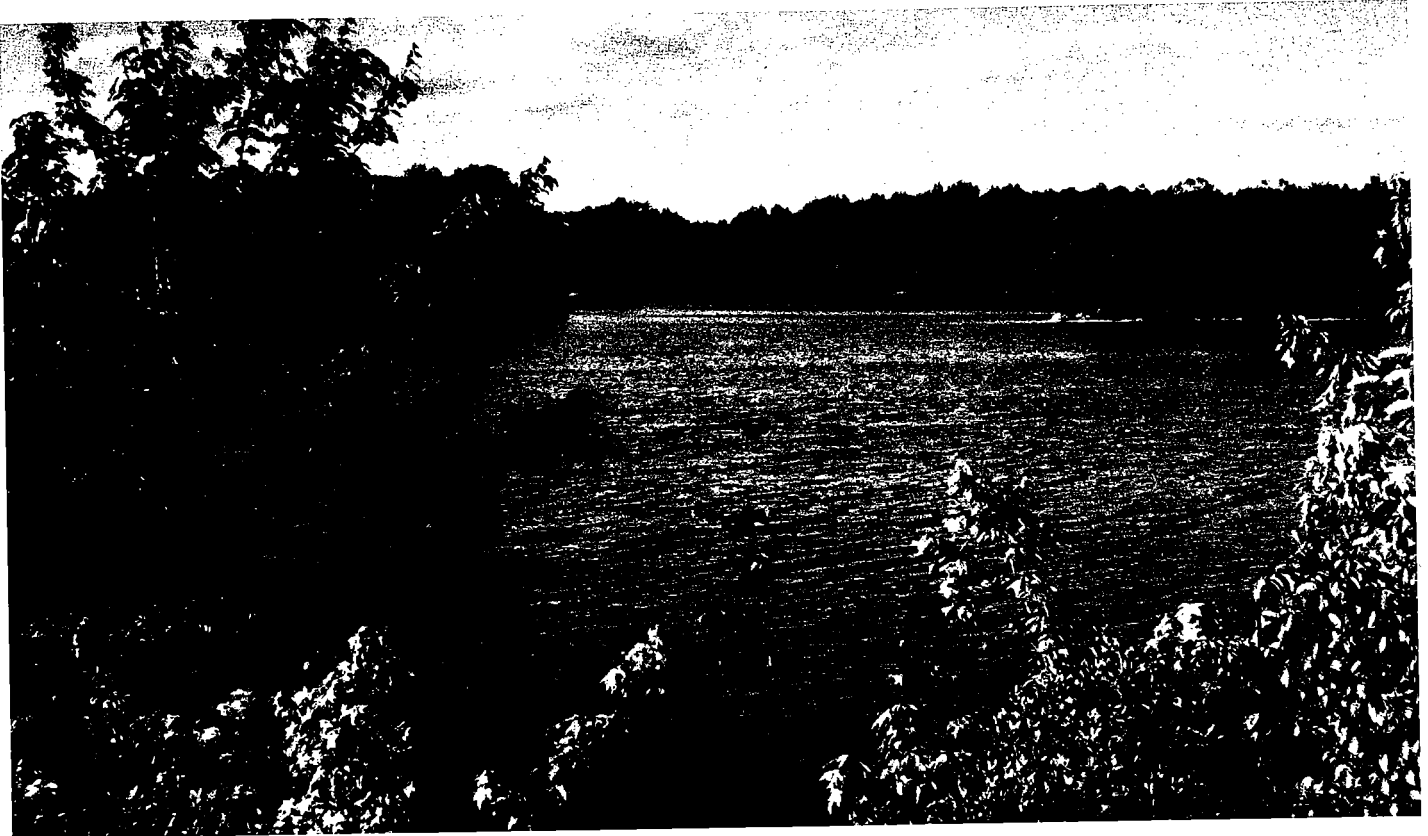




## Plainsboro's 1,000 Acre Nature Preserve

**Peter Cantu**

Mayor  
Plainsboro Township



*The 50-acre Lake McCormack was created by a sand and gravel company that once operated on the site of the Plainsboro Preserve.*

**P**lainsboro Township has successfully made the transition from a rural farming town to a vibrant, diverse community of 21,000 people. Located on the Route 1 Corridor next to Princeton, we are also a center for major office and research facilities that are home to prominent corporate citizens including Merrill Lynch, Bristol-Myers Squibb and American Re-Insurance.

