

# LAND







## New Jersey is a national leader in the preservation of open space, farmland, and historic sites.

The state's preservation programs and its policies for wetland protection that have been implemented over the last five decades have resulted in the public ownership or purchase of development rights for more than a third of New Jersey's land area, protecting over 1.5 million acres, [according to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection](#). However, even with this success, New Jersey will likely be the first state to reach full build-out in the next 25 years or fewer, resulting in no more buildable vacant land.

Data shows that of New Jersey's roughly five million acres, more than two million remain in their natural state as forests, wetlands, beaches, and grasslands. Some of these landscapes would benefit from restoration. Despite being the most densely populated state in the nation, [New Jersey provides habitats for more than 400 species of land-dwelling vertebrate wildlife, as well as for 134 freshwater fish species, 336 marine fish species, and thousands of terrestrial and aquatic species](#). Moreover, [1.5 million shorebirds and as many as 80,000 raptors make migratory stopovers in New Jersey each year](#).

# Preserve Habitat, Wildlife, and Natural Areas

Despite its small size and dense population, New Jersey hosts an impressive array of wildlife, habitat, and unique ecosystems. Spanning five geologic provinces, New Jersey's landscapes range from the Appalachian Ridge and Valley in the northwest to the Outer Coastal Plain in the south. There is a broad diversity of animal, fish, and plant species. Numerous plant and animal species reach either their northern or southernmost limits in New Jersey, because the state spans both northern and southern ecosystems. New Jersey is also one of the most important pathways in the world for an abundance of migrating birds.

Scenic and natural beauty are apparent in all reaches of the state, and the state's ecological treasures are appreciated and enjoyed by residents and nonresidents alike, bringing significant revenue from outdoor recreation, including hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching. These treasures include the deep forests of the Highlands and the vast sandy aquifer of the Pinelands National Reserve, which is recognized as an International Biosphere Reserve. New Jersey is also home to extensive salt marshes, free-flowing river systems, freshwater wetlands with forested swamps, and the dunes and bays of the Atlantic barrier islands.

In addition to nonprofit conservation organizations that preserve natural lands, various government agencies are charged with managing our wildlife and wild places. New Jersey is home to five national wildlife refuges (Great Swamp, Forsythe, Cape May, Supawna Meadows, and Walkill) and two National Recreation Areas (Gateway and the Delaware Water Gap). There are more than 170 state-owned wildlife management areas, state parks, and state forests that contain wildlands, as well as hundreds of tracts of forests, meadows, and wetlands owned and managed by counties and municipalities. The [New Jersey Natural Lands Trust](#) owns or manages more than 30,000 acres across the state and manages its properties to "conserve elements of natural diversity, such as habitat for rare plant and animal species and rare ecological communities." Within the lands held by the different divisions of the state's Department of Environmental Protection, there are designated "natural areas." Today, [this system](#) consists of 47 designated natural areas encompassing over 40,000 acres, and it extends from the Dryden Kuser Natural Area in High Point State Park to Cape May Point Natural Area on the tip of Cape May Peninsula.

## ► Ancestral Lands

For over 14,000 years, New Jersey has been the ancestral homeland to the Lenapehoking (Lenni-Lenape), who were forcibly removed and displaced by European colonizers. New Jersey has recognized several Indigenous tribes, including the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape, Powhatan Renape Nation, and Ramapough Lenape Indian Nation.

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The natural areas system and the Natural Lands Trust have seen declining staffing resources and a largely dormant governance, resulting both in fewer preserved natural areas and less oversight and management of these critical ecosystems. The science of ecological restoration must eventually guide habitat rejuvenation of degraded landscapes to counter ecological stressors like forest fragmentation, pollution, overabundant deer, and climate change.

Habitat connectivity is also a critical component of this strategy. Through the use of the science-based landscape map, the [New Jersey Conservation Blueprint](#), and the [Connecting Habitat Across New Jersey](#) program, land can be evaluated based upon the likelihood of the presence of certain species, with a goal of connecting landscapes to create corridors for wildlife. This also creates transparency and predictability in planning and development in order to protect vital wildlife. Finally, the management of wildlife is critically underfunded. Relying heavily on federal funds from the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants program, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Endangered and Nongame Species Program manages New Jersey's many wildlife and bird species with limited staffing and support.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- There is a continued loss of natural lands that sustain a rich diversity of both flora and fauna and a clean water supply, which are essential to residents' quality of life and the tourism industry.
- Funding is lacking for wildlife management, including research, monitoring, and restoration.
- Populations of rare plant and animal species are declining due to a variety of stressors, including development, illegal dumping, the destruction of wetlands, an overabundant deer population, the advancement of invasive species and pathogens, rising sea levels, salt intrusion, storm surges, and shoreline erosion.
- Damage from illegal off-road vehicle traffic on public lands is increasing to the detriment of important habitats
- The inclusion of Indigenous voices in land conservation and restoration strategies is lacking.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase the preservation and stewardship of natural lands through the state's Green Acres Program, focusing on restoring connectivity between large preserves, by using the Conservation Blueprint and the Connecting Habitat Across New Jersey effort.
- Increase overall funding and staff resources for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's work protecting natural resources, including enforcing laws regarding off-road vehicle use.
- Fully fund the Natural Heritage Program and hire additional staff to support the identification, research, and protection of rare plants.
- Increase funding for the Endangered and Nonngame Species Program.
- Revitalize and significantly expand lands in New Jersey's Natural Areas System; revitalize and expand the Natural Lands Trust Board of Trustees.
- Institute landscape-scale planning for state lands that considers and protects the range of natural resource values, and continue to expand coordination among state agencies.
- Implement best practices for sustainable wildlife management.
- Designate publicly owned forests with undisturbed soil as carbon reserves.
- Expand opportunities for the inclusion of Indigenous representation on state boards and commissions, and in policy decisions.
- Pursue policies with the support of tribal voices to empower their action on environmental issues, including the federal recognition of state-recognized tribes, if supported by tribal members.



# Promote the Robust Preservation of Open Space, Farmland, and Cultural Heritage

[As reported in NJ Spotlight News](#), federal, state, county, local, and private funds have permanently preserved more than one-third of New Jersey's total land area. However, since the 1940s, development and urbanization have led to the loss of well over a million acres of wetlands, forests, and farmland. [See New Jersey Conservation Foundation's [Nature for All: A 2050 Vision for New Jersey](#).]

## Public Support for Parks, Farmland, Open Space, Natural Areas, and Cultural Resources

New Jerseyans have increasingly turned to parks and open spaces in record numbers to find refuge in the beauty of nature and in the benefits of outdoor recreation. Research demonstrates that time in nature can improve our mental and physical health. Unfortunately, many residents do not have adequate access to parks and natural areas, especially in urban areas of the state. Funding for park maintenance is also a necessity, as some local, county, and state parks have deteriorated in quality and safety over time. Adequate resources need to be made available to state workers to steward New Jersey's public resources.

[Studies show](#) that for every \$1 invested in open-space preservation, \$10 is returned in the form of ecosystem services (e.g., water purification, waste treatment, and flood mitigation), natural goods (e.g., fish and farm products), and outdoor recreation. The restoration of historic sites creates more jobs than new construction and can often revitalize urban neighborhoods, allowing for the preservation and, in some cases, repurposing of valuable historic places. Residences adjacent to parks and preserved open spaces have real estate values 15 to 20 percent higher than those a block or more away.

New Jerseyans have consistently supported state funding for open-space, farmland, and historic preservation at the ballot. In 2014, after supporting every land preservation bond measure since 1961, nearly two-thirds of New Jerseyans voted to constitutionally dedicate a percentage of the Corporate Business Tax for open-space, farmland, and historic preservation and stewardship. This dedication provides regular and reliable

state funding, which is critical to leveraging millions in additional funding from federal, county, municipal, nonprofit, and corporate entities. Because of the Corporate Business Tax dedication, nearly \$1.9 billion since 2015 has been earmarked for both land preservation and for stewardship programs.

## State Preservation Programs

- Green Acres: Established in 1961, the program has helped preserve over 681,000 acres of land, and has provided more than 1,200 park development projects in all 21 counties.
- Farmland Preservation: Established in 1983, the program has preserved more than 250,000 acres.
- New Jersey Historic Trust: Since 1990, more than \$200 million has been invested in historic site projects.
- Blue Acres: Established in 1995, Blue Acres has facilitated the purchase of hundreds of floodprone properties to help families move to safer locations and decrease repeated home flooding.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity have agreed to conserve 30 percent of the earth's land and seas by 2030, but progress needs to be accelerated.
- Adequate access to parks and natural areas is lacking, especially in urban areas of the state.
- Need exists for additional funding and staff to maintain and operate state parks.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Set a goal of preserving 50% of the most critical remaining lands that are ranked highly for ecological, water, and agriculture values by 2050 to secure a legacy of preservation.
- Preserve approximately 315,000 acres of additional farmland to ensure a sustainable agricultural industry, and reach the Jersey State Agricultural Development Committee's goal of preserving a total of 550,00 acres of farmland.
- Protect New Jersey's cultural heritage, which will require more than \$700 million in additional funding.
- Permanently protect additional lands in the Highlands and Pinelands regions, which provide clean drinking water to more than 75 percent of the state, and provide for additional staff focused on the impacts of climate change on these important regions.
- Rapidly spend additional program funding from Blue Acres to purchase floodprone properties and return these lands to their natural state; adjust the program so that property owners can move faster through the process to sell their homes.
- Ensure that affordable housing siting does not conflict with preservation or protection strategies for habitat, wildlife, and natural lands.
- Continue to fund parks, open space, farmland, and cultural resources preservation through the allocation of funding from the Corporate Business Tax.
- Fully fund the state's Payment in Lieu of Taxes Program to compensate municipalities that host state-preserved lands. Encourage county and local governments to continue pursuing open-space funding programs, including the Payment In Lieu of Taxes Program.
- Encourage the state to fund preservation using federal funding, including the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program and other Natural Resources Conservation Service programs.
- Identify additional sources of funding to address critical unmet need for land preservation.
- Utilize the Conservation Blueprint as a tool to identify priority lands for protection.
- Adequately fund staffing and maintenance for state parks. See the "Fix Our Parks" campaign being coordinated by the Pinelands Preservation Alliance to keep public lands open and available for wildlife to thrive and for the public to have safe access for eco-friendly recreation.

