

Status

This first draft of the Open Space and Recreation Plan element was written by a team from the Open Space Committee and the Parks and Recreation Commission. It is an update of the Open Space and Recreation Plan element approved adopted on March 11, 2015.

Comments and suggestions for the element-writing team should be emailed to planning@penningtonboro.org.

BOROUGH OF PENNINGTON OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN – UPDATE 2023 DRAFT

MISSION AND VISION

This element of the Master Plan results from the consultation and collaboration of two advisory committees, on Open Space and on Parks and Recreation. Their respective missions or vision statements are presented below. Some aspects of these committees' visions intersect with the work and aims of other Borough advisory committees, and where relevant such intersections are noted in the text.

Open Space Preservation Mission:

To retain the “village” identity of Pennington and the semi-rural character of nearby surrounding areas, the Borough of Pennington works in collaboration with Hopewell Township, non-profit land preservation organizations, Mercer County, and the State of New Jersey to permanently protect open space in, adjacent to, and near the Borough as well as open space along roads and other undeveloped greenway corridors leading to and from the Borough.

Parks and Recreation Vision Statement:

Pennington Borough is a close-knit village surrounded by open space and accessible by numerous greenway corridors and trail systems. The Pennington Parks & Recreation Commission exists to provide recreational space, facilities, and programming for all Borough residents. Our vision is to maximize participation in outdoor and indoor recreation, and to collaborate with other Borough committees to maximize synergies between recreation, education, and economic development efforts inside and outside the Borough.

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GOALS AND POLICIES

The Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is consistent with the goals and objectives of the Borough's 2023 Master Plan Reexamination Report related to open space preservation. The Master Plan establishes as one of its goals the maintenance of Pennington as a primarily residential community, and elaborates that open space and recreational areas, both public and private, should be preserved and enhanced, with linkages to nearby preserved areas.

Undeveloped lands forming natural breaks in development around the Borough are a major factor in Pennington's distinctive historic village character. The Master Plan statement of goals emphasizes that the Borough should work with "public and private agencies" such as non-profit organizations to preserve these open space areas. Such partnerships also dramatically increase the effectiveness of the Borough's Open Space Tax, since partner contributions can often cover 90% or even more of acquisition costs.

The OSRP elaborates on these Master Plan goals as a vehicle for soliciting public input on how those goals should be realized. By voting to adopt an open space tax in 1998 by a margin of more than 3-1, Borough residents supported the idea that open space preservation and the recreation it offers are important. In 1999, subsequent to that vote, the Borough Council created by ordinance the Open Space Committee and an Open Space Trust Fund; in 2000, the Council established Pennington's participation in a Hopewell Valley, three-municipality Open Space Advisory Committee. Citizen input on the OSRP will help guide how those and other resources can be best used to preserve open space and enhance recreational opportunities.

Open Space Preservation:

The goals of the Borough's OSRP are to advance the broader Master Plan by acting in concert with Hopewell Township, Mercer County, the State of New Jersey, and local non-profit land preservation organizations to:

1. Create, expand, and maintain a permanently protected greenbelt of open space adjacent to and near the Borough, and to foster and protect greenway corridors leading into and out of the Borough.
2. Preserve the historic village character of Pennington, which depends on the maintenance of a rural landscape on the Borough's boundaries and on the fringes of developed land surrounding the Borough, and along corridors leading to and from the Borough.
3. Increase the range of passive recreational opportunities on permanently protected tracts of open space in and near the Borough.
4. Address environmental issues such as storm water management, water quality and quantity, and climate change that affect the health, welfare, and safety of Borough residents and neighboring populations, through actions related to open space preservation and protection.

Open Space and Recreational Enhancements:

The specific objectives of the Borough's OSRP related to open space and recreational activity are:

1. Create and enhance linkages that allow pedestrian access to open space and recreational opportunities from multiple points within the Borough.

2. Create and enhance linkages that allow bicycle access to open space and bicycle routes outside the Borough. Provide bicycle racks at Borough parks and in commercial areas.
3. Enhance recreational facilities in Kunkel and Sked Street parks, with attention to the needs of both children and adults..
4. Where the Borough owns land that is in a natural state, formalize its preservation. For example: complete work on the Borough-owned Arboretum land on East Curlis Ave.

