

## ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSION ROLE IN THE 2009 ADOPTED MASTER PLAN

### OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

As noted in the land use element, only 4% of the City's acreage is vacant leaving minimal if any opportunity for preserving additional open space or creating new recreation land. In a mature city such as Long Branch, the concept of open space sometimes needs to be redefined. The vision of large green spaces, although desirable, is not always practical. Open space, or the notion of greening a community and providing breaks in a densely developed landscape, can be woven into the fabric of the community through the use of street trees, pocket parks, small plazas and sitting areas, and the installation of public art in civic spaces. In response, the open space and recreation plan (OSRP) recommends:

- Ensuring the most efficient use of the City's existing parks and recreation facilities through regular maintenance and upgrades,
- **Identifying opportunities for new open space, no matter how small, associated with development and redevelopment projects or surplus properties** such as abandoned rail beds,
- Maintaining the urban forest,
- Maintaining the beach,
- Maintaining access to the beach including enhancements to the boardwalk/promenade,
- Providing better access to the rivers and creeks, and
- Better coordination with school recreation facilities.

### Improvements to the Existing System

Several recreation projects are already underway in the City. The first phase of improvements at Manahassett Creek Park was recently completed. The second phase of improvements is planned to include buildings for community meeting space, a concession stand, and related site improvements. Future phases may include building facilities for the City's Parks and Recreation Department. The Long Branch Housing Authority has plans to reconstruct the existing Bucky James Community Center. The new community center building will be roughly 12,000 square feet and will include, among other amenities, an indoor basketball court, gymnasium, library, a computer lab and community meeting space. The City also plans to improve George Naylor Park on Cherry Street. Improvements at this park may include new playground equipment, landscaping and aesthetic improvements.

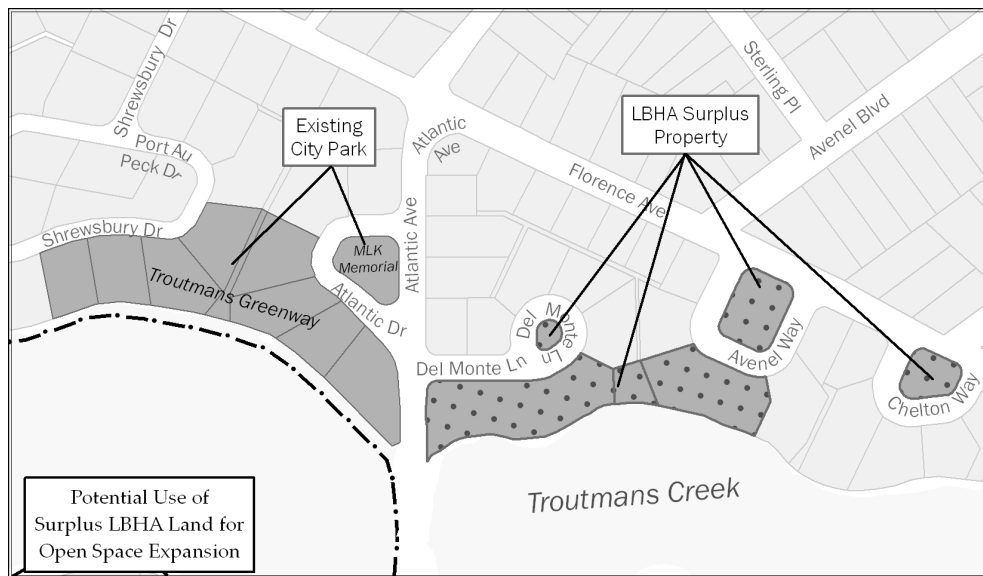
The OSRP recommends that an advisory group be formed consisting of, at a minimum, representatives of the Department of Recreation and the **Environmental Commission**. The advisory group would consider the condition of each of the City's parks and prepare a short and long-term action plan for specific park improvements. A broader endeavor could include an analysis of the opportunities and constraints related to each park's location, configuration, accessibility, unique onsite conditions, and funding options, and preparing a conceptual master plan for each park. **One such project could involve an evaluation of Takanassee Lake to**

identify access and landscaping upgrades along the banks of the lake. The evaluation would also include an analysis of the Lake's water quality; and if necessary, develop steps for improving the Lake to appropriate recreational standards.

