes. Upholding equitability through conservation is key to uplifting all members of our community and giving equal opportunity through the benefits of green space that provides clean living space, clean air, mental health benefits, as well as recreational and educational opportunities.

To maximize the effectiveness of conservation efforts, key parcels of land that are adjacent to preexisting conserved land or provide greenways, connection routes that travel between critical habitats, must be prioritized, along with solutions to prohibit high impact zoning next to green spaces to minimize disturbance of wildlife and only allowing low environmental impact activities with land restrictions to protect native wildlife and forest growth. For example, choosing forested areas or native meadows with only grass, gravel, or mulched trails over pavement permits local residents full access to the health benefits of the area, while maintaining the environmental benefits of natural, native growth.

In order to achieve these goals of greater environmental protection and stewardship, votership for environmental legislation and policy as well as donation of funds and time to local organizations is required. It is necessary to acknowledge and support such community agencies as Wildlands Conservancy, the D&L Heritage Corridor, and the local government's Environmental Advisory Councils as premier organizations of land conservation. Balance in a community is essential to it thriving. Focusing on growing both its development and green space hand in hand will make for a more resilient, adaptable, and sustainable future within the Lehigh Valley.

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