Reimagining (Sub-) Urban Parks

The Challenges of Negotiating Conflicting Interests in a Park System Master Planning Process

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Abstract

The demand for green spaces in highly urbanised, metropolitan cities is well documented. However, adjacent to, or surrounding these densely populated urban centres are extensive areas of newer suburbs, where land use and public space demands differ from those found in large urban cities. Depending on the age of a suburb, and its associated societal changes, the demands made upon suburban green space are changing. However, little research has focused on ageing suburban park systems, which today may be managed by multiple administrative entities. Developing a master plan for the seventy-year-old network of Bergen County parks, located in north-eastern New Jersey approximately 30 km outside of New York City, is a case study that illustrates this environmental planning challenge. Competing user interests can be traced to conflicting demands and expectations for open space amenities, highlighting the difficulty of providing an equal voice to all park user populations. A primary goal of this user-driven public process was to foster mutual respect and understanding between relevant groups, creating the possibility that these groups will become stewards of the county park system over the long term under subsequently elected administrations. Having these public champions will be critical to successfully implementing and sustaining the proposed parks master plan concept. The following discussion describes a community engagement process which surfaced and negotiated user conflicts linked to New Jersey's specific administrative and political environment.

Keywords

suburban parks, park politics, participatory planning, community outreach, environmental planning, park use

FIGURE 1 Diverse users, high demand for open space.

Bergen County Political Context

Challenges for environmental master planning include the characteristics of administrative systems and local politics in the United States, more specifically in New Jersey. The state's population was formed by numerous immigration waves that created a highly diverse population (Fig. 1), which self-segregates along economic and ethnic lines in 565 independent municipalities. These municipalities are responsible for schools, local police, fire departments, and state mandated social services. Municipal governments generate funding for these responsibilities through local property taxes. Because New Jersey has the highest property tax rates in the US, residents are highly sceptical of demands to increase government spending (Salmore, 2013, p. 301).

New Jersey is a Home Rule state, meaning that each of the 70 Bergen County municipalities have legal authority to make land use planning decisions for their community, which creates challenges for a county-wide master planning effort (Hoefer, 2013, p. 80). This political situation demands a sensitive and multi-layered community outreach approach to coordinate county-wide planning and develop public trust in the process.

The state also has relatively short terms of elected office, ranging from two to four years. This means that political control of local government can potentially change every two years, sometimes leading to turnover of elected officials and changing alliances between the county and various municipalities and/or interest groups, thus interrupting successful collaborative efforts. The short election cycles can pose an additional level of complexity because there is about an eighteen-month window after November elections before some elected officials are again caught up in the politics of the campaign trail.

Suburban Bergen County Residents

Bergen County is in the north-eastern corner of New Jersey, U.S.A. The county is directly connected to the Manhattan Borough of New York City via the George Washington Bridge, which crosses the Hudson River, as well as several commuter rail lines whose terminus is mid-town Manhattan. The County historically served as a 'bedroom community' for New York, but today contains a number of office parks, national business outlets, and many local businesses (Hughes & Seneca, 2015, p. 89). With almost one million residents living in approximately 640 km^2, Bergen County is the most populous county in New Jersey, which is the most densely populated state in the U.S.

Various open space properties within the county, totalling approximately 76 km^2, are managed by multiple government agencies, including municipal, county, state, and federal, each with different land-use priorities and rules. However, for county residents, it is of minor importance which public entity is responsible for a specific open space. The total open space available to residents in each Bergen County municipality was compared to Trust for Public Land's (TPL) 'Parkland per 1,000 Residents by City' from the 2016 City Park Facts Report (TPL, 2016). Determination of whether a municipality is underserved or adequately served is based on municipal density compared to all available public space acreage within the municipality (Fig. 2).

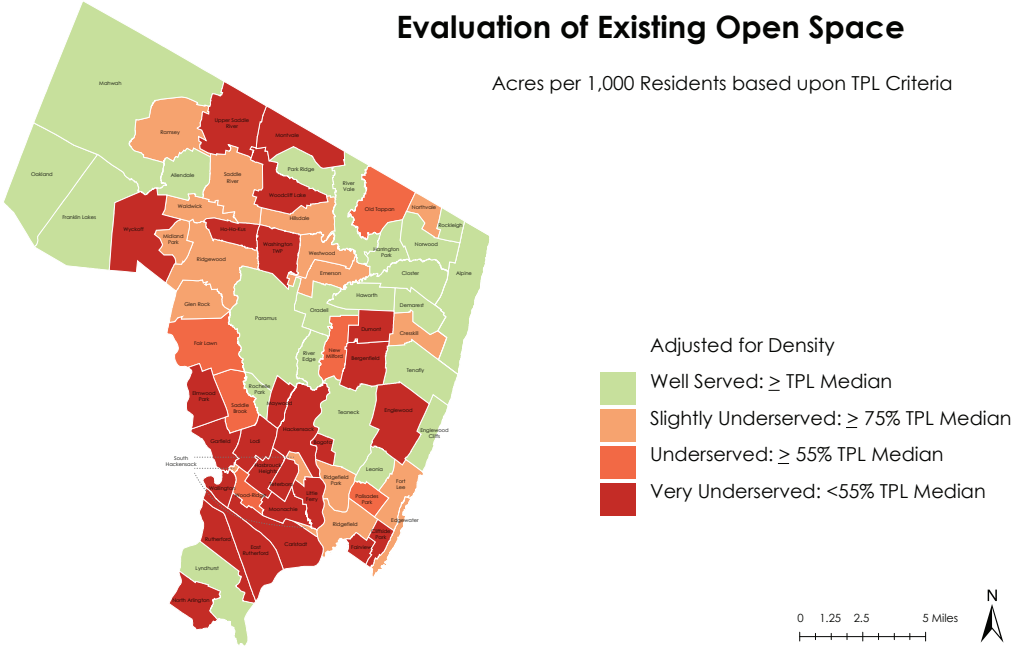

FIGURE 2 Evaluation of existing open space per 1,000 residents based upon Trust for Public Land criteria.

