

Township of West Orange - 2010 Master Plan Update Community Kickoff Meeting Summary

The Township of West Orange Planning Board has commissioned the preparation of a Master Plan Reexamination, updates to certain existing Master Plan elements and preparation of a new Sustainability Plan. As part of the process of preparing these documents (collectively referred to as the “Master Plan Update”), a series of public meetings is being held. The first of these was a community kickoff meeting, which was part of a regular meeting of the West Orange Planning Board on January 6, 2010. This meeting was held jointly between the Planning Board and the Open Space and Recreation Commission, as a portion of the meeting was devoted to a parallel long-range planning effort: an updated Open Space and Recreation Plan for the Township.

The objectives of the Master Plan Update portion of the community kickoff meeting were as follows:

- Explain the purpose, scope and requirements of the Master Plan Reexamination and plan element updates
- Describe the overall project timeline
- Provide an overview of initial research and stakeholder interviews
- Solicit input from the public
- Outline additional means of resident and merchant participation

Some residents offered their ideas, concerns and questions during the public comment portion of this meeting. These are listed below along with a summary of issues discussed during the portion of the meeting devoted to the Open Space and Recreation Plan. It should be emphasized that the items listed below represent suggestions and input from stakeholders, and will not necessarily be included as recommendations in the actual plan.

General/Process

- The outcome of this process should be more than just more rules and regulations
- The plan should expand enjoyment of the Township and residents’ freedom
- What impact will this plan have on policymaking in practical terms? After the Reexamination Report is completed, implementing the recommendations in the Plan and updating the Zoning Ordinance are the next steps
- Look to make small, incremental changes – that way progress will be visible
- For example, replanting trees and otherwise greening streets
- The Township should encourage more successful public events such as the St. Patrick’s Day Parade and The Taste of Downtown
- Does the current Master Plan address gated communities? Yes

Sustainability/Environmental

- The Sustainability Plan is a great idea

- The plan preparers should look into the Sustainable Sites Initiative by the American Society of Landscape Architects et al., which provides guidelines and performance benchmarks for sustainable development
- Green roofs have myriad of benefits and should be considered in this plan

Historic Preservation

- Historic preservation is important, but need to look beyond just local impacts
- There is vast local and national history in West Orange that can be capitalized on – for example, the Essex County reservations in West Orange were designed by the Olmsted Brothers firm
- Be sure to review the report of specific historic sites in the Township prepared by the Historic Preservation Commission and consider including these in the Reexamination

Open Space/Recreation/Circulation

- There should be a needs assessment to determine what areas are underserved by open space
- Bicycle paths are important – there are currently efforts underway to try to connect to Maplewood and South Orange
- Also, the Rahway River is a trail resource – the plan should seek to connect with South Orange's riverfront pathway
- Adequate parking can be provided for with limited impacts

There was additional, more in-depth discussion of open space and recreation issues during the portion of the meeting devoted to the Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). Two proposed maps that will be included in the OSRP were presented: a greenways map showing potential connections linking green spaces throughout the Township and an open space inventory showing existing, proposed and potential open space lands. The importance of West Orange being proactive in identifying potential open space parcels on the open space map was emphasized. A summary of discussion topics relating to this plan is presented below due to the overlap of the two planning efforts.

The following items were discussed:

- The Township should weigh the potential of open space versus the development of said property for commercial uses
- What are the potential impacts of a recent Essex County proposal to utilize land in South Mountain Reservation near Turtle Back Zoo for commercial recreation? It was noted that the County generally tries to balance open space and recreational needs
- It was noted that Essex County is one of the few counties that does not have annual appropriations for municipal programs from the County open space trust
- There was a lot of discussion regarding the pros and cons of "pocket parks," particularly in the eastern section of the Township, which could benefit from small open space/recreational areas on currently vacant or decrepit properties

- How can the OSRP address street buffers, especially around golf courses? These can be created through the purchase the perimeter of the properties, but also through creative means such as partnering with the Audubon Society to purchase development rights
- Can open space properties can be used for solar panels or other renewable energy? Not if purchased with State Green Acres funds
- Linkages between population concentrations, natural spaces and park areas are important
- What practical use would this plan have in the real world? The OSRP can be very practical as it helps the Township delineate areas for possible open space acquisition and recreational space, to support grant applications and to provide guidance for Committee and Board members
- There should be a focus on adding greenery downtown, particularly to replace trees that have been lost over the years along Main Street
- Safeguard from development the space between the Mayapple Hill section of South Mountain Reservation and the recently preserved Mayapple Extension
- The Township should promote the creation of a recreation center and community based recreation