

Executive Summary



Preservation and Recreation Needs Assessment and Action Plan

Franklin Township,
Somerset County, New Jersey
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Brandstetter Carroll Inc.
ARCHITECTS ENGINEERS PLANNERS



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Executive Summary

Trust Fund Background

In 1998, the voters of Franklin Township approved a referendum which established the Open Space, Recreation and Farm Land and Historic Preservation Trust Fund. The Trust Fund may be used for the following: (Pursuant to NJ Law NJSA:40:12-15.7.A(1)):

- Acquisition of lands for recreation and conservation purposes;
- Development of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes;
- Maintenance of lands acquired for recreation and conservation purposes;
- Historic preservation of historic properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects, and the acquisition of such properties, structures, facilities, sites, areas, or objects for historic preservation purposes; or
- Payment of debt service on indebtedness issued or incurred by a municipality for any of the purposes set forth.

To date, the Fund has been primarily used for open space acquisition, farm land preservation, and on a limited basis for historic preservation. Recently, the Township Council has approved expenditures from the Trust Fund for recreation development of Middlebush Park and the Little League Complex. This change in the use of the funds has sparked debate on the future of the Trust Fund among proponents for use of the fund for the various allowed uses. For example, the development of Middlebush Park has been discussed for over a decade.

Project Purpose

The discussions pertaining to the use of the Trust Fund caused Township Council to need two informational pieces to be used in their decision making process. First is a Recreation Needs Assessment that would be accomplished

in a statistically valid and comprehensive manner to identify the true recreation needs of the Township. The second item is an evaluation of the amount of funds needed for the various competing uses of the Trust Fund along with strategies for the use of the Fund to meet those needs.

The Existing Parks and Recreation Landscape in Franklin Township

The residents of Franklin Township, New Jersey are offered a wide variety of parks, recreation facilities, and programs. The community's needs are currently being met by community parks offered by the Township, County, school facilities, State Parks, and other facilities within the County. The Township owns 54 sites totaling 2,283.88 acres. Of this total, approximately 108.88 acres at 19 sites are "developed", meaning it is used for active or passive recreation.

The Somerset County Park Commission has 1,003 acres of park land within Franklin Township with 730 acres being developed. Of the 730 acres, 525 acres are golf courses. These parks include Colonial Park, Quail Brook Golf Course and Park, Spooky Brook Golf Course, and undeveloped land at the Speiden and Hoebel Farm sites.

The Franklin Township School Board owns 345 acres of which 42 acres are developed as active recreation that is available to the public or used for recreation leagues. These facilities are at ten sites

The State of New Jersey owns 4,114.4 acres at five sites of which 50 acres are used for active or passive recreation. The largest of these is the Six Mile Run Reservoir Site with 3307 acres. The main developed facility is the D&R Canal Trail.

Privately owned recreation facilities in the Township total 137.78 acres at 45 sites with 72 acres being developed. Most of these sites are small homeowner association or apartment sites with the main facilities including tennis courts, swimming pools, and playgrounds. Some privately owned recreation facilities include the Cedar Hill Swim Club, Jersey Knights Soccer Complex, Pillar of Fire/Nike Soccer Complex, Soccer Center, Protec Hockey Ponds indoor ice facility, and two private schools at Cedar Hill Prep and Rutgers Prep. Although these facilities are not available to the general public, they do meet some of the demand for facilities. The homeowner and apartment facilities provide close-to-home mini-park or neighborhood park facilities and the larger private athletic facilities provide fields for higher competition level athletic leagues.

The Need for a Plan

The population of Franklin Township has increased considerably over the last two decades from 42,780 residents in 1990 to 50,903 in 2000 to 62,300 in 2010. Although the amount of Township-owned open space has increased, the amount of park and recreation space has increased minimally. In addition, the athletic leagues participation numbers are increasing but the amount of fields available for games and practices have not increased. This results in the overuse of existing fields leading to unacceptable field conditions.

