

# **DRAFT OPEN SPACE PLAN EXCERPTS FOR DISCUSSION**

## **OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN**

### **HIGHLAND PARK, NEW JERSEY**

#### **PREPARED BY HIGHLAND PARK ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSION**

**JUNE 2002**

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

##### **Purposes**

This Highland Park Open Space and Recreation Plan and its accompanying Open Space Inventory are meant to provide borough decision makers and the public with information about and recommendations for open space in the Borough, including those lands actually dedicated as open space and those that now function as *de facto* open space, but whose zoning allows development.

Initial sections of the plan give an overview of existing conditions, followed by an estimate of needs and an analysis of how specific parcels might fulfill those needs. Highland Park is a municipality with small land area compared to its population, yet with a self image that prizes its walkable "small town" feel and almost bucolic edging of natural lands and parks along the Raritan River and in the Kilmer Woods. This nearly complete "green belt" of open space surrounding three sides of the borough helps Highland Park maintain what could be called a paradox: the high-density "small" town. Our population density of 7,608.2 per square mile is in the urban range—greater than that of other "livable" towns to which we often compare ourselves (Milltown 4,459, Metuchen 4,686). Highland Park today is in fact about where New Brunswick was a decade ago (7,975) and not far behind it in the 2000 census (9,287)—yet few would consider Highland Park to be "urban."

The thrust of this document is in part to show the interplay of open space and developed space that gives us our character, and to identify particular needs for preserving that character. "Walkability" can be seen as requiring frequent small neighborhood open spaces so that children can walk there from their homes, or seniors and other adults who have difficulty walking long

distances can nonetheless stroll about Highland Park secure in knowing that there will be frequent and congenial resting points. Larger open spaces along the river and wooded sections insulate our borough from surrounding municipalities and give our quasi-urban residents an experience of nature that city dwellers must seek out by driving.

Unfortunately, most of the land now used as *de facto* open space lacks permanent protection. It is zoned for housing or other purposes, and at full build-out would simply disappear as open space unless at least part of its natural character and public accessibility is retained by some combination of acquisition, easements, stream-corridor protection, or owner agreements. The final Action Plan recommends different approaches for different specific properties.

## Plan Origin and Planning Processes

This open space plan, drafted by the Highland Park Environmental Commission, builds on a decade of studies, reports, and public discussion during which increased attention was given to Highland Park's open space and natural environment. First was the Natural Resource Inventory for Highland Park (1992), followed by Highland Park's Cultural Resources Inventory (1993), Greenway Feasibility Study (1994), Master Plan revision of 1995, Street Tree Master Plan (1998), study of the Livingston Manor Historical District (1998), Community Forestry Management Plan (2001), Open Space Inventory (2001), and Biological Survey and Restoration Concepts for The Meadows (2001), the Public Meetings on Recreation (March 2002), and various reports of the Working Group for Environmental Education Centers (2001-2002).

Also during that period, regional and state levels of government produced various studies, plans, and model ordinances that give a whole new context for Highland Park's local master planning and open space planning. An increased environmental awareness shows in such documents as state and county development and open space plans, aquifer and watershed plans, a model stream corridor protection ordinance, bicycle/pedestrian path plans, and the East Coast Greenway. This last is a new federal "Millennium Trails" hiking/biking route that passes through Highland Park (via Johnson Park and Cedar Lane/ Rutgers Ecological Preserve) and gives us the opportunity of linking our riverfront greenway with both this high-profile federal project and the long-discussed Middlesex County Raritan River Greenway.

The recommended goals and actions included in this plan draw on all these and on the high level of public support for open space as evidenced by participation at hearings of the Planning Board and other bodies, as well as public input to the current Master Plan review process. The Highland Park Environmental Commission took these public meetings into account, conducted its own discussions at commission meetings, and circulated a request for input to mayor, council, and other officials, departments, commissions, and committees. Thus many studies and much public sentiment was evaluated and combined into an "Action Plan" to protect, restore, and enhance the natural and physical environment of Highland Park Borough and preserve what people value about living here.

## Goals

Implementation of the Highland Park Open Space and Recreation Plan shall further the following specific open space goals. These are meant, in turn, to further the broad, agreed-upon community goal that begins the mission statement adopted by Borough Council: "The desire to retain a basic safe, comfortable and accessible environment and character in the community."

