

CARLTON HILL BERGEN COUNTY GREENWAY PARK – Bergen County, New Jersey
Environmental Assessment – January 2, 2024

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

- a. Briefly describe the total development project

Carlton Hill Bergen County Greenway Park – This new park is being developed as a result of the County’s acquisition of the abandoned rail line in 2022 from the Norfolk Southern Railway Company (NSR). The purpose of the acquisition was to develop a park that would span the municipalities of Rutherford and East Rutherford offering residents and park users a 1.2-mile walking and bicycle corridor from the Passaic River to a residential neighborhood (at the intersection of Sidney Avenue and West Erie Avenue) near downtown Rutherford.

- b. State objectives of /need for the project

The County, along with the two municipalities, seek to develop this project to provide a new recreational linear park providing residents greater access to the outdoors for walking, strolling, and bicycling.

Bergen County has 952,997 residents and is the most populous in New Jersey, with the most municipalities (seventy) of any county in the State. The county's proximity to New York City continues to draw new residents, with each census seeing an increase in population.

In addition to the high population density, at 3,700 people per square mile, the population of the County continues to diversify. According to the United States Census Bureau (2022), 71.4% of Bergen County residents are White, 22.7% are Hispanic, 17.6% are Asian, 7.8% are Black or African American and 2.4% are Other or Two or More Races. The Hispanic/Latino population had the most growth, increasing by nearly 70% from 146,780 in 2012 to 216,150 in 2022.

Both East Rutherford and Rutherford contain Overburdened Communities Subject to Adverse Cumulative Stressors. In both communities, several OBC Block Groups are in close proximity to the envisioned County park. Immediately to the west of the Carlton Hill Greenway Park across the Passaic River lies the cities of Passaic and Clifton in Passaic County. The entirety of the City of Passaic is OBC Block Groups and the Delawanna section of the City of Clifton has two geographically large OBC Block Groups. These OBC Block Groups range from 30% to 90% minority and 6% to 54% low income.

In a parkland availability analysis, the Bergen County Park Master Plan (2019) noted that the southern region of the County continues to be recognized as being underserved for park space. Due to the development pattern, this parkland deficit remains today. The Master Plan recommends particular attention be paid to the southern portion of the County, where the current high population density is projected to grow and the amount of open space per resident is the lowest.

The report further states “demographic projections through 2040 predict that the fifty municipalities currently underserved by publicly available open space will see population increases, which will further increase their parkland deficit”. The analyses examined existing conditions and spatial patterns within Bergen County based upon population density, income, age, race and ethnicity, car ownership, and park accessibility. The Master Plan highlights that car ownership in suburban municipalities of Bergen County is generally correlated with income. The densest areas for zero-car households are located in southern

Bergen County. The car ownership variable suggests zero-car households may only be able to frequent local parks or may rely on public transportation to visit parks.

The Master Plan recommends balancing the amount of open space in the County by prioritizing the development of new parklands in the southern portion of the County. This could be accomplished by exploring connectors of land to expand existing parks and creating new linear parks.

Based on the demographics and parkland availability analysis, creating the new Carlton Hill Bergen County Greenway Park is a well justified endeavor for the County and the two municipalities. This greenway will provide the opportunity to connect municipal parks in Rutherford and East Rutherford and be fully extended into downtown Rutherford in a future phase. The Carlton Hill Greenway Park could serve as the inspiration for the creation of a Passaic River walkway segment at the western terminus of the greenway park. Last, the park will provide a safe, convenient, multimodal connector that will lead to improved environmental conditions, provide additional recreation opportunities, and support healthy lifestyle choices for residents.

c. Fully describe multi-phase projects

While this Carlton Hill Bergen County Greenway Park is a stand-alone park development project, future phases could include the continuation of the greenway leading from the eastern terminus at approximately Sidney Street, thence connecting to downtown Rutherford Borough. A new riverfront walkway along the Passaic River could be an offshoot of the greenway park. Both opportunities meet the County Park Master Plan goal of increasing parkland in southern Bergen County.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Describe existing environmental features.

a. Vegetation

The property contained a 1.2 mile inactive rail line. The line has been out of service since prior to 1999. Passenger service ceased on the line in 1966. As a rail line, the property was not designed or maintained for vegetation, rather efforts were undertaken by the prior owner to curtail and remove vegetative growth from the railroad tracks. No vegetation adjacent to the rail was purposely planted by the railroad as it would have disrupted rail operations. Over time, trees grew adjacent to the rail bed. These trees will be assessed by a tree arborist for species and health during the park design process. As this project is a greenway park, final design will look to retain and add as many native trees as possible.