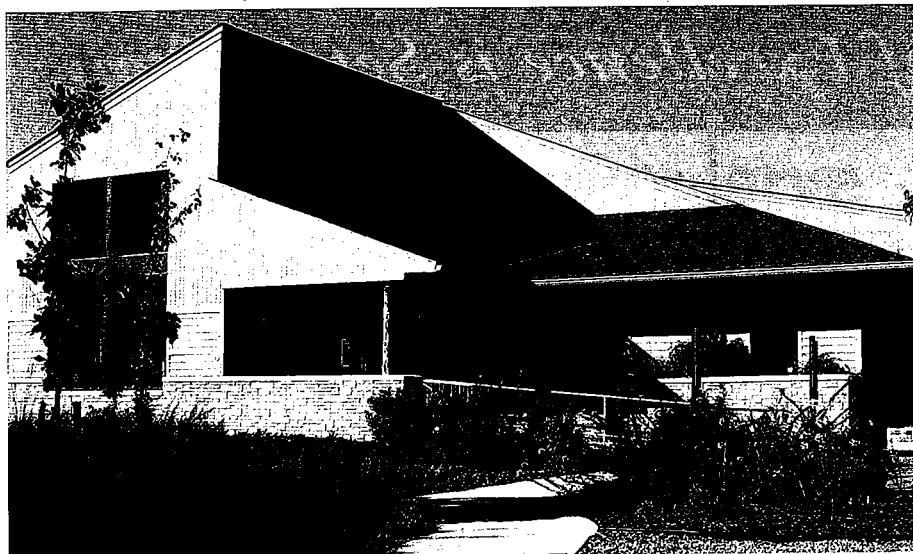
**Peter Cantu is Mayor of Plainsboro Township and 1st Vice President of the League of Municipalities.**

Plainsboro began to experience growth pressures during the very earliest stages of the Route 1 Corridor's explosion. Between 1971 and 1975, the township approved zoning that would result in the development of over 7,000 housing units and over 10 million square feet of office space, quickly making Plainsboro one of the fastest growing communities in New Jersey. This zoning and resulting development occurred without the benefit of a master plan or contingencies for meeting the profound service demands associated with the growth.

In 1977, my first year as Mayor, the burdens of this growth were impacting our community. The specter of earlier approvals loomed with a potential for population growth that would approach 50,000 residents and little consideration of open space or other quality of life essentials. Upon being sworn in, my first action was to identify three critical goals, which would allow us to balance growth with quality of life. These goals included the development of a comprehensive land use policy and the

*continued on page 74*





*The Environmental Education Center overlooking Lake McCormack was fully funded through grants and donations and is managed by the New Jersey Audubon Society.*

implementation of that policy through a master plan and revised zoning ordinance.

Today, after over 20 years of innovative planning, creating valuable partnerships and remaining faithful to our vision, we have created an effective balance of open space and development, with over 50 percent of our 12-square miles permanently preserved as open space and farmland and a population that at "build out" is not expected to

exceed 23,000 people. The centerpiece of this success story is The Plainsboro Preserve, a former industrial zone that is now over 1,000 acres of preserved natural wildlife habitat, with a 50-acre lake and a 6,500 square foot Environmental Education Center managed by the New Jersey Audubon Society.

**The Plainsboro Preserve: Step-by-Step** In Plainsboro we appreciated the importance of land preservation early

on. Consistent with our goals of preserving our rural heritage as well as managing growth, we initially focused our efforts on the southern part of town where working farms still operated. Through participation in the farmland preservation program and the use of innovative cluster zoning we successfully preserved 600 acres of farmland.

We then turned our attention northward to a 100-acre lot owned by a residential developer. An approval secured years earlier called for the construction of single-family homes at the edge of what was known as McCormack Lake. The 50-acre lake was created by a sand and gravel company that once operated on the site. Since the mid-1970s when the mining operation stopped, nature had reclaimed the lake and surrounding area. It was now home to rare species of plant, a variety of wildlife and migratory birds as well as prime forest. In a strategic sense, we not only appreciated the unique environmental qualities of the former industrial site but also noted that the McCormack site was at the core of a large area of undeveloped land in a part of the township that was experiencing increased pressure from residential developers. The elements of a large-scale preservation initiative were beginning to take shape.

Step one was to secure the preservation of this 100-acre site, which we accomplished with some innovative thinking and good luck. The owners of the site were also developing single-family homes in another area of town. By negotiating with the developer, we were able to secure a density transfer agreement, increasing the number of homes they were allowed to build on the other parcel, which was in an area more suitable for residential development, in return for the property we sought to preserve.