# Protect Farmland

Since its inception, New Jersey's Farmland Preservation Program has protected more than 250,000 acres of farmland across the state, which, among a myriad of benefits, ensures that future generations will have access to arable land. To sustain New Jersey's agricultural industry in the long term, [the New Jersey State Agricultural Development Committee has set a goal of preserving a total of 550,000 acres of farmland](#). However, farmland in New Jersey is currently under siege. New Jersey farmland is increasingly threatened by the ongoing conversion of farmland to residential and commercial development, including warehouse placement.

Preserved farmland can play a significant role in stopping sprawl and protecting the rural, historic, and scenic character of the landscape. Promoting sustainable agriculture that works in harmony with natural systems benefits New Jersey residents by providing locally grown, fresh food choices, and greater proximity to green spaces.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- The boom in online shopping has led to an increase of warehouse development on farmland in New Jersey. This type of development competes with preservation programs. Alternative siting requirements must be implemented to uphold the state's long-standing commitment and goal of preserving more land and open space as outlined in a report by New Jersey Future, [Warehouse Sprawl: Plan Now or Suffer the Consequences](#).
- Farms can help protect the state's water supply and wildlife habitat, particularly if measures are taken to decrease the use of synthetic chemicals, neonicotinoid pesticides, and treated seeds in commercial settings. Neonicotinoids (neonics) are a group of insecticides used widely on farmland and in urban and suburban landscapes, and have been proven to be highly toxic to insects, including the pollinators and bees that the state depends upon for its food supply. Birds, insects, and other wildlife have experienced dangerous declines in many regions of the world, and will continue to do so. [Research clearly shows](#) ecosystem collapse throughout the food chain due to neonics in lakes, stream corridors, forests, and meadows in proximity to agricultural areas, and in heavily suburbanized areas. Many European countries have already taken steps to ban neonicotinoids.
- Implementing practices such as cover cropping, decreased tilling, and adding compost not only helps retain rainwater onsite and increase soil health, but additionally combats climate change by increasing soil carbon sequestration. Given the increase in demand for locally grown food, protecting high-quality soil also ensures that preserved farmland in New Jersey continues to produce healthy food crops. Limiting the amount of building coverage and that of other impervious structures that can damage soil is an important step to meeting that objective.
- For nearly 20 years, there have been multiple proposals to allow commercial nonagricultural businesses on preserved farmland, including venues for large weddings, fairs, and concerts. The number of large events held on preserved farms should be limited and should require both municipal approvals and other limitations set by the State Agricultural Development Committee. Holding many large events, or the inclusion of permanent structures, creates a commercial use of farmland and removes the original focus of this taxpayer-funded agricultural program. Such events undermine the original intent of the program. They also often create traffic problems in rural areas, necessitating additional parking areas and other infrastructure that can negatively impact the soils and natural resources that the program was meant to protect.
- The Natural Resources Conservation Service, in the US Department of Agriculture, offers a variety of conservation programs that protect land and promote more sustainable



farming and land stewardship, including protecting grasslands, transitioning land to organic production, and installing riparian and wetlands buffers. The federal Agriculture Conservation Easement Program provides critical preservation resources, and these funds have preserved thousands of acres of farmland in New Jersey, often in partnership with nonprofit organizations.

- Access to land is one of the primary needs of a thriving, sustainable agriculture system, but the high cost of land in New Jersey poses an enormous challenge to minority, young, and beginning farmers. There are very few people of color who own farmland in our state—a problem the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey is working to address—but additional assistance is needed from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture. Additionally, consideration should be given to provide access to farmland for Indigenous tribes for sustenance farming and the education of their children and families in the traditional ways of their ancestors. The State Agriculture Development Committee hosts the [Farm Link Program](#), which connects farmers with landowners interested in leasing or selling farmland.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Strengthen soil protections to discourage deep soil cuts, stockpiling, compaction, and other harmful practices on preserved farmland, while supporting soil carbon sequestration.
- Uphold policies that limit nonagricultural commercial development on preserved farms, as well as buildings and other impervious surfaces, to ensure minimal impact on farming activities and soil health.
- Encourage agricultural production and assist with the marketing for new products, including organic grains.
- Continue to robustly and consistently fund farmland preservation through federal, state, and local programs, focusing on the access and ownership of land for minority, young, and beginning farmers, and for Indigenous tribal nations.
- Phase out the use of neonicotinoids in all forms, similar to how DDT was phased out over 50 years ago.
- Grow and promote New Jersey's Farm Link Program to engage minority, young, and beginning farmers with landowners interested in selling or leasing land for agriculture.
- Prohibit the location of warehouses, energy infrastructure—including renewable energy infrastructure—and nonfarming-related commercialization on New Jersey's prime agricultural soils to ensure farmlands remain viable and healthy for food production. Encourage the use of solar power on existing buildings or fences to avoid impacting prime agricultural land.
- Promote sustainable agricultural practices by using funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service's conservation programs and additional incentives that work in harmony with natural systems.



# Steward Open Space and Increase Access

New Jersey's open space provides a variety of environmental and economic benefits, including the protection of water resources, preservation of biodiversity and wildlife habitats, creation of greenways, enhancement of urban centers, and the support of recreational opportunities. Proper stewardship is essential for keeping these areas functional and in pristine condition.

Preserved parks and open spaces require funding for stewardship of natural resources, and some parks need revitalization, improved facilities, and increased public access. As more land is preserved, it is imperative that additional stewardship funding be made available. More than ever before, New Jerseyans rely heavily upon neighborhood playgrounds, city and state parks, forests and wildlife management areas, and the statewide trail system for healthy outdoor recreation. Proper stewardship of these resources will benefit present and future generations.

Part of this work must include making nature more accessible for people with disabilities, so that everyone can enjoy our parks and open spaces. (See [The Pinelands is for Everyone](#) project as an example.)

## Sound stewardship includes the following:

- well-funded state, county, and municipal park districts
- parks that serve the needs of area residents, including residents with physical or other disabilities
- parks that protect natural and historic resources
- habitat protection and restoration balanced with public recreation opportunities
- deer and invasive species management
- encouragement for alternative ways of creating and supporting parks—either through public-private partnerships or through nonprofit entities that advocate for parks
- utilization of school playgrounds as open public amenities during nonschool hours

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase budgetary support and allocate more money for staffing for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, particularly in the enforcement of wetlands protections and for stopping illegal off-road vehicles, dumping, and more.
- Institute long-term landscape planning for stewardship at all publicly owned parks, wildlife management areas, natural areas, and forests, including aggressive management of deer and invasive species.
- Increase grant-funding support for [Inclusive Healthy Communities](#) through the New Jersey Department of Human Services to increase outdoor recreational opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Ensure that forest stewardship plans address all components of forest ecology, including soils, native species, carbon sequestration, wetland communities, water resource protection, and compatible recreational values.
- Address the critical backlog of capital park improvements at the state, county, and local levels through planning and increased funding.
- Inventory, map, record, monitor, and enforce conservation easements to ensure that natural resources are permanently protected.
- Support the availability and expansion of natural and restored areas in New Jersey's more urban parks.