There are currently 20 Bergen County municipalities (out of a total of 70) that have an adequate amount of publicly available open space from a combination of all landowners. There are currently 50 municipalities that are slightly underserved (75% or more of the TPL median) to very underserved (less than 55% of the TPL median). Because of the county's solid economic base, the convenient commute to New York, and continuing high density development, further population growth is projected, which will increase user pressures on public open spaces. The Bergen County Parks Department was very aware of that challenge and selected the Rutgers Center for Urban Environmental Sustainability (CUES) to lead the overall environmental planning effort. Over the past 10 years, CUES developed a strong record of accomplishment in conducting active community engagement projects that integrate a collaborative research and design process[1]. As an academic institution, CUES was further viewed as a neutral entity that could lead a participatory master planning process without conflicting or vested interests in the outcome.

A main component of developing a master plan for the thirty-six county-owned parks, which encompass approximately 3,700 hectares, was to understand both the current physical conditions and park user behaviours. The physical inventory included ground-truthing available GIS data and mapping all existing park amenities, documenting traces of user activities such as desire paths, and the condition of all sports fields. A digital inventory was also completed for each of the seventy county municipalities, which included all public open space properties regardless of ownership in order to determine the total county-wide open space availability. Park user intercept surveys (950 respondents) and an online user survey (2245 respondents) provided data on user motivations (Fig. 3). In an initial round of eight public meetings, inventory findings were presented and public input for the master planning process was solicited. A second round of meetings shared developed visions and concepts with the public prior to plan finalisation. Meeting locations were strategically chosen to reflect the social, economic, and geographic diversity of Bergen County (Fig. 4).

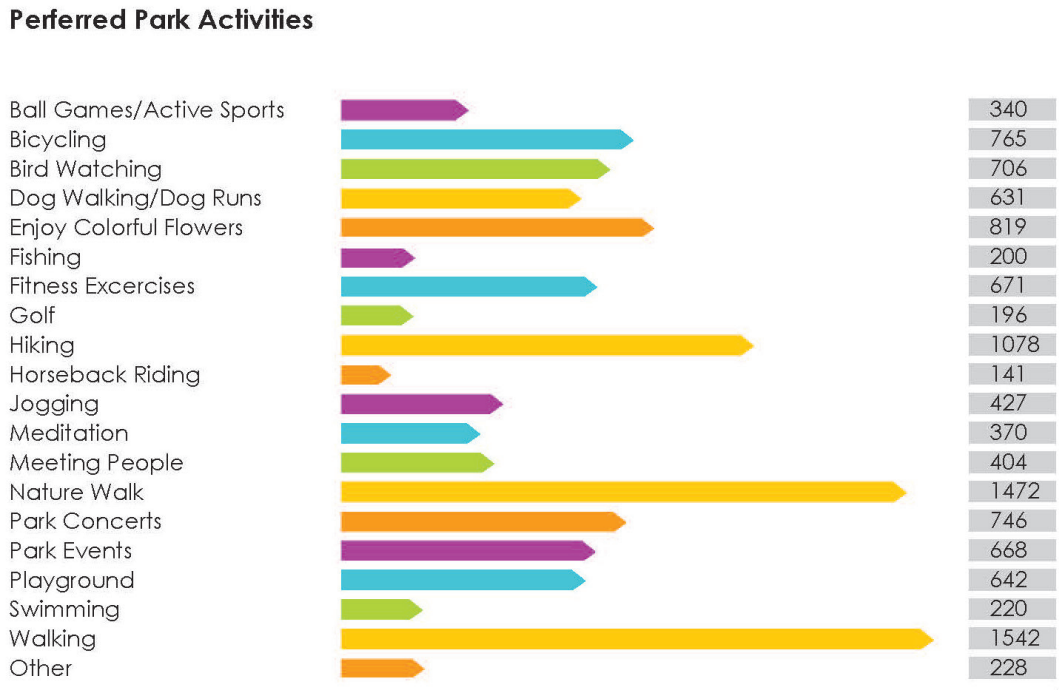

FIGURE 3 User Motivation.

1 The mission of the Center for Urban Environmental Sustainability (CUES) is to make environmental planning, research, and public outreach available through Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey out into the (sub-)urban communities of New Jersey.

These meetings, comments, and survey outcomes brought to the surface diverging views on the role played by public green spaces in the lives of suburban residents, who viewed parklands through two distinct lenses. For some users, parks were passive places for viewing nature, walking, and hiking; in other words, escaping their (sub-)urban environment. For others, parks were places for active recreation or social engagements; in other words, interacting with their (sub-)urban environment and other residents.

