

VERNON TOWNSHIP, SUSSEX COUNTY

SEPTEMBER 2022

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN UPDATE



PREPARED BY

THE LAND CONSERVANCY OF NEW JERSEY

VERNON TOWNSHIP, SUSSEX COUNTY

SEPTEMBER 22, 2022

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This original document was appropriately signed and sealed in accordance with Chapter 41, Title 13 of the State Board of Professional Planners:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Reaffirming its commitment to stay at the forefront of environmental awareness and providing open space and recreation to the broadest range of its residents, Vernon Township has prepared this update to its 2003 and 2010 Open Space and Recreation Plans.

Working with the state and county, Vernon Township has advanced its preservation program, making it a place where the past is preserved, and the future is a balance of growth, recreation, and conservation. The success of the open space program brings with it new thoughts of how those accomplishments may best be moved forward, as the town considers the varied recreational needs of its residents.

Vernon Township covers 44,769 acres and is home to **26,391** acres of preserved land. Since completion of the 2010 Plan, the town has preserved the **Masker Marsh** property (19.5 acres) and this year it acquired the **7 acre Town Center Greenway** on Black Creek Drive. In addition to these municipal projects, four more farms have been preserved totaling 479 acres, and the NJDEP increased their holdings by 937 acres.

For Vernon Township, the economy is reliant on the spectacular views, rugged natural features, and its healthy outdoor lifestyle. It is home to ski resorts and water parks, golf courses, and miles of trails including the popular Appalachian Trail. Covering 70 square miles, residents live in Vernon for its rural ambience and accessibility to New York City. The landscape is defined by ridgelines and valleys, farms and resorts, historic barns and modern conveniences, and the scenic roadways and trails.

The Open Space and Recreation Plan provides updated mapping, revisits the 2010 goals and greenways, and offers a short and long-term plan for the municipality. This Plan Update will help guide future planning by providing a supporting framework for decision-making. Implementing the recommendations included in the Plan Update will protect the environmental health, recreational opportunities, and aesthetic character of Vernon Township.



BENEFITS OF OPEN SPACE

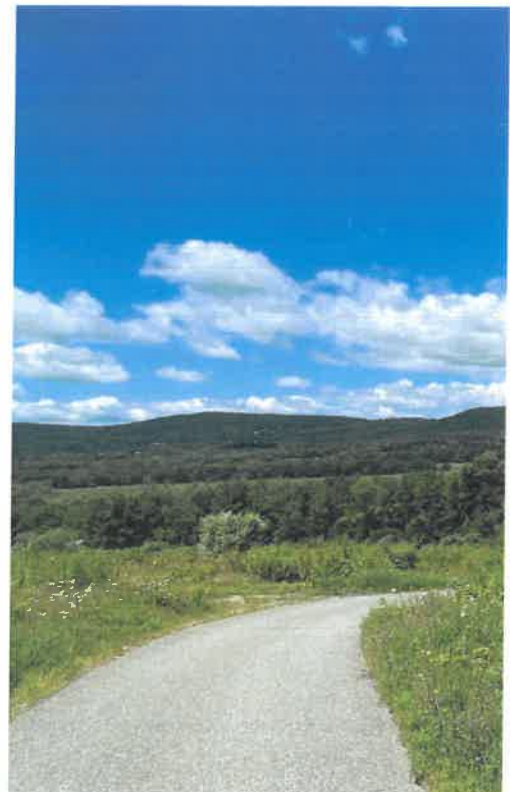
Benefits of open space in Vernon include:

- **Contributes to quality of life**
- **Improves air and water quality and flood mitigation**
- **Enhances homeowner property value**
- **Generates and sustains jobs in outdoor recreation and agriculture**
- **Encourages physical activity**
- **Provides carbon storage in trees to combat climate change**
- **Maintains wildlife habitat, for both flora and fauna**
- **Helps to keep streams and rivers clean**

When planned as a system, open space supports the community's **quality of life**, recreational programs and activities, and protects the agricultural, cultural, and natural resources.