- *Preserve Borough Character Through Open Space.*
- *Make Neighborhood Open Space Accessible to All Residents.* Provide pedestrian access to neighborhood open space within 1/4 mile of any residential concentration, as provided in the

1995 Master Plan, including dedication of appropriate municipal "vacant" or "underutilized" properties for this purpose.

- *Create a Green Buffer around Highland Park's Riverfront and Wooded Areas.* Connectivity between existing open space and natural areas shall be preserved, maintained, or enhanced.
- *Make Nature Areas Permanently Available and Attractive to Citizens.* Pursue various combinations of acquisition, easements, zoning, and owner agreements to preserve natural habitat and public enjoyment of major "at risk" natural areas such as Kilmer Woods, natural portions of the Midland–Ross/Grimes Aerospace property and other land along the Amtrak wildlife corridor, Ayres Beach (formerly Red's Marina/Barwood property), and the Buck Woods/Meadows complex in the southeastern corner of Highland Park.
- *Develop Consistent and Effective Environmental Ordinances and Policies.*
- *Provide Natural Lands for Environmental Education and Nature Activities.*
- *Provide Safe, Convenient, and Attractively Vegetated Bicycle/Pedestrian Paths.*
- *Preserve Stream Corridors to Protect Water Quality, Aquifer Recharge, and Riparian Natural Conditions.* Stream corridors shall be protected from encroachment. The hydrologic functioning of land within Highland Park Borough shall be protected and restored.
- *Protect Natural Habitat and Coordinate Open Space Planning through Accord among the Master Plan, Zoning, State and County Plans, and Modern Environmental Science.* All Highland Park Borough planning documents shall reflect the mounting public concern with open space preservation.

## **Actions Proposed [See Detailed Plan in Section 6]**

- ***Rezone for Conservation the Entire Meadows/Southside Bikeway Complex.***
- ***Create Bicycle/Pedestrian Paths Linked to Open Spaces.***
- ***Acquire Ayres Beach Natural Area (County Purchase).***
- ***Acquire "Buck Woods" or Protect via Conservation/Public-Access Easement.***
- ***Preserve Wildlife Corridor Along Rail Embankment/Cleveland Avenue.***
- ***Preserve the Kilmer Woods/Rutgers Ecological Preserve.***
- ***Examine Redevelopment Areas for Environmental, Open Space, and Historic Preservation Opportunities.***
- ***Strengthen Environmental and Open Space Aspects Of Master Plan and Ordinances.***
- Adopt the Middlesex County Model Stream Corridor Protection Ordinance.
- ***Create Neighborhood Open Space by Rezoning Small Municipal Properties.***

\* \* \* \*

# **DRAFT OPEN SPACE PLAN EXCERPTS FOR DISCUSSION**

## **SECTION SIX: ACTION PLAN**

The central goal of this action plan is the immediate preservation of existing de facto open space, especially where it is municipally owned already (obviating claims of "takings"). For details and possible future actions, see the Open Space Inventory (Appendix A):

***Create Neighborhood Open Space by Rezoning Small Municipal Properties.***

Selected municipal properties should be designated open space by council resolution or rezoning. They are now underutilized since residents see only vacant lots, without signs identifying them as neighborhood open space. Plantings, benches, or other improvements can follow later.

- **Cleveland Ave. Municipal Property on Mill Brook.** At the avenue's dead end, few residents realize the land is public. Designating it a park would encourage use. Block 192 Lot 1 wooded 0.0304 A, Block 154 Lot 5 substation 0.2164 A, and paper street. (Tax Sheets 30 & 31).
- **Crowells Road and South Eleventh.** This tiny municipal plot is a narrow point of lawn and oak trees where Crowells Road meets South Eleventh at a sharp angle. It is indistinguishable from the lawn of the apartment complex, but adding a seat and a sign identifying it as neighborhood open space would give passersby a public spot to rest. Block 66 Lot 2 lawn 0.0394 A (Tax Sheet 3.06).
- **North Eleventh Avenue.** Of these two thin plots on the east side of North Eleventh south of Park Avenue, the northernmost is large enough for a minipark, the other for a bench. Block 133 Lot 49 0.0671 A, and Lot 54 0.0264 A (Tax Sheet 19).
- **South Sixth Municipal Land at the Head of Buck Woods.** These three lots line the west side of the stub end of Sixth Avenue below Mansfield. They could be cleaned up and marked as the only public natural space in easy walking of adjacent senior housing and Bartle School. Block 43 Lot 3–5 0.0691 A (Tax Sheet 11).
- **Volkert/South Ninth.** This surprising municipal open space with large grassy area and grove of trees is inconspicuous because of a narrow entry. It should become a restful park barely a block from busy Woodbridge Avenue. Block 61 Lot 25 0.0876 A, Block 62 Lot 4 0.2296 A, and Block 62 Lot 11 0.0574 A (Tax Sheets 11 and 12).
- **South Fourth (Paper Street: Donaldson To Valentine).** This slope is used as a natural path to Donaldson Park. Park status, native plantings, and a sign would encourage use for more than passage. It gives an exceptional park and river view. Plant signs could aid the environmental education centers project. (Tax Sheet 3.01).
- **Other Small Municipal Properties, Paper Streets, and Rights of Way.** These can be considered as future opportunity arises, after the above. See inventory.

