

GREEN ACRES PROGRAM

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection



OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN GUIDELINES FOR NONPROFITS

for Eligibility for the Green Acres Planning Incentive Category

Updated 1/2025

Green Acres Mission Statement

To achieve, in partnership with others, a system of interconnected open spaces whose protection will preserve and enhance New Jersey's natural environment and its historic, scenic, and recreational resources for public use and enjoyment.

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**** Please submit a draft Open Space and Recreation Plan to your Green Acres Project Manager for review. ****

OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of these guidelines is to aid nonprofits in preparing an Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). The Guidelines outline the OSRP items that are needed to participate in the Green Acres Planning Incentive (PI) funding category. (Please see the *Green Acres Planning Incentive Land Acquisition Application* for full list of eligibility requirements.) The PI category awards funding to eligible nonprofits to preserve lands for outdoor recreation and conservation purposes that meet the criteria identified in their OSRP.

Advantages to a nonprofit that participates in the PI category include:

1. An OSRP identifies the open space and recreation resources that are important to the nonprofit and establishes a path to protecting them.
2. Once an OSRP has been approved by the Green Acres Program, a nonprofit can acquire lands identified in its OSRP without making multiple individual, site-specific applications for Green Acres funding to acquire those lands.

To be eligible for PI funding, nonprofits must have a Green Acres approved OSRP dated within the last ten years. In lieu of having its own OSRP, a nonprofit may qualify for the PI category by submitting documentation that it is assisting a local government in the preservation of properties identified in the local government's OSRP.

THE OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLANNING PROCESS

What is an OSRP?

An OSRP articulates a nonprofit's vision and establishes a justification for the preservation of open space and the creation of recreation opportunities. Through an OSRP, a nonprofit examines open space and recreation resources important to its community, fauna, and flora, and identifies ways to protect and enjoy those resources.

Why is it important to plan for open space and recreation?

Parks and open space are effective tools to increase access to recreational opportunities, improve public health, promote biodiversity, build community, energize local economies, and bolster a community's climate resilience. Preservation planning helps ensure that these benefits are realized and maximized.

Who prepares the OSRP?

OSRPs can be prepared by nonprofit staff, volunteers, or a consultant.

Since the OSRP sets forth land use goals and policies that affect the preservation, enhancement, and maintenance of open space and recreation resources by the organization, Green Acres requires the nonprofit's Board of Directors to adopt their OSRP.

What about the public?

A critical aspect of the OSRP is ascertaining community open space and recreation needs, which can best be accomplished through meaningful public participation in the planning process. The definition of "community" for the purposes of public engagement will vary depending on the type of nonprofit. Nonprofits that work on the municipal level may focus their engagement on both their members and

municipal residents. Nonprofits with a broader geographic scope may focus on their members and solicit feedback from the general public – local, regional, or statewide - using their website or social media.

The specific methods of public engagement, while left to the choice of the nonprofit, should ensure that all members of the community are provided opportunities to present their views on open space and recreation. See item 5 in the next section for more information about OSRP public engagement requirements.

What planning resources should be consulted?

Nonprofits should align their OSRP with the appropriate open space and recreation policies of the the [Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#), *Outside, Together!*, and the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (State Plan).

Consistency with regional and special area master plans is also important, as natural resources transcend political boundaries. Coordinating OSRP preparation with regional planning efforts can help nonprofits accomplish OSRP goals more effectively and cost efficiently.

Conservation Blueprint

The Conservation Blueprint is an important tool to help communities identify natural, recreational, and historic resources. An interactive map-based system, the Blueprint, provides a wide array of map data that is essential for open space and recreation planning. Visit the Conservation Blueprint at www.NJMAP2.com for more information.

OSRP REQUIRED COMPONENTS

Green Acres requires the following Open Space and Recreation Plan elements:

1. Executive Summary

The introductory section should consist of a concise summary of the purpose of the OSRP; the process employed in preparing the plan, including public engagement efforts; the plan's significant findings about the community's recreation and open space needs; and the actions proposed in the plan to meet those needs.

2. Community Profile

Note: Nonprofits that work in a particular location within the state (e.g. municipality, watershed, geologic formation) should complete this section. Nonprofits that work statewide or in a very large region may omit this section.

This section should paint a broad picture of the community, region, or geography describing its:

- Physical location;
- History;
- Population size, density, and demographics; and
- If applicable, the location and demographics of NJDEP-identified [Overburdened Communities](#) (OBCs), particularly highlighting those that are "Subject to Adverse Cumulative Stressors" (please contact your Green Acres Project Manager with any questions about identifying OBCs)

3. History of Open Space Funding

In this section, the nonprofit should review the establishment and history of their own funding sources and discuss how other local, county, state, federal and nonprofit open space funding sources have been leveraged to support open space and recreation projects.

