

All For One, Fun For All!

Bethlehem's Parks and Recreation
Comprehensive Master Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2015

Acknowledgements

Supervisor and Town Board

*John Clarkson, Town Supervisor
Joann Dawson, Town Board Member
Jeffrey Kuhn, Town Board Member
Bill Reinhardt, Town Board Member
Julie Sasso, Town Board Member*

Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan Project Team

*Nan Lanahan, Administrator, Parks and Recreation
Jason Gallo, Assistant Administrator, Parks and Recreation
Robert Leslie, Director, Economic Development and Planning
Brent Meredith, Highway Superintendent
John Smolinsky, Planning Board Chairman
Joan Gavrilik, President, Friends of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation
Mary Lyn Koval, Board Member, Friends of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation*

Friends of Bethlehem Park and Recreation

Board of Directors

*Joan Gavrilik, President
William Reinhardt, Vice President
Alan Lobel, Secretary
Pete deVries, Treasurer
Nan Lanahan, Administrator, Parks and Recreation
Mary Lyn Koval
Kimberleigh Phelan
Justin Ramson*

Consultant Team

*GreenPlay, LLC
Weston & Sampson*

*For more information about this document, contact GreenPlay, LLC
1021 E. South Boulder Road, Suite N, Louisville, Colorado 80027 Telephone: 303-439-8369
Toll Free: 866-849-9959 Email: info@greenplayllc.com www.greenplayllc.com*



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I. Executive Summary

Purpose of this Plan

The Town of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan is intended to help meet the needs of current and future residents by positioning Bethlehem to build on the community's unique parks and recreation assets and identify new opportunities. The citizen-driven plan establishes a clear direction to guide town staff, advisory committees, and elected officials in their efforts to enhance the community's parks and recreation services and facilities.

To create a greater awareness for the planning process and encourage citizen participation, the Project Team developed a project tag line and logo – *"All for one, fun for all!"*



Planning Process Summary

A project team, which included Town staff and representatives of the Friends of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation, has guided this project. This team provided input to the consultant team throughout the planning process. This collaborative effort creates a plan that fully utilizes the consultants' expertise and incorporates the local knowledge and institutional history that only community members can provide. The project consisted of the following tasks:

Community Engagement

- Review of previous planning efforts and Town historical information.
- Extensive community involvement effort including focus groups, meetings with key stakeholders, and a community-wide public meeting.
- Review of community survey conducted by the Friends of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation.
- Online community engagement website – MindMixer/mySidewalk.

Facility Inventory

- Inventory of parks and facilities using existing mapping, staff interviews, and on-site visits to verify amenities and assess the condition of the facilities and surrounding areas.

Level of Service Analysis

- Interviews with staff to provide information about park and recreation facilities and services, along with insight regarding the current practices and experiences of the Town in serving its residents and visitors.
- Identification of alternative providers of recreation services to provide insight regarding the market opportunities in the area for potential new facilities and services.
- Analysis addressing recreation, parks, natural resources, and related services.



Assessment and Analysis

- Review and assessment of relevant plans.
- Measurement of the current delivery of service for park and recreation facilities using the Level of Service Analysis and allowing for a target level of service to be determined that is both feasible and aligned with the desires of citizens as expressed through public input.
- Exploration of finance and funding mechanisms to support development and sustainability within the system.

Needs Assessment

- Consideration of the profile of the community and demographics, including population growth.
- Research of trends related to Bethlehem, the Capital Region, and American lifestyles to help guide the efforts of Parks and Recreation over the next several years.

Operational and Marketing Analysis

- Analysis of departmental programming and service delivery.
- Facilitation of an organizational Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis.
- Development of a broad assessment of the overall parks and recreation operations.

Recommendations: Goals, Objectives, and Action Plan

- Identification and categorization of recommendations into themes with goals, objectives, and an action plan for implementation.
- Development of an action plan for capital improvements including cost, funding source potentials, and timeframe to support the implementation of the plan.