# Develop New Trails and Maintain Existing Trails

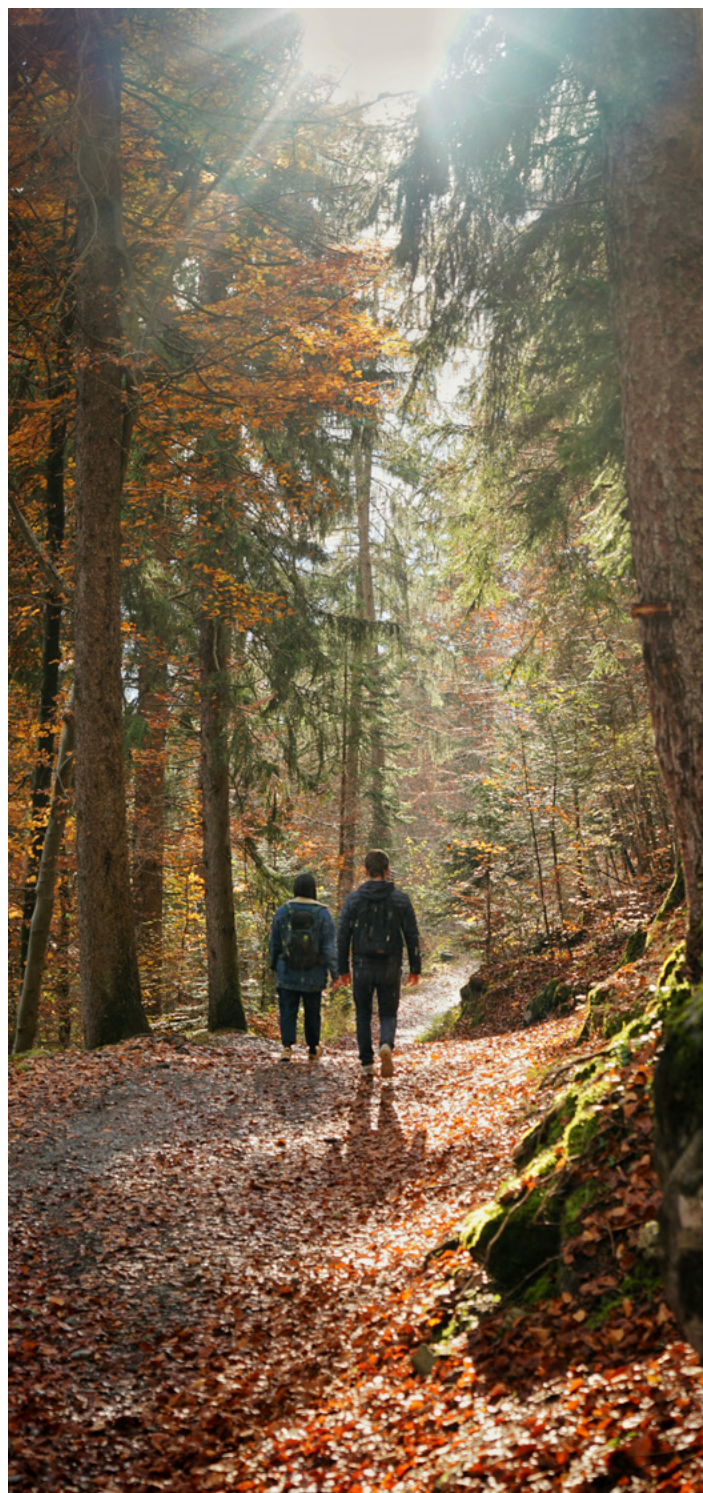
New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the country, which makes public access to open spaces absolutely vital. Trails provide this critical access to residents and visitors. The challenges of connecting people with nature, and particularly of ensuring safe and equitable access for people of color, must be addressed.

In addition, providing secure, well-maintained trails is essential to accommodating high volumes of visitors to more populated parks and outdoor areas.

Stories of overused natural areas are increasingly common. At the Dunnfield Creek trailhead along I-80, Trail Stewards counted over 7,000 hikers in a single day. The Appalachian Trail boardwalk in Vernon Township has been a longtime challenge for locals, with hundreds of cars parked illegally along high-speed roads and residential areas. For hiking locations with limited parking, there is often an overflow of cars into nearby neighborhoods, causing challenges for residents living there. These visitor numbers and parking problems often distract from the more subtle damage caused by unprecedented use—trampled vegetation, accelerated erosion, litter, confusing unapproved “social trails,” and search-and-rescue calls to rescue lost hikers. With this skyrocketing use and impact, it is critical that support for trails grows to accommodate the demand.

Part of the lack of support stems from poor public understanding of how trails are maintained and built. Many assume that trails are natural pathways kept open by foot traffic. Others believe that cadres of dedicated park personnel are the ones who cut back vegetation, mount trail markings, and pick up trash. Neither of these common misconceptions is true, which thereby contributes to the challenges in securing the resources needed to properly steward trails across the state.

The construction and maintenance of trails in New Jersey is undertaken as a partnership between land managers and partner nonprofits, with volunteers contributing thousands of hours annually to ensure the development and maintenance of the state's trails—the equivalent of many full-time paid staff. Any model of sustainable trail infrastructure must have nonprofit partners at its core, recognizing that they multiply the value of every dollar by leveraging volunteers in the execution





of important projects. Beyond providing funding mechanisms for partners, this means designing protocols that encourage volunteer and partner involvement rather than serving as obstacles, such as liability agreements, permit applications, and reporting requirements

If the environmental integrity, recreational value, and safety of these trails is to be preserved into the future, a commensurate rise in investment in New Jersey parks is critical.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Funding requests made to the NJDEP's Recreational Trails Program show increasing funding demand and interest in trails.
- Considering the increased public attention to the link between health and parks, the demand for recreation facilities in New Jersey will likely continue.
- The use of illegal off-road vehicles on trails creates safety issues for park users and impacts wildlife habitats and other important ecological features.
- Delays and expenses in obtaining approvals to repair trail infrastructure stymies timely upkeep.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Fund public land managers to handle trail infrastructure, such as parking lots, kiosks, restrooms, staffing, and enforcement.
- Provide easier access to and from more trail locations, both as a mode of transportation and for recreation, and reduce stress on existing parking areas using federal infrastructure funding.
- Extend trail plans into urban areas and older suburbs to address racial equity, diversity, and inclusion, bringing the state closer to the goal of having a park or open space within one mile of every New Jersey home.
- Design trails for people of all ages and abilities, and improve and ensure accessibility to trails for those with mobility challenges.
- Fund nonprofit partners to address trail monitoring, maintenance, repair, improvement, construction, relocation, and general upkeep.
- Continue efforts on the New Jersey Trails Playbook, a collaboration between NJDEP and NJDOT that was designed to ensure that everyone has safe and equitable access to quality recreational trails.
- Support the full build-out of the Essex-Hudson Greenway (AKA Garden State Greenway).
- Collaborate with local police to enforce off-road vehicle laws and other issues of public safety on trails.
- Review permit processes with local park superintendents and on-the-ground trail-building partners to identify where regulations are causing gridlock, resulting in environmental degradation and threats to visitor safety.

# Create and Invest in More Urban Parks



Local parks and urban green spaces improve physical and psychological health, strengthen communities, provide environmental and economic benefits to area residents, and make neighborhoods and cities more attractive places to live and work. New Jersey's exceptional population density demands our attention on the abundance, location, and maintenance of state parks.

American adults and children rarely engage in the recommended levels of physical activity needed for a healthy lifestyle. The epidemic of inactivity is partially due to car-based development patterns and to inadequate access to parks and open spaces. [Studies show](#) that when people live near parks, they exercise more. Physical activity also relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety, and enhances overall psychological well-being.

Local parks and green spaces provide benefits beyond physical activity. Community gardens and urban farms can provide access to healthy food and allow residents to make social connections within communities, relieving isolation and providing a connection to others. Many of the mental health benefits of parks come from access to natural areas, including trees and water. Lastly, expanding, maintaining, and acquiring open spaces boost local property values while creating jobs.

Despite the well-known benefits of access to outdoor recreation in green spaces, communities of color and low-income communities are still less likely to have access to parks, trails,

and gardens than their counterparts. In order to confront the challenge of inequitable access, the state should strive for every resident in more developed areas of New Jersey to live within a 10-minute walk of a park or green space.

## Reclaiming Abandoned and Polluted Sites

Abandoned or contaminated properties are a detriment to the health and wellbeing of the communities they are located within. These sites—often located in formerly or presently industrial urban areas, or along waterways or old rail lines—can be prime opportunities for new parks. An example of this is the proposed Essex-Hudson Greenway.

In New Jersey's urban areas—which see a mix of high-density residential buildings, commercial buildings, and transportation corridors—parks provide a unique opportunity to improve the economic vitality and quality of life of neighborhoods. Cleaning up formerly contaminated sites for parkland or other green gathering spaces can become the centerpiece of a revived neighborhood. Parks have the potential to connect redlined neighborhoods to city centers and vital resources, repair and improve the natural environment, and allow for artistic expression and community-building (See page 3). Moreover, parks provide vital ecosystem services through the addition of vegetation, which can improve air quality, create shade canopy, and reduce stormwater runoff.





Strategic park placement can repair environmental damage and add much-needed open space to neighborhoods without adequate parkland, thereby providing families with a space that contributes to health, happiness, and well-being.

### Creating Friends Groups

The state should encourage the development and support a network of nonprofit or community-based “friends” groups that can address equity issues where resources are most needed; they can also become effective advocates for the care, maintenance, and management of local parks and park matters, from design and stewardship to programming and management. The processes associated with these activities can be designed to support community involvement.

### Establishing Safe Routes to Parks

Parks should not only be created and well maintained; establishing a Safe Routes to Parks initiative is also key. A Safe Routes to Parks initiative would mean creating accessible, safe, and comfortable walking and biking paths to parks, ensuring that people of all ages and abilities can easily and conveniently reach them. Neighborhood issues of public safety, including unsafe public infrastructure (e.g., lack of sidewalks or pedestrian crosswalks), must be addressed to encourage use and to welcome area residents.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Many residents of New Jersey lack adequate access to a well-designed, well-funded, well-maintained, and well-programmed park, playground, or green space within a 10-minute walk from their home or place of work.
- Parks have been lost from diversions of public parkland for private and commercial purposes, including at least 10 in 2021.
- There is a disparity of access to and of quality of parks across the state.
- Insufficient parks and greenspaces are generally most acute in urban neighborhoods, where the least land is available to address the situation and where economic injustice has occurred. This often results in abandoned, contaminated industrial land and abandoned or unused rail corridors or vacant lots.
- Existing brownfields and blighted properties are a drain on community and city resources.
- Communities can be activated and strengthened by their involvement in the creation and care of local parks and green spaces.
- Numerous existing parks suffer from insufficient maintenance and programming.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that urban families in New Jersey have access to well-designed, well-funded, well-maintained, and well-programmed parks, playgrounds, or green spaces within a 10-minute walk from home or workplace.
- Ensure that the Capital Park project in Trenton is constructed in a way the public wants so that it can become a destination for the community and for visitors to the area.
- Prioritize funding for the development of parks and green spaces, in areas that historically have been impacted by pollution and contamination.
- Prioritize the use of funds from Natural Resource Damages settlements to expand parkland, urban green space, and restoration projects near affected neighborhoods and waterways using community input.
- Continue to support the spending of Green Acres dollars in urban areas, and strengthen the Green Acres rules to make it harder to divert all publicly preserved land for private commercial uses.
- Leverage the recent federal recommitment and support for funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and leverage other federal park funding mechanisms.
- Establish more New Jersey state parks in urban areas. While local and county parks play an important role in our urban areas, state parks are funded by all taxpayers in the state, yet residents of urban areas may have barriers to travel long distances to state parks.
- Continue and increase funding for the state's Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Fund for brownfield cleanup, including its use for brownfield-to-greenfield park development projects.
- Leverage the Long Term Control Plan goals for wastewater treatment plants and their need to develop green infrastructure projects. Parks and school grounds are ideal locations for such projects, which would also help provide funding for the development of those projects.
- Expand access to waterfronts and tidal waters in urban communities that have historically been denied entry due to industrial development along the shoreline.
- Establish a Safe Routes to Parks program, similar to the Safe Routes to Schools Program, where neighborhoods are reviewed as a whole and parks are made accessible and welcoming.
- Create safe, dedicated bicycle trails/lanes/systems that can help connect neighborhoods to work, schools, and play areas.
- Create food parks and small-scale agricultural spaces in densely populated areas so local growers can work with the community to cultivate nutritious and culturally appropriate foods.
- Create a statewide support system for “friends” groups in all communities across the state, and provide financial support and technical assistance for existing groups.
- Create green jobs and career pathways in green industry, as well as food service entrepreneurial opportunities.