EXISTING OPEN SPACE AND RECREATIONAL RESOURCES

Properties on the Borough's Recreation and Open Space Inventory (ROSI)

Within the Borough of Pennington there are four parcels of permanently protected open space listed on the Recreation and Open Space inventory, totaling 13.12 acres:

- Kunkel Park (7.59 acres) lies in the northeast corner of the Borough and offers playground equipment, a sand box and a pavilion for picnics and other functions, as well as a link to open space outside the Borough via the Pennington Loop Trail. The park also features a fine stand of mature hardwoods.
- The Sked Street mini-park (1.06 acres) offers a quiet spot for families and small children to play safely outdoors.
- The Arboretum being developed by the Borough, as referred to above (3.4 acres)
- Two lots adjacent to the Pennington African Cemetery, totaling 1.07 acres

These properties are valuable spots of green and quiet in the Borough, but they offer limited open space. They cannot provide the extensive open space needed for long country walks, nor can they provide a wide range of recreational facilities.

By virtue of the Borough's location near existing open space lands, however, there are opportunities to expand the open space and recreation opportunities available from within the Borough. Going north, for example, Kunkel Park can be linked along the Stony Brook to the protected lands of The Watershed Institute (formerly Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association), and thus connected by already existing footpaths to Hopewell Borough. The Pennington Loop Trail already provides access from Kunkel Park to the State's Fish and Wildlife Preserve at Baldwin Lake, which is linked to the trail easements and County-owned land along the Stony Brook referred to above.

Similar linkages are possible to the south and east as well. Preserved lands just outside the southern border of the Borough now allow access from South Main Street to Mercer County Park lands, with footpath access to Curlis Lake, the Equestrian Center, and Rosedale Park sections of Mercer Meadows. The Pennington Connector to the Lawrence-Hopewell Trail

(LHT) provides a pedestrian/bicycle connection from King George Road to the Watershed Institute Reserve and to Mercer Meadows.

School Property

Local school properties include open space and recreational facilities. To the rear of Toll Gate Grammar School, the cleared area of 2.6 acres includes a playground, baseball/soccer fields, bordering on wooded Borough property being improved as an arboretum. Over half of the 27 acres of The Pennington School property south of W. Delaware Avenue is open space, including athletic fields and a pond, as well as a large lawn area in front of Old Main on West Delaware Avenue, which features some of the Borough's largest trees. On the north side of West Delaware Avenue is another 5 acres of Pennington School land where tennis courts and soccer fields are located. The Pennington School permits the public to make use of its campus and athletic fields, with some occasional restrictions.

On South Main Street, to the rear of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District administrative offices, there are approximately 2 acres of mowed grass, which in the past were used by the YMCA, with permits, for baseball and soccer games. Future action could be taken to protect some portion of this property for public use.

Wooded Areas

There are three existing woodland sites within the Borough and two Borough-owned sites just outside the Borough:

1. 3.48 acres at the rear of the Toll Gate School site on East Curlis Avenue, owned by the Borough. A portion of this tract is currently being developed as an arboretum, as described above. The area includes a small stream and a trail from Curlis Avenue to Welling Avenue used mostly by school children. A portion of the trail is on a Borough right-of-way extending from Baldwin Street.
2. 3.2 acres with trails on the east side of Green Street, connecting to North Main Street, owned by The Pennington School and designated as the Lewis Brook Nature Trail. This site borders the south side of Lewis Brook. Additional markings could help walkers identify the access point for this trail on North Main Street.
3. Approximately .75 acre at the northern end of Reading Street, owned by the Borough. This area is the northern part of the Senior Citizen Center site, and is bounded on the west by the railroad tracks, on the east by the backyards of homes on Hale Street, and on the north by property of the Pennington School.
4. Just north of the Borough in Hopewell Township, there is an approximately 14-acre wooded area to the rear (north) of the Borough's Public Works garage. Crossing the site from Route 31 to the railroad tracks is Baldwin Brook, which feeds Baldwin Lake. The stream is designated as having a high natural resource value by NJ DEP (C-1) which requires a 300-foot-wide buffer on either side.

5. Also in Hopewell Township, the Borough owns a 4-acre former dam site on the Stony Brook just west of Old Mill Road. The WPA-built dam from the 1930s has been mostly destroyed by flood waters through the years, going back to the 1973 flood. The breach in the approximately 5-foot-high deteriorated stone dam is more than 100 feet wide.

Landfill Site

The Borough is currently conducting reviews of needed environmental remediation for its approximately 3-acre abandoned, grass-covered landfill along West Delaware Avenue. After the reviews are complete, zoning and suitable potential uses, which could include open space, will be decided.