b. Wildlife

As part of the rail line abandonment process, a search of the List of threatened and endangered species was conducted and zero threatened, endangered, or candidate species were identified on this species list.

c. Geology, topography, and soils

The park is located in Watershed Management Area 4 (WMA 4) that includes the Lower Passaic River (from the Pompton River confluence downstream to the Newark Bay) and its tributaries, including the

Saddle River. The 129 square miles of land in the Lower Passaic River Watershed is primarily urban/suburban. As a result, water quality conditions along this 33-mile section of the Passaic River are poor, reflective of numerous point sources, significant nonpoint source contributions, and high sediment oxygen demands. Reflecting the area's industrialized history, the conditions are affected by the number of hazardous waste sites and contamination problems found in these areas.
(https://www.nj.gov/njoem/mitigation/pdf/2019/mit2019_Appendix%20L_Watsheds_of_NJ.pdf)

The former rail line corridor has varying accessibility due to the topography of the corridor in relation to the adjacent properties. Sections of the corridor are below street grade and provide poor access. The Western terminus of the corridor is located along the Passaic River and is at street grade, which provides good access to the corridor. The Eastern terminus is located near the intersection of Sidney Avenue and W. Erie Avenue in Rutherford and is below street grade and provides poor access to the corridor. The trail is heavily wooded; however, it contains a cleared area along the central portion that was the railroad tracks featuring the wood cross ties and steel rails.

d. Water resources/hydrology

The former rail corridor has a Flood Zone designation of X, meaning no risk of flooding and zone AE designation with a high risk of flooding (Passaic River and Jackson Avenue). Areas with a high risk of flooding total approximately 5% of the corridor. The corridor is not impacted by wetlands. Stormwater outfalls are noted along the rail corridor.

e. Historic/archeological resources

The prior owner, Norfolk Southern Railway Company (NSR) had served no customers on the Line since it acquired the Line from the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail) in 1999. The Line remained out of service and no traffic traversed the Line. In the rail abandonment filings, the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office advised the NSR that the Line had previously been determined eligible for the National and New Jersey Registers of Historic Places and had been identified as a part of the Erie Railroad Main Line Historic District (SHPO Opinion 2/20/2003). The SHPO also noted that the Erie Railroad Main Line Historic District has no buildings, bridges, culverts, catenary, or rail present within the limits of the sections proposed to be abandoned. Finally, the SHPO concurred with the finding that, as proposed, the undertaking would have no adverse effect on historic properties.

f. Transportation/access to site

The linear Carlton Hill Greenway Park is within a quarter mile of residential neighborhoods in Rutherford and East Rutherford. Public transportation is provided by New Jersey Transit with train service on its Bergen County Line to Secaucus Junction and Hoboken from the Rutherford station that is less than one-half of a mile away from the park. NJ Transit bus routes include the 160, 190 and 703 buses serving the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Midtown Manhattan and Newark Penn Station. The park is accessible by walking and bicycling with entrances at several residential cross streets as well as from Memorial Park. While the formal rail line was not in operation, walkers trespassed onto the railroad property. Now under public ownership, this Greenway Park provides lawful public access to walk the length of the former rail line.

- g. Adjacent land uses/description of the surrounding neighborhood

Land uses adjacent to the corridor are Industrial and Residential in nature. The property is adjacent to 4.79 acres of residentially zoned land (42% of the overall corridor) and 6.67 acres of industrially zoned land (58% of the overall corridor).

3. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ANALYSIS OF PROPOSED ACTION

- a. Discuss all affected resources and the significance of each impact.

The new linear park does not pass through state parks or forests, national parks or forests, or wildlife sanctuaries. As such, no adverse effects on wildlife sanctuaries, national parks or forests, or state parks or forests are anticipated. As the former rail line has been out of service prior to 1999, residents have adopted the rail line as an unofficial linear walkway. This not only provided a walking or hiking path, but community park improvements along the rail line were also established, such as a community garden. Currently residents rely upon the sidewalks that run along West Erie Avenue to walk from one neighborhood to another. This Greenway Park will enable residents to walk on the 1.2-mile walking corridor separated from vehicular traffic.