Key Issues Summary

During the initial stages of the project, the following Key Issues were identified for focus:

Organizational:

- Provide better marketing and communication of activities and facilities.
- Increase staffing for programming and future facilities operations.
- Increase maintenance staffing to keep up with quality of service and demand.
- Review current athletic field allocation policy and update.

Programs and Service Delivery:

- Increase programming for families, seniors, and teens.
- Increase programs in wellness/fitness, cultural, and special needs.
- Increase the number of art and music events in parks.
- Develop outdoor/adventure-based/environmental program offerings.
- Increase aquatic opportunities (pool and river front).
- Explore opportunities to develop non-traditional sports programs.



Facilities and Amenities:

- Maintain and improve existing facilities.
- Renovate and update Elm Avenue Park Pool Complex.
- Develop connectivity of neighborhoods and parks.
- Meet future population demands through additional recreation facilities.
- Make needed repairs and updates to the Henry Hudson Park.
- Explore opportunities to develop mountain biking trails.
- Explore an outdoor amphitheater/special events venue.
- Explore opportunities for on leash dog access to select parks.
- Update ADA Transition Plan.
- Explore the establishment of a network of community gardens.
- Make repairs to the Fit Trail and replace outdated fitness equipment.
- Replace the playground at Elm Avenue Park.
- Consider redesign of Elm Avenue Park.
- Explore shade options in parks and at athletic fields.



Level of Service (LOS):

- Identify gaps that are in need of service-based LOS.
- Verify other service providers are not filling gaps in service.
- Develop LOS criteria for catchment areas and acreage by population.

Finance:

- Employ equitable user fees.
- Explore funding options that provide dedicated revenue for parks and recreation.
- Pursue grant opportunities.

Key Level of Service (LOS) Analysis Findings:

- There is a wide variety of well-distributed recreational opportunities, with the noted exception of the north-south corridor between Magee Park, Colonial Acres Golf Course, and Maple Ridge Park. Additional islands without nearby park resources are created due to major roadways and varying topographic and environmental resource areas, including the neighborhoods south of North Bethlehem Park.
- The park system is well supplemented by distribution of Bethlehem Central School District properties, which provide playground equipment and recreation fields/courts for basketball, tennis, baseball, etc. Recreational fields are available to Town residents outside of school hours and scheduled events.
- The majority of park properties are small (3 to 22 acres), compared to Elm Avenue Park (160 acres), Henry Hudson Park (56 acres), and Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve (55 acres).
- Overall connectivity within and between parks is limited, and the Town should focus on investment in the bicycle and pedestrian network that provides access to the Town parks. This would greatly improve park-to-park and neighborhood-to-park connections.
- Residential areas with lower level of service tend to be on the edges of the Town limits, tend to be adjacent to industrial property or farmland, and/or have a relatively low population density.



- Environmental, cultural, and historic resources exist throughout the community; however, beyond Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve, few Town Park areas are dedicated to passive recreational interests of the community. However, the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy, with several nature preserves in Town, along with the Albany County Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail, provide passive recreational opportunities.
- The Town has nearly ten miles of riverfront; however, public access is limited to a single access point at Henry Hudson Park.

Inventory Assessment Summary

- Most parks are in excellent condition; maintenance is generally great, but a few locations have aged significantly.
- Elm Avenue Park pools, playground, office building, and maintenance structures need major repairs, upgrades, or replacement.
- Turf throughout the park system is of high quality, with some attention needed to help with drainage and erosion in playing field areas and non-playing field areas.
- There is a good variety of neighborhood and regional parks throughout the Town, as well as number of alternative service providers.
- Most parks do not incorporate cultural or historical aspects of the community, beyond specialty parks.
- The dog park is heavily used and exhibits wear and tear.