Increased open space **fosters community**, encourages people to gather, and participate in recreational activity. Preserved land is productive and revenue producing; Households, local businesses, and governments benefit financially from the protection of open space.

It is costly to replicate these benefits once the land is developed.



OPEN SPACE GOALS

FOR THE 2022 OPEN SPACE & RECREATION PLAN

Vernon Township is committed to providing diverse outdoor opportunities and recreation programs for persons to engage in and enjoy their parks and open spaces. Vernon's natural features, the source of its stunning beauty, lend to a thriving tourism sector. The Hamburg and Wawayanda Mountains, and the Wallkill River offer outdoor activities enjoyed by tourists and residents alike.

The Goals Section of the Open Space and Recreation Plan Update acts as a guide for Vernon to preserve and manage its public open space lands for recreation and conservation. It has worked to protect watershed, forested areas, and large contiguous tracts of land, connect already preserved lands, and expand opportunities for trails in the community.





THREE THEMES DEFINE THE TOWN'S OBJECTIVES FOR THEIR PUBLIC LANDS:

PROTECT AND CONNECT

Connect **greenways** of preserved lands and public open spaces to reduce fragmentation of wildlife habitat and the forested hillsides.

Support the **farmer**, their farm, and the locally grown products they provide.

Expand the **bicycle and trail** system, where appropriate, to offer safe, healthy alternatives for accessing and enjoying the public parklands.

STEWARD

Recreational lands with an eye towards improving stewardship of undeveloped public lands to ensure their sustainability and resiliency.

Unique **natural areas** and water resources for their wildlife habitat value, their recreational opportunities, and to safeguard water quality and water supply lands.

Historic and cultural sites that form the backdrop of the town's scenic beauty.

SUSTAIN

Four season **tourism** opportunities.

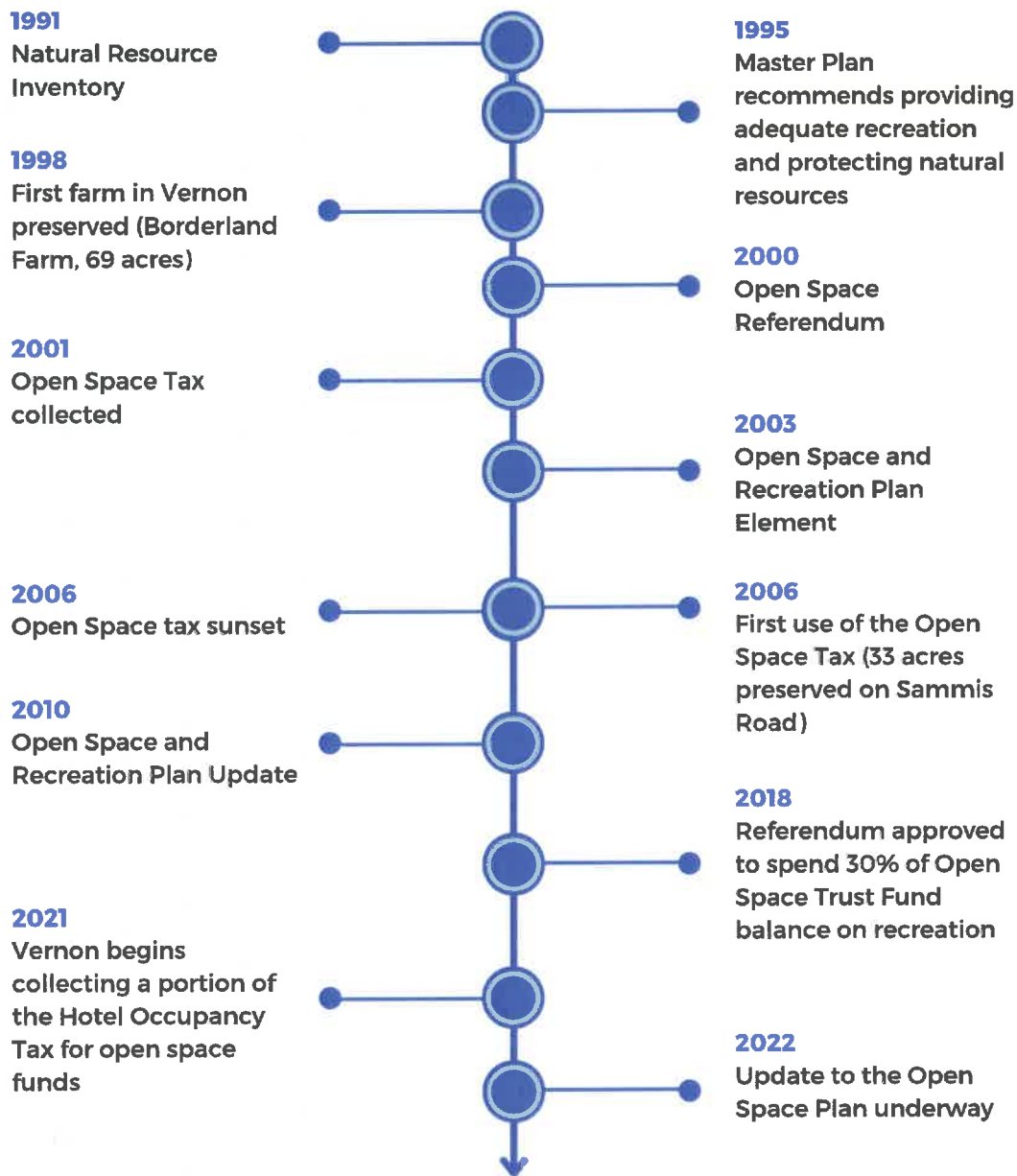
The town's capacity for receiving outside **funding** for open space.