- b. Discuss the short-term and long-term project impacts

As the Carlton Hill Bergen County Greenway Park is a new proposed park, park users will not be displaced from using the park during construction. The Department of Parks will engage a qualified park development planner/engineer team to advance the conceptual plans for the greenway into final plan that will consist of bid documents. As part of the task of the design consultant, a public engagement process will be followed to reach out to neighbors, park users and each municipal government. It is anticipated this process may take up to nine months to complete. Best estimates on the length of construction will depend upon a number of factors, however, it is estimated that it will be completed within twelve months.

- c. Discuss anticipated increase in recreation and overall use of the site over time.

The creation of this greenway park will provide residents with a new place to walk, run, stroll, or ride a bicycle. On a long term benefit perspective, the park will be a healthy recreational option for local residents available for generations to come. It will offer a non-vehicular access to the municipal parks, thus creating a larger regional park. It will help people of all ages to incorporate exercise and social interactions into their daily routines. Last, this park will provide a positive sense of community pride to have Bergen County's first linear park from an abandoned rail line. The development history of the municipalities is tied to the formation of the rail line. Residential neighborhood and industries were developed along the former rail line. This history will be used to inform park users about this transformation.

- d. Identify adjacent environmental features that may be affected by the proposal.

Adjacent environmental features to this project are not known as this time. Construction may present short term visual and noise effects on adjacent property owners and park users. Sequencing of construction will be managed to ensure the least amount of disturbance.

- e. List any permits required for project and brief status (i.e. waterfront development)

Soil Erosion & Sediment Control Certification & 5G3 Construction Activity Stormwater (GP) for construction; NJDEP Land Use Permits to be determined.

- b. Natural Heritage Data - Lands Management Form

NSR obtained a letter from the US Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Services, dated August 11, 2020, that provided guidance on birds of particular concern either because they occur on the USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern (BCC) list or warrant special attention in project location. The letter also indicated there were no critical habitats within the project area under this Office's jurisdiction.

- c. Discuss if/how the project will be impacted by sea level rise and any related design considerations.

The project will not be impacted by sea level rise.

4. **ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION**

- a. Identify alternative sites

The proposed park project is a result of the County's acquisition of this former rail line for the specific purpose of developing a linear park in a congested sector in the County. It is site specific and cannot be located elsewhere.

- b. Discuss alternative levels and type of development

The objective of the park is to provide a simple park design in order to open the park to the public as quickly as possible. The conceptual plans developed for Carlton Hill Greenway Park envision a multi-modal pedestrian and bike facility. The basis of the design is a hardscape and vegetative shoulder multi-use pathway configuration. At a length of approximately 5,040 linear feet the walkway would consist of a hardscape surface up to twenty feet wide with designed edging to hold the asphalt surface, planting, and erosion controls, and three (3) to six (6) foot wide soft vegetative shoulders on each side of the hardscape. Minimal park amenities, such as benches, signage, artistic features, are envisioned but not to overwhelm the simplistic approach for a walking and bicycle surface.

Alternative considerations could involve designing the linear park with the existing municipal parks such as creating spectator seating along the greenway facing the various sports fields in place or envisioned. While this will provide a greater opportunity for engagement, the time and coordination to do this approach may slow the progress of the straightforward linear park as envisioned today.

- c. Compare environmental impacts of each alternative

If a spectator seating feature would be considered, this may necessitate the removal of the existing rail bed soil and its proper disposal. The goal of the project is to have the least disruption of the rail base soil. Considering other alternative park amenity, while laudable, will impose new design requirements at a greater expense. The envisioned approach is considered economical, efficient in terms of least

disruption and appropriate. Adding multiple features will detract from the simple design of the envisioned greenway.

5. MITIGATING MEASURES

The park will be developed by a landscape architect/engineering team responsible for designing the project that adheres to professional standards of design. There will be an investment in a robust public engagement to arrive at a final construction plan with community input and participation as well as communication during the construction phase. Both municipal governments will be part of a project team to help arrive at a final design as well as communicate to residents and property owners adjacent to the new park. The landscape architect/engineering team will assist in the procurement of a competent construction firm to perform the construction work. The county will hire a dedicated construction manager to oversee the construction to ensure the project is constructed according to construction plans, but also be able to assess any unanticipated situations and recommend a course of action to mitigate any potential negative impact to the project timeline, quality, or cost.