

## THE VALUE OF GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE MUST BE PROTECTED

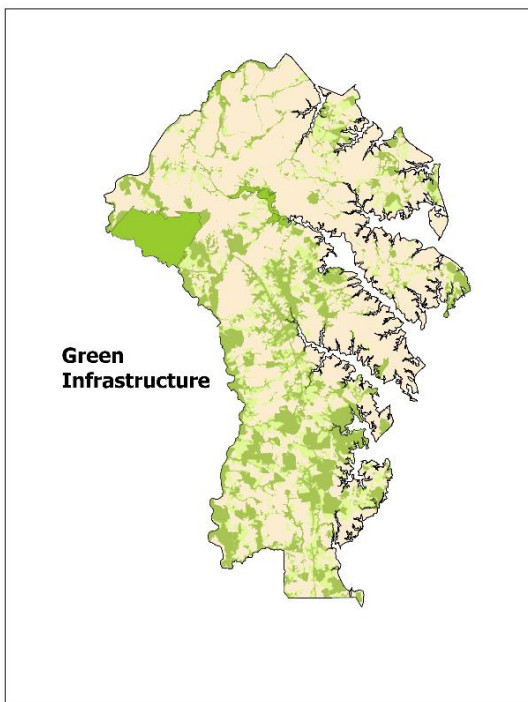
By Paul Christensen



Anne Arundel County's new Green Infrastructure Master Plan is a guide to conserving an interconnected network of the most significant remaining natural lands in Anne Arundel County. The lands identified in the Green Infrastructure Network help protect water quality and air quality, provide habitat for plants and wildlife, create opportunities for recreation, and support mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change. All of these services are known as Ecosystem Services, and they bring valuable additions to the quality of life of everyone in our County.

The economic value of Ecosystem Services has been extensively studied throughout the world, and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, has calculated and mapped their estimated value for much of AA county. (see <https://dnr.maryland.gov/ccs/Pages/Ecosystem-Services.aspx>)

The maps below show the locations of Green Infrastructure (GI) in the Plan and the areas in the County that provide highly valued ecosystem services. It is clear that designated Green Infrastructure in the map is typically associated with a high level of ecosystem services. The Green Infrastructure Network comprises 107,000 acres.



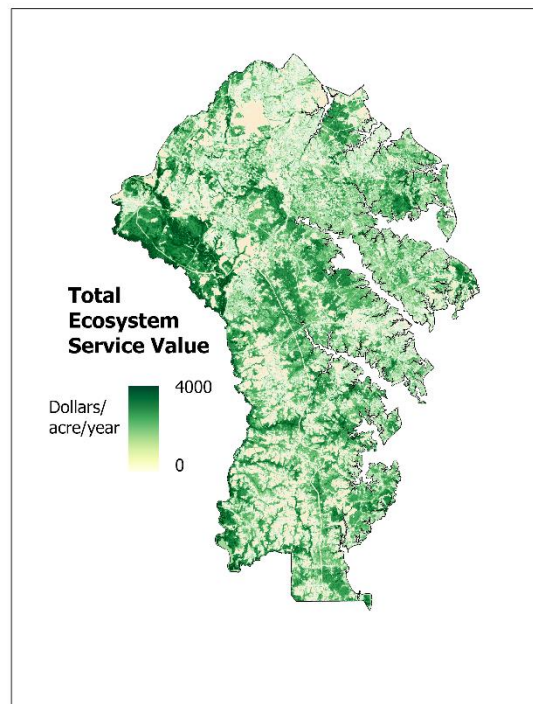
Development of Green Infrastructure areas dramatically reduces the ecosystem services provided. Fortunately, about 65% of the GI Network is protected from development by various types of easements and County acquisitions. About 35% of the Network, however, is privately owned and subject to the land use choices of the owner. The landowner thus controls an asset that has value both to himself and the general public.

Owners' perspectives on their property often change over time. There is risk of an owner choosing to convert some or

all of his equity in the land into a more liquid asset and destroying many of its ecosystem services in the process.

The coming "Regional Area Plans (RAPs)" should prioritize protection of Green Infrastructure and avoid land use or zoning changes that will allow more intensive development of areas in the GI Network. The RAPs are supposed to be consistent with the general guidance provided by Plan2040 (the County's General Development Plan), but on issues like land use, they will be able to recommend amendments to Plan2040 and thus override it. RAPS are intended to be more powerful than the Small Area Plans (SAPs) were for the last GDP.

Up-zoning of these properties or conversion from residential to multiuse or commercial zoning is clearly



not in the public interest. However, GI property owners in search of an exit strategy have the options of conservation/preservation easements or possible outright fee simple sale to the County.

The GI Plan targets protection of an additional 5,000 acres of the GI Network by 2030 through conservation easements administered by the County or private land trusts or through fee simple acquisition of properties by the County using County, State, and Federal funds. Because property values, easement costs, and available State and Federal funding can vary widely over time, the cost of protecting 5,000 acres is difficult to accurately estimate. However, the GI Plan states that \$40 million of funds were expended over the past decade for fee simple acquisition of 1,800 acres. Per acre costs for conservation easements are usually lower since the landowner retains use of the property.

Ultimately, achieving the objective of protection of an additional 5,000 acres will depend on the political will of the Administration and County Council to allocate the necessary funding to the project. County taxpayers should be prepared to strongly encourage their elected representatives to budget sufficient funds to assure protection of Green Infrastructure and its valuable ecosystem services. In a County with a \$1.7 billion annual budget, allocation of a few million dollars per year for Green Infrastructure preservation should be easily manageable.