



Figure 1 Photo by Ed Ng

Recreation and Conservation Vision for The 50 North Road Property, Chester Borough, Morris County, New Jersey

This Recreation and Conservation Vision was produced in June 2012 with the project team of CheterTrails.org by:



Introduction

This plan provides a management vision for the 50 North Road Property, Located in Chester Borough. This management vision includes utilizing the existing infrastructure of roads and trails into a family-friendly walkable and bikeable park with ecological restoration.

Property Overview

The 50 North Road property was purchased by Chester Borough in 2009 from Alcatel Lucent, the successor of Bell Labs. The property consists of a total of 86 acres, 64 of which were purchased with funding from the Morris County Preservation Trust and NJDEP Green Acres Program, and are therefore restricted to conservation and recreation uses. The remaining 22 acres were specifically bought for

other municipal purposes and will not be used for conservation or recreation. The Borough administrative complex has recently been located to a former Bell Labs building on this land.

50 North Road consists of four separate tax parcels, two located in Chester Borough and two in Chester Township



Figure 2 Municipally-owned property and open space at 50 North Road

The tax parcels in Chester Borough are

Block 6, Lot 5.01 and Block 115, Lot 17. Block 26.09, Lot 1, and Block 26, Lot 79 are located in Chester Township. Given its past industrial use as a Bell Labs facility, there is a significant area of groundwater contamination. Much of this contamination seems to be on the portion of the property that was purchased for municipal purposes, however precautions should be taken when implementing this plan to ensure that it does not adversely affect the cleanup activities. It is not expected that any of the recommendations for the park portion of 50-North Road would expose the public to this contaminated area. There are several buildings on the property and a network of gravel and paved driveways and service roads.

This management vision focuses on the portion of the property that is dedicated for conservation and recreation purposes, which will be referred to in this plan as the 50 North Road Park.

50 North Road Park

At 64 acres, 50 North Road Park is the largest park in Chester Borough. Consisting mainly of open, cool-season grass fields,

shrubs, and forest, it contains the highest point in Chester Borough, Seward Hill, which affords spectacular views of the Highlands landscape. Several former Bell Labs buildings are also located on this property.

50 North Road is adjacent to Highlands Ridge Park, which was historically part of the same Bell Labs complex but is now owned by Chester Township. Similar to 50 North Road, the buildings on Highlands Ridge Park are used for municipal purposes and the surrounding 110 acres is used for park purposes.

Chester Township has been implementing a park master plan they developed for Highlands Ridge Park. A Community Center, a Community Garden, an area for Boy Scout Camping, meadows for wildlife habitat, and a recreational ball field complex have all been created as part of this plan. In addition, there is an extensive trail network that includes the main stem of Patriots' Path, a regional trail system that stretches throughout Morris County. Highlands Ridge Park is adjacent to the township-owned Evans Family Preserve and the ball fields at Black River Fields which are adjacent to Black River Middle School.

Other key attributes of 50 North Road Park are its prime location across the street from Bragg School and Dickerson School at the edge of Chester Borough and its adjacency to a significant complex of Open Space. Being within walking distance to the businesses of historic downtown Chester will also add to its appeal to residents and visitors alike. It's location in the middle of all of the schools in Chester could provide a unique opportunity for ecological studies.

Any future use of this park should consider the fact that many recreational needs of residents are already being met at Highlands Ridge Park. For example, it is probably not necessary to create additional ball fields on 50 North Road because those community needs are met by the complex located