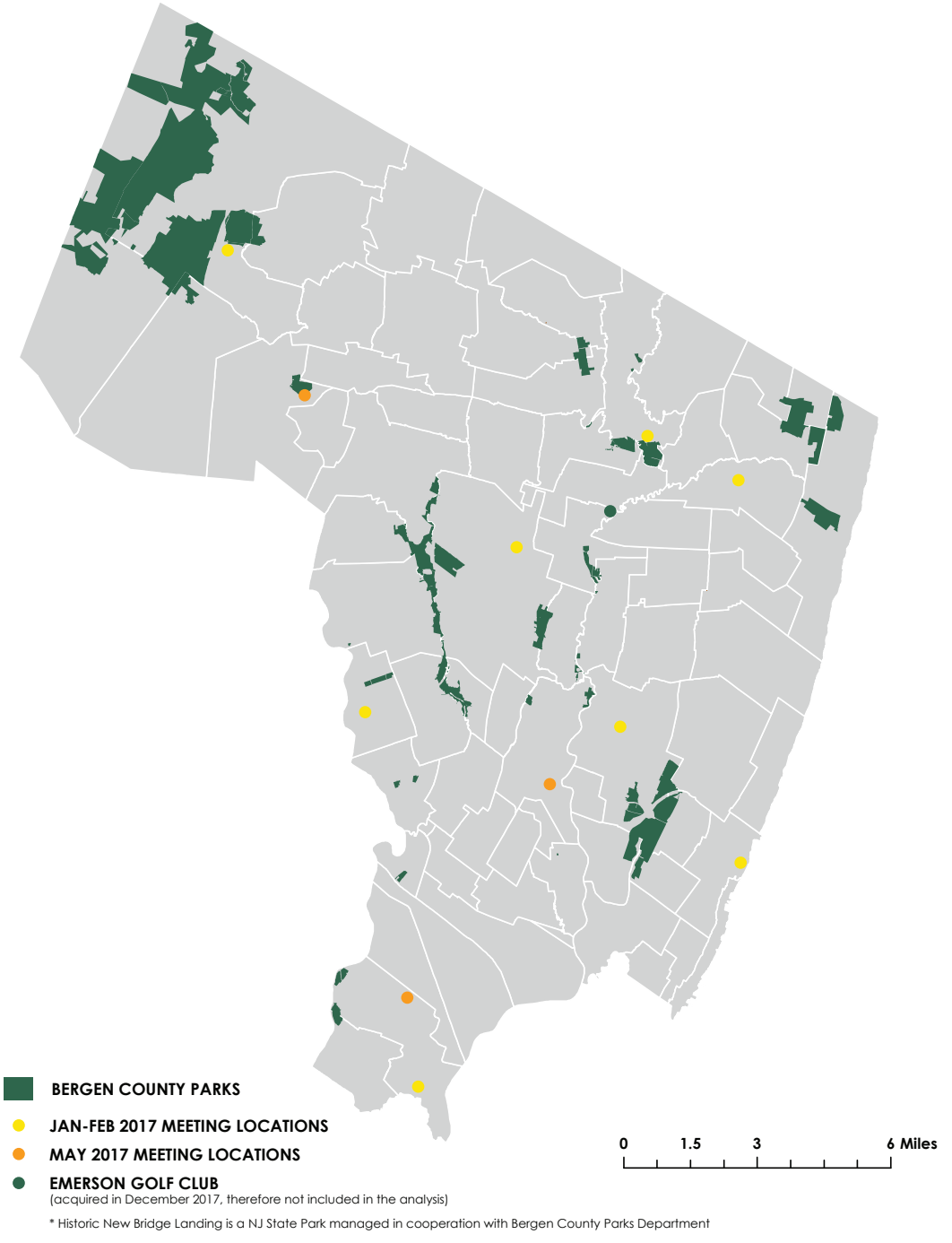

FIGURE 4 Bergen County Map with all county parks and the meeting locations.

These demands reflect two alternative uses of open space: finding peace and stress relief in the enjoyment of beautiful landscapes versus active recreation and participating in social events taking place within open space venues.

Obviously, those two activities may conflict—enjoying secluded nature is not "natural" when there is a festival underway at the same time in the same place. Compounding the issue of conflicting demands by the public was the demand from the parks department administration that new revenue sources be identified, which could support additional park amenities, as well as pay for the escalating maintenance costs associated with an ageing and growing park system. Each of these demands had merit and needed to be reconciled within the final park master plan.

Perspectives on Suburbia and Suburban Parks

Landscapes with clean air and clean water are good and safe places to raise a family (Stilgoe, 1988, p.2), and so nature and landscape are viewed as the healthy juxtaposition to an industrialised city. A home next to presumably virgin nature, or at least a space that allows the aesthetic experience of idealised nature, entails the promise that the untouched land is a land of opportunity. This reference to individual opportunity and freedom is a core component of the aesthetic interpretation of American landscapes (Olwig, 2005, p.316), and residential development in close vicinity to these idealised landscapes is viewed as desirable.

The motivation to find such a place, but remain close enough to the city so that a daily commute was feasible, was a driving force behind the rise of suburbia. The trend of city dwellers moving out into the landscape began in the nineteenth century. The New York City region was among one of the earliest examples of urbanites seeking the good landscape. The landscape itself was not only the backdrop for development; it became an essential component of innovative urban design concepts in the twentieth century.

Radburn, located in Fair Lawn, NJ, home of one of the earliest Bergen County parks, was begun in 1929, and featured two main aspects of suburban development: the landscape and the car. Radburn was the first town of the motor age (Martin, 2001, p.157), built at the same time the landscape evolved from an appreciated environment to a core element of the suburban fabric. The concept of cluster development embedded in the Radburn landscape gained traction in the second half of the twentieth century, advanced by the GI Bill and the American Highway Act. William Whyte (1964) saw this as an opportunity to provide common open space while limiting the size of the individual lot. The resulting large-scale suburban expansion was criticised as faceless 'cookie cutter' development. New Urbanism became the countermovement that propagated the small walkable town where a town centre conveyed the image of a small New England community (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2010, p.62). Historically, Cluster Development and New Urbanism were the predominant characteristics of suburbia in the north-eastern U.S. The concept of landscape is essentially the same for both suburban approaches - an open landscape which embraces the settlement is the desirable place.

This expectation of open, healthy, landscapes was the motivation to move to suburbia in the first place. Ironically, this natural space was the first casualty of suburban sprawl. At the same time, people who cared about the environment felt that the aesthetic and ecologic integrity of natural landscapes must be protected and preserved (Carr, 1998, p.11). In the period of rapid population growth at the end of the twentieth century, land acquisition by public entities was a tool to preserve open space from development.

However, the sequence of historic maps (Fig. 5) illustrates how urban growth has almost eliminated public open space in Bergen County.