# Promote Schoolyards for Public Use

There are thousands of public schools across the state of New Jersey. Nearly every one includes a schoolyard. Yet across the state, few of these schoolyards are open to the public for use during nonschool hours, and many are designed without the kinds of green space and play features that a school or a neighborhood deserve. Instead, the majority of schoolyards are expanses of asphalt. Accordingly, not only do thousands of playgrounds not provide quality spaces for play and recreation for children, nor outdoor education spaces to help teachers teach, these spaces also miss an opportunity to provide mental, physical, and aesthetic benefits to local neighborhoods.

## Schoolyards Should be a Green, Healthy Place or All to Enjoy

Both during and after school, schoolyards should provide a place that is green and healthy. Play equipment, sports fields, and games for students should be available to maximize the benefits of recess and gym class. Trees and gardens that reduce the heat island effect, along with rain gardens and other green infrastructure tools, can help manage stormwater runoff on-site rather than allowing storm events to impact the neighborhood with flooding or to contribute to combined sewer overflow issues. Outdoor classrooms would allow lessons to be taught outside.

One of the important facts to keep in mind is that a green, healthy schoolyard is good for the students, teachers, neighborhood, city, and state overall. Land owned by the state's school districts adds up to significant acreage. In communities where green space is scarce or where opportunities for green infrastructure to help with reducing flood risks are limited, schoolyards can make a significant difference.

## Serving Many Needs and Providing Many Benefits

First and foremost, the schoolyard is an outdoor education space. The space should enhance the learning environment, improve educational outcomes, and support the reduction of achievement gaps. This can be accomplished through outdoor classrooms, education gardens, the arts, teacher materials, and the necessary training to maximize outdoor education experiences.

Green healthy schoolyards do the following:

- Improve social determinants of health: As attractive places for relaxation and recreation, green schoolyards reduce climate-related health impacts, such as lowering heat island effects and helping lower the impact of flooding events. In addition, [studies show](#) that students who get a chance to play during the day do better at school.
- Address climate resilience by helping to improve clean air and clean water: When designed to be resilient to climate change, green schoolyards can improve the environmental literacy of the students, staff, and community members.
- Double as parks: When equitably designed and when access to the public is allowed, green schoolyards can double as parks. Most schoolyards are within a 10-minute walk in many neighborhoods where other options are not available, often because new greenspace is too expensive to purchase and redevelop into a meaningful space.

## Open Hours and Maintenance

Student safety is a primary concern. Therefore, it is appropriate for schools to close and secure the campus during the school day. However, the school, school district, and community can work together to find ways to keep playgrounds open outside of school hours during the evening, on weekends, and in the summer. Playgrounds should be monitored to ensure safety and adherence to rules, and they should be maintained on a regular basis by the school and the community.

An open schoolyard could be designed to include elements for the larger community, including a play area for pre-K children, adult fitness equipment, and areas for senior citizens to meet and gather, or to watch their grandchildren. Green schoolyards can also be places for community gardens or summer markets.



## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- The state has lots of land owned by school districts in schoolyards that do not best serve their students.
- Many schoolyards are not open to the public to provide recreation or other benefits to surrounding neighborhoods outside of school hours.
- Paved schoolyards contribute to environmental issues in urban areas.
- [According to the Trust for Public Land](#), over 29 million kids in America do not have a park with-in a ten minute walk of home.
- Student safety is a high concern within existing asphalt schoolyards.
- The responsibility for the cost of converting a paved schoolyard to a green healthy schoolyard is not clear.
- The responsibility for the cost of cleaning and maintaining an open schoolyard should not be borne solely by the school staff.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enact state policies and regulations that encourage or require green schoolyards as part of school development or redevelopment.
- Identify state funding to help local school districts pay for green schoolyards.
- Assist local school districts and municipalities to tap into federal funding that is becoming available for projects.
- Focus funding on communities experiencing social or environmental injustice.
- Create model programs for municipalities to work with their local school districts on policies, shared agreements, and identifying responsibilities and sources of funding to build, maintain, and manage green schoolyards.
- Include friends of schoolyards in the statewide effort to support park friend groups.
- Involve the community in projects aimed at improving the spaces. Such involvement will also improve community cohesion between school and their surrounding neighborhoods.

# Support and Promote Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture is the practice of cultivating, processing, and distributing food in or around urban areas. Urban agriculture is also the term used for animal husbandry, aquaculture, urban beekeeping, and horticulture.

Policy that supports the creation, protection, and long-term sustainability of urban agriculture helps create career pathways for students graduating with degrees ranging from botany and agriculture to business administration and public health.

Strong policy around urban agriculture would also stimulate a local economy and give rise to a new generation of ecopreneurs, or people who either create or sell sustainable products and services, along with spreading awareness about the environment. These products and services could include growing and selling organic foods, undertaking recycling efforts, or generating green-conscious construction.

## ➤ ***What are Food Deserts?***

Food deserts are regions where people have limited access to healthful and affordable food. This may be due to having a low income or to having to travel farther to find healthful food options. There are 50 designated food-desert communities in New Jersey.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Purchasing land in densely populated and densely developed areas is almost always more expensive than purchasing land elsewhere. Some urban farmers have found ways around purchasing property through the use of the adopt-a-lot program, which is the temporary lending of a lot in exchange for incredibly low prices, sometimes as low as \$1 dollar per year. The program was born to help revitalize communities with dilapidated properties and to deter illegal dumping from unused, abandoned lots, but it has been used by some urban farmers and gardeners as a means to provide themselves with temporary land access for gardening and/or urban farming. However, without proper pathways to land ownership, urban farmers on short-term leased land can often face difficulties accessing the infrastructure they need to operate, and they face the threat of eviction in the event of an interested property buyer.
- Access to water for irrigation is essential to farming. However, with temporary ownership of properties, farmers are not able to establish permanent water infrastructure on the properties they operate out of. Even when farmers own their own lot, establishing a water system on a property can be expensive and requires permits and approvals from the city.
- There are currently about 300,000 children receiving New Jersey SNAP (formerly food stamps) benefits. While SNAP is an essential program for low-income families to receive supplementary nutrition, it does not guarantee that produce is available at a family's nearby grocery store or market, nor that families may have the time or understanding of the produce to prepare it for themselves. Access to nutritious and culturally appropriate foods, and particularly fruits and vegetables, is critically important to promote these communities' well-being and flourishing.





## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a pilot program to financially support urban agriculture and urban farmers across the state that will demonstrate positive impact and results on nutrition and food access in communities.
- Create a state program to help farmers who intend to operate or are operating in urban areas acquire land for long-term leases or for purchase.
- Increase municipal support for community gardens, particularly in and around communities experiencing food insecurity and lack of food access. This can be done through the adoption of a resolution or policies that support the creation, protection, and long-term sustainability of community gardens.
- Implement suggestions from the Rutgers Cooperative Extension's Office of Urban Extension and Engagement's 2022 [\*Urban Agriculture Strategies for the State of New Jersey: A report that frames the Garden State's challenges and opportunities.\*](#)

# End Warehouse Sprawl

The need for warehouse space has been growing in New Jersey due to a combination of global and local forces. While trade policies and markets can shift and impact the demand for warehouse space, the Port of New York and New Jersey's major operations in Newark, Elizabeth, and Bayonne will likely continue to generate the need for large sorting, storage, and distribution facilities to handle the volume of goods arriving at the port from other countries. Meanwhile, the growth of e-commerce has resulted in a need for a new generation of smaller, more locally focused warehouses. While larger facilities value proximity to the port, small warehouses value proximity to customers.

The Port of New York and New Jersey is a major driver of the state's economy. Industries devoted to the movement and storage of goods provide jobs to nearly one out of every eight employed New Jersey residents, according to [a report by NJ Future](#). This is the highest proportion among the 50 states. Additionally, traffic at the port is growing due to increasing US trade with South Asia (the preferred shipping route from South Asia traverses the Atlantic and ends in East Coast ports like Newark and Elizabeth). In fact, [the Port of New York and New Jersey is the largest container complex in the world and is ranked third in the country for container throughput](#). All told, this economic activity has an impact on local communities through increased air pollution and truck traffic; it also impacts marine life through increased vessel traffic.