***Rezone for Conservation the Entire Meadows/Southside Bikeway Complex.*** "The Meadows," east of Donaldson Park, runs up from the river past the Southside Bikeway into Buck Woods Ravine. The lowest 16 acres of flood plain is already zoned conservation/recreation, the rest residential (in conflict with the 1995 Master Plan). All should be zoned conservation, supporting the greenway and environmental education centers. The marsh is on contiguous WCTC land (Block 75 Lot 8) and county park land (Lot 11). Block 75 is on Tax Sheet 3, Blocks 47, 48, and 49 on 3.04. All municipal parts are listed, though the first three keep current zoning:

- **Block 75 Lot 6 (Woods and Fields).** These 16 acres (largely flood plain) will stay conservation/recreation, with trail improvement by a Recreational Trails Grant.
- **Block 75 Lot 9 (DPW Garage and Stream Corridor).** The portion east of the garage should be managed as stream buffer and trail to Donaldson Park.
- **Block 75 Lot 7 (Road).** This road to the WCTC tower is municipally owned and can remain in use but managed for nature, without dump piles, which pollute wetlands.

- **Block 47 Lots 76-81 (Southside Bikeway Lower Portion).** Rezone these lots by South Fifth and the Southside Bikeway as crucial to its park-like ambiance. Remove dump piles or screen them with plantings and keep a stream buffer.
- **Block 48 Lots 30-33 (Southside Bikeway Upper Portion).** Rezone woods by bikeway, Seventh Avenue end. Approximately 0.9 A (four lots at 0.2296 each).
- **Block 49 Lots 41-56. Meadows Upper Plateau (East of Paper Sixth, below Donaldson).** Rezone (as per the 1995 Master Plan) this former dump, now recovering successional woods and fields. The ends are most crucial as the immediate natural setting for the bikeway, stream, woods, and proposed trails of the environmental education centers project: Lots 41-43 and 54-56 by bikeway, and Lots 48 and 49 buffering the impressive stream gorge below Crowells Road. A possible intermittent stream (unmapped) runs along the downhill side of the bikeway. If the borough continues allowing construction staging on Donaldson Street, it should be restricted to the central portion, screened by plantings and with strict rules protecting trees and wetland, with meadow restored after use. Approximately 3.8 A.

**Adopt the Middlesex County Model Stream Corridor Protection Ordinance.** Text for this model ordinance was circulated by the county to all municipalities in the early 1990s and is reprinted in an appendix to Highland Park's 1994 Greenway Feasibility Study. Adoption would apply an overlay zone to stream corridors, leaving existing uses and zoning intact but helping landowners locate and maintain natural stream buffers. Beginning on the north, streams are:

Raritan River  
 Buell Brook  
 Mill Brook (with branches)  
 Valley Place Ravine  
 Ayres Beach/Barwood Marsh (small streams by marsh)  
 Buck Woods Ravine (springs in lower, municipal portion, then open stream)  
 Crowells Road at Donaldson. See Appendix A for full inventory descriptions.

**Create Bicycle/Pedestrian Paths Linked to Open Spaces.** Provide native plantings and environmental education signage at appropriate points (such as in parks) along routes planned for Highland Park in the Middlesex County Bicycle Pedestrian Plan (Draft of November 2001). Paths in Johnson Park and up Cedar Lane will be designated segments of the East Coast Greenway, and our greenway should be designated a spur of that national Millennium Trail.

