

Open Space, Parks & Recreation

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OPEN SPACE:

Open space and parks in White Plains are a rapidly depleting resource. The City's woodlands, meadows and wetlands are being paved at a much faster rate than most people realize. The facts are striking: Between 1982, when the City of White Plains published its first *Open Space Inventory*, until 1992 when the *Inventory* was updated, well over half of the City's significant open space parcels in private ownership were developed. Since 1992 the trend has continued.

The 1997 Plan set a goal of attaining for the City's future carefully preserved and maintained open spaces, natural environments and historic sites open to the citizens of White Plains for their quiet enjoyment and for their environmental and historical education; along with an open space network and trail system linking major parks, nature areas and historic sites (excerpted from *White Plains Vision*), but the Plan did more than simply set forth generalized open space goals. The volumes of materials synthesized into the *Vision* included many specific steps needed to be taken by the City of White Plains to achieve those goals. The City's Environmental, Open Space and Historical Preservation Task Force, in its 1995 Report to the City, called for the City to do the following:

- Implement a policy where open space preservation is encouraged because of its benefits to the City's quality of life and the enhancement of property values.
- Integrate and where necessary acquire additional open spaces into a coherent citywide system of parks which together can serve the varied needs of all White Plains citizens and workers for recreation of all kinds.
- Establish a major, centrally located park as part of a city-wide park system to benefit all residents and visitors to the City of White Plains.

Since adoption of the 1997 Comprehensive Plan, some welcome steps have been taken in open space and recreational park development, including:

- Preservation of the D'Elia property adjoining the Greenway
- Liberty Park, in cooperation with Mayor Delfino's City of White Plains Environmental Protection Initiative.
- The Environmental Protection Initiative has the potential to develop a small revenue stream for open space and parks acquisition.

The City of White Plains currently owns approximately 56 acres of parks and 110 acres

of open space, along with some 150 acres of public school property, much of which is recreational open space. See Appendix. For a city of more than 50,000 people, however, these are not generous figures, and many further steps to be taken, including the following specific actions:

Identify and establish protection strategies for key open space resources throughout the City of White Plains.

The Open Space Task Force's initial evaluation of open space preservation goals for more than individual parcels, plus waterways, wetland areas and historic sites, is included as Appendix resources. Suggested preservation strategies include:

- Acquisition (including by donation)
- Right of First Refusal
- Subdivision Park Lands
- Conservation Development Subdivision
- Conservation Easement
- Tree Preservation
- Steep Slope Preservation
- Wetlands/Watercourse Protection
- Historical/Architectural Preservation
- Vista/Scenic Preservation
- Preservation Planning, including updating the Open Space Plan
- Regulatory Actions and upgrade of the City Code to enhance environmental and open space protection (see Appendix).

Priority now should be given to the following:

- Completion of the Greenway Project, a hiking trail/open space network reaching from Scarsdale in the south up to Liberty Park in the north.
- Long term protection planning for the nursery properties and other open space properties along the west side of Mamaroneck Avenue.
- Long term protection planning for the Pace and Good Counsel properties on Broadway.
- Establishment of a Central Park for White Plains@ (see below).
- Preservation of the open space qualities of Westchester Hills and Ridgeway Country Club properties.

Develop a revenue source for acquisition funding.

Good planning and fair-minded preservation regulation are notably effective in reducing the detrimental impacts of uncontrolled growth and development, but the City of White Plains cannot expect to protect all of the open space resources that should and deserve to be protected unless it is able to pay for at least some of the land it needs. Public

acquisition of land can take a variety of forms: It can be purchased outright, or the owner can be paid a portion of the value of the land simply to protect the land, or parts of it, through deed restrictions or preservation agreements known as a Conservation Easements. Capital for local preservation acquisitions is obtainable from federal, state and county government sources, private charitable contributions, foundation, corporate and business sources, and a revolving acquisition funds or ongoing revenue streams set up by the municipal government for the purpose of buying land or Conservation Easements. The Mayor's Environmental Protection Initiative appears to be good start at raising significant funds for preservation purposes.