Recommendations

The following Goals, Objectives, and Action Items are drawn from the public input, inventory, level of service analysis, findings feedback, and all of the information gathered during the master planning process, with a primary focus on maintaining, sustaining, and improving Town of Bethlehem parks, recreation, and greenways/trails. A complete table of Goals, Objectives, and Action Items with estimated costs and prioritization are included in the Master Plan.

Goal 1: Continue to Improve Organizational Efficiencies

Objective 1.1 – Maintain and increase a level of service quality to citizens.

The Town of Bethlehem currently does not have an established Level of Service (LOS) Standard of acres of park land per 1,000 persons. Based on the 2015 data, the Town has 326 acres of park land and a population of 34,110 that results in a 9.55 acres per 1,000 persons LOS. At a minimum, the Town should establish a LOS at 10 acres per 1,000 persons and seek to maintain that standard as the population grows. A review of the NRPA's 2015 Field Report shows that the Town of Bethlehem would rank in the top percentage for like sized communities for acres per 1,000 population. Establishing a LOS Standard should be directed through the Town's Comprehensive Plan and with community input. Additionally, the Town should adopt an LOS Standard that establishes a walkable level of service of 0.5 mile from parks, greenways, and trails. Since school districts and non-profits provide various recreational opportunities, their facilities should be included as resources to achieve the LOS Standard. As new development occurs, the Parks and Recreation Department, working in coordination with the Planning Department and Planning Board, should look for opportunities for additional land acquisitions and reservations for open space and parks.



There is a gap in service located along the north-south corridor between Magee Park, Colonial Acres Golf Course, and Maple Ridge Park. Use of the parkland reservation requirements pursuant to the Town Subdivision Regulations §103-29 and Town Zoning Law §128-57 should be considered in this location and other locations as residential development is proposed and under review by the Town Board and/or Planning Board.

Objective 1.2 – Enhance and improve internal and external communication regarding Department activities and services.

The Parks and Recreation Department should develop a Marketing Plan (including improved use of social media) that will guide its efforts in communicating and promoting its activities and facilities. This should include all the recommendations in the Master Plan for programs, services, and facility upgrades which will serve to improve awareness. The Marketing Plan should be updated every five years and include marketing strategies that incorporate the efforts of partner departments and projects.

The marketing and communication of Parks and Recreation Department activities should be enhanced with a focused effort opening lines of communication and meeting with partners and potential partners within the community.

Objective 1.3 – Provide improved signage Town-wide to make it easier for patrons to find and use parks, facilities, and trails.

The Parks and Recreation Department should evaluate directional and wayfinding signage to facilities on roadways, trails, and within parks. The Department should enhance and update existing park signs as parks are renovated. Improved wayfinding signage will contribute to a greater connectivity of parks and facilities.

Objective 1.4 – Maintain existing facilities and amenities.

There was an overwhelming public response to make sure that Parks and Recreation maintains and improves existing facilities. The Department should continue to improve and upgrade existing facilities and amenities as well as address low-scoring components through the Capital Improvements Plan (CIP). The Department should develop a Cyclical Maintenance Program to ensure consistent application of maintenance standards and cost efficiencies.

Objective 1.5 – Improve access to athletic fields.

The Department should review the current field allocation policy and update it based on demand, residency, and equitable scheduling. As part of the review, the Department should consider user groups' needs.

Objective 1.6 – Increase appropriate partnerships and collaborations within the community.

The Town of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation Department currently partners with a number of agencies to provide programs and activities to the community. The Department should continue to explore additional opportunities as well as build on its existing partnerships. Where not already in place, the Department should ensure that all existing and future partnerships are accurately portrayed in a signed partnership agreement (Sample Partnership Policy can be found in **Appendix D**).

The Parks and Recreation Department should continue to work collaboratively with other Town departments to achieve goals and objectives and, as opportunities arise, expand to include other departments as appropriate. To ensure that efficiencies are benefiting each department, continuous communications and an annual review are essential.



Objective 1.7 – Staff appropriately to meet current demand and maintain established levels of service.