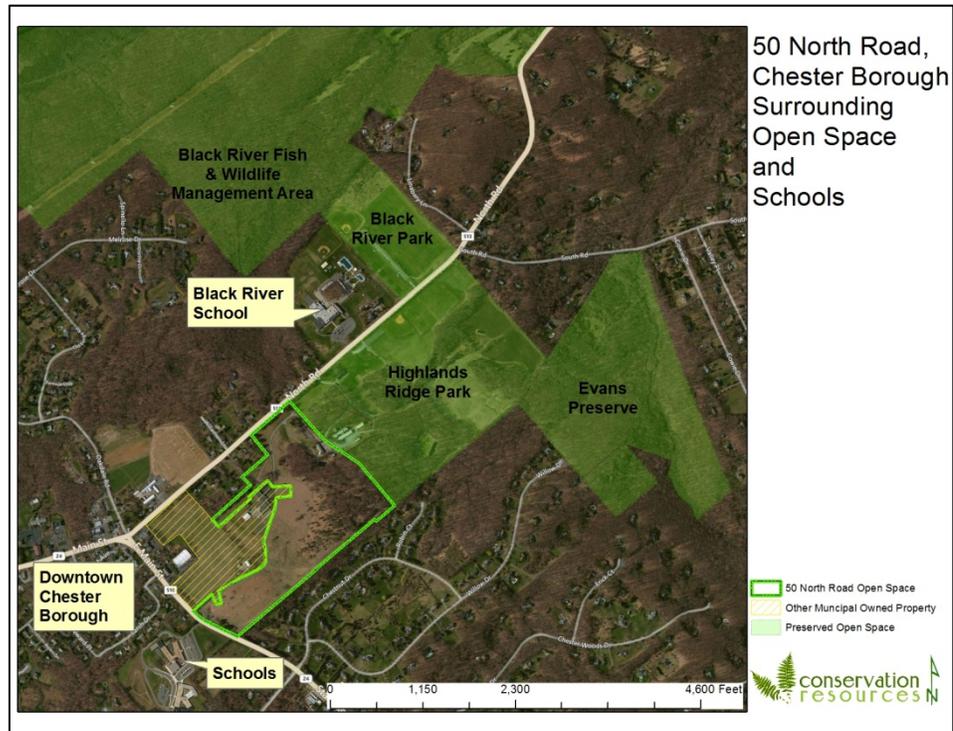


Figure 3 50 North Road Park and Surrounding Preserved Open Space.

at Black River Park and Highlands Ridge Park. Similarly, a community garden and community center would also not likely be something that would be needed.

Legally permissible uses of Property

50 North Road was acquired with both Green Acres and Morris County Preservation Trust Funding, so there are significant restrictions as to its future use. The 64 acres must be dedicated to Conservation or Recreation purposes. Conservation and Recreation Purposes is broadly interpreted by the Green Acres Program to mean everything from wildlife habitat management to active recreation such as ball fields. Essentially, it is what would commonly be thought of as a “Park”.