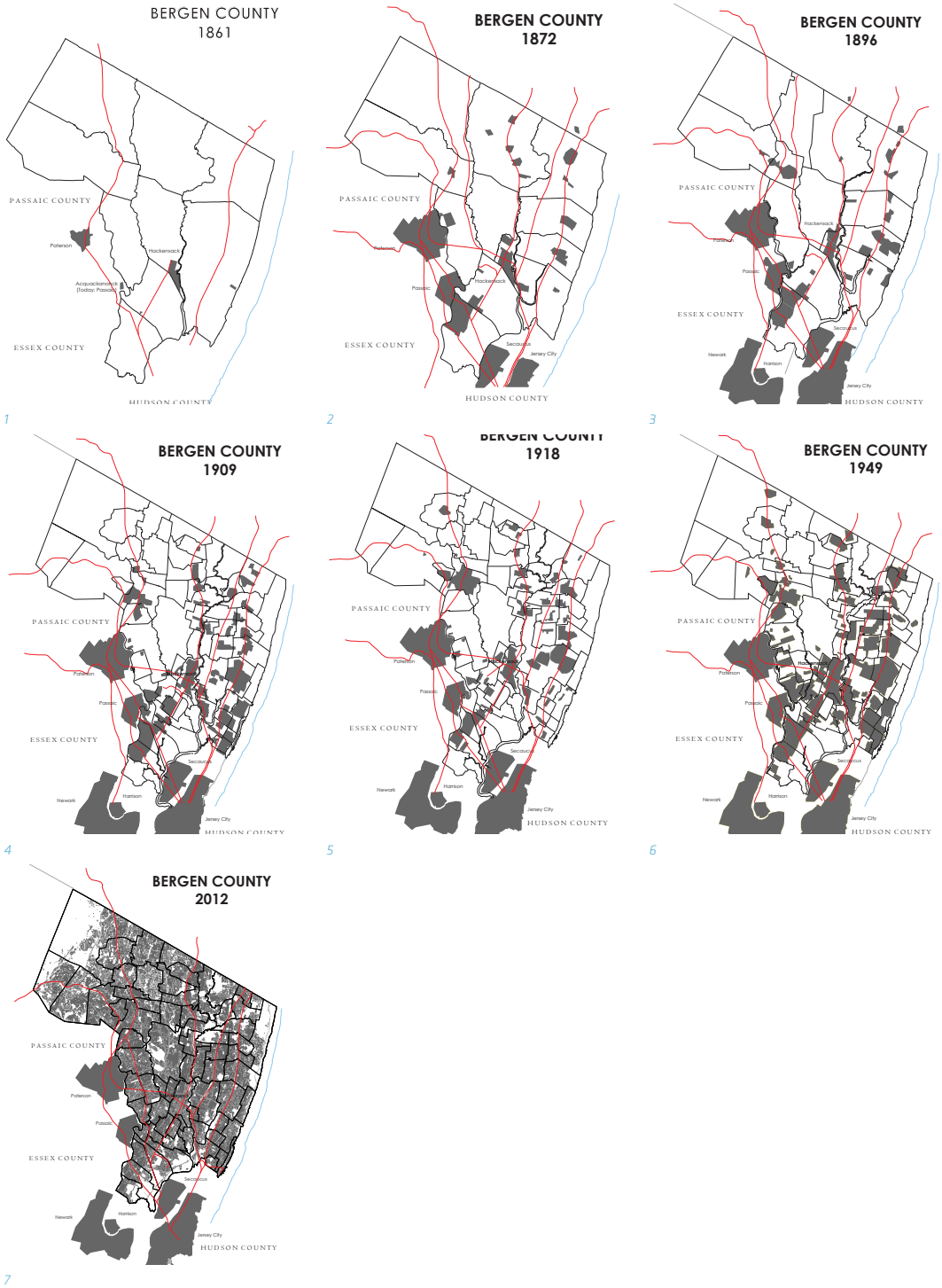

FIGURE 5 Bergen County development (in grey) from 1861-2012. Red indicates railroad lines.

Rapid development and loss of open space were already considered an issue in 1938 when the New Jersey State Planning Board noted that Bergen County "suffered greatly from development... [and] almost completely ignored amenities such as parks" (Bergen County Parks Commission 1947). Although neighbouring New Jersey counties acquired and built parklands, Bergen County did not address its lack of parks until after World War II. In 1946, the county requested the required State of New Jersey legislation needed to create a Parks Commission in order to provide recreational open space for county residents. This forerunner of the Bergen County Parks department was officially established in 1947.
The map of current Bergen County Parks (Fig. 3) illustrates how expansion of urban land uses reduced the open landscape to small fragmented parcels. This development was observed critically by environmental groups that care about nature in general and that are driven to preserve intact landscapes. Although the earliest development of the original county parks mid-century was based on planned acquisition of specific properties, later county parkland acquisitions were driven by a desire to preserve remaining tracts of open space.

Bergen County Suburban Parks Today

In addition to preserving natural landscapes, today's suburban parks and open spaces provide active recreational experiences, as well as places for social interactions (Currie, 2017, p.78), where people of different ages and social and cultural backgrounds meet. This social component of park use is increasingly important in suburban societies that are experiencing ongoing self-segregation enhanced by digital media. People watch their own partisan television channels and communicate with friends they 'like' in digital echo chambers. Bergen County's earlier suburban residents are now ageing, often 'in place', and expect to continue to be able to use the parks they have always visited, and so pickleball is now competing with tennis[2]. Families with young children are also moving to Bergen County, drawn by public amenities like parks, as were the earlier suburban inhabitants. However, these new families are coming from other cultures that favour different sports (cricket) and cultural events (Korean Festival). Public parks provide opportunities to rise above these growing social and cultural divisions. This social role of open spaces is relevant in planning for the future of the Bergen County parks system and raises the question of how to best provide parks that can meet the needs of all users, both those looking for various social experiences and those looking for passive nature experiences. In the same way that the car made suburban development of the 20th century possible, the car provided transportation to reach the suburban parks and their various amenities. The current suburban park design focuses on car-oriented convenience; roads loop throughout the older parks and are visually dominant features. However, suburban lifestyles are changing, and Bergen County residents are searching for ways to get out of their cars via alternative transportation options. The inventory and mapping research identified 90 kilometres of paved roads versus 57 kilometres of walking/cycling pathways within the thirty-six Bergen County parks. Riverside County Park North in Lyndhurst provides a good example of an earlier car-oriented county park design that no longer meets the needs of all park users. The park design approach provides car-oriented access and circulation within the park (Fig. 6). A one-way road loops through the site with car parking at the centre of the park. There are only two pedestrian entrances, although the park is located within a now densely populated residential neighbourhood (Fig. 7). The demand for new access points is obvious from the presence of desire paths where pedestrians are creating their own entrances (Fig. 8). This example illustrates that the current concept of Bergen Country parks does not reflect the changed and rapidly evolving demands of pedestrian and cyclist users that are associated with the increased urbanisation of older suburban communities.

2 Pickleball is a paddle sport enjoyed by active seniors. Combining elements of badminton, tennis, and table tennis, it is played on modified tennis courts

FIGURE 6 Inventory Map Riverside County Park North.