Alongside shifting patterns of international trade, the growth in online shopping has further increased demand for warehousing across the country. The gradual decline of brick-and-mortar retail has helped catalyze the growth of the industrial real estate market for at least the last decade. For example, [in 2020 Amazon was New Jersey's largest employer](#) and has opened facilities of various sizes across the state.

## Warehouse Sprawl

The pattern of warehouse development is changing. Previously, former industrial or manufacturing sites in northern New Jersey were targeted, but now warehouse development is moving west along I-78 and into Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley, consuming farmland at an alarming rate. Sprawl has begun to proliferate south along the New Jersey Turnpike, generating enough new truck traffic to prompt an expensive widening of the New Jersey Turnpike southward into Burlington County. Higher land values may be the only thing that has prevented a similar loss of prime farmland along I-78 in Warren and Hunterdon counties. However,

recent warehouse development proposals in western and central New Jersey indicate that the protection afforded by land-value differentials may prove short-lived.

Complicating matters further, local officials may be attracted to warehouse development, since it produces property tax revenue without demanding much in terms of government services. But leaving the fate of one of New Jersey's most important industries, as well as its associated land-use decisions, solely in the hands of a myriad of local governments and their fiscal self-interests does not guarantee a regionally optimal solution. By adopting a regional perspective, communities can make sure that port-oriented storage and distribution functions are not consuming outlying lands that are better used for farming, recreation, or other nonindustrial uses. Additionally, communities can ensure that redevelopment opportunities near the port that are ideal for warehousing are not instead allocated to other land uses that lack the same location constraints. In 2022, the New Jersey State Planning Commission's Office of Planning Advocacy released [Distribution Warehousing and Goods Movement Guidelines](#) aimed at encouraging a proactive, regional approach to planning, siting, and facilitating warehouses.

From a commerce standpoint, locating large warehousing and distribution facilities as close to the port as possible is a desirable outcome. But, from a local perspective, these location decisions concentrate the negative effects of goods movement, such as truck traffic and subsequent noise and air pollution, in communities adjacent to the port. Many of these communities are home to significant low-income populations of color, which have historically borne the worst health and quality-of-life impacts of New Jersey's industrial past.

To help rectify these environmental injustices, the state's push to electrify vehicles should prioritize heavy-duty trucks, medium-duty trucks, and port equipment before devoting attention to personal vehicles and charging infrastructure. Beginning in 2022, New Jersey requires that all new warehouses over 100,000 square feet be "solar-ready." Policies that build on that law—such as mandating clean energy—and include improved stormwater management for sites should be considered, including vegetated green roofs. Now that warehouse development has come to other peoples' backyards, considerations about placement, operation, and external impacts need to be applied equitably across the region.



## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- New Jersey is losing prime farmland and other open space.
- Truck traffic and associated local pollution, noise, and congestion is on the rise.
- Induced demand for new and larger road infrastructure has increased.
- Local officials are increasingly considering the fiscal incentives of zoning for warehouses.
- There is a notable lack of regional perspective when addressing the issue of warehouse sprawl.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Involve regional governments, port officials, and shippers in land-use planning to identify redevelopment locations that are particularly well suited to the needs of the goods movement industry.
- Provide municipal officials with legal and land-use tools to rezone and avoid as-of-right warehouse development in inappropriate locations, and require municipalities to consult with and obtain consent from neighboring towns in determining appropriate locations for warehouses.
- Create a program through the Office of Planning Advocacy to provide incentives for municipalities to reexamine their master plans and zoning ordinances in light of warehouse sprawl, and to appropriately plan for their community's development prior to the receipt of a warehouse application.
- Encourage warehousing to continue using redevelopment sites in appropriate locations. For port-dependent functions, sites near the port should get high priority and facilities located in environmental justice communities should move to become zero-emissions zones; for smaller, more customer-focused distribution facilities, obsolete shopping centers or office parks could make for ideal locations.
- Prioritize and incentivize the cleanup and reuse of brownfield sites in optimal warehousing locations. Consider a fee on warehouses located outside of these areas that is dedicated to programs for the reduction of air pollution in environmental justice areas.
- Minimize impervious surfaces by building up rather than out, and install permeable pavement, bioswales, or other green infrastructure (e.g., green roofs) to mitigate stormwater runoff.
- Broaden the scope for "solar-ready" warehouses. Enable more goods to be shipped by rail, as trains emit far fewer pollutants and greenhouse gases per ton-mile than trucks.
- Prioritize heavy-duty trucks, medium-duty trucks, and port equipment for vehicle electrification in order to mitigate the effects on port-adjacent communities.



# Enhance Local Environmental Power

In 1968, legislation was enacted that provides a municipal authority in New Jersey the ability to create environmental commissions (ECs) with the primary goal of protecting natural resources. The legislation enabling environmental commissions ([NJSA 40:56A-1 et seq.](#)) states that an environmental commission has responsibility for “the protection, development or use of natural resources, including water resources, located within its territorial limits.” Moreover, New Jersey’s Municipal Land Use Law states that “whenever the environmental commission has prepared and submitted to the planning board and the board of adjustment an index of the natural resources of the municipality, the planning board or the board of adjustment shall make available to the environmental commission an informational copy of every application for development submitted to either board” ([NJSA 40:55D-27](#)).

## Expanding the Role of New Jersey’s Environmental Commissions

While ECs have the responsibility for the protection, development, or use of natural resources located within their municipalities (including water resources), they operate in an advisory-based capacity and without the legal powers of decision-making authority under the law. This inconsistency between their responsibilities and their lack of authority to carry out their duties limits environmental commissions’ effectiveness at the expense of New Jersey’s shared natural resources.

Given the tremendous environmental challenges facing New Jersey, more than 50 years after ECs were first established, the time has come to expand and codify the decision-making power and authority of ECs to protect local natural resources. All municipalities should be required to establish an EC, as the time for optional environmental protection is gone. Additionally, required training for planning board members should be expanded to include planning for climate change and resiliency. Currently, training for planning board members is limited to a one-time requirement. Since the impacts of climate change are evolving and laws and policy change over time, compulsory training at regular intervals should be the standard.

EC authority should be expanded to ensure environmental planning, review, and compliance at the municipal level. Granting ECs decision-making authority similar to other municipal land-use boards will ensure that development and redevelopment plans include climate-crisis assessment reviews, minimize the impacts of the climate crisis, reduce impacts on overburdened communities, and protect natural resources and habitats for ecological and human use. Given New Jersey’s existing municipal authority structure, existing land-use boards are overwhelmed with affordable housing and zoning requirements, traffic plans, community character, etc. Environmental planning and protection too often fall to the wayside at land-use board meetings. Expanding the authority of ECs will ensure dedication to municipal environmental protections and planning.

## ➤ *What is the New Jersey Municipal Land Use Law?*

The Municipal Land Use Law ([NJSA. 40:55D-1](#)), first established in 1975, grants towns the power to enact a master plan to set land-use priorities and direction, as well as adopt a zoning ordinance to dictate where and in what form development should happen, all with the purpose of protecting the health, safety, and welfare of citizens.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Natural resource protection, planning for climate threats, and development/redevelopment impacts on overburdened communities are often given little to no consideration at the municipal level, specifically within the context of reviews of site plan applications.
- Approximately 400 of New Jersey's 564 municipalities have established environmental commissions to advise on natural resource protection, with about 300 active with current appointments. Local governing bodies will allow appointments to expire and ECs to go dormant when they want to fast-track development without hearing about or abiding by environmental best practices at the local level.
- ECs often provide thoughtful review of and comments on site plan applications, but since ECs are advisory only, land-use boards often ignore their advice in the pursuit of increasing ratables (i.e., more taxes) to the peril of natural resources and the people living in the municipalities.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Amend the Municipal Land Use Law to require every municipality to establish an Environmental Commission.
- Expand the powers and authority of ECs to include their required review and approval of environmental impacts development and redevelopment plans, and environment-related ordinances, such as stormwater management. Such environmental impacts include stormwater, development upon or infringement into steep slopes, tree removal, construction phasing, and landscape planning. (See [Assembly Bill No. 4791](#) of the 2024–2025 legislative session as a potential starting point for this consideration.)
- Ensure that all development plans include a climate impact assessment for EC review.
- Include an environmental justice impact assessment in any development plan that is in an environmental justice community, as defined by recent state legislation.
- Ensure ECs approve and review all new environmental ordinances in the town before ordinances go to the municipal council for voting.
- Allow the enforcement or review of permits for items such as tree removal, impervious cover variances, etc., by ECs.
- Require ECs and land-use board members to attend appropriate training on an annual basis.

# Nurture Ecotourism



According to a [2019 report](#) from the Outdoor Industry Association, outdoor recreation accounts for almost \$12 billion in economic gains and employs about 132,000 people in New Jersey. In Cape May County alone, more than 470,000 tourists visit to seek out migratory birds, with an estimated economic impact of \$313 million each year between expenditures on lodging, food, recreation, and shopping.

New Jersey released [Outside, Together! A Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan](#) in 2023. While the plan provides direction on funding policies, as well as priorities for statewide recreation needs and opportunities, New Jersey can take the next step to more actively promote the state's robust outdoor recreation economy.