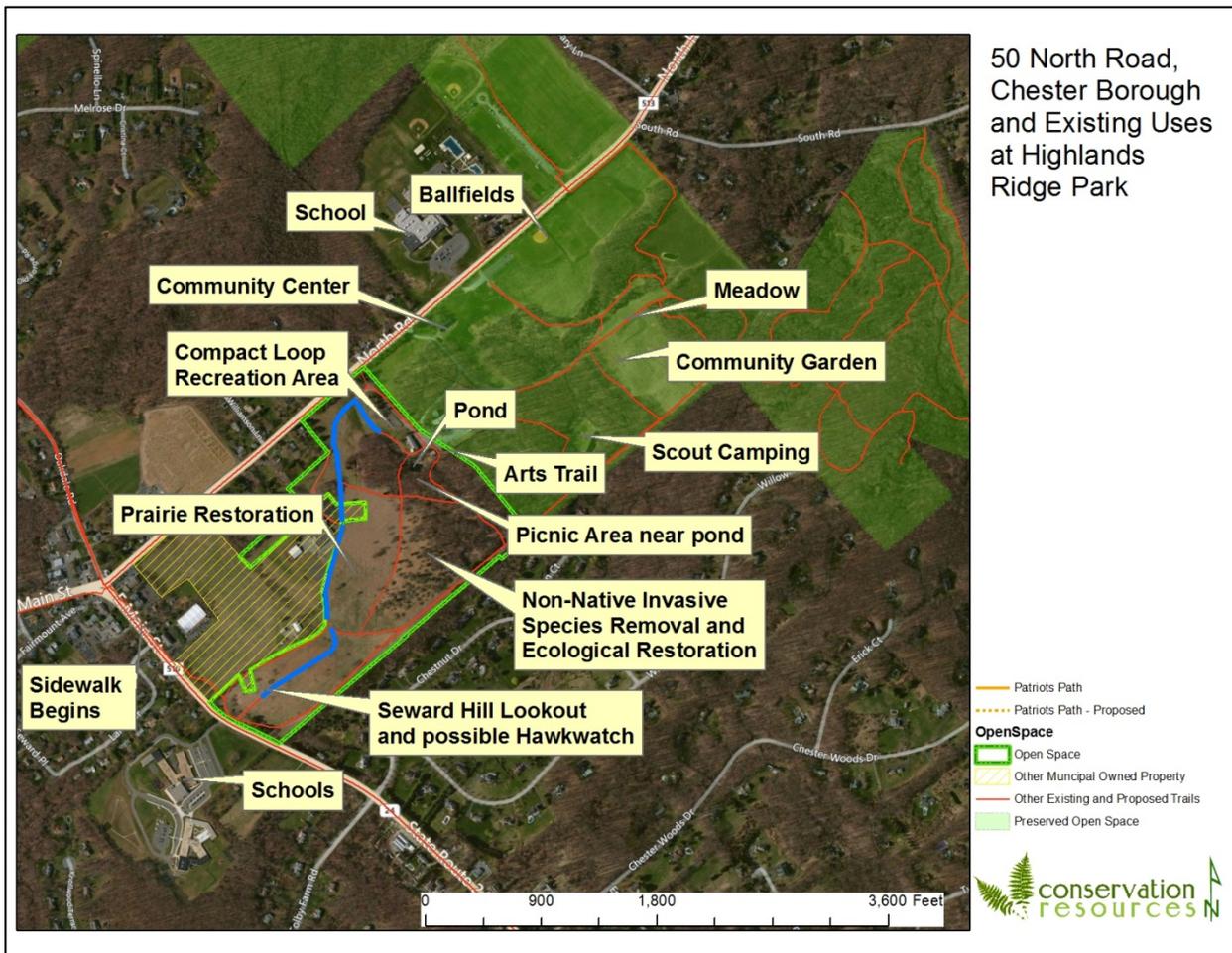


Figure 4 50 North Road Park management vision including Highlands Ridge Park.

Needs Identified in the Chester Trails Plan

As part of the Chester Trails Plan, Conservation Resources conducted a survey of over 130 residents of Chester Township and Chester Borough. Among other things, the survey asked about what open space and park properties were currently being used in the Chesters and what people would like to see added to the existing park and trail infrastructure. High on the list of desires was the need for a family-friendly community park where people could enjoy light biking and walking. In addition, the survey found a large number of people wanting:

- A paved multi-use trail system for light biking, walking, and jogging
- Connections to the extensive regional trail network in Morris County including Patriots' Path
- Butterfly gardens and Wildlife Habitat
- Lakes and water features to walk around or along

Family-Friendly Walking, Jogging, and Biking Trails

Paved flat trails are the most popular for walking, jogging, light biking, and family activities. Locally, Grove Street Park in Chester contains a good example of a small but very popular paved trail.

50 North Road has many miles of existing paved access roads and driveways as well as gravel roads that could provide a more extensive network.

The trails could be broken into a

compact loop system and a larger loop system. However, it should be noted that some of the existing roads will be continue to be used by cars and emergency vehicles to access the municipal complex. Many of the recreation activities proposed here would not be compatible with roads actively being used by cars, especially emergency vehicles such as police cars. Therefore, we strongly recommend that any recreational trail system that is developed is separated from the roads where vehicular traffic is allowed.

