

Chapter 7 – Conservation, Open Space and Recreation

Conservation, Open Space and Recreation are essential elements of any Green Plan. This section describes Highland Park’s current situation and its regional coordination. The section also provides recommendations and strategies to further improve Highland Park’s conservation, open space and recreation elements.

7.1 – Current Situation in Highland Park

Highland Park has already included a *Conservation, Open Space, and Recreation* Element within its current Master Plan. In addition, *Highland Park 2020: A Sustainable Community* includes sections that focus on conservation, open space, and recreation, such as natural vegetation, wetlands/waterways greenways and the various commissions to implement them. These elements are summarized below.

Open Space

Currently, over 60 percent of Highland Park lies within an eighth of a mile of preserved land, while over 85 percent lies within a quarter of a mile. Highland Park boasts over 220 acres of land preserved, which comprises 21 percent of the total land area within the municipality (See Exhibit 7.1). These 220 acres include neighborhood, community, regional and mini parks – as classified by the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA). Based on the NRPA’s guidelines, Highland Park needs more mini and neighborhood parks (See Exhibit 7.2).

Realizing this deficiency, Highland Park identified, in its master plan, some possible sites for these smaller community parks. Highland Park will significantly reduce the deficit of neighborhood parks after it acquires these proposed parcels (See Exhibit 7.3). Highland Park’s strategy to accomplish this acquisition involves state and county funding, NJ Green Acres matching grants and low-interest loans.

Exhibit 7.2 - Highland Park’s Recreational Needs				
Park Type	Standard (acres per 1,000 population)	Acres	NRPA Requirements	Deficiency/ Surplus
Mini-parks	0.5	< 1 acre	7 acres	(-) 6 acres
Neighborhood Parks	1.5	1 acre	21 acres	(-) 20 acres
Community Parks	6.75	149 acres	91 acres	(+) 58 acres

Source: National Recreation and Park Association Standards, 2002.

Recreation

Highland Park contains many recreational opportunities available to its residents (see Exhibit 7.4), although an uneven distribution exists. Thus, Highland Park determined some active recreation improvements throughout the Borough; it plans to add two basketball courts, replace the bocce court at the senior center, revamp the play equipment and potentially offer nautical activities. Creating a solid combination of both passive and active recreation throughout the municipality will be important.

Exhibit 7.4 - Highland Park's Active Recreation Inventory								
	Kilmer Woods (Rutgers)	Donaldson Park	Johnson Park	Karsey Park	Felton Park	Irving School	Bartle School	High School
Baseball/Softball		5	3					1
Basketball Court		2				1	1	
Football Field		1						1
Soccer Field			1					
Tennis Court		4	8					
Volleyball Court		1						
Playground		3	1	1	1	1		
Picnic Grove		7	2					
Running Track								1
Boat Ramp		1						
Trails/Paths	1	1	1	1	1			

Source: Highland Park Recreation Department, 2002

Natural Vegetation

Highland Park understands the essential need for trees within a community. As a result, they initiated a program to plant trees and other vegetation within the community in their Highland Park 2020 Vision. In addition, Highland Park established a Native Plant Reserve located on River Road.

Wetlands and Waterways

Highland Park boasts an extraordinary hydrologic system of waterways, including the Raritan River, the Buell Brook, the Mill Brook and smaller intermittent streams. The majority of wetlands in Highland Park are located adjacent to these three main waterways and smaller streams. Wetlands, inundated by water for a certain amount of time throughout the year, contain vegetation and soils to filter water. In order to protect these areas, Highland Park has adopted a stream corridor protection ordinance. This ordinance will help guide future growth within the Borough without disrupting the natural patterns of the streams and wetlands.

Greenways

In 1995, Middlesex County identified the Raritan River Greenway portion in Highland Park, including the River Road Nature Reserve/Environmental Center Location, Johnson Park, Ayres Beach, Red's Marina, Donaldson Park, the Gutman/Barwood Property, Valley Place

Ravine, and Lower Meadows. The Borough of Highland Park continues to work with the state, county, and local agencies to complete this greenway.