The Township has taken some stock in its open space and recreation needs by preparing the: Open Space and Recreation Plan in 2000, Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan in 2007, Canal Access Vision and Strategic Plan in 2009, 2006 Township Master Plan, Pathways and Trails Plan in 2008, Southern Park Survey Report in 2009, other studies, and a review of benchmarking of New Jersey communities prepared for Middletown Township by Brandstetter Carroll Inc. in 2008. This benchmarking indicated that Franklin Township budgeted much less per capita than the average of other communities, provided considerably less acres of developed park land, and provided

less fields for the population. Summaries of previous documents are included in Appendix A.

Another factor to consider is the distribution of the Township's population. While much of the land area is rural, pockets in the northeast (Wards 4 and 5) and in the Franklin Park area are very dense. The distribution of recreation facilities needed to be evaluated to identify the gaps in where facilities are located.

All of these factors and the desire to improve the quality of life for present and future residents of Franklin Township caused the Township Council to realize the need for a comprehensive process to identify the true needs of the community so that Franklin Township can be in a position to meet those needs in the future.

The first phase of the planning process was to identify the community needs through an extensive public input process, comparison to other communities, and identification of regional and national trends in parks and recreation services. The process continued with an approach of identifying specific strategies to provide for the needs of as many residents as possible in the most efficient manner.

A Citizen Driven Plan

A concerted effort was made throughout the development of this Plan to elicit input from the public and from the various committees and commissions that serve the Township. The following methods were employed to generate public input and involvement of the public and various groups:

- **Development of Scope and RFP for the Plan** - After an initial draft scope (outline) for the Plan was developed by the Steering Committee, the draft scope (outline) was distributed to various Township committees including the Planning Board, Recreation Advisory Council, Open Space Advisory Committee, Trails Advisory Committee, Agricultural Advisory Committee and Historic Preservation Commission. These groups reviewed the draft scope during their open public meetings and offered various

suggested changes which were incorporated into the Request for Proposal (RFP) issued by the Township.

- **Stakeholder Meetings** - The consultant team met with several organizations and staff members included the following:

Athletic Organizations & Interests

- Adult Softball Group
- Hershey Track and Field
- Franklin Little League
- Somerset South Boundbrook Little League
- Franklin Township Soccer
- Franklin Township Pop Warner
- FTWC (Franklin Township Wrestling Club)

Township Boards and Commissions

- Land Use and Open Space Committee
- Planning Board
- Recreation Advisory Committee
- Trails Advisory Committee
- Environmental Commission
- Agriculture Committee
- Open Space Advisory Committee
- Historic Preservation Advisory Committee

Community Organizations

- School Board Members
- Kingston Village Advisory Committee
- Chamber of Commerce at the Marconi Foundation
- Meadows Foundation
- Redevelopment Agency
- Hamilton Street Business District

User Group Interviews

- Senior Citizens Group
- Special Needs
- Parents of Children with Disabilities
- Therapeutic Recreation

Elected Official Interviews

- Council Persons

Staff Interviews

- Senior Citizen Coordinator
- Superintendent of Recreation
- Parks and Recreation Foreman from the Public Works

- Summaries of these meetings are provided in Appendix C.

- **Public Meeting #1** - An initial public workshop was held on April 14, 2011 at the Senior/Community Center at the beginning of the planning process. The public workshop involved a facilitated discussion intended to help establish priorities for the future development of parks and recreation facilities, programs and services, and the preservation of open space, farmland and historic resources within the community and to help guide the priorities for the use of the Township's "Open Space, Recreation and Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust Fund". A complete summary of the public workshop is included in Appendix C.

- **Mail/ Phone Survey** - Community Attitude and Interest Survey - Franklin Township conducted a Community Attitude and Interest Survey during the spring of 2011. The survey was designed to obtain statistically valid results from households throughout Franklin Township. The survey was administered by a combination of mail and phone. Leisure Vision Inc. worked with the Steering Committee, as well as members of the consultant team in the development of the survey questionnaire. A draft of the survey questionnaire was also sent to the Township Planning Board and Open Space Advisory Committee which offered various suggested changes which were incorporated into the final survey. This work allowed the survey to be tailored to issues of strategic importance to effectively plan the future system. Leisure Vision mailed surveys to a random sample of 3,000 households in Franklin Township. Approximately three days after the surveys were mailed, each household that received a survey, also received an electronic voice message encouraging them to complete the survey. In addition, about two weeks after the surveys