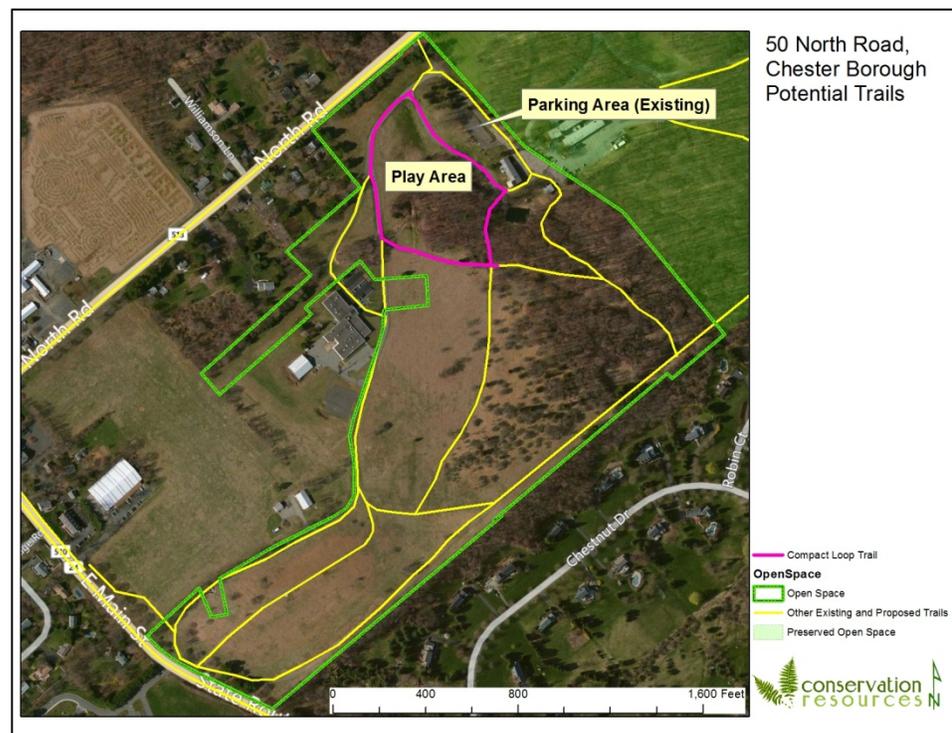


Figure 5 Proposed Compact Loop Trail and Recreational Area

The Compact Loop Recreation Area – The Nucleus of the 50 North Road Park

The compact loop system could meander for a measured half-mile in length and surround mowed fields and a rustic, nature-oriented children’s structure. This family-friendly half mile paved trail could be used for biking, walking, rollerblading, pushing strollers or wheelchairs, and jogging. The central part of the loop would consist of a mowed field area and a play structure. This compact loop system would form the nucleus of the park and could be located adjacent to the existing parking area (see map). Picnic tables, benches, chess and checker tables, and other park structures could be located here.

Near the parking area and compact loop, a small pond surrounded by a small forest is located on the property. The edges of the pond and water control structure could be improved by native species landscaping to make it more attractive. Removal of non-native invasive plants in the forest and creation of a small picnic grove would also make this area more attractive.

Longer Trails

From the nucleus of the Compact Loop, a series of larger loop trails could be created. Most of these trails already exist and are improved with gravel or pavement. These trails should have a good surface and be well-delineated with signs. The loops should be given recognizable names, perhaps using historic Chester names.



Figure 6 Proposed Measured mile loop.

We recommend at

least two separate longer loop trails; a measured mile loop trail and a larger loop that would extend into Chester Township’s Highlands Ridge Park and pass the entrance to Evans Family Preserve. All of the loops should be paved and bikeable, although the topography of the site will mean some challenging hills may be encountered, especially on the 5K loop. This longer loop trail could also be used to tell the story of the history of the property and Bell Labs.

In addition to two marked longer loop trails, a trail should be improved and blazed to the top of Seward’s Hill (see next section).

Seward's Hill Lookout and Hawkwatch Improvements

The most spectacular view in the region is from the top of Seward's Hill. This attraction could be improved with a very minor investment. The existing path to the top could be enhanced either through paving or using a hardened quarry process material. On the top of Seward's Hill, improvements could be made including construction of a

small viewing platform, and benches.

