

## **HUNTERDON COUNTY NEEDS YOUR INPUT ON COUNTY STRATEGIC PARK, OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN DECISIONS**

The Hunterdon County Strategic Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan is at a stage in its preliminary findings and draft recommendations that public input is needed to finalize a plan document for future public hearings. A public meeting is planned for November 17, 2016 at the County's Route 12 offices to review key issues.

The County Freeholders authorized Maser Consulting P. A. and GreenPlay LLC in March to assist the staff of the Hunterdon County Planning Board and its Division of Parks and Recreation in preparing the County Park Plan which is intended to provide direction for a future County Park System and the expenditure of County Open Space Trust Funds.

The plan foresees the over-arching goal of a future County Park System that provides appropriate active and passive recreational opportunities and complements the contributions of State, municipal and farmland preservation and conservation group efforts in protecting the County's extensive network of natural resources and retention of its rural open space landscape.

Some of the Plan findings so far are:

1. Over the past 50 years, the County Park System has added 24 separate park areas. Since the year 2000, the County system has significantly expanded from 5,217 acres to 8,230 acres in 2016, largely due to County Open Space Trust Fund.
2. Hunterdon County has 80,717 acres of set aside as protected or preserved open space. This open space amounts to 28.8 percent of the County's total land area of 279,961 acres

<b>Ranking of the Existing Types of Preserved Open Space in Hunterdon County</b>	
<b>Type of Open Space</b>	<b>Acres</b>
1. Preserved Farmland	35,016.45
2. State Parks and Preserved Open Space	19,376.00
3. County Parks and Open Space (including jointly owned with State)	8,230.00
4. Municipal Parks and Open Space	8,893.00
5. Non-profit Conservation Lands	4,232.38
6. Board of Education	1,643.16
7. Private Open Space	1,949.78
8. Common Owned Open Space	1,305.92

3. Nine of the ten municipalities in Hunterdon County with the least amount of combined Municipal and County parkland within their jurisdiction consist of small boroughs and only one township. Half of these underserved municipalities border the Delaware River. To elevate this problem, County planning policy could be acquisition of County park open space near these boroughs or provision of trust funds for making facility improvements that would expand recreational experiences at existing municipal parks.

**Ten Municipalities with Least Amount of Municipal and County Park and Open Space Municipal Parks/Open Space**

<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Acres</b>
1. Stockton	5.90
2. Lebanon	12.47
3. Flemington	20.47
4. Lambertville	31.76
5. Frenchtown	32.12
6. Bloomsbury	33.84
7. Hampton	39.63
8. Kingwood	49.88
9. Clinton Town	63.69
10. Glen Gardner	77.26

4. The preliminary vision for the future County Park System would be to acquire 13,664 additional acres adding them to the 7,814 acres currently solely owned by the County amounting to an ultimate County Park System of 21, 478 acres.

5. The following draft goals of this future County Park System are proposed:

Goal 1 - Acquire and preserve the major physical features of Hunterdon County for public use and enjoyment of the rivers, the mountains and major scenic vistas.

Goal 2 - Provide developed, active park and recreation opportunities near the County's population concentrations.

Goal 3 – Preserve open space to preserve environmental resources and protect natural resources.

Goal 4 – Create a County Park system that contributes to resident's quality of life and economic well-being.

Goal 5 – Create a connected network of greenways and trails linking together an open space system throughout Hunterdon County.

Goal 6 – Seek new funding opportunities in light of the County's fiscal constraints and the public demand for greater active recreation and tourism experiences.

Goal 7 – Recognize and treat the County Park System as a public asset and provide the necessary resources to create a quality park system.

6. The proposed priorities for open space acquisition and development of the future Hunterdon County Park System are:

First priority of the County Park and Open Space Plan is given to acquiring, for public access and use, the remaining vacant and underdeveloped properties with frontage on the Delaware River and promontory sites offering views of the County's most scenic resource.

Second priority of the County Park and Open Space Plan is completion of a continuous greenway along the Musconetcong Mountains, the prominent landscape feature framing the County's northern border.

The third priority of the County Park Plan is to provide County park open space and parkland within or near the population concentrations in Hunterdon County.

The fourth priority of the County Park and Open Space Plan is acquisition of trail linkages connecting all existing trails in Hunterdon County.

The fifth priority of the County Park and Open Space Plan is the acquisition and development of seven General Use Parks appropriately distributed across the County.

Sixth Priority is to make the County Park System part of an enhanced tourism program by designing imaginative General Use County Park features and enlisting the private sector to create recreational facilities such as a county-wide rail-and-trail system.

The Seventh Priority is recognition of the potential of preserving a "farm belt" across the center and southern section of Hunterdon County where there is an existing concentration of both preserved farms and active agriculture under farmland assessment.

The preparation of the County Strategic Park and Open Space Plan included the following basic activities:

1. Review of past Hunterdon County Park and planning documents such as the past County Park Master Plans, the County Growth Management Plan, the Hunterdon County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy and County Open Space, Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund Plan.
2. Meetings with the staffs of County Park and County Planning Board.
3. Focal group sessions with interested residents and meetings with stakeholders involved with open space acquisition and public recreation and conservation.
4. Public sessions to gather information and commentary and to present findings of surveys and studies including a visioning session to obtain a consensus of County Park Plan priorities.
5. A statistical valid survey of County residents to elicit views on County park and recreation sites, programs, staff operations and an open information or non-statistical valued survey offering another forum for opinions and commentary by County residents.

6. Compilation and mapping of all sources of protected open space at all levels of government, preserved farmland and non-profit environmental groups. A list showing all of the existing open space parcels was sent to all 26 municipalities to review for accuracy and updated information.
7. Identification and mapping of the remaining vacant and non-preserved farmland in the county which should be considered in future County park site and acquisition planning. For the purposes of selecting potential County park and greenway properties, the amount of potential available land chosen from was 104,955.56 acres consisting of 8,907.57 acres of vacant land, 2,759.90 acres of non-ROSI public land and 93,288.09 acres of non-preserved farm qualified land.
8. Analysis of basic demographics and trends in park and recreation activities relevant to a Hunterdon County Park system.

The survey was conducted using three primary methods: 1) an “Invitation” mail-back survey; 2) on-line, password protected invitation only web survey to further encourage response from those residents within the defined invitation sample choosing to respond via the web rather than the paper form, and 3) an “Open-link” online survey for members of the public who were not part of the invitation sample. The analysis herein primarily focuses on responses from the statistically-valid invitation sample.

Summary of selected key survey findings are:

1. Focus on maintenance of parks and open space.
2. Trails and pathways, park amenities and open space acquisitions are top priorities.
3. Community events, like the summer concerts, are the most desired program.
4. In allocating future funding, focus on additional open space acquisition, improvement of existing park facilities and increasing trail connectivity ranked as the highest preference.
5. To increase County park use, respondents highly ranked communicating program awareness, park maintenance and developing additional facilities and amenities.