Educational, public outreach, and community wellness campaigns to secure the **healthy lifestyle** inherent to Vernon.

Municipal funding for future **acquisitions**.

The public's **understanding** of the use of these preserved lands.

HISTORY OF THE OPEN SPACE PROGRAM



***THE TOWN HELD TWO PUBLIC MEETINGS ON THE PLAN UPDATE:**

- Public Meeting #1 took place on August 23, 2021 with the Township Council.
- Public Meeting #2 was hosted by the Land Use Board on September 14, 2022 to share the Draft Update with its residents and consider it as an Element of the Master Plan.

FUNDING LAND PRESERVATION

Following approval by the voters in November 2000, Vernon Township started collecting the open space tax in 2001. Ordinance #00-16 authorized the collection of the open space levy, the creation of a five-member advisory committee, and limited expenditures to farm and open space land acquisition.

The tax was collected from 2001 to 2005 at rates ranging from \$0.011 to \$0.022 per \$100 of assessed value.

Year	Rate	Tax Amount
2001	0.011	\$138,817
2002	0.020	\$278,880
2003	0.021	\$293,360
2004	0.022	\$289,180
2005	0.021	\$293,269

In 2006, 2007, 2010 and in 2017 the Township put forward ballot questions (authorized by Ordinances #29-06, #18-07, #10-18, and #17-163 respectively) to reinstate and/or expand the use of the Trust Fund. These questions were not approved by the voters.

With 55% of voters approving a 2018 ballot referendum, a portion of the open space funds were approved for reallocation for recreation. Previously, the money from the trust fund was only to be used for open space acquisition.

- Up to 30% of open space tax funds for creation and maintenance of trails and bikeways.
- Up to 30% of open space tax funds for outdoor recreation, property maintenance, and the preservation of cultural sites.
- A minimum of 40% of open space tax funds dedicated to farmland preservation and to preserving open space.

2018 REFEREDUM

"If passed by the voters, this referendum would authorize the Vernon Township Committee to modify the current purposes of the Township Open Space Trust Fund ("Fund") to allow for no more than thirty percent (30%) of the Fund to be used for the creation and maintenance of trails and bikeways, such as trailheads, trails, boardwalks, bridges, park kiosks, road crossings, signage, and other improvements needed to develop a trail system. This proposal would also allow the Fund to be used to maintain Township owned open space, create amenities such as public gardens, disc golf and bike pump track and the preservation and maintenance of cultural sites. The current authorized uses of the Fund shall continue to be for the acquisition of open space and farmland, but up to thirty percent (30%) of the Fund balance would be authorized for outdoor recreation, property maintenance, and the preservation and maintenance cultural sites. A "Yes" vote will not impose an Open Space tax levy, but will authorize the use of existing funds for the purposes stated above. Eligible projects will be determined by the Township Council on a case-by-case basis."