The next step was to secure two key parcels totaling 530 acres that constituted the balance of the lake and surrounding area. The owner was amenable to discussions concerning preservation of his property, which was valued at \$2.9 million.

At this time we needed to confront

*continued on page 76*

## NATURE PRESERVE

the financial realities of embarking on an extensive preservation effort. This led us to an important partnership with Middlesex County. In 1999 we received \$2.9 million from the newly established Middlesex County Open Space and Farmland Preservation Trust

and would later provide funds at the municipal level for future expansion of the Preserve. With these tools in place we began to assemble key parcels.

We turned our attention to expanding the Plainsboro Preserve to the south. In 2001 two parcels were acquired

In 2002 a 126-acre property located west of the Preserve that had been approved for 76 single-family homes was about to be developed. The property was located across the railroad tracks, and there were also plans by the state for the creation of a new roadway to run through the northernmost tip of the property. The \$5.4 million cost was substantial; but by negotiating with the state, the county and the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, we were able to get outside funding for \$4.4 million of the cost, paying the remaining \$1 million out of the municipal Open Space Fund.

In 2003, we used New Jersey Green Acres funds to secure a 150-acre property on the southwestern border of the Preserve. Using cluster zoning, land donations, development transfers and critical partnerships with Middlesex County and the New Jersey Green Acres program we had reached the

---

**We soon recognized that the assembling of such a large holding of environmentally important land brought with it management challenges.**

---

Fund. Our application outlined a plan for "The Plainsboro Preserve," an initiative that sought the preservation of over 1,000 contiguous acres of land with the McCormack property and its scenic lake at the core. That year Plainsboro held a referendum to create a 1 cent Open Space Tax, which was overwhelmingly approved by the voters

totaling 80 acres through the use of New Jersey Green Acres program and with money from the township's new Open Space Fund. In 2002 negotiations with a residential developer resulted in a condition of approval that allowed for the clustering of houses in return for a donation of 100 acres that bordered on the Preserve.

*continued on page 78*

## NATURE PRESERVE

goal of over 1,000 contiguous acres of preserved land.

**Creating the Environmental Education Center** We soon recognized that the assembling of such a large holding of environmentally important land brought with it management challenges. There would be a need to carefully manage and maintain these lands and at the same time provide the public access through an environmental education program and an accompanying facility. In 1998 we initiated discussions with the New Jersey Audubon Society. Audubon possessed the expertise to care for the land and offer the programs we sought. The Preserve site offered Audubon the opportunity to provide an environmental center in a part of the state where they did not have a presence. Another critical partnership was established.

In August 2001, we formally announced plans for the 6,500 square foot Environmental Education Center that would be owned by Plainsboro and operated by the New Jersey Audubon

Society. The Center would serve as the operating and administrative headquarters for The Plainsboro Preserve. Located at the edge of McCormack Lake, it would have an 18-foot by 30-foot two-story glass window, an amphitheater for educational classes and seminars, two large classrooms, a resource library, an interactive pond experience room, a nature bookstore, and a wide array of hands-on exhibits and displays for people of all ages.

We formed The Plainsboro Preserve Advisory Committee, and by reaching out to the public gained the support of 16 environmental, civic and regional planning groups, as well as many members of the general public. Within six months of publicly announcing the plans, \$1.4 million —100 percent of the cost of the new Center — was raised through grants and donations. We worked with Congressman Rush Holt to secure two federal grants totaling \$850,000; with state Senator Peter Inverso for a \$100,000 grant from the State of New Jersey; and with our corporate community, including major

funding by Merrill Lynch (\$200,000); Bristol-Myers Squibb, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Carlton Homes (each contributing \$50,000), with various other companies and individuals contributing the remainder.

We broke ground on the Center in the summer of 2002, and on May 19, 2003 the new Environmental Education Center was officially dedicated at a ceremony at the Preserve. Numerous state, county, regional and local officials, students and residents attended the groundbreaking ceremony.

The Plainsboro Preserve today is a regional treasure that provides a beautiful, untouched setting to study and observe the quiet wonders of nature. Increasing numbers of area residents and school children from throughout the region are visiting the Environmental Center. Through careful planning, persistence and the help of many generous partners we are now able to extend the invitation to explore one of the region's most significant ecological legacies. ▲