- CS (County Seat) 201: Waterfront path from Johnson to Donaldson Park via streets.
- CS 204: Cedar Lane Bicycle Path of Rutgers University (under construction 3/02).
- CS 202 and 203: street bicycle lanes accessing Donaldson Park, Southside Bikeway, and the Native Plant Reserve (River Road).

**Acquire Ayres Beach Natural Area (County Purchase).** Middlesex County may purchase Red's Marina and the adjacent Barwood Marsh as open space within our greenway. The Environmental Commission proposes naming the combination Ayres Beach Natural Area after Highland Park's s early twentieth-century swimming beach and center of outdoor social life:

- **Red's Marina.** The land (and possibly the old beach house if its condition allows) could benefit from cleanup followed by rehabilitation with native plantings. Block 75 Lot 16 0.2870 A; and Lot 17 2.000 A; Block 4 Lot 2 0.3881 A (Tax Sheet 3).
- **Barwood Property (Marsh, Woods, and Upland).** The lower strip below the rear property line of homes on Skyview Terrace is called "Middlesex County Conservation Area" in the 2001 tax list, giving some form of protection under a 1993 memorandum of the Highland Park Planning Board. The line is not field-marked and needs to be surveyed and staked. The upland portion of the same lot has no protection yet is important as the last spot where the river bend can be looked down onto from the public street; adding a house here would destroy the remnant of what was perhaps Highland Park's finest public river viewscape. A path by the woods and freshwater wetland would support the greenway and environmental

education centers project, and the upland would give the area an entry and view, so that the entire property should be acquired. Block 75 Lot 15.02, 5.2 A (Tax Sheet 3).

**Acquire "Buck Woods" or a Conservation/Public-Access Easement.** This longest wooded ravine remaining in the developed part of Highland Park has municipal land at both top and bottom and should be acquired as connecting open space if funds can be found. If development must occur, a recent (2001) rezoning allows a cluster option. There are municipal lots at both the upper and lower ends. The goal would be to connect these upper and lower public lands in the ravine by natural habitat with public access either on the full ravine width or at least on road and path if some housing must be built. If the route is not cut off by private housing lots, retaining walls, or detention structures, seniors in the apartments and students at Bartle School just uphill would have a safe and attractively natural pedestrian route down to the Southside Bikeway, The Meadows, and Donaldson Park. This ravine was already noted as a desirable spur for the riverside greenway in the 1992 Natural Resource Inventory (p. 37).

- **Buck Woods (Private Land).** Block 47 Lots 27–75, 4.0849 A (Tax Sheet 3.04).
- **Municipal Portions Above and Below:** See the discussion above of suggested neighborhood open space for the upper municipal lots along the spur of South Sixth, Block 43 Lots 3–5 0.0691 A (Tax Sheet 11); see The Meadows for municipal lots at the foot, Block 47 Lots 76–81 and all of Blocks 48 and 49 (Tax Sheet 3.04).

**Preserve Wildlife Corridor Along Rail Embankment/Cleveland Avenue.** These wooded strips behind industrial or former industrial sites make an important wildlife corridor along the rail embankment. It connects to woods and wetlands extending far into Edison. In Highland Park, wildlife include deer, wild turkey, and heron (a sign of possible wetland).

- **Midland–Ross/Grimes Aerospace.** This property is still subject to DEP-directed groundwater decontamination, but has been rezoned residential with cluster option (2001). Clustering could preserve a U-shape of woods at River Road, with a narrower edging along north and south edges of the whole property. Housing or assisted-care units built here would benefit from the natural setting and screening. Block 181 Lots 25-30, 6+ A (Tax Sheet 33).
- **Cleveland Avenue Industrial Strip.** In addition to the suggestions above for Midland–Ross and for creating neighborhood open space on municipal property at the end of Cleveland Avenue, the Environmental Commission feels it important to preserve the narrow but wooded natural corridor behind privately owned industrial properties all along Cleveland or Jackson. Portions of Blocks 154, 155, 170, and 172 (Tax Sheets 30, 31, and 32).

**Preserve the Kilmer Woods/Rutgers Ecological Preserve.** The Kilmer Woods should be saved intact as our largest wild natural habitat, extending into Edison and Piscataway, though portions have already been taken on the south for housing and on the north for road widening. Full or even partial preservation (through existing cluster zoning) would support the adjacent East Coast Greenway and Johnson Park, and would advance local and county watershed, aquifer, and open space goals. Adopting the Middlesex County Model Stream Protection Corridor Ordinance would be important for an area so dominated by Buell Brook and its tributaries, and with multiple owners (Rutgers University, the Parker Home, and the Kaplan Organization for the Castle, while the Cenacle lies across Cedar Lane).