FIGURE 7 Existing park roads misses pedestrian access.

FIGURE 8 Desire path entrance.

As suburban population density continues to increase, development expands and encloses older county parks, often obliterating the distinction between municipal and county-owned properties. This blurring of park ownership/management has an impact on New Jersey's traditional open space management practices that originally treated county parks as venues to provide open space amenities beyond the capability of an individual municipality. Local municipalities own and manage smaller parks that serve a specific town or neighbourhood, and those parks typically have a focus on active recreation, providing ball fields, track and field facilities, and playgrounds. The primary focus of county and state park agencies is management of larger landscapes, often with a focus on passive recreation and landscape preservation, that serve residents from the surrounding region. In the northern mountainous areas of Bergen County, state, municipal, and county open space properties are adjacent. However, land uses, rules, and regulations differ between these multiple property owners, causing confusion amongst park users when they unknowingly enter lands controlled by a different owner.

Although the Bergen County park system began in 1947, a comprehensive master plan outlining guidelines for land management and land acquisition was never formalised. Therefore, the park system developed over seventy years in a haphazard piecemeal manner. Some properties were planned for water management/ flood control (Saddle River and Overpeck Parks) and some acquisitions were to preserve land from urban development (Ramapo Mt., Emerson Golf Course, Darlington Park). The diversity of park properties and users has fuelled differing user demands, which have not been addressed by overall management decisions and activities, but rather by posting extensive visitor rules (Fig. 9, Signage rules), which are flagrantly ignored because there is little or no enforcement. Lack of enforcement is the result of funding cutbacks as park department budgets were curtailed by elected officials. Positive human interactions and experiences can only happen when the park visit is not regulated by overwhelming rules, but instead allows individuals to self-regulate their activities and construct meaningful experiences (Godbey et al., 2005, p.152). On the other hand, a diverse user population may have competing interests and self-regulated actions may cause conflicts that can impinge on a positive park experience for others. Future population growth will lead to a higher demand for public open space, potentially increasing the number of user conflicts. Addressing these multiple user demands, that are changing and at times conflicting, and rationalising potential funding sources were the main challenges in the development of the Bergen County Parks Master Plan.

FIGURE 9 Signage rules .

Participation Process

The current literature on participatory planning and community engagement stresses that it is of great importance to know the community, honour local knowledge, and engage with residents (de la Peña et al., 2017, p.45). This is especially relevant for any planning process that has the goal to empower residents to become well-informed participants, and that goes beyond just seeking approval for predetermined administrative or political decisions. The applied method of community engagement comprises participation techniques outlined by Frederik Steiner (2008, p.274; 2018, p.13) for large scale planning approaches. Elected officials and public administrations initiate the participation process while hired planning professionals (in our case CUES) engage the public through a set of meetings, surveys, and additional workgroups to identify general goals. Throughout the process, collected knowledge about existing conditions and possible solutions is discussed at public meetings to inform the planning process. An inherent deficit of this approach is that only those groups who engage in the process are heard because there is no information gathered about the interests and needs of those who do not actively participate (see below).

Because of the diverse population and evolving expectations for open space in suburbia, the project team anticipated conflicts. We shared the point of view that "democratic designers do not consider conflict a dirty word, but rather a time-honored means to honorable ends" (de la Peña et al., 2017, p.4). Thirty years of ongoing public controversy about the detriments of urban development have produced an active, well-organised, and vocal environmental community with several special interest groups. The CUES team anticipated that these groups could disrupt the parks' master planning process in an effort to promote their particular environmental agenda. To prepare for our role as moderator, the CUES team explored potential contested topics with environmental groups at an early stage. Those informal conversations did not predetermine possible solutions but made the project team aware of topics that could derail the process and assured active members of the environmental community that their topics were considered and their voices heard.

The identification of public meeting venues followed the goal to reflect the social, economic, and geographic diversity of Bergen County. The six existing county planning regions were used as guidelines because these divisions reflect that diversity.

A third component in preparing for community engagement was to 'get the facts right'. The complexity of the project required an interdisciplinary team with ecologists, traffic planners, event managers, and concession experts under the leadership of CUES landscape architects and environmental planners. The inventory of individual parks and the park system analysis (ecological context, demographics, traffic, events, concessions) were presented at the first round of public meetings, before planning conclusions were drawn. Attendees at these meetings were considered valued partners in the planning process and provided local knowledge and perspectives that were of great value to the concept development phase. The expert team developed a preliminary concept in close collaboration with the Bergen County Parks Department and a technical advisory board. The outcome was then presented in a second round of meetings, before the final concept and report were developed.

The participatory approach has proven to be mostly successful at the neighbourhood scale, when members of a community engage in critical discussions and residents can personally relate to a particular park or other improvement project. However, the Bergen County regional park master planning project faced the challenge of meeting the needs of almost one million residents of different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. The concept of a master plan for a complex park system contains a level of abstraction that must be broken down into tangible components that can be addressed in large meetings. Our approach was to bring boards with images of all thirty-six parks to each meeting. Attendees were invited to write comments about the individual parks they knew while gaining a visual impression of the variety of the entire Bergen County park system (Fig. 10).

FIGURE 10 Residents were able to make oral comments as well as provide notes with suggestions for individual parks at public meetings.

Those comments about local interests were taken into consideration when the team further evolved the overall park system context. The project team was very impressed by the level of expertise and sophistication that surfaced in the public meetings. Several attendees were members of local non-profit advocacy groups (environmental, historic, civic) which included well-educated, sophisticated, and outspoken individuals, who had frequently participated in previous planning processes (Fig. 11: Groups who self-identified during the public outreach process). Some individuals stated that their experience of community engagement had often been a meaningless exercise to obtain public support for outcomes that had already been decided, resulting in a widely shared public feeling of scepticism in the process. We believe the strong public support we experienced is an indicator that the chosen engagement approach helped to overcome those negative expectations.