Highland Park also created a proposed list of new greenways and bikeways for the community. First, the Borough proposed a trail network in the Meadows Complex to connect to the Southside Bikeway and to the trail network in Donaldson Park. Second, it plans to improve the existing Cedar Lane Bike Path and creating more bike paths consistent with the Middlesex County Transportation Plan and Circulation Element. Finally, Highland Park wants to improve passive recreation paths at Valley Place Ravine, the Department of Public Works, and on the North Eighth Avenue median strip.

Commissions

The Borough of Highland Park established an Environmental Commission and a Shade Tree Advisory Committee to assist the local government and oversee many of the aforementioned tasks. The Environmental Commission, which prepared an Open Space Plan and an Annotated Open Space Inventory in 2002, conducts advisory reviews on applications before the Planning Board and Zoning Board and provides environmental information to the residents of Highland Park.

The Shade Tree Advisory Committee advises the township on the street tree and park plantings. They prepared a Community Forestry Management Plan, which makes the Borough eligible for the grants through the NJ Parks and Forestry Community Stewardship Incentive Program. Finally, the Shade Tree Advisory Committee has planted 200 trees since 2000.

7.2 – Highland Park Regional Efforts

Although environmental resources do not stop at legal boundaries, they are often managed as if they did. Thus, Highland Park should strive to coordinate environmental efforts with its municipal neighbors, Middlesex County and the State of New Jersey.

Municipal Neighbors

Highland Park has three municipal neighbors with which to coordinate: Edison Township, Piscataway Township and New Brunswick City. All three of these neighboring municipalities land uses are compatible with Highland Parks. Each one works to protect and manage their conservation, open space, and recreation, while encouraging smart growth.

Middlesex County

Middlesex County will help Highland Park complete its Raritan River Greenway. The County targeted some key parcels for acquisition and plans to aid the township financially. One of the issues that Highland Park and Middlesex County will need to coordinate on in the future is the management of these preserved lands.

The State of New Jersey

Highland Park's conservation, open space, and recreation plan proves consistent with the State of New Jersey Development and Redevelopment Plan. The NJ Development and Redevelopment Plan classified the State of New Jersey into five different planning areas (PAs). Highland Park falls within the Metropolitan Planning Area, PA1. PA1 includes areas that are already highly developed, large urban areas and post-war suburbs.

7.3 – Existing Conservation, Open Space and Recreation

Highland Park has already determined ways to implement conservation, open space, and recreation throughout the community. However, some more options can be utilized to achieve their goals more efficiently.

Financial Diversity

Highland Park can look beyond the NJDEP Green Acres and Middlesex County funding. Other options available to the Borough include applying for foundation grants for open space acquisition, initiating an open space tax for preservation and maintenance of space and seeking more partners, such as non-profit land trusts, watershed associations, local parks and greenspace alliances, private citizens or corporations.

Management of Open Spaces

Highland Park must create management plans for all of its existing and future preserved lands. Highland Park can improve its conservation, open space, and recreational opportunities simply through different management techniques.

Lawns

One focus of management would be on the lawns of the preserved land. Lawns and lawn maintenance are often large contributors of environmental degradation. The most standard lawn, monoculture, supports only grass and a small amount of species diversity. Fertilizers, pesticides, watering, and frequent mowing are the typical methods of maintenance. However, all of these contribute to poorer air quality and water quality. Instead, lawns should be maintained at a natural state and include trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. These natural-state lawns will support more species diversity, reduce stormwater runoff, conserve water and improve air quality. Proper management of lawns does not need to be solely a municipal task. Private residents can manage their lawns more environmentally consciously as well. To encourage residents to replace their existing lawns with these water-conserving lawns, Highland Park can offer a tax abatements. **To read more about hazardous materials, see Chapter 3.**

Invasive Species

Invasive species are plants, animals, and other organisms that aggressively migrate into environments where they do not live under normal conditions. They are usually introduced through some sort of human action, such as planting gardens with exotic species, and can cause economic, health, and environmental harm. Invasive species can displace native organisms and disrupt natural processes and can be very costly to remove effectively.

