

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today, Hunterdon County residents enjoy a rural landscape, consisting of a mosaic of farms, parks, protected forests, wooded stream corridors and wetlands. This rural character is threatened by a slow accretion of low-density suburban development that fragments forest habitats, brings residents in conflict with farming and closes off the views of open vistas from public roads. Proof of this gradual erosion is the change Hunterdon County experienced between 1972 and 1995 in the loss of its natural communities and habitats; over 11,075 acres of grassland/cultivated land (9.1% loss), 23,567 acres of upland forest cover (20% loss), and 14,418 acres of wetlands (60% loss). In the past decade, the pace of development has slowed significantly, but our perspective must take a longer view and set out now to preserve the essential elements of the County's open space landscape assuring it remains for future generations.

In accordance with their mission statement, "the Hunterdon County Division of Parks & Recreation is dedicated to preserving open space and natural resources, providing safe parks and facilities, and offering educational and recreational opportunities, all contributing to an enhanced quality of life for present and future generations."

The Hunterdon County Strategic Park and Open Space Plan ("County Park Plan") advances this mission, and proposes a future County Park system as one of the main components of achieving the primary vision of the Hunterdon County Growth Management Plan: Protection of Hunterdon County's extensive network of natural resources and maintenance of its rural or scenic-rural landscape.



Hunterdon County's Vista of Rolling Hills, Farms, and Low Density Development

The County Park Plan will serve as a guide for County Open Space Tax Fund expenditures for park, recreation and open space. The main focus on this Plan is to give direction as to where future County parks, trails and greenways should be located and improved. Recommendations are offered on how the other type of open space plans prepared by others such as farmland preservation can contribute to achieving open space and recreation goals complementary to a County Park System.

The County Park Plan proposes a future County Park System that complements the other programs contributing to the County's open space character: State, municipal, farmland preservation, non-profit conservation areas and deed-restricted environmental corridors. These different approaches to open space preservation and the connective tissues of environmental corridors together can form the future open space landscape of the County.

In addition to identifying the County Park System role in natural resource protection, the County Park Plan proposes an ultimate County Park System made up of sites and facilities for active and passive outdoor recreation activities available for the public. The County Park Plan recommends how agricultural land, municipal parkland and local development tools also can be used to create local and tourist experiences contributing to the County's economic well-being. Showcasing the natural beauty of the county and recognizing it as a great asset serves to benefit a healthy county.

The intention of this Plan for the ultimate Hunterdon County Park System is to set forth a strategic process to identify future County parkland acquisitions that would capture the essential landscape character of Hunterdon County and provide a platform for achieving a multitude of diverse goals such as resource management, habitat restoration, greater recreation opportunities and economic development support.

The effort to develop this plan was comprised over a two-year timeframe that encompassed information gathering and feedback through focus groups, surveys, and individual meetings from members of the public, municipalities, nonprofit organizations, county staff, and volunteers. Specific municipal input and feedback was incorporated by bringing the Plan and its concepts to municipal counsel and stakeholder meetings.

To highlight the major recommendations and takeaways of this plan:

- The addition of over 4400 acres of new parkland to the County Park System
- Upgrades to three current or future park locations to serve as additional general use parks
- Additional focus on trail connectivity across the county and between parks
- Additional focus on park improvements to enhance user experience and tourism

Hunterdon County, in its three-hundred-year history, has evolved through many agricultural periods beginning with small farmsteads and forests denuded of food and fuel, and transitioning into, peaches, dairy, equestrian, nursery-based agriculture and gentleman farms and estates interspersed with villages and low-density suburbia. It is left to this generation, therefore, to plan and preserve the essential landscape features of what may become Hunterdon County's last landscape.

THE HUNTERDON COUNTY PARK SYSTEM 2018

The County Park System has expanded at a continuous rate since it acquired its first park, the Wescott Nature Preserve, in 1966. Over the past 50 years, the County Park System has added 24 separate park areas. Since the year 2000, the County system has significantly expanded from 5,217 acres to 8,423 acres in 2017, largely due to County Open Space Trust Fund.¹ First approved in 1998, this tax has contributed nearly eight million dollars to the County's open space preservation efforts.