Howe Commons

The privately owned courtyard area in the center of the Howe Commons office complex on South Main Street is a highly valued oasis of open space in the Borough. In addition to its aesthetic quality, this open space is used for special public events. Under a license agreement signed by the owner and the Borough in January 2005, the courtyard area can be used without charge for “community events” such as “Pennington Day, Christmas caroling and summer band concerts,” and has been so used for at least 25 years.

Trails and Bike Routes

The Borough is fortunate to have direct pedestrian access to hiking trails from its borders to two large open space preserves: the County’s Curlis Lake Woods section of Mercer Meadows, and land north of the Borough extending to Baldwin Lake via the Pennington Loop Trail. This land includes property owned and maintained by the NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife and D&R Greenway Land Trust.

The Borough also enjoys direct access to the multi-use Lawrence Hopewell Trail (LHT) via the Pennington Connector, completed in 2014. The LHT is a 22-mile loop trail suitable for biking which extends through sections of Hopewell Township and Lawrence Township. Of particular benefit to Pennington is the trail’s connection to the County’s Rosedale Park and other sections of Mercer Meadows. See Appendix B for a map showing entrance points to the LHT and hiking trails.

Just south of the Borough, Pennington-Lawrenceville Road (County Route 546) has been widened by Mercer County to provide bike lanes. This improves safety for bicyclists riding from Pennington to the Twin Pines recreational fields and residential areas along County Route 546, including Brandon Farms. Bicyclists can extend their ride from the Twin Pines fields to Mercer Meadows on the east side of Federal City Road and further east to Village Park and the Johnson Trolley Line in Lawrenceville.

This improvement of Route 546 is part of the implementation of Mercer County’s plans for the “Great Western Bikeway.” The Great Western Bikeway, mostly on CR 546, will extend

from Washington Crossing State Park to Lawrenceville and the D&R Canal. The route includes Washington Crossing-Pennington Road to the west of Pennington and Pennington-Lawrenceville Road to the east of Pennington, with Pennington being at the mid-point of the 8-mile bikeway (see map in Appendix C). The plan calls for the bike route to detour around the Pennington Circle via Ingleside Avenue and South Main Street with a pedestrian activated light at the Route 31-Ingleside Avenue intersection. At its western end, this bike route will provide access to roads within Washington Crossing State Park and to the Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park towpath, a 30-mile bikeway extending along the feeder canal from Trenton to Frenchtown. At the eastern end, the route will connect to the main leg of the D&R Canal and its towpath, and the Lawrence Hopewell Trail in Lawrence Township.

RECREATIONAL NEEDS ANALYSIS

The Borough's existing open space within its boundaries clearly cannot alone provide for expansion of open space recreation. The only feasible strategy is for the Borough to work with other agencies and non-profit groups to expand permanently protected and preserved open space outside the Borough for recreational use. Within the Borough, however, there are ways to enhance some recreational opportunities.

OPEN SPACE RESOURCE ASSESSMENT

A broad band of undeveloped land, some already preserved and much of it not preserved, extends around Pennington Borough and offers substantial opportunities for progress towards the OSRP goals. Specific parcels of land will be identified as potential preservation opportunities through communications with interested landowners.

Analysis of tax maps suggests possible preservation opportunities that would expand preserved open space to the east and west. To the east, there is substantial vacant land opposite Mercer Meadows along Federal City Road. To the west, open space corridors are being created by Hopewell Township and other entities toward the Delaware River along Pennington-Titusville Road and Washington Crossing-Pennington Road. Expansion of open space preservation in each of these areas would advance the OSRP goals.

Criteria for preserving land outside the Borough should be based on several factors including (in no order of priority):

1. Proximity to the Borough
2. Whether adjacent to preserved land
3. Natural resource value, including woodlands and stream corridors
4. Potential for environmental restoration and protection
5. Potential for passive recreational use
6. Potential for active recreational use
7. Viewshed from adjacent roads
8. Potential for linkages to other preserved land
9. Risk of potential development

The Borough's Open Space Tax (one cent on every \$100 of assessed valuation) is an important source of revenue for open space acquisition in and around the Borough, and for enhancing recreational facilities within the Borough. The tax revenue allows the Borough to tap into other revenue sources that can dramatically increase the purchasing power of modest expenditures from its own funds. For open space acquisition, the Borough has taken advantage of NJ Green Acres grants and Mercer County Municipal Assistance grants; when both are obtained for a project, they cover all but a 10% required local match for an open space purchase. This practice has allowed the Borough to build up its open space fund. The Borough should consider this fund as a strategic asset that can be used to leverage State and County funds and funds available from non-profit partners.