Examples of invasive species are Japanese honey suckle, Tree-of-Heaven, cow vetch, and Japanese knotweed.

Current State of Affairs. More than 1,000 non-native species exist in NJ. A report from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, “An Overview of Non-indigenous Plant Species in New Jersey”, highlights 27 of the most problematic species (see Exhibit 7.5) in New Jersey, all of which potentially habitat in Highland Park with one exception, the Japanese sedge, which is a coastal species. Highland Park’s Environmental Commission has some information about invasive species on its website, although more is needed. Also, the commission developed a native plant reserve on River Road and plans to highlight native plantings in Donaldson Park, The Meadows, Ayers Beach and Valley Place.

Exhibit 7.5 – The 27 Most Problematic Invasive Species in NJ

- Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*)
- Tree-of-Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*)
- Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*)
- Porcelain Berry (*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*)
- Japanese Berry (*Berberis thunbergii*)
- Japanese Sedge (*Carex kobomugi*)
- Asian Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*)
- Spotted knapweed (*Centaura biebersteinii*)
- Canadian thistle (*Cirsium arvense*)
- Wild Teasel, Cut-leaf Teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*)
- Autumn Olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*)
- Winged Spindletree (*Euonymus alata*)
- Chinese bush-cover (*Lespedeza cuneata*)
- Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*)
- Morrow’s bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera morrowii*)
- Tartarian honey suckle (*Lonicera tatarica*)
- Purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*)
- Yellow Sweetclover (*Melilotus officinalis*)
- Japanese Stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*)
- Eurasian Water-milfoil (*Myriophyllum spicatum*)
- Japanese knotweed (*Polygonum cuspidatum*)
- Mile-A-Minute (*Polygonum perfoliatum*)
- Curly Leaf Pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*)
- Lesser Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*)
- Common Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*)
- Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*)
- Multiflora Rose (*Rosa multiflora*)
- Wineberry (*Rubus phoenicolasius*)

(Source: NJDEP)

7.4 –Management Strategy Opportunities

Borough-County Partnership

Highland Park should ensure that its goals and strategies comply with those of Middlesex County. The Borough-County Partnership serves to: outline a management plan for all of the preserved land within Highland Park’s municipal borders; strengthen the joint implementation of the Raritan River Greenway and any future greenways; and improve any uncoordinated efforts to protect the natural resources in Highland Park. This partnership will ensure proper management of contiguous parcels of preserved land owned by both government entities.

A Stewardship Forum

The stewardship forum is based on outside expertise and the local community stakeholders working together to help the Borough shift from the planning and analysis stage to the implementation stage. A stewardship forum involves a one-week program designed to develop and sustain local interests in stewardship issues and identify feasible implementation strategies as quickly as possible. The one-week event generates recommendations for stewardship action strategies, inter-jurisdictional coordination, funding sources, monitoring and management, and public education. The borough can hold a stewardship forum on an annual basis covering different topics each year.

7.5 – Recommendations

Financial Diversity

Increase the borough’s funding sources beyond the NJ Green Acres program and Middlesex County. This will allow the Borough to leverage their dollars to accomplish more goals from the conservation, open space, and recreation element of their master plan.

Management

Initiate a Stewardship Forum Program to help transition the management strategy from the planning to the implementation stage. This will allow local officials, residents and regional experts to discuss the issues of open space management, conservation, and recreation.

References:

Borough of Highland Park 2003 Master Plan.

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The Regional Planning Partnership. The Green Infrastructure Guide: Planning for a Healthy Urban and Community Forest. 2001.

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