Flowing Waters of the Lockatong Creek at the Wescott Nature Preserve

The Hunterdon County Park System has a park classification system for all County Parks, defining the levels of public use sought and the management responsibilities needed. This classification system, shown in Figure 1 (in the Appendix), highlights the dual role of the Hunterdon County Park Division as both a resource management agency and a provider of recreation opportunities. Table 1 presents all of the Hunterdon County Parks with their individual acreage and improvements organized according to each park's classification designation.

Based on this classification system, the County Park System currently consists predominately of largely undeveloped natural areas suited to trails for hiking and horseback riding, and nature watching.

¹ 8,423 acres is the figure used in Hunterdon County Park and Recreation Areas and Facilities Index; it includes acreage acquired in partnership with the New Jersey Water Supply Authority. For the purpose of analyses in the plan, the total amount of County Park Acreage will be 7,814 acres based on the County's GIS data of acreage solely owned by the Hunterdon County Park System.

- 15% of the 1,303 acres of the County parkland consists of areas in their natural state with little or no parking, offering a variety of designated trails.
- The largest classification of County Park land consists of improved natural areas found in 15 parks amounting to 4,644 acres or 55% of the County's total parkland. These parks offer scenic vistas and improvements in the form of signage and parking, as well as a variety of trails.
- Linked greenways account for 1,564 acres (9.5%), including the four major County-owned and maintained trail systems: The Columbia Trail, The Landsdown Trail, The South Branch Trail segments and the Charlestown Greenway Section.

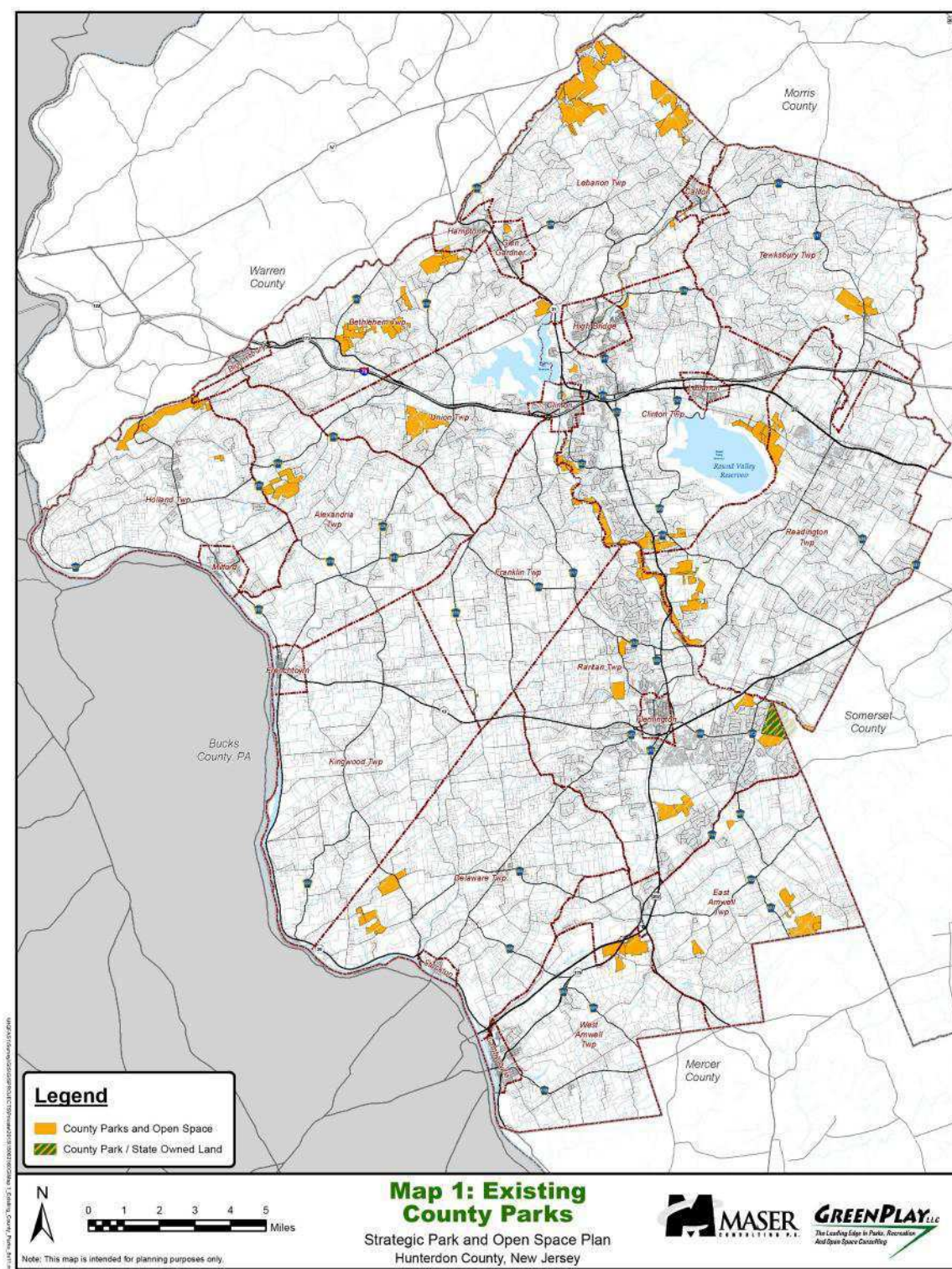
Only 11.2% of County parkland consisting of 912 acres is improved for active recreation uses:

- There is only one General Use Area, Deer Path Park, with 104-acres devoted to group activities such as picnic sites, a gazebo, sports fields supported by parking, and a variety of trails including a fitness trail.
- There are five Special Use Areas totaling 808 acres. One Special Use Area has been developed for golfing, the 241-acre Heron Glen Golf Course. The other four Special Use Areas serve the needs of both individuals and groups seeking to participate in organized activities or casual relaxed outdoor experiences. The 90-acre Echo Hill Park provides campsites and indoor facilities. The 135-acre Hunterdon County Arboretum offers gardens, picnic sites and a gazebo. The 252-acre South County Park with its 89-acre fairgrounds section hosts the annual Hunterdon County 4-H Fair, and the one-acre Court Street Park serves County employees, visitors and residents adjacent to the County Governmental and Court complex in Flemington.

Each Hunterdon County park site is identified on Map 1, titled Existing Parks and Open Space, along with other types of preserved open space and parks in Hunterdon County.



Hand Constructed Single Stone Arch Bridge in Teetertown Preserve



Map 1: Existing County Parks

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAN CONTENTS

The County Strategic Park and Open Space Plan is organized into five sections:

Executive Summary

The Executive Summary provides a brief overview of the County Park System today and a brief summary of each of the sections informing this strategic park plan.

Section One

Section One introduces the reader to background information on the parks.

Section Two

Section Two provides an analysis of parks operations.

Section Three

Section Three provides the County's vision, goals, and priorities for parks.

Appendices

The County Plan appendices includes larger scale maps of existing and proposed open space for the entire County and each of the four Planning Regions. Maps, tables and lists of properties of existing and proposed open space in each municipality in Hunterdon County. Supporting documents include:

- Pyramid Pricing Methodology and Pyramid Cost Recovery
- Model Inclusion Program
- Sample Partnership
- Building Successful Trail Networks
- Leverage Municipal and HOA Partnership
- Single Sponsorship Policy
- Hunterdon County Parks, Open Space and Recreation Strategic Planning Survey Report

SECTION ONE: SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC PLAN BACKGROUND

Section One identifies the amount and municipal location of various type of existing, protected open space in Hunterdon County. This information will assist future decisions on where County Open Space Tax monies might be directed to complement municipal and county open space and park opportunities. This section outlines key details from the County's demographic profile and feedback from the community survey.