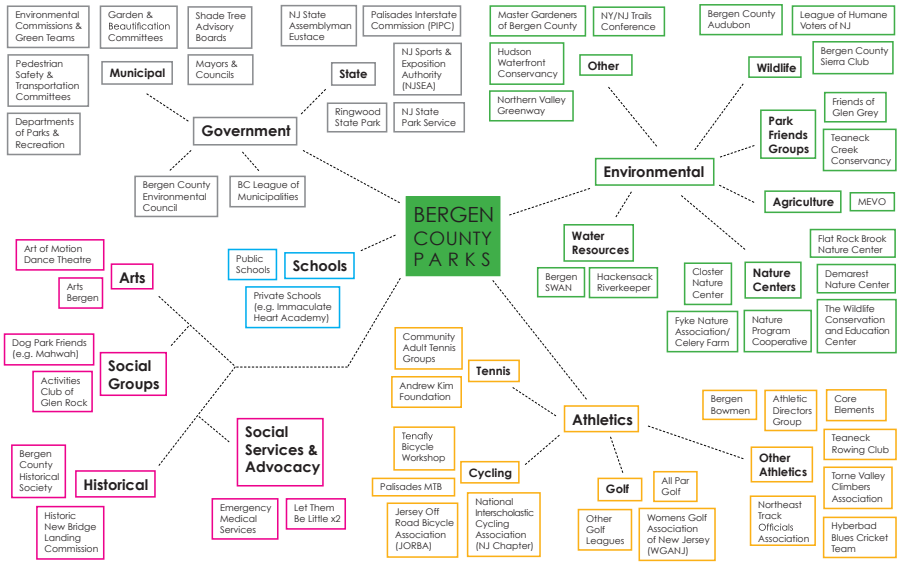

FIGURE 11 Groups who self-identified throughout the planning and participation process.

However, a clear shortcoming was that we did not reach all social groups equally. Data from the online survey showed that approximately half the respondents were in the 45-64 age range (1036), followed by 30% in the 25-44 age bracket (Fig. 12). Almost two-thirds of the households taking the online survey had an annual income of $100,000 or higher (Fig. 13). Young people and low-income groups were clearly underrepresented. In hindsight, it might have been helpful to target neighbourhood groups beyond the environmental community to generate broader participation. Collaborating with schools would have enhanced youth particaption[3]. A new and interesting approach, which was unfortunately beyond our scope of work, is the analysis of social media posts by teenagers and adolescents (Shirtcliff, 2015, p.55). This method opens the door to obtain reliable data on behaviour and space preferences of a segment of our society that is usually underrepresented in surveys and other forms of quantitative data collection. Although we are aware of these shortcomings, the active engagement with stakeholders and open discussions at numerous public meetings helped to increase the team's knowledge of existing open space conditions and public needs. At the same time, awareness was raised of how various groups interpret open space needs differently. Therefore, the final master plan for this (sub-)urban park system developed organically, based first upon user inputs and secondly, upon administrative requirements and conditions expressed by elected decision-makers and park department staff.

3 Timing and budget constraints did not allow CUES to engage schools as we previously did for the Voorhees Environmental Park in South Jersey. Responses from middle school students informed that park design project.

Age Group of Online Survey Respondents

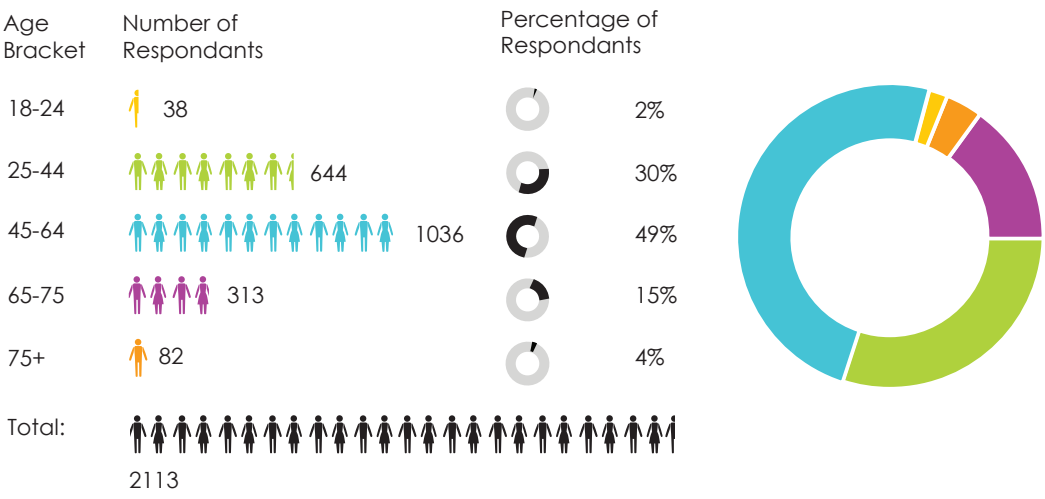

FIGURE 12 Approximately half of respondents were in the 45-64 age bracket, while one-third of respondents were in the 25-44 age bracket.

