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NEWS RELEASE

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GOV. CHRISTIE WHITMAN HIGHLIGHTS COMMITMENT TO MAKING NEW JERSEY MORE AFFORDABLE AND PRESERVING OPEN SPACE

Gov. Christie Whitman today highlighted the commitments she made in her State of the State and Inauguration messages to make New Jersey more affordable and preserve New Jersey's open space when she accepted the Somerset Alliance for the Future Quality of Life Award.

The Somerset Alliance for the Future presented the Governor with its Quality of Life Award in recognition of her commitment and contribution to Somerset County's quality of life in all aspects of community living.

"Despite the fact that New Jerseyans earn the third highest wages in the country, we need to be doing more to make it more affordable to live here," Gov. Whitman said. "People are being squeezed. We need to relieve the pressure."

Whitman said that because property taxes represent one of the most expensive aspects of living in New Jersey, she proposed a number of measures that will help ease that burden.

"To start with, I believe we need to give the voters the tools to help control property taxes," the Governor said. "That is why I've proposed making local governments go to the voters for approval any time they want to raise property taxes above the rate of inflation."

"Predictably," she said, "there was an immediate outcry from those who maintain that giving voters a greater say will diminish the quality of life in New Jersey's villages, boroughs, townships and cities. There are some who believe that the people can't be trusted to have a greater voice in their own affairs."

"I strongly disagree," Whitman said. "These are the services local governments provide -- the highly visible services that have a real effect on the everyday quality of life in our communities. I believe people are willing to pay for those services. But I also believe they aren't willing to pay for waste or inefficiency."

The Governor said Somerset County is to be commended for its efforts to promote shared services which have helped county taxpayers save more than \$1 million.

According to Whitman, her administration has preserved 115,000 acres of open and farmland, a four-year record in the nearly 45-year history of the Green Acres program.

"But records are made to be broken," she said. "I pledged to preserve another 300,000 acres of open space and farmland over the next four years. Getting there won't be easy -- and it won't be cheap. But it's an investment in future generations that I believe we are called to make. Given the pace of growth, ours may be the last generation that can do this. I am not against development -- not at all. But we do need to strike a balance"

The Governor said the vote last November of Somerset County residents to raise more than \$7 million a year to meet open space goals through taxes shows the seriousness of voters in preserving open space.

"It also shows the voters won't automatically vote down a local tax increase, if they are convinced it will help improve the quality of life in their communities." Gov. Whitman said.

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