There are 18 states that have outdoor recreation units, task forces, or policy advisors. Vermont and Maryland have active organizations dedicated to promoting and supporting outdoor recreation (both established in 2017). In Vermont, the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative provides annual status reports to the governor that include recommendations to increase residents' connection to nature. They also include recommendations to attract both high-quality employers and a sustainable workforce in all economic sectors supported by the outdoor recreation economy. The Collaborative is an invaluable partner to the government agencies that maintain the parks and open spaces in the state.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- There is no broad, coordinated statewide program to promote and support outdoor recreation users and businesses.
- Economic health requires fully maintained parks and facilities to attract tourists.
- Recreational and commercial fishing and hunting permits are insufficient to fund the maintenance of parks and wildlife management areas.
- Public transportation connections to popular attractions are needed to reduce parking overflow and to provide access to all people.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create an Outdoor Recreation Council in New Jersey.
- Launch a recreation hub marketing campaign: This campaign would coordinate a public-awareness effort that organizes New Jersey's outdoor products, services, and places geographically to redirect participation or visitation to underutilized recreation areas or higher-priority destinations. A rebranding could drive patronage of nearby businesses, spread out visitations, incentivize small groups, and encourage local shopping, all while reinforcing public health, quality of life, and outdoor community building.
- Secure innovative financing for outdoor recreation-economy businesses: Continue to tailor grants, loans, and sources of capital to the needs of small businesses and startups, especially for opportunities that are unique to outdoor recreation, such as investments in infrastructure and facilities.
- Establish a statewide platform for outdoor workforce development: Build an outdoor jobs portal that facilitates the ongoing hiring and training of outdoor professionals and seasonal workers.



# Restore the Pinelands

The Pinelands regional planning program was the result of the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978 and the state Pinelands Protection Act of 1979. Thirty-seven years later, the Pinelands program is still the country's strongest regional planning authority. A central goal of the Pinelands program is to protect the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer by preserving the forests that collect and cleanse rainfall across the aquifer's two million acres. The aquifer provides more than 35 billion gallons of water per year to residents, farmers, businesses, and industry in southern New Jersey. In addition to farmers who use the aquifer for irrigation, the region's cranberry industry is dependent on this water to maintain its bogs. A 2009 report by the US Department of Agriculture identified the Pinelands watershed as one of the northeastern US's most critical sources of water.



Currently, the 1.1 million acres of the Pinelands National Reserve are home to 800,000 acres of forest, 300,000 acres of which are owned privately. An additional 60,000 acres of the reserve is farmland, and the rest is composed of communities ranging from new suburbs to towns tracing their history to early colonial settlers.

## Pinelands Program

The Pinelands program has two key components. The Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan consists of a land-use map and regulations that govern all development in the Pinelands. The plan establishes mandatory regional zoning for conservation and economic growth zones, and is designed to protect both the natural functioning of the Pine Barrens habitats and the integrity of the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer. The Pinelands Commission is responsible for overseeing and amending the Comprehensive Management Plan. It is composed of 15 volunteer commissioners: seven appointed by the governor, seven chosen by counties in the Pinelands region, and one representative from the US Department of the Interior.

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Empty seats on the commission are often not filled with conservation-minded leaders, and the commission is often used as a tool for political favors.
- Funding is lacking for the implementation of decade-old recommendations and for the hiring of adequate staff, which in turn leads to a lack of focus on critical issues like climate change.
- The aquifer is contaminated by increased development, leading to increased levels of nitrogen from lawn and farm stormwater runoff.
- There is increased demand for clean water, resulting in saltwater intrusion into the aquifers, periodic water supply crises, and the drying out of wetlands, streams, and ponds.
- Public lands and habitats are being destroyed by off-road vehicles in environmentally sensitive areas.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### ➤ Pinelands Commission

- ✓ Advance a list of nominees to the Pinelands Commission that reflects gender and ethnic diversity, along with years of experience and expertise in governance and environmental protections.
- ✓ Increase funding for the Pinelands Commission to restore lost positions rather than shrinking the agency.
- ✓ Support changes to the Comprehensive Management Plan to ensure that infrastructure projects are properly reviewed by the Pinelands Commission before they can move forward.

### ➤ Habitat and Water Protection

- ✓ Revise the Comprehensive Management Plan to establish no-net-tree-loss and other measures to combat climate change.
- ✓ Employ comprehensive planning between the Pinelands Commission and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to address emerging contaminants and inconsistent land development projects, such as artificial turf facilities.
- ✓ Promote infrastructure planning and repairs to eliminate water lost from public supply systems.
- ✓ Establish new rules requiring water protection measures in site preparation and in the design of new construction.
- ✓ NJDEP should adopt a comprehensive, science-based plan for controlling motor vehicle usage for each state forest to protect peoples' safety and natural resources; NJDEP should also provide vehicle access maps.
- ✓ Enforce any existing vehicle use maps and maintain a sustained public communications initiative to change the expectations of those doing the damage; engage the broader public in enjoying state lands through low-impact recreation.
- ✓ Use state's existing regulatory authority to deny fossil fuel infrastructure projects in the Pinelands region.

# Protect the New Jersey Highlands

The [New Jersey Highlands region covers an area of approximately 1,250 square miles and 88 municipalities in 7 counties](#). The Region's water travels as far south as Camden and Gloucester counties and makes its way east to the most densely populated areas of New Jersey. With 70% of New Jersey residents getting at least some of their drinking water from this region, including 8 out of every 10 people residing in an identified overburdened community, and given the mounting impacts of more severe storms and droughts, the need to protect our drinking water supplies increases every day. Highlands open spaces and forests, however, provide no-cost filtration and protection for the region's drinking water. By protecting the Highlands Region's farmland, forests, and open spaces, the state will be protecting the drinking water supply for approximately seven million New Jerseyans.



The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, passed in 2004, was implemented to protect this water supply, along with the many other assets in the region, including recreation and ecotourism, historic areas, agriculture, other industry, and much more. But today, approximately 230 square miles of the Highlands remain threatened by some form of development: there are some 19,000 privately owned properties at risk of being converted.

In addition to the water resource that Highlands forests provide, the 320-square-mile core mature forest is home to a great diversity of native plant and animal species, many of them rare, threatened, or endangered. The forest offers abundant, accessible outdoor recreational opportunities, filters our air, and moderates flooding, and its outstanding ability to capture and store atmospheric carbon makes it a significant part of New Jersey's developing climate resiliency strategies.

## Highlands Preservation And Planning Areas

By statute, the Highlands region is delineated by two distinct areas. The first is the Preservation Area, which became subject to the strict land-use regulations of NJDEP with the passage of the Highlands Act. The second is the Planning Area, which balances growth and development with capacity-based protections for water resources through voluntary municipal conformance to the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

The water resource protection goals for the Preservation and Planning Areas are the same. But, whereas in the Preservation Area the goals are achieved by regulation, in the Planning Area they are achieved through innovative regional planning. Of the Highlands' 88 municipalities, 5 are located entirely within the Preservation Area, 36 are entirely within the Planning Area, and 47 are split between the Preservation and Planning Areas.

## Highlands Regional Master Plan

The capacity-based Highlands Regional Master Plan was adopted by the Highlands Council in 2008, primarily to balance natural resource protection with appropriate economic growth in the Planning Area. Since municipal conformance to the Regional Master Plan is voluntary, and because the goals and objectives of the Highlands Act are implemented in the Planning Area through ordinances that are consistent with the Regional Master Plan and adopted by conforming municipalities, the work of the Highlands Council to promote municipal conformance is extremely important.





## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Vacancies on the Highlands Council remain a concern. The council is currently operating with only 11 of its statutorily mandated 15 members.
- Funding challenges mean the council cannot fulfil its responsibilities.
- Approximately 6.2 million people rely on the Highlands for drinking water, but many of these waters continue to be degraded because of inadequate protection.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Fully fund the Highlands Council and its programs. The Highlands Council needs more funding for staff and land preservation.
  - ✓ Provide dedicated, repeated funding for the Highlands Open Space Partnership program from the existing Corporate Business Tax's preservation funding. This funding should be used to protect upland forests, farmland, and other natural resources.
  - ✓ Provide a modest budget increase to allow for enough staff to address climate change, agricultural policy, water resource management, and environmental resource stewardship.
  - ✓ Restore the Highlands Council's grant budget (currently funded from an allocation of the Realty Transfer Tax) to implement the Highlands Act and Highlands Regional Master Plan.
  - ✓ Provide funding for restoration and stewardship projects that are intended to protect the state's water supply and future needs. Funding for this policy area could also come from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative's proceeds.
- Fill current Highlands Council vacancies.
- Require that all state agencies, including NJDEP, defer to the Highland's Council for findings of consistency with the Regional Master Plan for activities that have impacts on Highlands protected resources.

# Protect The New Jersey Palisades

The Palisades Interstate Park Commission was created in 1900 by the states of New Jersey and New York to protect the cliffs of the Palisades, an internationally significant geological formation. Palisades Interstate Park, stretching 12 miles north of the George Washington Bridge, was established in 1909.

To further protect the Palisades, a narrow strip of land at the summit, going west from the edge of the escarpment and running the length of the park, was purchased by John D. Rockefeller and donated to the Commission in 1933. Existing buildings along the summit were removed to return the tree line to its unbroken natural state. This was followed in 1948 by the construction of the Palisades Interstate Parkway, complete with overlooks and service buildings hidden from view among the trees. The parkway was completed in 1958, since which time the Palisades have stood pristine, surrounded on both the New Jersey and New York sides by some of the densest development in the world.

In 1965, Congress designated the Palisades Interstate Park a National Historic Landmark, [noting](#), “The Palisades Interstate Park represents an unusual effort by two states, New Jersey and New York, to preserve the scenic beauty of the cliffs on the lower western side of the Hudson River.” In 1983, “The Palisades of the Hudson” was designated a National Natural Landmark, and in 1998 the Palisades Interstate Parkway was designated as a National Landmark by the National Park Service.

For decades, the New Jersey towns north of the George Washington Bridge acted as guardians of this national treasure, the Palisades, preserving the unspoiled view through zoning laws that limited building heights to 35 feet.