There are 80,718 acres of preserved open space in Hunterdon County, amounting to 28.8% of the total County land. The majority, or 67.3% is protected open space in the form of privately-held preserved agricultural land and State-owned public parks and open space. Preserved farmland makes up 43.3% (35,016 acres) of this protected open space, followed by State Parks and State preserved conservation lands together amounting to 19,376 acres for 24% of the open space in Hunterdon County.

Public open space acquired, developed, and maintained for active and passive recreation to serve local residents consists of 16,707 total acres or 20.6% of Hunterdon's open space. Local parkland is found in each of the county's 26 municipalities amount to 8,893 acres. The County Park System contains 7,814 acres. The County also manages 609 acres acquired mainly with the New Jersey Water Supply Authority.

Other sources in Hunterdon County contribute 9,131 acres or 11.3% of the total county open space. These sources are non-profit conservation land, Board of Education, private open space and common-owned open space.



Two Soccer Fields at Deer Path Park Constructed by Hunterdon United Soccer Club

The Hunterdon County Demographic profile

Section One also provides demographic statistics and trends that informed the planning policies of the Plan using data sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau and its American Community Survey and ERIS Business Analyst.

Key Highlights of this section

Aging Population: The median age of Hunterdon County residents was 45.2 years in 2015, older than the median age for New Jersey (39.7) and the United States (37.4). Between 2010 and 2020, the number of residents 39 years and younger is projected to decrease by 2.1% and residents aged 40 and over are projected to increase by 2%. In 2015, 56.9% of Hunterdon's population was over the age of 40 years.

High Median Household Income: Hunterdon median household income in 2015 was \$110,520, significantly higher than both State median household income of \$70,538, and the national median household income of \$53,217. Hunterdon is projected by ESRI for 2020 a median household income of \$124,924.

Population Growth Has Slowed with Minimum Projected Increase: Hunterdon County is projected by the U.S. Census to add only 29 persons in the ten-year period from 2010 to 2020.

Educational Level High but Declining with Young Adults: County residents ages 25+ are better educated than their peers statewide. However, young adults age 18 to 29 are less educated than State residents of this same age group.

White Collar Employees Predominate: The majority (75.8%) of Hunterdon County residents were employed in white collar jobs in 2015. Employment within the County was mainly in service industries and retail trade (59.7%).

A Healthy Place: Hunterdon County was ranked by the United Health Foundation number one in New Jersey, the 11th healthiest state nationally. The County does face a rise in the overall prevalence of adult obesity, as well as among its younger population.

Section One also includes an analysis of trends influencing parks and recreation services, including a comprehensive view of current and evolving nationwide desires for a variety of park and recreation activities that could shape decisions about future recreation facilities and program development in Hunterdon County's parks.

According to ESRI Business Analyst, the top outdoor recreation activities that Hunterdon County residents participated in 2014 were skiing, bicycling (both mountain and road), hiking, golf, boating, and backpacking. As for gym and field sports, ESRI data indicated a high preference for individual fitness activities, with local spending at \$14 million on sports and exercise equipment. County residents also exhibited an interest in 2014 in attending cultural and community events, spending nearly \$82.7 million doing so.

Looking to the future demand for recreation facilities, Recreation Management's 2015 State of the Industry Report found that the top 10 parks and recreation departments nationwide in the near future include:

1. Splash play areas
2. Playgrounds
3. Dog Parks
4. Fitness trails and outdoor fitness equipment
5. Hiking and walking trails
6. Bike trails
7. Park restroom structures
8. Park structures such as shelters and gazebos
9. Synthetic turf sports fields
10. Wi-Fi services



Nature Studies at Teetertown Preserve

Planning for recreational facility development in Hunterdon County, at least for the next decade, should be correlated with the County's dominant demographic groups and the recreational preferences.

Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, comprise 42% of the County's population. According to national recreation studies, Baby Boomers are looking for opportunities in fitness, exercise, outdoor sports, and attendance at arts and cultural events.