## New Open Space

The advisory group mentioned above should also **evaluate any surplus lands connected to public rights-of-way such as streets, highways, utilities, and railroads, and any publically-owned vacant land for potential use as open/civic space or pedestrian/bicycle trails.** For instance, the Long Branch Housing Authority owns several islands within cul-de-sacs that may have potential as open space. The islands are located on River Lane, Middle Lane, Baruch Drive, Chelton Way, Avenel Way, Del Monte Lane, and Manahassett Way.

A prime example of how surplus properties could add to the open space system is illustrated in the figure below. There are several surplus Housing Authority lots fronting on Troutmans Creek between Atlantic Avenue and Avenel Way. If added to the City's open space system, these parcels would extend Troutmans Greenway southward across Atlantic Avenue and provide direct access to Florence Avenue.



As a general policy, **the OSRP recommends that properties that are impacted by natural or other disasters, abandoned, or exhibit severe deterioration be evaluated for possible acquisition for open space through fee simple purchase, easement, or donation.** This policy especially applies to properties abutting existing open space. **Environmentally sensitive lands such as wetlands identified in the 2008 Community Profile are also recommended for evaluation as potential open space candidates.**

The OSRP also recommends that the open space requirements in the City's development ordinances be revisited to ensure that large scale residential and commercial projects provide quality open/civic space that meets the following criteria: (a) the space is strategically located to be attractive and easily accessible to either the tenants or the general public, as opposed to being placed on the "leftover" portion of the parcel; and (b) the space is of adequate dimension to

provide amenities such as play equipment, sitting areas, or public art, as opposed to narrow or oddly shaped landscape strips. In other words, the planning and design of the open space should be as integral to the project as the planning and design of the building.

## **Community Forestry Management Plan**

The OSRP recommends that the City adopt a community forestry management plan, which could be incorporated into this element. The community forestry management plan is enabled by the New Jersey Shade Tree and Community Forestry Assistance Act. In addition to establishing the Community Forestry Council, the act enables New Jersey's communities to reduce or eliminate their exposure to litigation due to the decline of the community tree resource. The basis for this protection is a properly planned local community forestry program implemented through a state approved management plan, as well as municipal participation in the state's Training Skills and Accreditation Program.

The community forestry management plan is an essential guide to successfully achieving a healthy and safe community forest. By developing and implementing a management plan for a community's shade trees, the City's tree program can become more proactive and efficient resulting in a decrease in tree maintenance and removal costs, shortened response time to citizen requests for work and a decrease in hazardous tree situations.

The community forestry management plan includes the following elements:

- Mission Statement
- Goals and Objectives
- Liability Statement
- Community Overview
- Community Forestry Program Administration
- Community Map
- Training Plan
- Public Education/Awareness/Outreach
- Statement of Tree Budget
- Statement of Plan Implementation

The goals of a community forestry management plan are to:

1. Promote general tree awareness and stewardship among residents of the municipality.
2. Improve the community forest resource in the City of Long Branch.
3. Improve the health and safety of the community forest.
4. Become a Tree City USA.
5. Enhance the community's awareness of the value provided by the community forest.
6. Recruit members to serve on a shade tree committee early in the planning period.
7. Review and recommend an updated shade tree ordinance if deemed necessary by the shade tree committee.

### **Sustainable Jersey Action Step Tree & Woodlands Management**

Communities throughout New Jersey have long recognized the importance of managing and protecting their street tree and woodlands resources. The goal of this action is to help communities initiate or expand tree management programs by:

- planning and assessing the existing community tree resources,
- assessing the health of the trees,
- developing programs to protect, manage, and expand the tree canopy in the municipality and document the benefits trees provide for mitigating climate change, and
- reducing flooding and improving air quality.

8. Develop resources to create an active tree replacement program and provide alternate and innovative funding sources for tree planting and maintenance programs.
9. Provide training for urban and community forest care to 1-2 City employees and 1-2 volunteers from the community in order to maintain certification.
10. Advocate cooperation between the Board of Education, Chamber of Commerce, Master Gardeners, civic groups (Elks Club, Women's Clubs) and the Department of Public Works.
11. Complete a comprehensive inventory of all street and park trees, which will be covered under the community forestry plan.