- **Rutgers Ecological Preserve/Kilmer Woods.** The residential zoning for parts not in the preserve offers a cluster option, but full conservation zoning is preferable for this, our largest natural open space. The best is if Rutgers decides (as some professors suggest) to give all of it "preserve" status for continuing classes and research in the natural sciences. Block 189 Lot 9, 68.048 acres in Highland Park (Tax Sheet 34).
- **Francis E. Parker Memorial Home.** This portion of Kilmer Woods, has a nursing home zoned QP–Quasi-Public. As the home remodels, all efforts should be made to reach agreement to preserve historic buildings and the woods. Block 189 Lot 3, 7.36 A (Tax Sheet 34).

- **The Castle.** A land developer has headquarters in "The Castle," a reconstructed English-style mansion eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This and other buildings remain from Johnson Family estates. An art gallery once gave the public more excuse to enter, and there may be inventive ways to allow the owner valuable use of the land while continuing to preserve the wooded setting and stream overviews. Adopting the Middlesex County Model Stream Corridor Protection Ordinance would be a first step. Block 189 Lot 4, 16.77 A (Tax Sheet 34).
- **Cenacle Retreat House.** These wooded grounds are adjacent to the Rutgers Ecological Preserve, East Coast Greenway, and Johnson Park. If the religious order ever sells, public acquisition would be desirable, or easements preserving the historic building and grounds. Block 190 Lot 4 (retreat house 9.66 acres) and Lot 4.1 (prayer garden 3.0 acres) (Tax Sheet 34).

***Examine Redevelopment Areas for Environmental, Open Space, and Historic Preservation Opportunities.*** The first two of the five areas under consideration as redevelopment areas in the Borough Council resolution of January 2002 are fully built but with opportunities for small corners of miniature open space. The final three have greater opportunities for full or partial open space.

- **Raritan Avenue.** Built up, but "environmental" factors can be incorporated early into design: small landscaped corners and bench areas, restored shop fronts suggesting the varied architecture of old Highland Park, street trees (preferably native), landscaping at curbs and store fronts, and "dark sky friendly" lighting. Such outmoded design standards as glaring "acorn" lights should be reexamined.
- **Woodbridge Avenue.** Similar concerns to Raritan Avenue. For both, a design study of some years ago recommended moving parking entrances from the fronts of shops to side streets to avoid cars' turning across pedestrian flow and to allow removing asphalt in favor of plantings and benches.
- **Cleveland Avenue from Janeway Avenue East to the Borough Boundary.** The wooded wildlife corridor behind these properties and along the rail embankment should be preserved and enhanced, whatever the front uses. Cultural renovations like the proposed dance center could be supported by a more park-like use of the wooded strip that screens the rail line and of municipal land at the Mill Brook end.
- **The Former Midland–Ross Facility.** The wooded portions of this large site should be preserved as part of the same natural wildlife corridor along the railroad embankment described above. See the separate discussion of Midland–Ross.
- **258 South 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue (Collectively the 'Properties').** This is apparently a reference to the upland portions of "The Meadows." The Environmental Commission recommends open space zoning and use for the whole, as discussed above.

***Strengthen environmental and open space aspects of Master Plan and ordinances.***

- **Master Plan.** Revise the Highland Park Master Plan to promote open space and contiguous natural habitat and to limit build-out densities and impervious cover. Incorporate by reference such studies as Natural Resource Inventory (1992), Greenway Feasibility Study (1994), Street Tree Master Plan (1998), Community Forestry Management Plan (2001), reports of the Environmental Education Centers Working Group, and the Open Space Inventory and Plan.
- **Ordinances.** Enact zoning and other changes for open space protection. Clarify and strengthen ordinances protecting environmentally sensitive areas. Bring ordinances concerning trees into better accord with the Community Forestry Management Plan's treatment of tree selection, planting, and maintenance, including improved methods of treating tree/sidewalk conflicts. Allow for flexibility by incorporating by reference standards or separate documents that can be changed more readily than ordinances as environmental

methods evolve, so that Highland Park can follow the latest best management practices and goals.