The Millennial Generation, born between 1980 and 1999, comprise 19% of the County's population. Like Baby Boomers, Millennials seek opportunities to exercise, walk, hike, bike, and participate in group activities. Many millennials own dogs, and want places they can recreate with them.

Youth - Generation Z, 18 years or younger, comprise 24% of the County's population. They are absorbed with technology and are less physically active as evidenced by the prevalence of obesity in their age group. Parks offering easy walking paths featuring interesting things to look at (perhaps activities tied in with their electronic devices) might be one way to entice Generation Z to experience an outdoor recreation activity.

Outdoor festivals and special events in the County parks may also entice Generation Z to enjoy an afternoon outside. Festivals are appealing to all demographic groups, and can be an economic driver of tourism.

The Community Survey section describes the three-prong survey outreach effort to gather public feedback on Hunterdon County parks, recreation facilities, services, and programs, as well as support for continued County Open Space Tax and use for four delineated purposes: maintenance, build parks and trails, open space acquisition, and building recreation facilities.

The survey was conducted using three primary methods, an invitation-only mail back survey; an online, invitation-only web survey; and an “open-link” online survey for members of the public who were not part of the invitation sample.

The Survey disclosed these key findings:

- Public focus on the need for park maintenance.
- Trails and pathways, park amenities, and open space acquisitions are top priorities. Over half of invitation respondents (57%) identified adding trails and pathways as the greater need for future facilities, followed by improving park amenities (playgrounds, shelters, restrooms, etc. at 50%), and open space/natural areas acquisition (each 43%).
- Community events like festivals and concerts are the most desired program activity.
- Respondents were given the opportunity to allocate a hypothetical \$100 to parks and open space facilities. Their priorities were
 - Acquiring and preserving additional open space - \$22;
 - Improvements/renovation of existing amenities at parks and facilities - \$18;
 - Adding aquatics facilities (pools, splash pads, etc.) - \$12;
 - Trail and pathway connectivity - \$12;
- The public indicated continued support for the Open Space Tax as well as support for an increase in this tax.

SECTION TWO: ANALYSIS OF CURRENT PARK OPERATIONS

Section Two looks at the organization and management structure of the Parks, with history dating back to the 1960s, evolving from a Board of Recreation Commissioners to the current Division of Parks and Recreation. One recent change to the County structure was the assignment of park maintenance to the Building and Maintenance Division, which has helped to streamline collaboration between Departments and Divisions, and deliver improved service to the residents of the County. As the County increases its open space acreage and development of its parks, there will need to be an enhanced effort to coordinate general park maintenance. Communication is key in this new management structure and there are ongoing efforts to improve the flow of information.

While the County parks have historically served county-wide passive recreational needs, there is a growing need for the County to increase its active park recreational amenities, e.g. team sports fields and fitness enhancements. As funding from other sources slows and continues to decline, there will be a greater need for the County to fill this role.



Instructions for Safe Canoeing on the South Branch River

Several key issues relative to the current park operation were identified in the survey and focus group meetings. The addition of web-based registration and availability of electronic payments would improve efficiency. Improved partner relationships could help expand park offerings through sponsorships, and increased volunteer land stewardship would enhance public participation within the parks.

As it relates to the staffing analysis, much information was gathered from the community survey and interviews, resulting in a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). Staff, rangers, and diverse program offerings were some of the Parks greatest strengths with high importance. Few developed parks were noted as an area for improvement. Social media presence is highly attractive and additional access would likely produce increased programmatic success.

The Program Analysis highlights the diverse programs offered by the Parks Division, in addition to passive recreation, hunting, fishing, and educational programming that is highly successful. *The Harbinger*, the quarterly Parks publication, is a successful outreach tool used by the Division to highlight ongoing programs and activities.

Public respondents to the Survey identified additional community events and more passive recreational amenities as desirable. Also noted was the need for additional public awareness and outreach about the many programs offered. New leisure and recreational trends should also be incorporated into park activities.