The Community Forestry Management Plan applies primarily to the public realm – street trees, parks and public lands. Trees within the private realm also contribute to the community forest and should also be afforded similar protections and management strategies. To that end the OSRP recommends that the City consider adopting a tree protection and replacement ordinance to ensure a holistic approach to maintaining the community's forest.

## **Beach Management Plan**

One of the City's most important recreational and natural resources is its oceanfront. The City has endeavored to protect the environmentally sensitive nature of the beach while ensuring the greatest degree of public access and enjoyment of the beach. In May of 2008, the City prepared a Beach Management Plan in cooperation with the NJ Department of Environmental Protection and US Department of the Interior. That plan is incorporated by reference into this element. The purpose of the Beach Management Plan is to provide a framework for cooperation among the City, NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service in the stewardship of endangered and threatened beach-nesting birds and flora. To that end, three management zones were identified on Long Branch Beaches.

- ❖ *North Beach Protected Zone: Monmouth Beach border to Seven Presidents Park.* This zone will be managed to promote the protection and recovery of listed species and the enhancement of their habitat. Recreational uses will be accommodated consistent with species protection.
- ❖ *Central Beach Recreational Zone: Seven Presidents Park to Lake Takanassee.* This is the City's developed recreational zone and will be managed primarily for recreation. Any listed species documented in this zone will receive protection as required by applicable State and federal laws and regulations.
- ❖ *South Beach Protected Zone: Lake Takanassee to the Deal border.* This zone will be managed to promote the protection and recovery of listed species and the enhancement of their habitat if suitable habitat is created or exists in the future. Recreational uses will be accommodated consistent with species protections.

## **Rivers and Creeks**

Although the City's oceanfront is well recognized and utilized for its recreational value, the City's "other" waterfront – Branchport Creek, Manahasset Creek and the Shrewsbury River – is perhaps not always appreciated or utilized to its fullest potential. To address this issue, the OSRP recommends that the City's existing riverfront parks – Branchport, Pleasure Bay, Troutman's Greenway, and Manahasset Creek – be improved and expanded as appropriate with the goal of establishing a continuous riverfront walkway. **It is further recommended that a targeted study be undertaken to identify a potential route for the walkway (using parks and public rights-of-way), conceptual design features, and funding sources and partnerships.**

Consistent with this rivers and creeks policy, the land use plan makes certain recommendations for rezoning riverfront properties to ensure uses that are compatible with and take advantage of their waterfront locations by ensuring public access and appropriate recreation and entertainment opportunities.

Taking full recreational advantage of the rivers and creeks is dependent on the quality of the water. Use of the Branchport Creek in particular has been restricted due to runoff from Monmouth Park Racetrack. A four-year plan scheduled for completion in 2013 is now in place to correct the runoff problem but the City is encouraged to continue to work with local and state agencies as needed to monitor progress; and be vigilant for any other sources of pollution along the entire waterfront.

## **School Facilities**

Long Branch utilizes several school facilities for indoor recreation. The elementary, middle, and high school buildings have been used to accommodate recreational basketball, wrestling, and indoor soccer. The City will endeavor to continue a dialogue with the Board of Education to ensure that the use of these facilities continues, and that additional opportunities for use of school facilities may be explored.

## **Natural Resource Inventory / Environmental Resource Inventory (NRI/ ERI)**

The OSRP recommends that the City's **Environmental Commission** prepare a **Natural Resource Inventory (NRI)** to provide a comprehensive inventory of the City's natural and cultural resources. The NRI can help guide and prioritize future decisions regarding the acquisition and preservation of open space. An NRI identifies and describes the physical, cultural and biological features of the City including but not limited to topography, climate and soils, historically significant sites, types of vegetation, groundwater and surface water resources, flood hazards and wetlands. Much of this information is included in the 2008 Community Profile, which and can be used as the basis for the NRI.

### **Sustainable Jersey Action Step Natural Resource Inventory**

The Natural Resource Inventory (NRI) serves as an index of natural resources and is a compilation of text and visual information about the natural resource characteristics and environmental features of an area. It provides baseline documentation for measuring and evaluating resource protection issues. The NRI is an important tool for environmental commissions, planning boards, and zoning boards of adjustment. NRIs are dynamic documents and should be revised and refined as additional information and updated data become available.