

# Master Plan Element

## Recreation/Open Space

### Preface

This Master Plan Element is being drafted pursuant to the requirements of the New Jersey Municipal Land Use Law, N.J.S.A. 40:55D-28-b.(7 & 8). The element concerns the provision for identification of existing and proposed sites for recreation activities and sites specifically designated for open space conservation.

### Introduction

The Borough of Metuchen Master Plan lists among its goals and objectives the following:

- ◆ To preserve and enhance the residential character of the Borough.
- ◆ To maintain the Borough's physical and visual identity in the region.
- ◆ To provide a circulation system which brings into balance the needs of the **pedestrian** (emphasis added) and the needs of cars trucks and buses.
- ◆ To preserve areas of environmental sensitivity, with additional planning of surrounding land uses to ensure the maximum public benefit from the resultant open space.

The goals and objectives of the Master Plan have been elaborated and characterized to be principally one of preservation: preservation of the Borough's essentially residential character, of the integrity of its neighborhoods, and ultimately, its desirability as a community in which to live. This desirability includes the need to provide a consistent level of service to the community while maintaining a property tax burden, which is affordable to property owners.

The designation of sites in the Borough which either are currently utilized as, or proposed to be used as active and passive recreation and open space areas is consistent with the specific and the overall goals and objectives of the Borough Master Plan. The presence of adequate and accessible parks and open space areas is often cited among the most desirable elements of a particular community. Real property values are enhanced by the presence and proximity of recreation and open space areas in a community. As such, it is in the interest of the Borough to have a clear plan relating to the open space and recreation needs of the community, including the provision for future acquisition of parcels as they may become available.

The Recreation/Open Space Element of the Borough Master Plan sets forth the goals and objectives for the Borough relative to recreation and open space, as well as specific policy recommendations necessary for implementation.

### **Background Information**

The 1983 Master Plan and the 1983 Housing Element, both prepared by Frost Associates, were reviewed, in conjunction with the Environmental Resource Inventory, prepared by the Borough's Environmental Commission and issued in 1976, for relevant observations and recommendations relating to Recreation and Open Space needs in the Borough. The resources were compared with the recent 1988 Master Plan Re-examination report and 1988 Housing Plan and Fair Share Element, both prepared by Hintz-Nelessen Associates, PC to ensure the recommendations were still valid today. The conclusion was drawn that they are with some minor modifications.

The prior plans refer to the need for neighborhood park areas to serve the immediate residents of a specific area. There are several neighborhoods in the borough which are not served by neighborhood parks or playgrounds, or are isolated from adequate facilities by busy traffic streets. The neighborhoods include the area north of the Port Reading Railroad, the Hillside/Highland neighborhood, the northwest quadrant area north of New Durham Road and the Linden/Oak Avenue neighborhood. This need should be addressed through future policy implementation.

The need for natural open space areas as a habitat for indigenous vegetation and as wildlife corridors is demonstrated in the 1988 Master Plan Re-examination Report and Housing Element/Fair Share Plan. The areas in the northwest quadrant of the Borough and along the Lehigh Valley Railroad were shown to contain many instances of Red Maple and Ash specimen trees which are an indicator of the wet nature of the land in those areas. The trees are a unique natural resource necessary for the balance of ecology in the Borough. The Lehigh Valley RR also supports a wide variety of tree, shrub and herb species, including red maple, pin oak, slippery elm, silky dogwood, bayberry, honeysuckle, pokeweed, goldenrod and watercress. The LVRR is also uniquely suited as a connecting link to many diverse areas of the Borough, including parks and natural open space areas. The LVRR is unique to itself through the diversity of habitats found along its length. This may enable different portions of the parcel to be developed for different purposes, while in total, fulfilling the goals and objectives of the Master Plan and the Recreation/Open Space Element.

## Goals and Objectives

The recommended goals and objectives of the Recreation/Open Space Master Plan Element are as follows:

1. To provide adequate and accessible active and passive recreation areas for use by Borough residents and others throughout the region.
2. To provide for safe accessible neighborhood playgrounds for the youth of the Borough.
3. To increase the number, size, type and variety of open space and recreational opportunities for the residents of the Borough.
4. To provide additional open space parcels with appropriate vegetation necessary to reduce noise, traffic and air pollution, in closer compliance with the Clean Air Act of 1990.
5. To provide for the establishment of alternate transportation modes (bicycle /pedestrian) to reduce traffic, noise and air pollution in compliance with the requirements of the Clean Air Act of 1990.
6. To provide for pedestrian and bicycle connections between the various recreation and open space parcels in the Borough, thereby providing additional recreational opportunities to all residents.
7. To utilize the unique characteristics of all specific open space parcels to further the goals and objectives of the Borough Master Plan for environmental, land use and circulation issues.