were mailed, Leisure Vision began contacting households by phone. Those who indicated they had not returned the survey were given the option of completing it by phone. The goal was to obtain a total of at least 600 completed surveys. This goal was accomplished, with a total of 604 surveys having been completed. The results of the random sample of 604 households have a 95% level of confidence with a precision of at least +/- 4.0%. Therefore, the statistically valid survey with 95% level of confidence is highly representative of the views of Franklin Township residents. The survey document is included in Appendix D.

- **Web Survey** - In addition to mail and mail/phone survey, the Consultants prepared a shorter web based survey using Survey Monkey. A total of 750 residents completed these forms. A summary of the web survey is included in Appendix E.
- **Public Meeting #2** - A second public meeting was held on September 19th 2011 in the Council Chambers. At the meeting, the Township's consultants presented the results of input received at the various workshops, meetings and surveys and facilitated a public discussion of these results.
- **Review of Draft Recommendations** by Open Space Advisory Committee and Planning Board - The consultant presented the preliminary recommendations of the Plan to the Open Space Advisory Committee and Planning Board at their respective public meetings in December 2011. The discussions of the preliminary recommendations resulted in several changes in preliminary recommendations in the Plan.
- **Joint Meeting of Steering Committee/ Open Space Advisory Committee/ Recreation Advisory Council** - The members of the Open Space Advisory Committee and Recreation Advisory Council were provided the draft of the "Preservation/Recreation Needs Assessment and Action Plan" and were invited to

attend a meeting with the Steering Committee on January 31, 2012 to voice comments, concerns, questions or suggestions they may have regarding the Plan. The comments received from members of the Open Space Advisory Committee and Recreation Advisory Council resulted in various revisions to the draft plan.

- **Public Meeting #3** - A third public meeting was held on March 6, 2012. At that meeting the Consultants presented the recommendations contained in the "Preservation/Recreation Needs Assessment and Action Plan" and facilitated a public discussion of the Plan.

What Franklin Township Residents Told Us

Through the many opportunities for community input, the citizens' needs were determined. The following is a brief summary of the findings and needs as communicated in the various methods:

1. Colonial Park, D&R Canal State Park, Inman Park, Middlebush Park and schools, are the parks and recreational facilities that are visited by the most households in the random sample survey
2. 79% of persons responding to the mail/phone survey and 94% of those responding to the web survey visited a park at least once in the past year which is much higher than the national benchmark of 72%.
3. Approximately 87% of the households that use parks rated the existing facilities as "Excellent" or "Good".
4. Approximately 31% of respondent households in the mail survey and 75% in the web survey have participated in programs offered by the Township in the past year. (Higher than the national benchmark of 30%)

5. According to the random sample survey results, the facilities with the highest unmet demand include:

- Indoor swimming pools/water parks
- Outdoor swimming pools/aquatic centers
- Paved bike trails
- Recreation/Community Center
- Outdoor stage or amphitheater
- Walking and hiking trails
- Picnic areas and shelters
- Natural areas and nature parks
- Rental facilities for banquets and receptions
- Small Neighborhood Parks

6. Programs indicated in the random sample mail/phone survey with the highest unmet needs include:

- Adult wellness and fitness
- Nature programs
- Water fitness
- Adult Sports
- Adult art, dance performing arts
- Adult day trips
- Youth learn-to-swim programs
- Martial arts programs
- Special events
- Youth fitness and wellness
- Youth sports programs

7. The top functions that residents felt the Township should provide include:

- Operating and maintaining parks and facilities
- Providing programs for all residents
- Preserve the environment and provide open/green space
- Provide spaces for outdoor sports programs

8. There is a large shortage of active recreation facilities, especially athletic fields, throughout Franklin Township and gaps in the locations of parks and facilities.

9. There is a strong desire to maintain and upgrade the park and recreation system.

10. There is a strong demand indicated in all methods of public input for a recreation/community center and integrated trails throughout the community.