ACTION PLAN

Open Space Acquisition

The Borough's strategy is and should continue to be to work in concert with Hopewell Valley partners. These partners are already actively identifying emerging land preservation opportunities. The Borough can work with interested landowners to negotiate terms and financial arrangements that can satisfy the public's interest in land preservation and landowners' legitimate interest in realizing a fair return for their land. The Borough should cooperate with Hopewell Township, the Friends of Hopewell Valley Open space, D&R Greenway Land Trust, Mercer County, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, and the State of New Jersey. The Borough should remain open to participating in transactions that might entail purchase of land in fee simple from owners, as well as transactions in which land is preserved through the conveyance of conservation easements. With such cooperation, the Borough can expect that land preservation transactions will typically involve a combination of resources contributed by the Borough and these partners.

Rather than identify specific parcels that would be targets of preservation, the Borough prefers to follow up on opportunities that are consistent with the overall goals of the OSRP. Identifying specific parcels would be unrealistic, since the voluntary interest of landowners in the area must first be engaged. Moreover, identifying specific parcels in the absence of landowner's expressions of interest could be perceived as coercive or alternatively might weaken the bargaining position of the partners who are negotiating preservation deals.

The plan of action for open space acquisition will be guided by the accompanying Open Space Map (Appendix A) showing the proposed Greenbelt and nearby greenway corridor roads. Other "gateway" corridors that are off-road and offer potential non-auto access to the Borough can be identified based on emerging land preservation opportunities. This map provides a broad guideline for determining whether land preservation opportunities will contribute to the overall OSRP goals. The Borough also will take into account the Hopewell Township Open Space Plan, which also defines a Greenbelt around the Borough. .

The proposed Greenbelt as shown on the Open Space Map is important to preserving the identity of Pennington as a separate and distinct small town. The Greenbelt includes a

substantial amount of undeveloped land especially to the west and east of the Borough. The eastern boundary extends to Mercer Meadows along Federal City Road, while the western boundary extends to Scotch Road. The northern boundary extends to Yard Road, and the southern boundary extends to the Pennington Circle and Blackwell Road. It should be noted, however, that further residential development around Pennington could make it appropriate to reconsider and expand this Greenbelt definition to maintain a focus on preserving green areas that surround Pennington and its adjacent developed areas in what might be called “greater Pennington.”

The other major element in preserving open space as shown on the Open Space Map consists of nearby “greenway corridors” emanating from the Borough or the nearby Pennington Circle. In earlier OSRPs, these corridors were defined solely along roads that link Pennington to state, county, and municipal parks; preserving the scenic quality of these roads can thus contribute to the goal of maintaining Pennington’s character. Each of these roads is bordered by a substantial amount of open space, much already preserved.

The identified “greenway corridor roads” are as follows: 1) to the west of Pennington, Washington Crossing-Pennington Road and Pennington-Titusville Road, both of which extend to Hopewell Township’s Woolsey Park and Washington Crossing State Park; 2) to the east, Federal City Road, which leads to Rosedale Park and the County’s Mercer Meadows; 3) to the northeast, Pennington-Rocky Hill Road, which includes the former Bristol-Myers Squibb site with its 200 acres of farmland. Priority for preservation should be given to sites on these roads within two miles of the Borough.

There is an increasing appetite among the public for ways to move around our area without getting in a car. For that reason, the OSRP envisions creation, where possible, of off-road corridors in and out of the Borough. . Such corridors may provide Borough residents with access to recreational opportunities outside the Borough, and for non-Borough residents to come into the Borough to visit local businesses or friends. Such corridors could include footpaths or even bicycle paths where feasible.

Preservation of Wooded Areas in Pennington and of Other Sites Owned by the Borough

The Borough has designated the land behind Toll Gate Elementary School as an arboretum development area, and has included it in its ROSI. The Borough should continue to work with local volunteers and its Public Works Department to transform selected areas of that wooded parcel into an arboretum—a protected area for installation of native trees, shrubs, and perennials, with access trails, that can serve the enjoyment and education of residents and visitors.