Annual Household Income of Online Survey Respondents

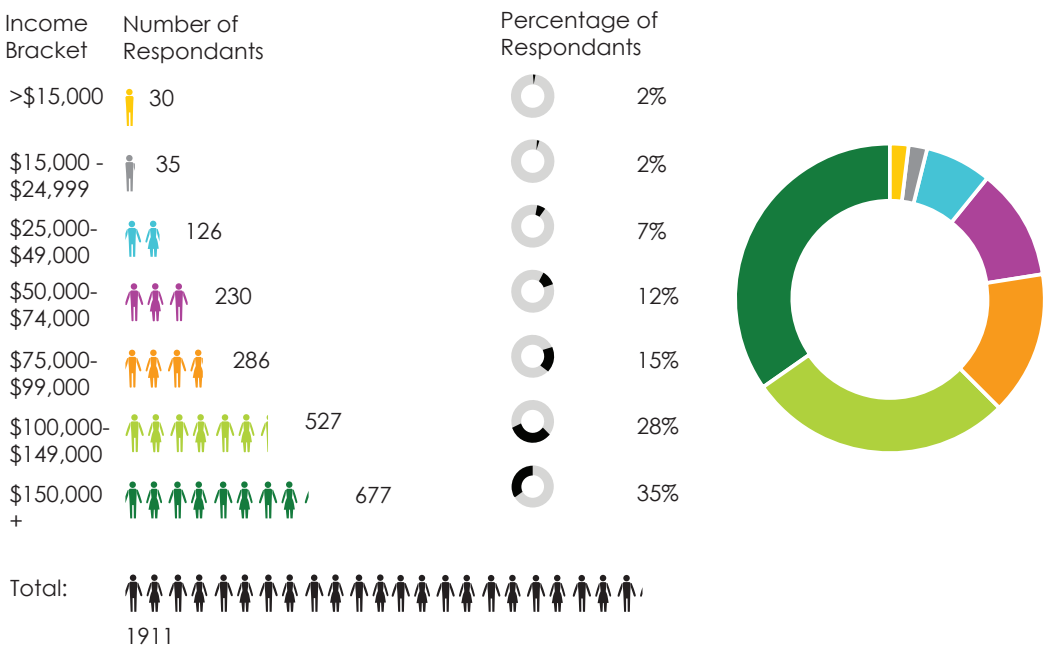

FIGURE 13 Almost two-thirds of the respondents were in households with an annual income of $100,000 or higher.

Master plan concept reflecting conflicting interests

The community outreach and planning process revealed a wide range of reasons for resident visits to parks. Therefore, the overall master plan vision *From the Marshes to the Mountains* (Fig. 14) celebrates the Bergen County parkland geographic diversity through Park Types. The master plan also identifies Emphasis Categories for individual parks that support the diversity of user experiences (Fig. 15).

The dual typology of Park Emphasis and Park Type reflects the distinction between emotions related to perception of place and the functionality of specific properties. All parks are grouped into four Emphasis categories: Nature Park, Social/Cultural Park, Neighbourhood Parks, and Golf Courses[4]. On a second layer, the parks are grouped into four Types based on size, geography, user reach, potential for expansion, and amenities.

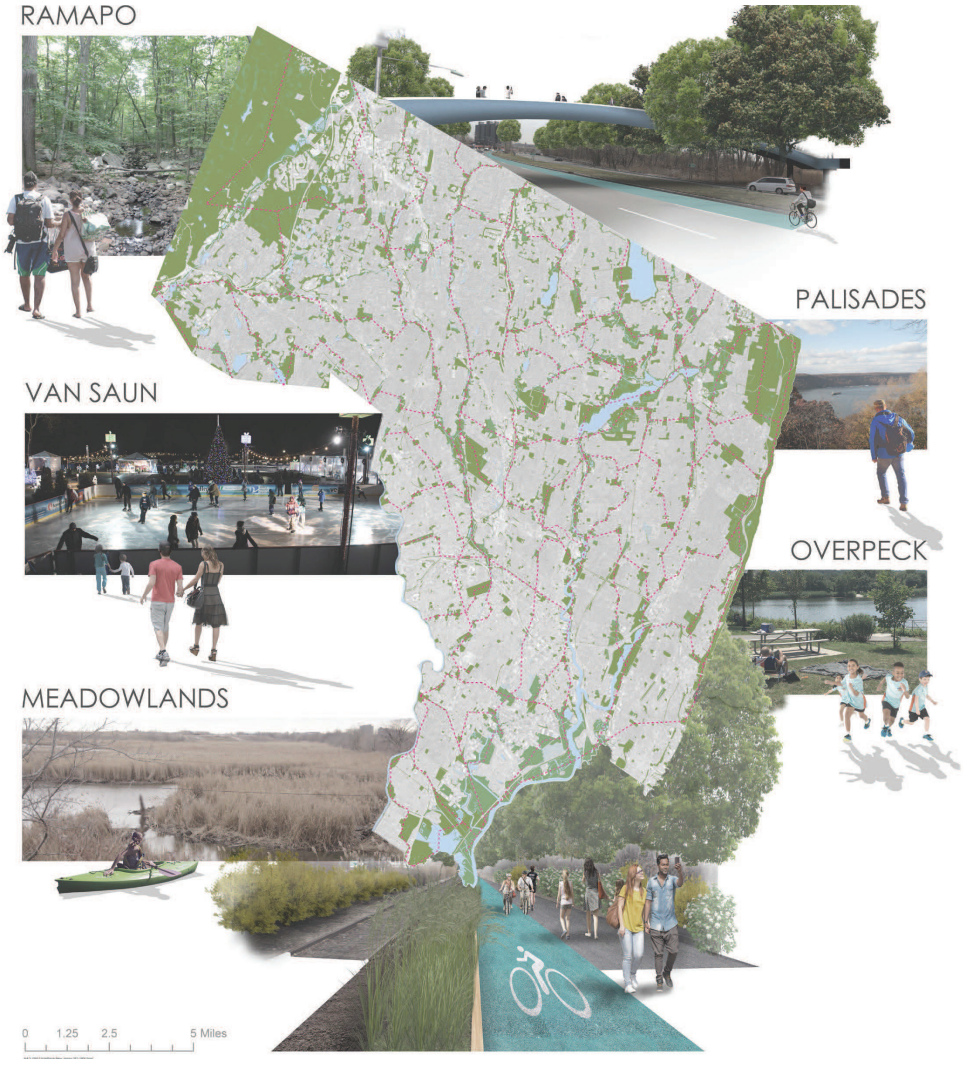

FIGURE 14 Master plan vision: From the Marshes to the Mountains.

4 Public golf courses managed by the county are a very important low-cost alternative to private golf clubs for lower and middle-income residents.

The introduction of multi-modal connections encourages bike and pedestrian access with combined concepts of adaptive re-use of rail lines and bike lanes on appropriate roadways, increasing the connectivity and functionality of the overall system. Additionally, the master plan addresses the need to identify new opportunities to develop open space properties that fit within the proposed master plan framework in order to meet the increasing demands for public open space due to projected population growth.

The large Anchor Parks serve as the backbone of the Bergen County parks system and offer appropriate activities, programming, and events on a regional scale. Long and narrow Linear Parks follow river corridors through multiple municipalities, offering smaller scale amenities. Small local parks supplement municipal open spaces, serving primarily community residents. Golf courses are a standalone feature of the county parks system with very distinct users and management requirements.

