

# Freeholders OK \$9.85M bond

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SALEM - A \$9.85 million bond ordinance, primarily meant to fund bridge repairs and preserve more than 1,890 acres of county farmland, was unanimously adopted by the freeholder board this past week.

Freeholder Director Lee Ware called the 20-year debt the county will take on as "vital to the safety of our residents and (for) securing our way of life for future generations."

The county will use \$4.8 million of the funds to re-open bridges in Lower Alloways Creek and Oldmans townships. Another \$2.6 million will be used for farmland preservation.

Though it is some of the short-term purchases added on to the bond which have raised questions for Freeholder Julie Acton, the lone Republican on the seven-member board.

"I have concerns with bonding items with a shelf life of five to seven years in a 20-year bond," Acton said. "These items should have come out of our operating expense budget."

Some of the items with the shortest period of usefulness include firearms, Mosquito Extermination Commission trucks and data video recorders for the Salem County Sheriff's Department.

County Administrator Earl Gage explained the county is well below its bonding capacity and short-term purchases will not become the norm. He expects the county to pay about \$625,000 in principal and interest per year, meaning \$2.64 million in interest would be paid over the life of the bond.

"I support farmland preservation and the beauty it provides ... I am in favor of the construction and repair of our bridges for the health, welfare and safety of our citizens," Acton said. "That is the reason I voted yes."

No one from the public offered comment during the public hearing portion of the meeting focusing on the bond.

In a breakdown of the \$9,854,000 bond, 64 percent will go toward bridge repair and other public works needs, 26 percent for farmland preservation, 5 percent for public safety, 2 percent for IT Department and Office of Archives and Records Management needs and 3 percent to cover the cost of issuing the bond.

Two century-old, wooden plank and steel bridges - one along New Bridge Road in Lower Alloways Creek and the other along East Mill Street in Pedricktown - will be reconstructed after years of closure.

"We believe that this bond is in the best interest of the taxpayer," according to Ware. "It allows us to continue to provide services that the taxpayers rely upon."