Municipalities may use a number of revenue-generating programs to finance an open space acquisition program. The "Westchester 2000" report suggests the following possibilities:

- Real Estate Transfer Tax
- Sale of default property taken by the City for tax arrears
- Payment in lieu of dedication of open space lands as an element of subdivision approval (already in use in White Plains)
- Special assessment districts, formed to include properties benefited by open space projects
- Other earmarked revenue sources, as undertaken by the Mayor's Environmental Protection Initiative.

Expenditures for land preservation are sound investments in the City's future. According to The Report of the President's Commission: Americans Outdoors:

"Across the country, when people are asked where they would prefer to live, work, shop and recreate, they invariably select communities or neighborhoods that have an abundance of trees, open spaces, and uncluttered pedestrian ways. These preferences translate into clear economic terms: if a community is to succeed in attracting new residents and businesses, it must be concerned about its appearance, physical character, livability and feel."

Government acquisition can take many forms, some of which do not necessarily require payment of full market value for the property, including:

- Conservation Easement. An agreement between a land owner and the local

municipality, or a charitable organization known as a land trust, by which the owner gives up some or all of the property's development potential in exchange for payment or, in some cases, tax benefits.

- Lease Arrangements. Leasing for open space and recreational uses, including options to purchase (discussed below); alternatively, the City can purchase property and lease it back to the owners.
- Option Agreement/Right of First Refusal. Agreements between a landowner and the City that give the City the right to purchase the property (or a Conservation Easement, etc.) under specified conditions in the future. The City of White Plains currently holds rights of first refusal on some of the country clubs in the City.
- Bargain Sale. A sale to the City for less than fair market value, which may result in significant tax savings to the owner.
- Land Exchange. Trading City-owned parcels of developable land for preservation land. The landowners may benefit by receiving land that is easier to develop (possibly lacking the wetlands or other resources that make their original parcel valuable as open space).
- Eminent Domain proceedings. Condemnation by the City of valuable open space property for public acquisition to use as park or recreational land. The law requires the landowner to be paid the property' fair market value. Government agencies have employed this mechanism to acquire land considered to be of prime open space importance. Under a procedure sometimes called friendly condemnation, the City pays the landowner up front the amount that the City considers to be fair market value, and the parties would agree to let a court decide what else, if anything, is owed to the landowner.

Using a variety of ownership and acquisition techniques, such as those discussed above, the City of White Plains could achieve the most cost-effective use of its acquisition resources.

Establish a Central Park for White Plains on the lower portion of the New York Hospital Property.

The City of White Plains would benefit immeasurably by establishing a Central Park of more than 100 acres on a parcel of land that is centrally located to serve the entire City. The parcel best suiting this purpose is currently undeveloped land belonging to New York Hospital along Bryant Avenue east of Bloomingdale Road. The land is beautiful,

open and easy to get to. This property had immense potential to serve as a recreational hub, centrally located to hiking, bicycle and greenway trails connecting all parts of the City.

In the 1995 report of the City's Open Space Task Force, mentioned above, the Task Force stated:

"A central park for White Plains will (as with Central Park in New York City) increase the economic value of all properties throughout the city, including commercial uses in the downtown area, while enhancing the quality of life for all residents and future generations into perpetuity. Moreover, a central park served by adequate public transportation making it accessible to all citizens will serve the entire city and avoid favoritism and polarization."