## Threats

In 2012, Englewood Cliffs granted LG Electronics a variance to build a 143-foot office tower that would rise far above the tree-line, marring the iconic cliffs that are National Natural and National Historic Landmarks. The variance sparked protests from conservation groups, residents, and elected officials in New Jersey and New York. The New Jersey Conservation Foundation joined the Natural Resources Defense Council and Scenic Hudson in a lawsuit challenging the variance. After extensive advocacy and negotiations, and a call by four former New Jersey governors for a low-rise alternative, a settlement was reached in 2015. The agreement allows for a five-story wing just shy of 70 feet and a three-story wing, with landscaping, lighting, and other design features to reduce visual impacts. The settlement was hailed as a



win by advocates, LG, and the town, but the struggle made clear the tenuous nature of the protection.

In 2020, a zoning overlay adopted under an affordable housing court settlement between Englewood Cliffs and Fair Share Housing permits another tract critical to the Palisades viewshed to be developed in violation of the State Plan and against the regulations of the Council on Affordable Housing. The site under consideration is surrounded by parkland and is designated as Planning Area 5 (i.e., environmentally sensitive) by the State Development and Redevelopment Plan; it was also removed from the NJDEP’s sewer service area. The Council of Affordable Housing’s regulations for affordable housing require that any proposed Planning Area 5 development be in a designated center, which is not the case for this site. Any further development on this site will almost certainly have a negative impact on the integrity of the Palisades.

## PRIMARY CONCERN

- Without a higher level of protection through state action, the Palisades remain vulnerable to zoning changes, proposed development at the local level, and other threats.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pass state legislation that preserves the Palisades Cliffs and creates the Palisades Cliffs Preservation Council (see [Senate Bill No. 273](#) / [Assembly Bill No. 1377](#) of the 2024-2025 legislative session).



# Create Compact, Walkable Communities

For the latter half of the 20th century, New Jersey's dominant development pattern was car-centric suburbia, with homes, stores, and offices confined to different quadrants of town, thereby requiring residents to get in the car for just about every trip purpose. This pattern persisted into the first half of the 2000s. By the end of the decade, demographic and economic trends steered development back into already-developed places. Redevelopment became the new normal, with built-out cities, towns, and older suburbs suddenly absorbing the majority of the state's population growth. Thanks mainly to the residential preferences of younger generations, compact, walkable communities are now the locus of residential demand.

## Unmet Demand For In-Town Living

This shift first happened slowly and then suddenly, putting upward pressure on housing prices in many cities and in walkable suburban downtowns. It also put pressures on existing outdated infrastructure. Some cities and towns, mainly those that were abandoned en masse in the great suburban wave and have

struggled through the intervening decades, are experiencing a renaissance. Others are enforcing zoning codes that prescribe mostly single-family detached housing, limiting opportunities for the construction of smaller and more affordable housing types that might make the town accessible to a wider range of households.

Despite the obstacles, it is imperative that the need for affordable housing and job growth be addressed in older, walkable centers in order to retain younger residents in the live-work-shop-play environments they prefer. In-town living hosts a number of other societal benefits for all age groups and benefits the economy and ecology as a whole.

## Multiple Benefits

Studies show that people who live in mixed-use in-town communities tend to drive less, especially if public transit is available. This results in cleaner air, fewer greenhouse gas emissions, and less time behind the wheel. Residents also tend to walk more, which can support individual health. And for those





## ➤ **15-Minute Neighborhoods**

provide residents with easy access to parks, schools, gathering places, social services, places to buy healthy and fresh food, and (in urban settings) public transit within a comfortable walk or bike ride. They have walkways, bicycle facilities, and other amenities to encourage people to drive less.

who can no longer drive, living in a walkable or transit-friendly town where destinations are nearby means that the loss of a driver's license does not negatively affect quality of life.

Compact development helps to conserve land. Infrastructure—roads, sidewalks, pipes, and power lines—serve more people per linear foot than in a low-density environment, thereby reducing per-capita costs for building and maintenance. This results in a good long-term strategy for keeping property taxes down.

### **Enhancing Centers And Creating New Ones**

Strategies for meeting the demand for in-town living will differ depending on the kind of development that is already in place. For older towns with “good bones” (i.e., a fine-grained street grid with small blocks and a variety of housing options), the secret is finding opportunities for redevelopment and infill, such as repurposing old buildings, building on surface parking lots, and sometimes demolishing outdated land uses and reusing the land. In car-dependent suburbs without clear downtowns or main streets, new future centers of activity can be identified and planned out. Using large redevelopment parcels (such as defunct shopping centers) or existing single-use developments can be good candidates for main street centers if they are properly designed and integrated into the surrounding community, and if a clear path for future expansion and connectivity is outlined.

## **PRIMARY CONCERNS**

- Aging infrastructure in many older centers limit the absorption of new population and business growth.
- There is a lack of coordinated state support to invest in walkable communities, unlike the support in maintaining suburban sprawl infrastructure investment patterns, such as highway and road capacity expansions.
- Many streets are unsafe for pedestrians and bicyclists of all ages.
- There is insufficient allowable density that would enable a strong mix of uses and enough built-in residential demand.
- There is an insufficient mix of housing options in walkable, mixed-use centers at prices that are affordable to a wide range of household incomes.
- Investment is lacking for future and existing transit systems to foster more transit-oriented development.
- The overabundance of car-centric communities will require significant planning and investment to retrofit into walkable places.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide assistance for economic development and land-use planning to municipalities that want to improve an existing downtown.
- Increase allowable densities and incentivize a mix of uses in downtowns, centers, main streets, and transit station areas.
- Devote more land to people and less to cars. Incentivize shared parking and reduce or eliminate minimum parking requirements in appropriate locations.
- Support the implementation of form-based codes, which regulate the height and bulk of buildings but not their use. This would allow residential and nonpolluting commercial uses to locate in the same neighborhood.
- Initiate a Main Street program at the New Jersey Department of Transportation that focuses on rethinking and investing in state and county roads that serve as main streets to make towns more pedestrian- and business-friendly.
- Fully implement the new law creating a statewide Target Zero Commission, which has the goal of eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries in New Jersey by 2040, to make roads safer for pedestrians.
- Provide affordable financing, including grant funding, to upgrade municipal infrastructure, so that older centers are able to accommodate new residents and businesses.
- Increase the diversity of housing choices in walkable towns. Implement zoning reform similar to what Oregon and some individual cities elsewhere in the country have done. In these instances, towns are no longer permitted to create residential zones in which only single-family detached homes are allowed. Similarly, California has removed restrictions on accessory dwelling units (e.g., above-garage apartments or in-law suites).
- Support the regionalization of school districts to lessen municipal resistance to zoning for more housing.
- Explore restrictions on cul-de-sacs and new residential development in places served by public water and sewer systems that do not support grid patterns and design for walkability. Provide incentives for redevelopment in car-oriented suburbs to seek ways to increase overall street network connectivity by creating new through-streets and connections to surrounding development.
- Change the culture at NJDOT to focus on moving people and supporting economic development rather than moving vehicles.
- Expand NJDOT's Transit Village program to make it more proactive, so that the state is actively promoting transit-oriented development in as many places as possible.
- Expand the charge of NJ Transit's real estate division to plan and partner with communities to repurpose state assets and foster more transit-oriented development.
- Invest in transit improvements in already-developed areas to meet current demand, and expand capacity to meet future demand.
- Focus on pedestrian accessibility at transit stations. Make sure sidewalks are continuous and well maintained, and that safe routes to nearby destinations are easy to find.
- Create or maintain incentives for economic development and job growth in transit hubs. Locating jobs near transit is an effective way to take cars off the road and reduce the state's carbon footprint.

# Encourage Inclusive Redevelopment



Home to approximately nine million people on only 8,721 square miles, New Jersey is a highly developed state with the highest population density in the country, with little land left for development or preservation.

According to NJDEP's 2015 land-use estimates, roughly 86 percent of New Jersey's land is either developed (33 percent) or preserved/ constrained (53 percent), leaving only 14 percent as

developable. For comparison, 41 percent of New Jersey's land was developable in 1986, illustrating the extent of new development that occurred over the three decades that followed.

The state continues to encourage new development and growth. The best way to accommodate this pressure is through redevelopment. This a more efficient way to grow and it relieves pressure to convert farmland and other open spaces into development. This will be especially critical as New Jersey municipalities begin to implement the Fourth Round of affordable housing obligations in 2025.

New Jersey continues to be one of the top five most diverse states in the country based on statewide demographic data, according to [WorldPopulationReview.com](https://www.worldpopulationreview.com). At the community level, however, New Jersey can do better. According to the [US Census Bureau](https://www.census.gov), approximately 52 percent of New Jersey's residents identify as white alone (i.e., not Hispanic or Latino), 22 percent as Hispanic or Latino, 15 percent as Black alone, and 1 percent as Asian alone. At the same time, approximately one-fifth of New Jersey municipalities have populations where

## ► *What Is Redevelopment?*

Redevelopment is the practice of reusing sites that have been previously developed and that have the necessary infrastructure and proximity to other developments.



90 percent of individuals identify as white, and 75 percent of residents in about half of the state's municipalities identify as white. Redevelopment can help begin a process of establishing communities that are more representative of the various groups and rich cultures throughout the state.

## Benefits and Challenges of Inclusive Redevelopment

The two major environmental benefits from redevelopment are (1) reduced air pollution (more people commute by walking, cycling, and public transit), and (2) decreased development pressure on open spaces, which are necessary both for protecting the state's water quality and habitats, and for sequestering carbon to aid in cleaning the air. The benefits are even greater when brownfields are redeveloped, as cleaning up these contaminated sites results in reduced soil and water pollution.