Driven by administration budget cutbacks, we found that the county's existing business model is inadequate to support needed ongoing operation and maintenance activities, enforcement of park rules, additional land acquisitions, or enhanced facilities and programming. Therefore, structural changes within the county parks administration and exploration of additional revenue generating activities were recommended.

The final master plan, developed in close collaboration with the Bergen County Parks Department, evolved through several rounds of revisions and integrated all contributions of the interdisciplinary team. The team had originally intended to make very specific recommendations based on the public input. Because elected administrations and leadership of the parks department can change very quickly, we wanted an outline for the future of the park system that included very specific actions for individual parks. This would give residents a guideline so that if improvements to individual parks did not happen they could demand action in accordance with the master plan. The County Executive and Board of Chosen Freeholders were not in favour of this approach, preferring a more general outline of goals and planning principles that would allow them future flexibility and less specific accountability. In fact, at the time of this writing, one of the elected representatives who is in the middle of a re-election campaign is withholding their approval of the final master plan document.

This hesitation by politicians to make binding decisions illustrates the importance of community engagement and the role of stakeholders as stewards of the parks. The public participation process fostered communication between different interest groups with different demographic backgrounds. During public meetings, people learned about others who saw open spaces from a different perspective, but realised that multiple demands on open spaces also demand compromises. The positive and 'neighbourly' atmosphere of the meetings gives hope that new alliances between stakeholders will develop into active support groups for the public parks. Although many residents expressed suspicion of "commercialization" of the parks, the planning process illustrated the need to raise additional revenues without additional taxation. In short, the general public appear to have more courage to embrace the master plan to ensure the future of county parklands than the elected politicians.

The applied research of developing a master plan for the Bergen County park system has shown that creating guidelines for a complex suburban park system is closely tied to the context of evolving societal values. Conflicting user demands turn out to be core challenges for developing a (sub-)urban park master plan that addresses the needs of an increasingly diverse suburban population. Identifying and addressing conflicts through the planning and outreach process contributes to the general discussion of public open space needs for an expanding suburban population. The future of (sub-)urban parks depends on honest, open, and thorough negotiations among diverse user groups. Convincing reluctant politicians, worried about the next election cycle, that residents can and will accept change if they are engaged in the process is an ongoing challenge. A further area of research should be exploring areas where suburban park user demands diverge from those of urban park users as the ageing of suburbs continues.

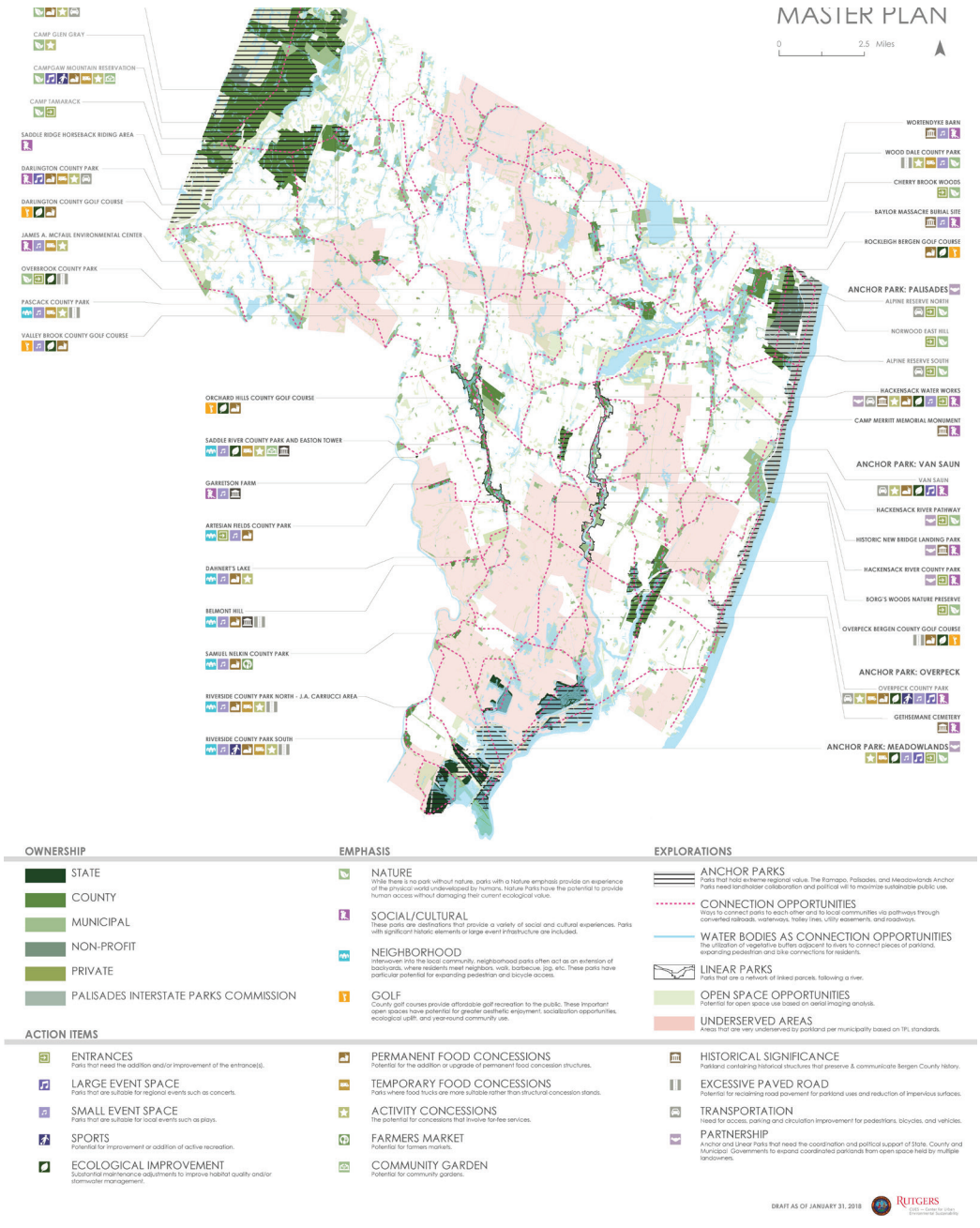

FIGURE 15 Master Plan.

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