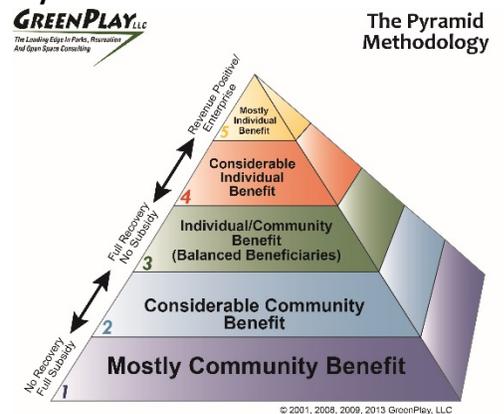
As recommendations in the Master Plan for programs, services, and facility upgrades are implemented, it is important to maintain staffing levels to uphold current performance standards. This will require the addition of new positions both in parks and recreation.

Parks and grounds maintenance was transferred to the Highway Department in 2012. To ensure that this structure is achieving the efficiencies and meeting citizen expectation of parks maintenance levels, it is very important to monitor and track work orders and general maintenance to make certain that a drop in service does not occur. This structure should be evaluated annually with the budget process to ensure that maximum efficiencies and outstanding customer service are being achieved.

Goal 2: Increase Financial Opportunities

Objective 2.1 – Consider implementing a cost recovery and pricing policy.

There is a consensus among focus group participants and survey respondents to implement and employ equitable user fees for Parks and Recreation activities based on a value received by the participant for the services with a personal benefit. Parks and Recreation should consider implementing a Cost Recovery Policy such as the Pyramid Pricing Methodology (**Appendix B**) to determine a consistent method of pricing parks and recreation activities throughout the Department. As part of the policy, the Bethlehem Parks and Recreation Department should continue to support the existing Scholarship Program.



Objective 2.2 – Pursue grant and philanthropic opportunities.

The Department currently takes advantage of grant opportunities available for programming and facility improvements. The Parks and Recreation Department should continue to pursue any and all grant opportunities at the federal, state, regional, and local levels. To accomplish this, the Department may consider contracting with a dedicated grant writer to research, submit, and track such grants.

Objective 2.3 – Pursue opportunities for a dedicated revenue source for parks and recreation.

The community appears willing to explore the feasibility of a dedicated revenue source to pay for the improvements that come out of this Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan. A campaign for an increased community investment may be a successful way of implementing the long-term recommendations in the Master Plan. These funding opportunities may include a bond referendum. It may also include an increase to the “in-lieu-of” parkland fees associated with new residential development (see Subdivision Regulations §103-29 and Town Zoning Law §128-57). The current in-lieu-of parkland fee was established in 2001. The current rate of \$1,550 for a single-family dwelling, and rates for other types of residential units, should be reviewed and adjusted, if necessary.



Goal 3: Continue to Improve Programs and Service Delivery

Objective 3.1 – Explore opportunities to increase recreational activities based on demand and trends.

The community would like to see additional programs for families, teens, and seniors. As new programs are developed and delivered, fitness/wellness, cultural, and special needs programs are in high demand. In order to ensure that service delivery reflects the diversity of the community, the Department should engage the community in program development. To effectively achieve this objective, the Department should look to partner with other service providers in the community.

Objective 3.2 – Explore opportunities to increase the number of events based on demand and trends.

The Department should continue to look for opportunities to expand the number of music and art events offered annually.

Objective 3.3 – Explore offering more non-athletic and non-traditional programs.

Based on demand and current trends in the industry, the Department should explore opportunities to develop and expand programs that are outdoor/nature-based/environmentally focused. There are also opportunities to develop or expand on non-traditional sports programs such as disc golf, Pickleball, or Ultimate Frisbee.

Objective 3.4 – Explore increasing aquatic opportunities.