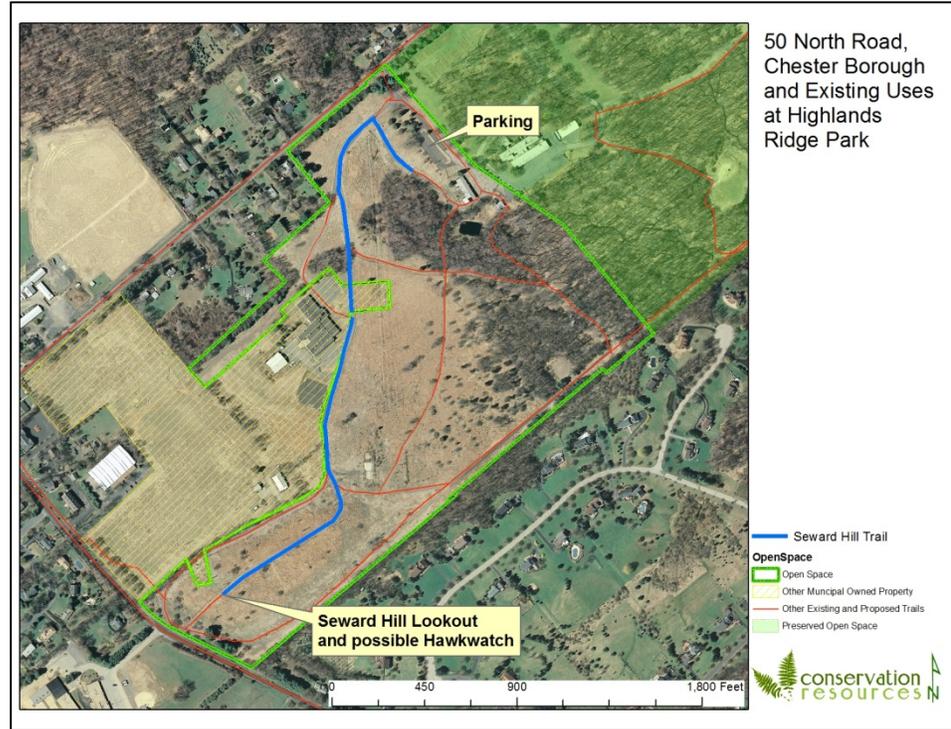


Figure 7 Proposed Seward's Hill Trail

Regional Trails – Patriots' Path

Patriots' Path runs from Black River Wildlife Management Area across Highlands Ridge Park. The Morris County Parks System, which manages Patriots' Path, would like to formalize the trail through 50 North Road and through Mendham Borough. The proposed