Redevelopment does not begin at a city's borders. A major component of redevelopment includes a sizeable investment in infrastructure as well. Redevelopment becomes an opportunity to rebuild infrastructure for the next century.

All told, communities that succeed in fostering good redevelopment will spur other towns to do the same, as increased demand boosts real estate values and brings new growth to cities. Keeping a balance will no doubt require ongoing management to ensure that the vibrant, walkable places that are being created will produce opportunities for residents with a mix of incomes (including the elderly and the disabled) and, ultimately, a more equitable society.



## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Current policies support outdated growth and development patterns, which threaten open space and do not encourage the redevelopment of existing properties.
- Redevelopment is more complicated and expensive than greenfield development.
- Single-family and antiquated zoning prevents appropriate, forward-looking redevelopment from being planned and implemented.
- Weak real estate markets and overburdened communities have many barriers that discourage the redevelopment and revitalization of their communities.
- Lower-income communities and communities of color rarely have an appropriate seat at the table when redevelopment projects are being planned and developed.
- Redevelopment without public input and guidance will likely continue New Jersey's historic, outdated patterns of growth.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Align state department policies and investment decisions around the New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan, which coordinates planning activities and establishes statewide planning objectives in land use and housing, among several other topics.
- Reuse existing buildings, especially historic buildings, with incentives, including improving and expanding the state's historic preservation tax credit.
- Promote mixed-use development and zoning to reduce single-use development.
- Provide incentives for redevelopment projects, especially those in car-oriented suburbs, to seek ways to increase overall street network connectivity by creating new through-streets and connections to surrounding development.
- Invest in transit in already-developed areas to meet current demand and expand capacity to meet future demand.
- Minimize investment in new road miles, especially in low-density areas, and direct those scarce resources to redeveloping areas where the most people would benefit.
- Provide affordable financing (including grant funding) to upgrade municipal infrastructure and invest in new energy and broadband assets.
- Provide priority funding and treatment to redevelopment projects that maximize affordable housing. Do not treat redevelopment projects and greenfield projects equally when prioritizing funding or developing land-use rules.
- Provide additional support and subsidies for redevelopment in weak economic markets. Create new and enhance existing programs to reduce barriers and to incentivize redevelopment in these communities.
- Develop a redevelopment inclusion toolkit for municipalities that can be used in both gentrifying communities and in already-wealthy exclusionary communities, and pass laws to support their implementation. Elements of the toolkit would include the following:
  - ✓ Removing a percentage of housing units from the market and making them permanently affordable to lower-income residents
  - ✓ Instituting an inclusionary housing ordinance that results in a percentage of all new residential units being permanently affordable to lower-income residents
  - ✓ Reducing the cost structure of a percentage of commercial and retail spaces to ensure that small mom-and-pop and start-up businesses can exist
  - ✓ Developing public space guidelines to ensure all people have access to appropriate public spaces and facilities
- Require Community Benefits Agreements in more instances. Expand the traditional scope of these agreements to include physical and quality-of-life benefits, and ensure that community members are party to the agreements.
- Pilot a Community Design Advocates program that pays community leaders in overburdened communities to coordinate input from community members, and then ensure that the input is incorporated into the design and development of redevelopment projects. This can be combined with Community Benefits Agreements.

# Connect Communities through Boulevarding

In the mid-20th century, federal and state highway policies led to the widening of existing urban arterials and the development of freeways. The construction of many new roadways was sized to accommodate cars at the expense of urban living. When these superroads passed through cities, they often were elevated, sometimes built below grade, and sometimes passed right through cities at ground level. This caused enormous damage to existing neighborhoods, sometimes completely erasing communities and displacing city residents. Most affected were people of color and low-income families with little political power to fight these proposals. The cultural, financial, and emotional toll this took on communities is immeasurable and lasts to this day.

Now, more than half a century later, these structures are reaching the ends of their useful lives. Many urban freeways cut off key parts of what made cities attractive (e.g., access to waterfronts), separated once-cohesive neighborhoods, and negatively impacted walkability between neighborhoods. New roadways also consumed land that is much more valuable as urban real estate.

Today, rather than spend tax dollars to rebuild these highways, many cities are turning to the concept of boulevarding—a departure from mid-century highway standards and a return to human-scale design. Boulevarding creates additional uses for roads that are built around the pedestrian and ecological needs of a community, and may factor in the use of road diets, which reduces the girth of urban arterials across the state.

## A Review Of Land-Use Patterns

The land-use patterns that arose in response to the suburban New Jersey lifestyle has brought about the proliferation of freeways and urban arterials. Owning a vehicle is a necessity for travel out of these areas. Over time, the proliferation of single-occupancy vehicles for access to cities has increased

throughout the state, adding to the congestion. As a result, walking along these roadways is difficult, unpleasant, and dangerous, given the speed of vehicles, the absence of pedestrian infrastructure, and the overall vehicle-centric nature of the landscape. Drivers, businesses, and residents along these roadways are exposed to noise, concentrated traffic congestion, and dangerous pollutants from vehicle emissions; pedestrians face the added risk of injury or death from encounters with motor vehicles.

Moving toward a boulevard model and a “re-ownership of roads” would allow roadways to provide access while slowing down traffic—making it safer for pedestrians to access neighborhood amenities. Boulevarding would provide drivers with access to other roadways as well, spreading out existing transportation emissions while improving transit, bicycle pathways, and pedestrian pathways in and around cities.

[Route 29 in Trenton](#) has been a prime candidate for boulevarding for over a decade. By routing a new boulevard more inland and repurposing the existing roadway, NJDOT would accomplish the dual goals of transportation resiliency and improved connectivity with Trenton’s neighborhoods. This would also open up the waterfront for development, completing the secondary goal of developing safe pedestrian access to the Delaware River and the recently daylighted Assunpink Creek.

Moving toward a boulevard model also generates construction jobs and increases opportunities for small-business and union labor. In Rochester, New York, the conversion of the “Inner Loop” to a boulevard has created an environment prime for redevelopment. This will allow existing community members to determine what they want their neighborhoods to look like, as well provide the potential for economic development for the city.

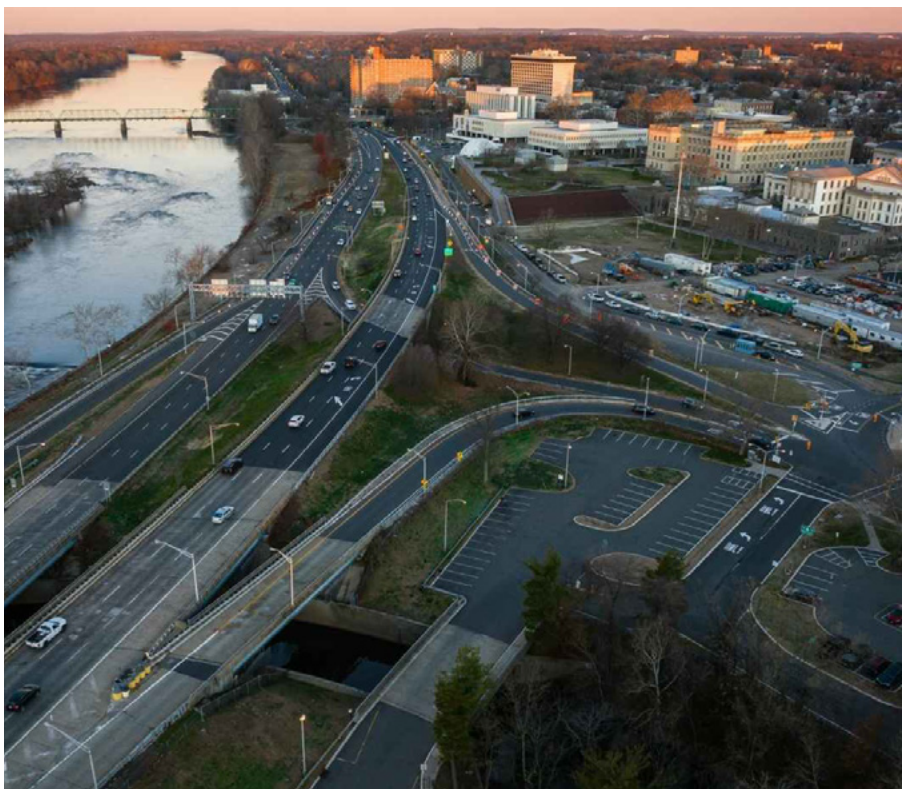
## ➤ What Are Road Diets?

A road diet calls for restriping a stretch of road to remove at least one lane and turning that pavement over for other purposes.



## ➤ **What is Daylighting?**

Daylighting rivers or streams is the process of removing obstructions that are covering the waterway and restoring the latter to its previous condition. A portion of the Assunpink Creek in downtown Trenton was reopened by removing a concrete culvert that was covering the waterway.



Route 29, Trenton, NJ Source: [ROI-NJ.com](http://ROI-NJ.com)

## PRIMARY CONCERNS

- Freeways and wide urban arterials concentrate air pollution locally and in nearby neighborhoods.
- Freeways create segregated communities within cities, especially across racial lines, and increased car reliance.
- Massive arterial highways take up vital land in cities that could be used for business, residential, or green space.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support community efforts to reimagine Route 29 in Trenton to reconnect the community with the Delaware River.
- Conduct research on air-quality monitoring along these roadways to quantify changes to emissions levels, particularly NO<sub>x</sub> and SO<sub>x</sub>, and to ensure emissions reductions for nearby communities.
- Ask the New Jersey Department of Transportation, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, and the Office of State Planning to lead the way by creating templates and pursuing pilots for boulevarding redevelopment plans. This should emphasize centering local community business, minority- and women-owned enterprises, and community amenities in future plans.