At the time of this writing, the City is working on a plan to establish a portion of this property as a City Park, but the long-term viability of this plan has not yet been established, nor does the land currently included in the proposed park sufficient for the natural and recreational opportunities that the property can provide to the City. Before final determinations are made on this plan, it is necessary to consider the plan's impact on this unique land resource. The undeveloped lower portion of the New York Hospital property is well over one hundred acres. Most of this land is not included in the park now being considered by the City. *The following must be considered:*

- Impact of Aug 2002 approval- ie: 384,000 sq ft research bldg, proton beam accelerator and 900+ car multi-story garage.
- Zoning requirement for a master plan for the property.
- The National Recreation Parks Association (NRPA) guidelines regarding adequate parks facilities (see page 7)
- Discussions between Administration and Hospital re possible rezoning and open space usage by City- including 99 year lease arrangement vs. transfer of property, acceptable size of property to be transferred, extent of non-residential development desirable, non-competing with downtown activities
- De facto commercial zoning change on property-impact on surrounding residential properties.
- Review of NYS Historical designation and possible request to NYS to revert to prior non-designation to better utilize property
- Change of status of St. Agnes Hospital-potential buyers and possible usage (underlying is R1-12.5 zoning)
 - Special permit for hospital use only
 - Lifetime care facility
 - Consider rezoning

The City of White Plains can and must take the lead promptly in acquiring the parkland from New York Hospital by using the acquisition and funding mechanisms discussed above.

In a May, 1998 report to Mayor Delfino, local citizens group Concerned Citizens for Open Space (CCOS) recommended employment of an Adoption contract by the City, an agreement between the City of White Plains and New York Hospital, and an experienced third party that had the ability to workout funding arrangements, for the City to purchase the land at specified price and under conditions enumerated in the contract, within a specified period known as the Adoption period.

The option period in this case would need to be long enough, at least two years, to allow private and government funds to be raised to pay the agreed price.

The experience of land preservation organizations and government agencies has proven the option contract to be very successful in facilitating public acquisition of important open space parcels.

PARKS and RECREATION

Background

"America was once a land of compact cities surrounded by vast areas of fields, streams and forests. Today, we are a country of enormous cities surrounded by yet more metropolitan regions. City parks have become the places where we most often enjoy open space and outdoor recreation. Cities are defined by their urban parks, plazas, public gardens, and linear greenways and their residents experience the natural environment when natural areas are threaded among and between the urban environment. It is imperative that we understand that city parks should be preserved, improved and enlarged."

Attractive, safe and usable parks bolster their neighborhoods, but cities need a strong economic base to fix or create parks in the first place and a public will to accomplish this goal. The most desirable cities for people to move to are often those with substantial municipal parks that offer an option to the demands of urban living.

More than a century ago, Frederick Law Olmsted, the great park designer and city planner referred to as the father of landscape architecture, found this issue to be central to his work when he pointed out that *"a park exercises a very different and much greater influence upon the progress of a city in its general structure than any other ordinary public work."* Parks give a city a survival advantage, they improve the

quality of life- by cleaning the air, providing cooling shade, space for recreation and play, offering attractive vistas and furnishing outdoor environmental classrooms.

Although White Plains is a city of about 53,000, it occupies only ten square miles or 6400 acres. On the basis of city population density (ie: number of residents per acre) it falls between Cincinnati, OH (pop. 346,000 and 49,408 acres) with 7.0 and St. Louis, MO (pop. 352,000 and 39,616 acres) with 8.9- White Plains is 8.4 residents per acre.

If we now compare acres of park per thousand residents, Cincinnati with 4,686 acres of park rates 13.5, St. Louis with 3,290 acres of park rates 9.3 and White Plains with 55.58 acres of park (per Recreation Master Plan-Sept. 1999) rates only 1.05 acres of park per thousand residents. As a point of reference, New York City with its dense population has an index more than three times as great as ours- 3.8. Should we seek to make White Plains a “mini-Manhattan” or should we strive to increase the index number that will indicate the goal of a healthier city for its fulltime residents and daytime population in excess of 250,000?

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR RECREATIONAL FACILITIES

The National Recreation Parks Association (NRPA) has developed guidelines for all communities to follow regarding the amount and location of various types of parks. It looks at three park systems, mini-park, neighborhood park and community park; and determines how much acreage should be supplied per 1,000 residents. The chart details the recommendations that NRPA has developed.