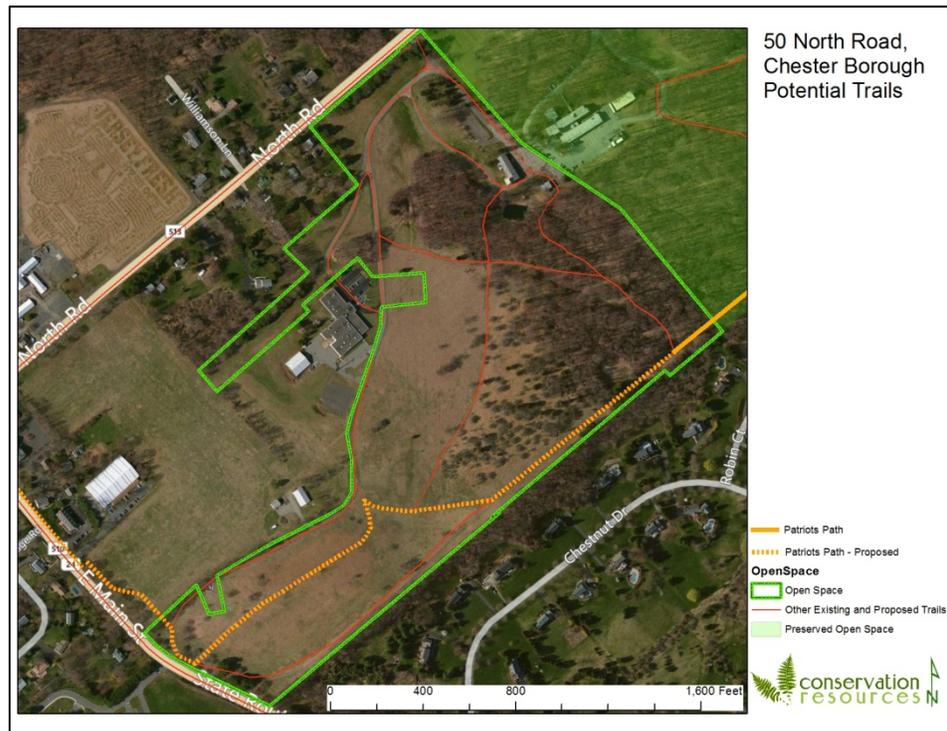


Figure 8 Patriots' Path through 50 North Road Park

location of Patriots' Path would intersect with the Larger Loop Trails as well as crest Seward's Hill.

In addition to extending Patriots' Path across 50 North Road, people who completed the survey of the Chester Trails Plan desired better pedestrian connection to the local schools. This could be accomplished by creating a wide sidewalk on 50 North Road along North Road to the Highland Ridge Park and then up to Black River Middle School, which is adjacent to the Chester Area Pool and Black River Playing Fields. A safe crossing of Route 24 to the Bragg and Dickerson School Complex would also be needed to fully connect Chester's schools.

Wildlife Habitat

A large portion of the 50 North Road Park is made up of open meadows that get mowed on at least an annual basis. Strategic conversion of these grassy areas to native prairie grasses with native wildflowers would be more scenic, attract more wildlife, and substantially reduce long-term maintenance needs.

In addition to the open grassy areas on the property, approximately 11 acres are dominated by non-native invasive brush including autumn olive. Removal of these invasive species should be a priority as they will spread to other non-invaded areas of the property. Removal of non-native invasive species and conversion of the open areas to native prairies would complement the walking, jogging, and biking experience on the loop trail network. The native prairies would contain native wildflowers as well as attract butterflies, grassland birds, and proves a nice focal point for nature studies. A portion of the property could also be dedicated to more formal gardens that highlight native plants. Bluebird and bat boxes could be installed and maintained by Boy Scouts and local residents.

In addition to native prairie grasses, limited agricultural production could be done on some of the open areas. Attractive crops such as sunflowers could be planted and complement the outdoor experience of visitors. Indeed, similar sunflower fields in other NJ municipalities have been especially popular with visitors.

However, any planting of crops or wildflowers will have to take into account the overabundant deer population in the area and will likely need to be fenced. There is substantial evidence on 50 North Road Park that there are overabundant deer, although a deer survey can better determine this. We would therefore recommend a basic deer survey of the property before any plantings take place. If the study confirms the overabundance of deer, fencing and a deer control project should be implemented. For more information about deer management, visit www.deerinbalance.org

Next Steps/Implementation

In order to successfully implement the vision of 50 North Road, community involvement will be critical. Successful community engagement could be accomplished in several ways.

- First, genuine opportunities for substantial public input on this draft management vision should be provided. There are likely many additional ideas that the public has that could be incorporated into design of this park.
- After the public has provided input for this vision, a master plan with design elements should be developed. Specifically, the compact Loop Recreation Area and the Seward's Hill Lookout

should be designed by a landscape architect. All of the existing roads and parking areas should be incorporated into the plan, in order to reduce costs. The design should also include trail signs for the larger loop trails, provide costs estimates, and break the construction into phases.

- In addition to the design produced by the landscape architect, an ecological restoration plan should be completed to outline the best way to deal with the prairie restoration and management of non-native invasive species.
- The landscape plan and the ecological restoration plan should be presented to the public, along with a phased implementation plan that can either be worked into the capital budget of Chester Borough and/or become the focus on grant applications.
- The name of the park should also be changed from 50 North Road to an easily recognizable and unique name. A possible name based on geography would be Seward's Hill Park.
- Finally, at the same time this planning is occurring, Chester should encourage use of the park by residents. The Borough recreation program should begin to utilize this property for fitness activities such as guided hikes, recreational runs, bike clinics, and bike races. These community wellness activities could help Chester with its Sustainable NJ Actions.

Conservation Resources would be happy to help with the implementation of any or all of the recommendations included in this vision plan.