As part of the program review process, the Department should continue to monitor participation and demand for aquatic programs and adjust to meet the needs. It should also review the current schedule to maximize usage and meet demand at the Elm Avenue Park Pool Complex.

Goal 4: Continue to Improve Facilities and Amenities

Objective 4.1 – Maintain and improve existing facilities and amenities.

There was an overwhelming public response to make sure that Parks and Recreation maintains and improves existing facilities. The Department should continue to improve and upgrade existing facilities and amenities through the Capital Improvements Plan (CIP), Master Plan, and the Cyclical Maintenance Programs as recommended in the Master Plan.

Objective 4.2 – Expand greenways and trails connectivity.

Working with the Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee, the Department should continue to develop shared-use paths and/or sidewalks/greenways to connect neighborhoods to parks. As new and existing greenways and shared-use paths are designed and renovated, the Department should consider adding fitness stations and family fun stations in appropriate locations. As Elm Avenue Park is redesigned or upgraded, consider opportunities to install a perimeter shared-use path and return the existing Fit Trail to a predominantly natural surface trail. As popularity grows and demand increases, the Department should explore opportunities to develop and add mountain biking trails in existing or future parks or public lands.



Objective 4.3 – Meet current and future population demands through new land acquisition and redesign of current facilities.

The Department is in need of programming space as well as administrative space. The opportunity is available to build a new community center at Elm Avenue Park to replace the current office building and provide much-needed space. Based on recommendations from the Master Plan and increased demand, the Department should explore opportunities for appropriate future facility expansion and redesign that include an outdoor amphitheater/special event venue and additional picnic shelters, as well acquisition of additional land for parks. Evaluation of the community center should consider collaborative uses by other Town departments and affiliates that would maximize the use of and funding opportunities for a center such as the Bethlehem Seniors and Bethlehem Historic Association. A top priority along the Hudson River waterfront should be to make repairs to the Henry Hudson Park that were identified in the Shoreline Stabilization Study.

Objective 4.4 – Develop additional aquatic opportunities.

The Parks and Recreation Department should make the needed renovations and updates to the Elm Avenue Park Pool Complex to address low-scoring components. Priority should be given to the locker rooms and building, incorporating family changing rooms and making repairs to the marcite. In addition to the pool complex, the Department should explore opportunities to create additional river access and programming at Henry Hudson Park.

Objective 4.5 – Develop new amenities at existing parks based on level of service analysis.

Demand for usage of Bethlehem parks, shelters, and athletic facilities continues to grow, and the Department should look for opportunities to add new amenities to enhance the experience for users. A top priority must be the replacement of the outdated wooden playground at Elm Avenue Park with an industry standard playground. Some enhancements identified through the public process are establishing a network of community gardens, providing shade to parks and facilities either with tree planting or shade structures, and developing a shared-use path network at Elm Avenue Park. Also, as the popularity of the dog park grows, the Department should explore both the opportunity to provide separate spaces for large and small dogs, as well as opportunities for on-leash access in identified parks.

Objective 4.6 – Develop individual park master plans.

Based on the Facilities Inventory and Level of Service recommendations in the Master Plan, develop individual park master plans to address low scoring components and repurpose spaces for better usage.

Objective 4.7 – Continue to improve ADA accessibility at all facilities.

According to the ADA.gov website, “Access to civic life by people with disabilities is a fundamental goal of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). To ensure that this goal is met, Title II of the ADA requires State and local governments to make their programs and services accessible to persons with disabilities... One important way to ensure that Title II's requirements are being met in cities of all sizes is through self-evaluation, which is required by the ADA regulations. Self-evaluation enables local governments to pinpoint the facilities, programs, and services that must be modified or relocated to ensure that local governments are complying with the ADA.”

Parks and Recreation currently does not have an ADA Transition Plan that identifies needed changes during a self-evaluation process. The Department needs to conduct a self-evaluation and develop a comprehensive transition plan. Once the ADA Transition Plan is developed and adopted, it should be updated at least every five years.