Component	Service Area	Desireable Size	Acres/1,000 Population
Mini-Park	Less than ¼ mile Radius	1 acre or less	0.25 to 0.5 acres
Neighborhood	¼ to ½ mile radius To serve a population Up to 5,000	15+ acres	1.0 to 2.0 acres
Community Park	several neighborhoods 1 to 2 mile radius	25+ acres	5.0 to 8.0 acres

1997 Comprehensive Plan

The 1997 Comprehensive Plan contains a Vision Statement for community resources which includes the following goal for recreational resources:

*“...well designed and well maintained parks and playgrounds with a sufficient number and mix of athletic fields to meet the active recreational needs of all ages;
Carefully preserved and maintained open spaces, natural environments and historic sites open to the citizens of White Plains for their quiet enjoyment and for their*

environmental and historical education...An open space network and trail system linking major parks, nature areas and historic sites."

The Plan's Recreation and Parks Resource Goals are stated:

"...the Plan contains a vision for open space and recreational resources that includes better integrating public open space into the fabric of the city's neighborhoods through an interconnected open space system; creating additional recreational opportunities through the construction of ball fields and passive open spaces; and achieving new parkland through the development review process. The high quality municipal recreational facilities...will be maintained and expanded to adapt to the changing needs of the city's population pursuant to a long range Recreation and Parks Master Plan to be developed consistent with the goals of this Comprehensive Plan. With improved access to a wider variety of recreational, cultural and leisure time options, the City will improve the well being of its residents and foster a more vibrant and active community life."

Demographic Changes Since 1997 (refer to Planning Data section)

White Plains has been described by the 1999 Recreation Master Plan as a *"medium size community in both population and size with a distinctive urban and suburban character. It is anticipated that the population of the city will stabilize at around 50,000 by the year 2000."* In fact,

- By 2004 the city has grown to 53,000 plus
- An additional 2,000 plus housing units are built, under construction or approved that will add 2500 to 4000 more residents largely to the densely populated Core Area of White Plains

The city's three geographically defined planning areas reflect differing characters and differing recreational facilities at the neighborhood level, but the modest size of White Plains brings all residents together in the use of larger city-wide facilities.

"The primary recreation facilities strategy noted in the 1997 Comprehensive Plan is 'the development of a Park and Recreation Capital Improvement Plan' for the next 1-15 years, as well as an inventory, evaluation and recommendation for programs. Yet, recognizing that it takes time to properly prepare such a master plan, the 1997 Comprehensive Plan goes on to state: 'However, existing conditions, changing circumstances and funding may necessitate initiation of ...strategies prior to the completion of that Plan. These strategies should...be built into the Park and Capital Improvement Program Plan.'"

Core Area- The 1997 Plan made no comment with reference to the open space

component within the core neighborhoods. The Recreation Master Plan, September 199, refers to the following open spaces within this area:

- Jacob Purdy Park- WP Historical Society HQ, Heritage Trail Stop
- Tibbits Park- annual public events
- Main-Mamaroneck Plaza- completely rebuilt 2003/2004
- Recreational include the Library (possible use for outdoor cultural events, sculpture garden), Senior Center, Slater Community Center, three parks and two playgrounds

Close-In Area- The 1997 Plan envisioned upgrading existing neighborhood facilities and developing a Carhart neighborhood playground. The Recreation Master Plan refers to the following features in Close-In neighborhoods:

- Gardella Park- swimming pool, basketball, two field, playground, picnic space
- Battle Hill Park- Little League, soccer, tennis courts, Community room
- Battle-Whitney Park- passive recreation
- Turnure Park- local usage, passive recreation
- Kittrell Park- swimming pool, basketball, passive recreation

Outer Area-

- Majority of large city-owned parks and open space
- WPHS, the largest public school property
- Largest county facilities and privately owned golf courses