Overall recommendations for improving the County's Park System and programs focus on:

- *Enhancing programs and service delivery recommendations:* seek regular input and feedback, increase neighborhood and cultural special events, provide adaptive programming for special needs citizens and initiate programming with a health and wellness emphasis.
- *Facility recommendations:* recreational connectivity, leverage municipal, non-profit and HOA partnerships, engage in partnerships with schools, improve parking and access, improve signage and provide additional pavilions for rental.
- *Finance recommendations:* prudent use of the Open Space Trust Fund for acquisitions, make provisions for credit card registration payment and establish partnerships for mutual benefits.
- *Organizational recommendations:* provide online registration, improve marketing activities, provide coordinated maintenance structure, assign staff to explore partnerships, sponsorships, grants and donations.



Workshop on Butterfly Identification

SECTION THREE: VISION, GOALS, POLICIES OF THE COUNTY STRATEGIC PARK AND OPEN SPACE PLAN

The County Park Plan envisions the County Park System as part of a comprehensive strategy of achieving a number of public policy goals beyond its role as supplier of outdoor recreation facilities and programs and a guide to allocating County Open Space Tax funds. This vision includes:

- Preservation of the dominant regional landscape features differentiating Hunterdon County from other places;
- Continuation of the major environmental role of the County Park System;
- Distribution of a variety of traditional and new recreational facilities throughout Hunterdon County;
- Recognition of the County Park System as a tourist destination.



The Bend in the South Branch of the Raritan River

Section Three also includes details on the planning process used to inform the Plan and develop its seven preservation goals and supporting policies to direct acquisitions and identify preservation priorities. The seven goals include:

Goal 1 - Acquire and preserve the major physical features of Hunterdon County for public use and enjoyment of the rivers, the mountains and major scenic vistas.

Goal 2 - Provide developed, active park and recreation opportunities near the County's population concentrations.

Goal 3 - Preserve open space to preserve environmental resources and protect natural resources.

Goal 4 - Create a County Park System that contributes to residents' quality of life and economic well-being.

Goal 5 - Create a connected network of greenways and trails linking together an open space system throughout Hunterdon County.

Goal 6 - Seek new funding opportunities in light of the County's fiscal constraints and the public demand for greater active recreation and tourism experiences.

Goal 7 - Continue to recognize and treat the County Park System as a public asset and provide the necessary resources to create a quality park system.



Biking on the Columbia Trail

Top priorities, not in ranked order, include:

1. Focus preservation efforts along the Delaware, South Branch of the Raritan and Musconetcong River and promontory sites offering views of the County's most scenic resources.
2. Target a continuous greenway along the Musconetcong and Sourland Mountains, the prominent landscape features framing the County's northern and southern borders.
3. Acquire trail linkages connecting all existing trails in Hunterdon County.
4. Provide County open space and parkland within or near the population concentrations.
5. Develop four General Use Parks appropriately distributed across the County.
6. Participate in the County's enhanced tourism programs by showcasing the County's natural features and designing imaginative General Use County Park features by enlisting the private and non-profit sectors to create recreational facilities.
7. Preserve a "farm belt" across the center and southern section of Hunterdon County where there is an existing concentration of both preserved farms and active agriculture under farmland assessment.
8. Preserve buildings and supporting agricultural structures contributing to the appreciation of the County's rural heritage when acquiring open space properties.
9. Expand current recreational offerings and become a full-service park and recreation provider to satisfy the recreational interests of existing and future residents.
10. Continue to recognize the County Park System as a public asset and provide resources to achieve the quality of facilities and services desired by County residents.

Section Three also includes calculations used to estimate the acreage necessary to meet the County's open space target goal of 12,000 acres, general use park features and design principles, as well as the importance of greenway and trail linkages.

In addition to acquisition and recreational development, stewardship and the important role of our preservation partners are discussed. Short-, middle-, and long-term guidelines for implementation over the next 5-10 years are also outlined.