4. Recreation and Open Space Inventory

Next, the plan should document the nonprofit-owned open spaces and parks that are available to the community, including a listing of all lands and waters that:

- are available for active and passive recreation;
- are maintained as conservation areas dedicated to the preservation of natural and cultural resources; and
- provide access to coastal and inland water bodies.

Inventory listings should each include land type, size, location, facilities, degree of protection, form of ownership, and any other pertinent information.

5. Public Engagement & Public Meeting

Nonprofits should solicit public comment and feedback at two steps in the process: (1) public engagement early in the planning process, and then (2) a public meeting once a draft plan has been prepared.

Public Engagement

In this section, nonprofits must discuss in detail the public participation process that was used to

solicit, record, and incorporate member and public input during the preparation of the OSRP.

Applicants must strive to solicit broad community feedback from varied sources. Whatever means are used to engage the public during project planning, outreach efforts should be well-advertised and offer ample opportunities for participation. Applicants must implement at least two of the following outreach methods and submit documentation of completion for each:

1) Community survey

- On-line surveys, advertised on websites, in local news sources, flyers, etc.
- Paper surveys available at public buildings and events – e.g., library, municipal building, recreation center, senior citizen center, school functions

Note: To qualify as meaningful outreach, the survey should include open-ended questions to solicit respondent opinions and be conducted early enough in the process to allow sufficient time to incorporate findings into the plan.

2) Community meeting (*in person and/or virtual*)

- Open house meetings
- Focus groups

3) Invitation for community input

- Pop-up feedback sessions at park and/or at public buildings and community events
- Mailers to households inviting input
- Social media posts inviting input

If applicable, the nonprofit should ensure that residents from Overburdened Communities, particularly those that are Subject to Adverse Cumulative Stressors, are involved in the public participation process.

After discussing the public engagement solicitation process, the OSRP should summarize the input received and identify how public input was incorporated into the plan. Nonprofits must also attach documentation from their public engagement efforts as an appendix. Examples of such documentation include:

- A copy of the electronic or paper survey questionnaire with tabulated survey results
- Copies of flyers, ads, and/or mailings advertising public engagement opportunities/meetings
- Photos of in-person engagement events
- Screen shots of social media posts soliciting public input

Public Meeting

In addition to the vigorous public engagement discussed above, the nonprofit must hold at least one public meeting prior to the completion of the OSRP, which must be noticed on a prominent location on the nonprofit's website and through its social media, and which may be virtual or in person. A discussion of this meeting should be included in the OSRP, and the meeting notices and minutes should be attached as an appendix.

6. Goals and Policies

Incorporating feedback gathered through its public engagement process, the nonprofit should clearly state the organization's open space and recreation goals. Any internal policies necessary to achieve the identified goals should be discussed.

7. Environmental Analysis

The plan should provide an analysis of those public and private land and water resources that have potential for providing important open space benefits or recreation opportunities. Please consult the Conservation Blueprint for information to complete this portion of the OSRP. Include a combination of maps and discussion to define areas that have the opportunities for open space and recreation expansion or development.

The environmental analysis should examine, where applicable, opportunities for:

- Creation of linear recreation and open space facilities such as trails, bicycle paths, and greenways that link existing recreation and open space sites in an integrated system;
- Supporting conservation objectives, such as water supply protection; protection of wildlife habitat and habitat corridors; and protection of rivers, streams and forest lands;
- Supporting climate resilience objectives, particularly carbon sequestration through the preservation of existing woodlands and protection of properties that provide flood attenuation;
- Supporting community land use objectives, including preservation of open space that buffers or defines developed areas, open space that preserves scenic or distinctive landscape features, and open space with development-limiting characteristics such as floodplains and steep slopes; and
- Additional public access to coastal and inland waters.

8. Recreation Facilities Assessment

The OSRP should include an assessment of the organization's current recreation properties to satisfy present and projected recreational needs. The assessment should specifically include:

- A discussion of the number, geographic location, and condition of the nonprofit's properties that contain recreation facilities;
- A description of current recreation activity levels and participation patterns;
- A description of changes that will affect recreation and open space provision and that form the basis for forecasts of future recreation needs, such as changes in number of residents, age structure, land use, leisure time, income, and recreation trends;
- In consideration of the above, an assessment of the overall recreational facilities needs and a break-down of facility needs based on geographic distribution of facilities relative to population and user groups, including within OBCs; and
- A determination of the additional land and water areas and new or rehabilitated facilities necessary to meet current and future recreation needs of the community.