The Borough’s Public Works garage is on a site in Hopewell Township just north of the Borough Boundary, which is partly wooded. The entire wooded area to the rear (north) of the garage should be retained and kept natural by the Borough. The area immediately behind the facility is already devoted to a solar array. Given stream buffer requirements, difficulty of access from Route 31, and Township zoning (industrial commercial), it is unlikely that the wooded area

north of Baldwin Creek is threatened by development interests. Since that area is also isolated from residential areas in the Borough, it is not an attractive site for development of recreational trails. Nevertheless, the Borough could consider deed restricting the remainder of that site (Township Block 48, Lot 13).to ensure that it remains undeveloped. .

No action is needed to preserve the Borough's dam site as open space due to wetland and stream corridor restrictions imposed by NJ DEP. Future recreational use of the site is doubtful given extensive wetlands on the site, limited access from Old Mill Road, and the unlikely reconstruction of the dam given DEP permitting issues and cost. Subdivision and sale of the site to adjacent homeowners on either side of the Stony Brook should be considered.

Recreational Enhancements

Biking:

The safety of bicyclists within the Borough could be served by the installation of bike route signs on those streets best suited for bicycles and which provide connections to bike routes outside the Borough – see Proposed Bike Route map in Appendix D. These routes run both east-west and north-south. The east--west route shown takes advantage of bike lanes on lower King George Road, which lead to the Pennington Connector to the Lawrence-Hopewell Trail. Whenever the Borough is resurfacing roadways that align with the Proposed Bike Route map or that intersect with the Great Western Bikeway, appropriate signage and marking should be created.

Property owners in the Route 31 commercial corridor whose properties can be safely reached by bicycle from the Borough should be encouraged to provide bike racks on their sites.

A major improvement in access to safe bicycle routes outside the Borough could be achieved with a “Stony Brook-Presidential Hill Connector.” This connector would link the Pennington Connector to the LHT with the Pennington neighborhoods south of East Delaware Avenue. It would consist of:

- A crosswalk across East Delaware Avenue at its intersection with King George Road
- A new bicycle-capable trail along the south side of East Delaware Avenue from Stony Brook to the intersection of East Delaware Avenue and Federal City Road. This can be an off-road trail because the land is owned by the County.
- A crosswalk across Federal City Road from that intersection to the fire road access to Presidential Hill.
- Surfacing of the fire road up to Madison Avenue, from which cyclists and pedestrians can safely use neighborhood streets to the southeast quadrant of Pennington.

Many students attending the Toll Gate school ride bicycles to school on the 4-foot- wide sidewalk along the south side of E. Curlis Avenue leading to bicycle racks near the playground. The sidewalk is also used by students walking to and from school and by students being dropped off or picked up by their parents momentarily parking along E. Curlis Avenue. Since the

sidewalk is adjacent to the curb, open car doors extend over the sidewalk. The 4-foot width is inadequate for both bicycle and pedestrian use and hazardous due to its proximity to parked cars. To address this hazard and make bicycling to the school safer, a separate bike path consistent with the Borough's "complete streets" policy should be constructed running east from the school driveway potentially as far as the intersection with Abey Drive or perhaps part (e.g., 300 feet) of that distance. Alternatively, the sidewalk could be widened.

Bike-friendly linkages can also be extended to the south, taking advantage of the Great Western Bikeway (GWB) route. Bike lanes along South Main Street could connect to the GWB for rides towards Lawrenceville. If bike lanes or markings were added to Wellington Drive, Borough residents could ride safely to shopping and dining opportunities on Denow Road without a Route 31 riding experience.

Pedestrian Trails:

The Pennington Loop Trail should be extended north of Baldwin Lake along the west side of the Stony Brook to Titus Mill Road and then to the The Watershed Institute Reserve on the east side of the Stony Brook. Trail easements and land acquisition by Mercer County make this theoretically possible, but details of those deeds have become obstacles to achieving agreement with the owners or neighbors. Further discussions could be pursued again to determine whether agreement on such trails is now feasible.

Park Enhancement:

Important improvements have been made to the Borough's Kunkel Park and Sked Street Park. The emphasis has been on children's playground equipment. Opportunities might be found in those parks, or at other locations in the Borough, for simple facilities to enhance exercise values for runner and walkers.

Potential Synergies with Economic Development:

Although the emphasis in this OSRP is on outdoor recreation, some initiatives focused primarily on economic development could serve recreation goals as well. For example, promoting establishment of youth-friendly establishments might create indoor recreation and entertainment. Availability of outdoor-oriented shops can help local residents find convenient ways to equip themselves for recreational jaunts on foot or on bikes.