Freeholder Virginia E. Haines Award

By Victoria Ford



Freeholder Haines on top of Forked River Mountain with Michael T. Mangum, director of Ocean County Parks & Recreation. Photo credit: Donna Flynn

The most important thing to know about the re-election of the Board of Chosen Freeholders this past November, according to Freeholder Ginny Haines, is voters approved a ballot question that modifies the Ocean County Natural Lands Program – i.e. the open space tax – with no impact on taxpayers, she explained in a phone interview before the end of the year.

Cultural and Heritage Commission Director Tim Hart commended the Freeholders' courage for standing behind the measure. The Commission has created an award for history advocacy in Haines' name, to be awarded at the annual Salute to Ocean County this spring.

"All we did was take out the wording from 1998," she explained, in order to expand the program to allow the open space tax to be used to acquire, develop, and maintain land for recreational and historical preservation purposes. The vote passed with 55,851 votes (to 44,883).

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The Ocean County Natural Lands program generates more than $10 million per year for natural lands acquisitions and farmland preservation, Haines explained. For more than 20 years, the county government has purchased and preserved over 32,000 acres of open space. Many of those purchases were made through partnerships with non-profit organizations, municipalities, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 2006, the program was awarded the Governor's Environmental Excellence Award.

Currently, roughly 230,000 acres, or 60 percent of Ocean County's 408,000 acres, are preserved as open space by federal, state, county, and municipal programs; for Ocean County's part, the Freeholders feel the program's expansion is the logical next step.

"We will continue to make certain the priority of the natural lands program is to purchase and preserve open space; and current properties such as the Barnegat Branch Trail will be able to be maintained," Haines said. Other popular visitor sites, including Cloverdale Farm, Cedar Bridge Tavern, and the Cox House, all in Barnegat, she named as proud landmarks in the County's collection of properties.



Freeholder Haines examines exhibits at Cedar Bridge Tavern Historic Site with Michael T. Mangum, director of Ocean County Parks & Recreation. Photo credit: Donna Flynn

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Freeholder Haines at the Cox House in Barnegat Township with Michael T. Mangum, director of Ocean County Parks & Recreation. Photo credit: Donna Flynn

For recreational activities, farming, and, in some areas, hunting, Haines said, "We want to make sure land stays available for generations to come."

The Cox House, a two-and-a-half story mansion in the heart of Barnegat's downtown, is the first historical project to benefit from the open space tax fund's use toward preserving the county's culture and heritage. The building is presently undergoing renovations, including a new watertight roof and asbestos removal in the basement.

For Haines, saving the county's history isn't just good policy – it's personal.

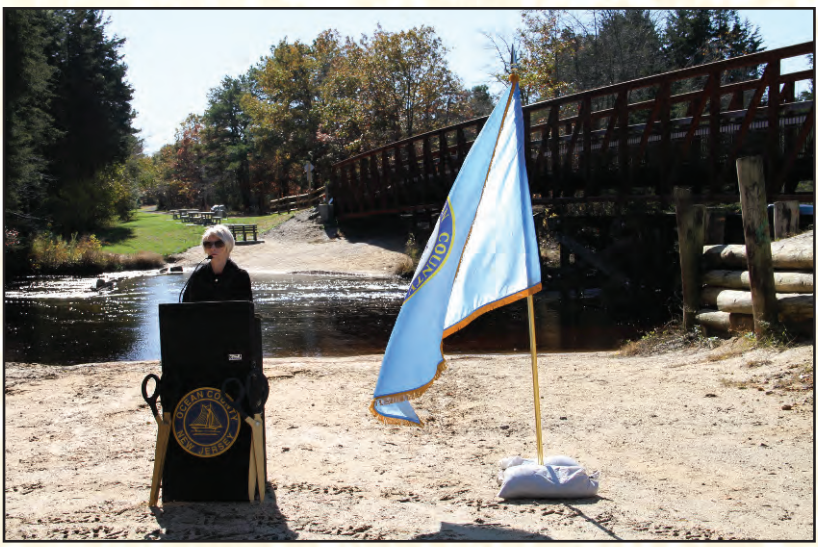
Her family history and heritage in the area dates back to the 1600s; in Haines' lineage are two patriots proven to have fought in the Revolutionary War. In 2017 she was officially sworn in as a member of the Joshua Huddy Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, a nonprofit, nonpolitical, volunteer women's service organization dedicated to promoting patriotism, preserving American history, and securing America's future through better education for children.

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In her own lifetime she has seen the county population increase more than tenfold, from 50,000 to 600,000. “There really aren’t a lot of people who have that kind of history in the county,” she said. “It means a lot” to her to have such deep roots.

Her mom and aunt were nurses who came to the aid of victims of the Hindenburg disaster. Her mom was from the Ocean Avenue side of town, east of Route 9, and her dad was from the western side. As a child, Haines and her family lived in Ocean County Park, formerly John D. Rockefeller’s estate and today’s home of the Police Academy. “It was a nice playground that we had,” she said, full of natural wonders – and not full of neighbors. Later they moved to Hope Chapel Road.



Freeholder Haines at the dedication of Barnegat Branch Trail at the Cedar Creek Trestle. Photo credit: Donna Flynn



Freeholder Haines rings the bell commemorating the 100th anniversary of the end of World War 1. .Photo credit: Donna Flynn