## Existing Open Space Parcels

The Borough of Metuchen contains 14 parcels of land, comprising approximately 70.0 acres, which are either municipally owned public park and open space lands, or privately owned, deed restricted, open space areas. These parcels include:

| <u>Number</u> | <u>Block / Lot</u>          | <u>Name</u>             | <u>Size (acres)</u> | <u>Use</u>               |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1.            | 126 / 130                   | Green Acres             | 10.0                | Natural Open Space       |
| 2.            | 175 / 1.01                  | Oakland Park            | 10.96               | Tennis, Baseball         |
| 3.            | 213 / 1.01<br>216 / 63, 126 | Myrtle Park             | 11.0                | Baseball, Softball,      |
| 4.            | 155 / 1                     | Edgar Park              | 10.9                | Football, Baseball, Pool |
| 5.            | 149 / 15                    | Thomas Park             | 1.9                 | Pond                     |
| 6.            | 105 / 58<br>106 / 12        | Woodwild Park           | 3.7                 | Natural open space       |
| 7.            | 92 / 32                     | Olmezer Park            | 1.13                | Playground, Basketball   |
| 8.            | 51.04 / 27                  | Centre St. Park         | 1.13                | Playground               |
| 9.            | 133 / 59                    | Memorial Park           | 0.9                 | Passive Recreation       |
| 10.           | 135 / 1<br>136 / 1          | Kentnor Park            | 3.0                 | Basketball, Playground   |
| 11.           | 79 / 12, 13                 | Hampton Park            | 3.5                 | Baseball, Basketball     |
| 12.           | 37 / 1.02                   | Boy Scout/Green Acres   | 10.83               | Natural Open Space       |
| 13            | 101 / 1                     | Martin Luther King Park | 1.0                 | Passive Recreation       |
| 14            | -- / --                     | Horse Trough            | 0.1                 | Historic Site            |

The listed parcels do not include any parcels which are owned or utilized by the Board of Education, or in conjunction with other Borough facilities.

## Potential Open Space Parcels

There are several parcels in the Borough which may become available for acquisition as open space areas for active and passive recreation. They include the Lehigh Valley Railroad right-of-way from the southeastern boundary of the Borough to the northwestern boundary of the Borough and the northern portion of the Gulton Property, which is adjacent to the Boy Scout/Green Acres parcel. The parcels are listed for informational purposes.

| <u>Number</u> | <u>Block / Lot</u>  | <u>Name</u> | <u>Size (acres)</u> | <u>Use</u>         |
|---------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| P1            | 43 / 8              | LVRP        | 27                  | Recreation         |
| P2            | 37 / 5.5, 14, 17.02 | Gulton      | 5.5                 | Natural open space |

## Potential Open Space Parcels (cont'd)

The LVRR has been delineated on Map-1 as P1 and P1a. The parcel delineated as P1a is not currently abandoned and may not be readily available for acquisition. The railroad use of the parcel delineated as P1 as a railroad has been terminated. The significance of the designation of the Lehigh Valley Railroad as an open space parcel is vital with respect to several of the goals of the master plan.

The parcel would increase the amount of open space within the Borough by approximately 40%, bringing Metuchen much closer to the desired Recreation and Parks Association standard of 8 acres of parks and recreation areas per 1,000 residents. The parcel would be a unique open space within the Borough, and serve as a potential pedestrian connection between the various parks via seven identifiable access points. The LVRR would also provide additional safe access to parks and recreation areas for residents who do not have a neighborhood park near their home.

The northwestern portion of the Gulton parcel, which lies north and west of several railroad spurs (identified as P2) contains a significant amount of freshwater wetland habitats and lies within the 100-year floodplain. Additionally, this parcel is part of the uplands to the Dismal Swamp, a unique wildlife ecosystem for the region. The preservation of additional open space in this area would serve to buffer environmentally sensitive areas, thus providing additional public benefit from existing and new open space parcels.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Master Plan would make the following recommendations to implement the goals and objectives of the element:

1. Designate the LVRR as an open space corridor, with appropriate zoning and land development regulations on the use of the land and on the surrounding properties, whether they are to be used, developed or redeveloped to ensure the implementation of the objectives of the plan.
2. Continue to actively pursue as parcels become available, acquiring easements, dedications and/or outright purchase of open space lands. This activity should be extended to seeking additional neighborhood parks to serve Borough residents.
3. Seek to improve existing open space parcels through buffer planting, acquisition of additional buffer areas, establishment of interconnections within the system and other proactive planning methods to ensure maximum public and environmental benefit