11. The addition of restrooms in the parks was by far the most indicated improvement to existing parks that residents desired.

12. Residents generally support the use of the Trust Fund for improving existing parks, new park development, and trail development as higher priorities compared to the historic uses of the Fund for open space acquisition, farm land preservation and historic preservation.

Future Vision of Parks and Recreation in Franklin Township

Current Township Mission Statement

The Township of Franklin shall, through the democratic process, evaluate the needs of the public and shall provide quality, cost effective services to the community.

Current Township Vision Statement

Residents of the Township of Franklin will live and thrive in a community that values community pride and spirit, celebrates diversity and creates an environment that provides opportunities for all people so that they develop as healthy, caring, positive, educated and responsible members of the community.

Current Recreation Department Mission Statement

The mission of the Department of Recreation, Community Celebrations & Park Administration is to improve the quality of life in the community by providing a wide range of services to meet the recreational needs of the public, and by providing and preserving open space and parkland for all to enjoy.

Vision for the Future

The Steering Committee and Township leaders envision a parks and recreation system that accomplishes the following goals:

2. **Balance:**

- Provides an appropriate mix of active recreation, passive recreation, and natural environments that are equitably distributed throughout Franklin Township;
- Fosters an appreciation of nature and illustrates respect for the natural environment and promotes sustainable natural resource management practices;
- Preserves the past while planning for the future;

3. **Equal Access:** Provides facilities that are equitably distributed, accessible to persons of all abilities, and for persons with a variety of interests;

4. **Quality Experiences:**

- Provides parks and facilities that are safe, attractive, well used, and well maintained;
- Provides facilities and program that are unique and are attractive to both existing and potential residents;
- Offers unique and scenic park and recreation opportunities;
- Provides quality athletic fields for children and adults to participate in healthy sports programs. The fields are developed in complexes for efficient maintenance, management and supervision. The complexes serve the needs of local leagues and host tournaments to generate income;
- Provides an outdoor family aquatic center designed with the whole family in mind. Provides aquatic programs such as aerobics, learn-to-swim, life saving, etc.
- Partners with another organization to provide an indoor recreation and community center to supplement the programs offered at the Senior/Community Center. Provides opportunities for fitness, wellness,

education, and athletics. Ideally it would include indoor aquatics.

5. **Connectivity:**

- Is connected with a series of safe pathways and bikeways to provide access to neighborhoods, parks, schools and other destinations for transportation purposes and for recreation. Current and future modes of transportation are considered;

6. **Programming Opportunities:**

- Engages families and all citizens to participate in healthy indoor and outdoor activities;
- Provides a recreation/community center that offers facilities for fun, fitness, wellness, and a variety of programs for residents of all ages. The center is a community gathering place for families and residents of all ages;
- Includes parks and programs that are well publicized and recognized by the residents;

7. **Fosters Cooperation:**

- Includes a partnership of Franklin Township (including several boards and commissions), Franklin Township Schools, athletic organizations, neighborhoods, developers, volunteers, and various organizations to acquire, develop, operate and manage the parks, trails, and facilities;
- Complements the activities, facilities and programs offered by other organizations and businesses serving the community;
- Is supported by an active group of community leaders and volunteers that promotes implementation of the Plan over the long term.

8. **Improves Franklin Township:**

- Significantly adds to the unique identity of Franklin Township as an

outstanding place to live, work and play;

- Creates a unique identity for Franklin Township;
- Increases property values;
- Increases the aesthetic beauty and sense of pride in Franklin Township;

9. **Fiscally Sound:**

- Is funded in an efficient and responsible manner while providing the level of service and maintenance necessary for a high quality system;
- Franklin Township utilizes every opportunity to leverage funding from outside sources such as grants, philanthropy, partnerships, and volunteerism;
- Provides events and programs that generate revenues to support the operations costs;
- Establishes policies or target guidelines for equitable distribution of the Trust Fund among the various potential uses based upon the findings of the Plan.

Action Plan

The public opinion has clearly shifted since the creation of the Trust Fund. The Township, along with the County, State and Federal Governments have been successful in preserving 34% of the township land mass as open space. The Open Space Committee is shifting their recommendations from outright acquisition to purchase of development rights for farm land preservation. The Plan recommends the following expenditures of funds from the Trust Fund in the time frames listed below for consideration by Township Council.