9. Land Use Planning Context

In this section, the nonprofit should discuss the land use planning context for its conservation and recreation planning efforts. The document should discuss which of the following planning resources were consulted and how each influenced the OSRP:

- Local and county government officials and commissions, including recreation staff and

advisory boards, environmental commissions, historic preservation committees, and open space and recreation committees and advisory boards

- Local interest groups, including environmental groups, historic preservation groups, athletic clubs, and other community groups and current or potential park users
- Local and county land use plans, and specifically any open space or recreation elements
- Regional planning efforts, such as regional trail plans, redevelopment plans, and special area master plans (e.g., [Highlands](#), [Meadowlands](#), [Pinelands](#))
- State open space and land use planning efforts, such as the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, [Outside, Together!](#) and the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan ([State Plan](#)). Please address *Outside, Together!* Principles.
- [Conservation Blueprint](#)
- [Furthering the Promise](#), a guidance document for advancing environmental justice
- NJ's [Global Warming Response Act 80x50 Report](#), the [Climate Change Resilience Strategy](#), the [Scientific Report on Climate Change](#), and the appropriate regional action plan, all available through the Department's [Climate Change website](#)
- DEP-approved [Municipal Public Access Plan\(s\)](#), if available
- NJ Department of Health and NJDEP [Healthy Community Planning website](#) and resources
- New Jersey [Comprehensive Statewide Historic Preservation Plan](#)

10. Action Plan

The Action Plan provides a road map to achieve the goals of the OSRP. By comparing the Recreation and Open Space Inventory with the OSRP's Environmental Analysis, Recreation Facilities Assessment, and Land Use Planning Context findings, as well as the nonprofit's goals and the results of the public engagement process, the nonprofit community's unmet open space and recreation needs can be determined. The nonprofit, of course, must balance these needs with fiscal reality. Thus, the Action Plan lays out how the communities or region's goals will be met with the financial resources available. The OSRP should describe anticipated actions for the next ten years.

The Action Plan should clearly define criteria and/or focus areas that the nonprofit will use to focus and prioritize its preservation efforts:

- Acquisition criteria may reference specific recreation or resource protection goals and needs. For example, the plan may identify as preservation priorities those lands that are: wooded and greater than ten acres, flat and cleared and appropriate for ball fields, within a quarter mile of a specific waterbody, within an underserved geographic part of the community, etc.
- Focus areas are mappable areas, such as greenways, trail corridors, or buffer areas.

11. Comprehensive Open Space System Map

The OSRP should include a comprehensive open space system map that provides a general overview by depicting the nonprofit's existing open space and recreational facilities and, when possible, the proposed preservation focus areas.

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS

While not components of OSRP document itself, the following are additional Green Acres OSRP requirements:

1. Nonprofit Eligibility Certification

Nonprofits that meet the requirements set out in the [Nonprofit Eligibility Certification](#) form are eligible to apply for the Planning Incentive Grant program. The Nonprofit Eligibility Certification form must be signed by the nonprofit's chief executive officer or state director and its attorney, and the form and attachments must be submitted with the application.

2. GIS Data

To coordinate efficient open space planning in New Jersey, open space is identified in the Green Acres Program's GIS, which utilizes Environmental System Research Institute's (ESRI) ArcGIS Software. To conduct such a statewide effort, Green Acres requires applicants to provide, in addition to the general system map, GIS data of **existing** preserved open space sites documented in the plan's Recreation and Open Space Inventory, delineated at the block and lot level. Delineation of partial lots should be noted and shown as well.

3. Plan Adoption

As previously noted, the nonprofit's Board of Directors must adopt the OSRP. The Resolution stating the OSRP was adopted by the nonprofit's Board of Directors must be provided to Green Acres.

Prior to adoption, please submit the draft OSRP to your Green Acres Project Manager. After Green Acres approves the draft OSRP and the Board of Directors has adopted the final plan, please submit the final OSRP, adoption documentation, and all accompanying requirements mentioned in this document.

4. Updates

For Planning Incentive eligibility, the OSRP must be updated at least every **ten years**.

After **five years**, the nonprofit must check in with its members and the public regarding the OSRP goals through outreach such as a survey or a public information session that solicits feedback on open space and recreation needs. The results of the public outreach should be summarized and submitted to Green Acres with a discussion of how the feedback will be incorporated into open space and recreation planning.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND ASSISTANCE

Each nonprofit should review and consider the applicable [Landscape Project](#) maps and reports, developed by the NJDEP Fish and Wildlife, during the formulation of its open space preservation, recreation, and planning goals, and as part of its preparation of a Green Acres application and the Open Space and Recreation Plan.

Municipal and county planning boards can provide information on current fiscal, demographic, and growth management data that may not be contained in the master plan. Counties often conduct special studies that also may be useful.

As previously noted, the [Conservation Blueprint](#) is an invaluable resource during the OSRP preparation process.

The [National Recreation and Park Association](#) and the [New Jersey Recreation and Park Association](#) have information and a variety of publications of open space and recreation planning interest.

The [Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions](#) maintains a resource center which also has useful information for an OSRP.

Regional studies prepared by other nonprofit conservation organizations active in New Jersey should be part of the OSRP where appropriate, such as plans prepared by: [Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission](#), [The Land Conservancy of New Jersey](#), [New Jersey Conservation Foundation](#), and [Trust for Public Land](#).