

# **GREEN ACRES PROGRAM**

*New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection*



## **OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN GUIDELINES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

*for Participation in the Green Acres Planning Incentive Program*

*Updated 2/2025*

### ***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**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of these guidelines is to aid local governments 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. The PI category awards 50% matching grant funding to a local government to preserve lands for outdoor recreation and conservation purposes that meet the criteria identified in its OSRP.

Other advantages to a local government that participates in the PI category include:

1. An OSRP identifies the open space and recreation resources that are important to the local government and establishes a path to protecting them.
2. Open space and recreation planning is more efficient and cost effective when supported by a stable source of funding like a tax and an OSRP.
3. Once an OSRP has been approved by the Green Acres Program, a local government 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, local governments must have a Green Acres approved OSRP dated within the last ten years and be collecting an open space tax.

### **OPEN SPACE TAX REQUIREMENTS FOR QUALIFICATION**

A qualifying local government must have established and be collecting an open space tax of at least ½ cent per \$100 of assessed property value. Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 40:12-15.7d., counties and municipalities may assess a tax, approved by voter referendum, for all or any combination of the following purposes:

- (a) Acquisition of lands for recreation and conservation purposes,
- (b) Development of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes,
- (c) Maintenance of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes,
- (d) Acquisition of farmland for farmland preservation purposes,
- (e) Preservation of historic properties, including the acquisition of such properties for historic preservation purposes, or
- (f) Payment of debt service on indebtedness issued or incurred by a local government for any of the purposes stated in (a), (b), (d) or (e).

To qualify for Green Acres acquisition PI funding, the local government must, at a minimum, be collecting and expending the tax for the acquisition of land for recreation and conservation purposes.

The Garden State Preservation Trust Act extends PI eligibility to local governments that have adopted, through a governing body resolution, a Green Acres-approved alternative source of funding for acquisition. To be considered, the funding must be stable and equivalent in effect to an annual open space and recreation tax levy of at least 1 cent per \$100 of assessed value for a ten-year period. Please contact the Green Acres Program to determine if an existing or proposed alternative means meets the intent of the Garden State Preservation Act.

## **THE OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLANNING PROCESS**

### ***What is an OSRP?***

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

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

Parks 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 resiliency. Without planning, the appearance of a community, the quality of life enjoyed by residents, and the community's natural resources can be dramatically altered due to unanticipated changes in land use. Open space and recreation should be considered as part of the public infrastructure, just like roads, schools, and utilities. As with other infrastructure, a local government must plan for parks and open spaces in order to provide them for their residents.

### ***Who prepares the OSRP?***

Local governments have many options for who prepares the OSRP, including existing committees (e.g., the open space committee and/or recreation committee), a task force or citizen advisory committee created for the purpose, local government staff (e.g., members of the planning department), or a consultant.

Since the master plan sets forth land use goals and policies, including those that affect the preservation and maintenance of open space and recreation resources in a community, Green Acres requires the local unit's Planning Board to adopt their OSRP as part of their master plan.

### ***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 specific methods of public engagement, while left to the choice of the local government, should ensure that all members of the community are provided opportunities to present their views on open space and recreation.

### ***What planning resources should be consulted?***

Local governments should align their OSRP with the appropriate open space and recreation policies of the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (State Plan) and the [Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#), *Outside, Together!* These plans contain several open space and recreation policies that pertain to local governments.

Consistency with regional and special area master plans is also important, as natural resources often transcend political boundaries. Coordinating OSRP preparation with neighboring local governments and regional planning efforts can assist local governments in accomplishing OSRP goals more effectively and cost efficiently.

#### **New Jersey Conservation Blueprint**

The New Jersey 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 New Jersey Conservation Blueprint at [www.NJMAP2.com](http://www.NJMAP2.com) for more information.

## OSRP REQUIRED COMPONENTS

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Green Acres requires the following eleven 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

This section should paint a broad picture of the community, 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 local government should review the establishment and history of their local open space tax and discuss how other local, county, state, federal and nonprofit open space funding sources have been leveraged to support open space and recreation projects. For OSRP updates, the local government should also discuss its history with the Green Acres Planning Incentive Program.

### 4. Recreation and Open Space Inventory

Next, the plan should document the open spaces 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 Hearing

Applicants 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 hearing once a draft plan has been prepared.

#### Public Engagement

In this section, applicants must discuss in detail the public participation process that was used to solicit, record, and incorporate citizen 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 applicant 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. Applicants 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 Hearing

In addition to the vigorous public engagement discussed above, the local government must hold at least one public hearing, which must be noticed on its website and through its social media, and which may be virtual or in person. A discussion of this hearing 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 local government should clearly state the community's open space and recreation goals. The goals section should discuss the public purposes the local government will pursue in protecting open space resources and providing recreation opportunities. Any 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 New Jersey 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 adequacy of the community's current recreation properties to satisfy present and projected public recreational needs. The assessment should specifically include:

- A discussion of the number, geographic location, and condition of existing 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 for the community 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 the current and future recreation needs of the community.

## **9. Land Use Planning Context**

In this section, the local government 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 New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (State Plan) and the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, *Outside, Together!* Please address *Outside, Together!* Principles.
- The NJ Conservation Blueprint
- Furthering the Promise, a guidance document for advancing environmental justice
- NJ's Global Warming Response Act 80x50 Report, the Climate Change Resilience Strategies, the Scientific Report on Climate Change, and the appropriate regional action plan, all available through the Department's Climate Change website
- The DEP-approved Municipal Public Access Plan
- The NJ Department of Health and NJDEP Healthy Community Planning website and resources
- The New Jersey Comprehensive Statewide Historic Preservation Plan
- Zoning, development regulations, subdivision regulations, and the use of innovative planning techniques, such as the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR), mandatory clustering, non-contiguous clustering and lot size averaging

## **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 local government's goals and the results of the public engagement process, the community's unmet open space and recreation needs can be determined. The local government, of course, must balance these needs with fiscal reality. Thus, the Action Plan lays out how the communities' 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 local government 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 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 community's existing open space and recreational facilities and, when

possible, the proposed preservation focus areas.



## **ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS**

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

### **1. 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.

### **2. Plan Adoption**

As previously noted, the Planning Board must adopt the OSRP as an element of the local master plan. The Resolution stating the OSRP was adopted as an element of the local master plan must be provided to Green Acres.

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

### **3. Updates**

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

After **five years**, the applicant must check in with 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

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The local government's master plan will contain much of the information needed for the OSRP, such as population, income, growth projections, infrastructure and environmentally sensitive areas. Many local governments have also prepared a Natural Resource Inventory (NRI) that includes detailed information on steep slopes, soils, vegetation and water resources. These documents should provide base data for the OSRP.

Each local government 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 also 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.

There are many nonprofit conservation organizations active in New Jersey. Some of them have prepared regional studies that should be part of a local OSRP where appropriate, including: [Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission](#), [The Land Conservancy of New Jersey](#), [New Jersey Conservation Foundation](#), and [Trust for Public Land](#).