1. **Short Term – Immediate needs (0-2 years)**

- Increased maintenance staff for existing parks

- Short term improvements to existing parks as outlined in the Qualitative Park Inventory
- Two open space acquisitions of targeted open space land
- Historic preservation immediate needs to prevent further deterioration of properties.
- Continue Farm Land Preservation Plan
- Higher percentage dedicated for new park facilities development
- Develop the high priority new park improvements by:
 - Completing the next phase of Middlebush Park to serve the north half of the Township
 - Develop the Franklin Park Natural Area (Catalpa) in the South.
 - Develop small parks on current Township owned park land in Wards 4 and 5 at Willow Road, Arlington Park, Norris Road Park, and Hawthorne Park
 - Developer to complete Summerfield Park
 - Planning for the North-South Connector Trail
- Reach out to potential partners (such as the YMCA) for the development of an indoor recreation and fitness center with an indoor pool. Continue this action item through other time frames until a partner is found.
- Acquire land or easements for the Marconi Site Canal Bridge Access with historic markers.
- Dunn-Gunther Park – Start the diversion application process if this site is to be developed for active recreation.

3. Mid-Short Term (3-5 years)

- Complete high priority, and start medium priority improvements to existing parks
- Continue increased maintenance staff
- New Park Development
 - Complete Middlebush Park
 - New facilities development at one or two sites in the central part of the Township requiring approximately 110 to 120 total acres of developed area. Ideally the park site(s) would also include an equal amount of passive/natural area to provide a balance and provide opportunities for nature education.
 - Outdoor Family Aquatic Center
 - Amphitheater
 - Large all-access playground
 - Four-field baseball-softball complex
 - Three picnic shelters for 50-75 people each
 - Six soccer/rectangular multi-purpose fields
 - Community Center Gymnasium and Fitness Addition
- Upgrade the Middle School Athletic Field complex in cooperation with the School Board.
- Increase maintenance staff to coincide with the new park development.
- Complete higher priority historic preservation improvements
- Continue Farm Land Preservation Plan

4. Medium Term (6-10 years)

- Complete lower priority improvements to existing parks

- Continue increased maintenance staff
- New Park and Facility Development
 - Purchase additional land and develop small parks in Wards 4 and 5
 - Develop a Community Park with athletic complex in the south-central part of the Township. The park should include:
 - Approximately 65 to 75 acres of developed area.
 - Four-field youth baseball and softball complex with one field large enough for adult and senior softball.
 - 4-7 soccer/rectangular multi-purpose fields.
 - Large baseball field for adults and 16 year old and over players.
 - Playground
 - Picnic shelters
 - Basketball Courts
 - Walking trails
 - Other support facilities.
 - Develop the Hamilton Street Business District Park
 - Form a partnership for the development of the Fitness and Recreation Center if not yet established.
- Continue farm land preservation process of targeted farms
- Continue progress on historic preservation priorities
- Completion of the North-South Connector Bike Trail

5. Long Term (11-20 years)

- Acquisition of land and development of a future Community Park in growth areas of the Township
- Complete additional small parks in Wards 4 and 5

- Develop an indoor swimming facility if a partnership is not formed for the Fitness and Recreation Center with an indoor swimming pool.
- Complete farm land purchase of development rights
- Complete lower priority improvements for historic preservation

Where to Get More Information

The Preservation and Recreation Needs Assessment and Action Plan includes a great deal of additional detail including the following topics:

- Population and land use trends
- Summaries of previous studies
- Existing budget
- Inventory and assessment of existing parks and facilities

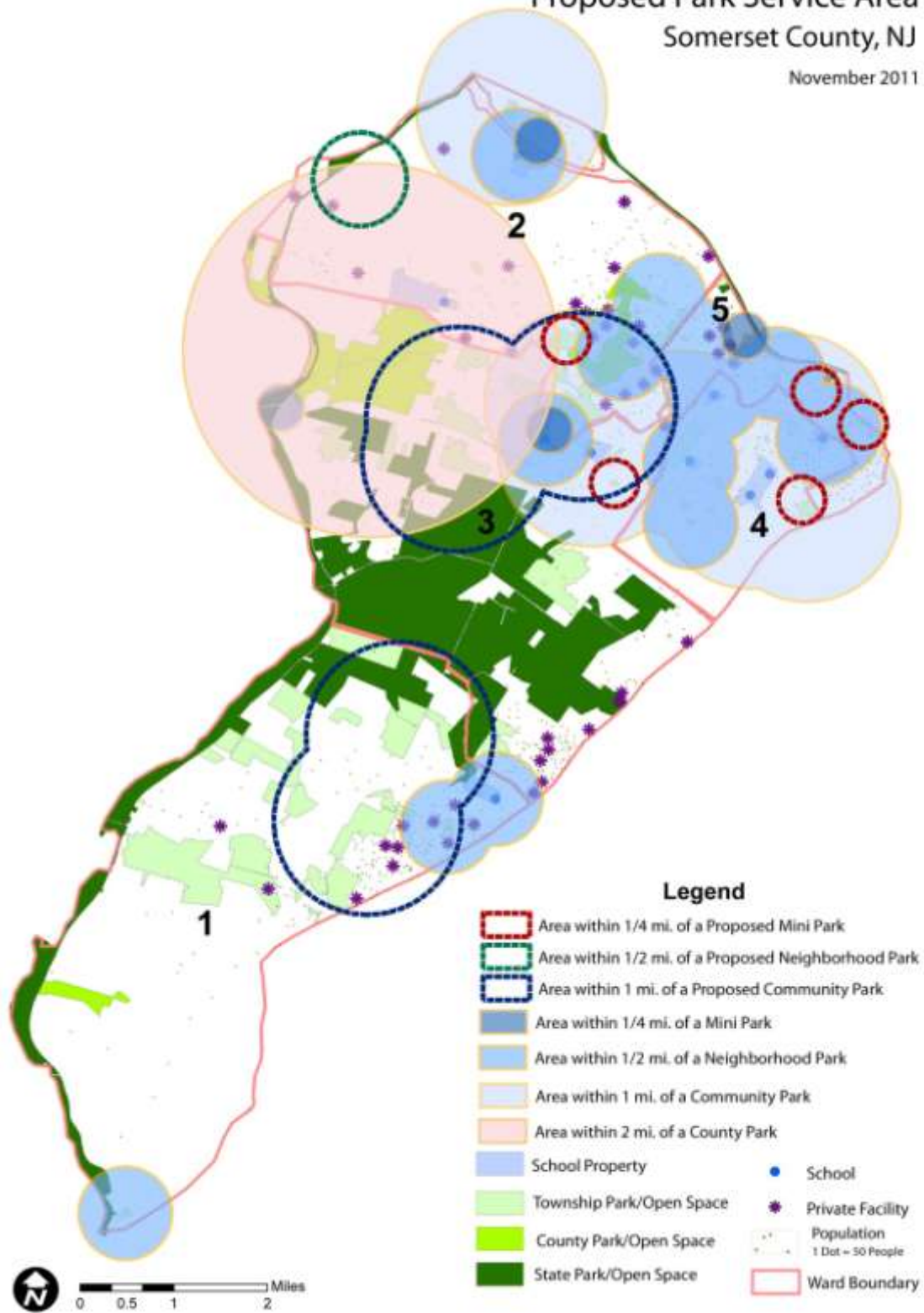
- Summary of public workshops and stakeholder group discussions
- Discussion of survey results
- Parks, recreation facilities, and open space needs
- Individual park recommendations and budgets
- Priorities for the proposed improvements
- Recommendations for the use of the Trust Fund over a 20 year period
- Implementation strategies in a time-line

This information is intended to provide the direction needed by the Township Council in key decisions pertaining to park and recreation facility development and use of the Trust Fund. The final Plan is available for viewing at the Franklin Township Planning Department.

Franklin Township Proposed Park Service Area

Somerset County, NJ

November 2011



RBA Brandstetter Carroll Inc.