Starting in July 2021, the Township began allocating a portion of the funds generated from the Hotel Occupancy Tax. In 2021 \$50,929 (7% of the hotel tax) was allocated to open space. As of December 31, 2021 the municipal open space trust fund had a balance of **\$623,449**. The town has purchased and preserved **six properties (154.5 acres)** using the open space trust fund:

2006

33 acres on Sammis Road

Former Owner: Smith

Adjacent to the NJ Audubon Janet Van Gelder Wildlife Sanctuary and the Glen Meadow Middle School and across from Sammis Road from Lounsberry Hollow Middle School.

2007

92 acres of Sandhill Road

Former Owner: Hauck

Contains prime aquifer recharge area along the Black Creek, federal and state endangered species habitat.

2007

5 acres on Sandhill Road

Former Owner: Grey

Adjacent to the Hauck property.

2008

3 acres on Commerce Street

Former Owner: Bard

Repurchase of previous open space to comply with Green Acres requirements.

2019

19.5 acres on Wisteria Court

Known as the Masker Marsh property, it connects Maple Grange Park to Canal Road via the existing bike path and extends to the New York State line. A section of the property is wetlands and contains several endangered species. Sussex County awarded a \$20,000 grant towards the preservation of this property in 2019.

2022

7 acres on Black Creek Drive

Vernon Town Center Greenway - Black Creek (Baldwin Tract, Block 391, Lot 12, seven acres at 8-20 Black Creek Drive) was preserved in 2022. Vernon received a \$75,000 grant from Sussex County in 2021 to acquire this property which is located near the Township's Police Athletic building and across from land owned by the municipality.

SUSSEX COUNTY OPEN SPACE TRUST FUND

On November 7, 2000, Sussex County voters approved the creation of the Open Space Trust Fund. The county funds open space and farmland preservation projects. In 2021, the Sussex County Commissioners approved a trails grant program to allow money from the county's farmland, preservation, recreation and open space trust fund to be used to develop trails on permanently preserved open space lands.

Vernon received its first grant from Sussex County in 2002 to preserve 43 acres along Black Creek. Its most recent grant award in 2021 was used to help complete the recent preservation of the Vernon Town Center Greenway project (Baldwin property). Vernon has received six grants totaling \$361,000 to preserve 152 acres in the municipality.

Project Name	Acreage	Grant Amount	Funding Year
Black Creek	43.00	\$30,000	2002
Sandhill Road (Hauck)	48.20	\$45,000	2003
Sandhill Road Greenway (Grey)	5.20	\$41,000	2004
TPL/Smith/Berkleigh	28.85	\$150,000	2006
Masker Path (Masker Marsh)	19.50	\$20,000	2019
Vernon Town Center Greenway - Black Creek	7.24	\$75,000	2021
Total Grant Awards:	151.99	\$361,000	6 grants

STATE OF NEW JERSEY GREEN ACRES PROGRAM

The Green Acres program, administered by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), grants funds to counties and municipalities to preserve open space. Green Acres incentivizes funding for towns that are collecting an open space tax and have an Open Space Plan that is less than 10 years old. While Vernon remains eligible for site specific funding, the municipality would be eligible for larger and more flexible state grants if they maintained an open space fund equal to one-half cent per year.

Vernon Township has received state funds for both acquisition and park development projects. The state has awarded a total of \$237,235 in grants to the municipality.

Type	Name	Payment Amount	Year
Acquisition	Veterans Memorial Park Acquisition	\$47,025.00	1972
Development	Veterans Memorial Park (Development 1)	\$18,372.00	1980s
Development	Veterans Memorial Park (Development 2)	\$45,000.00	1983
Acquisition	Planning Incentive Acquisition	\$126,837.80	2010
	Total	\$237,234.80	4 grants

PRESERVED LAND

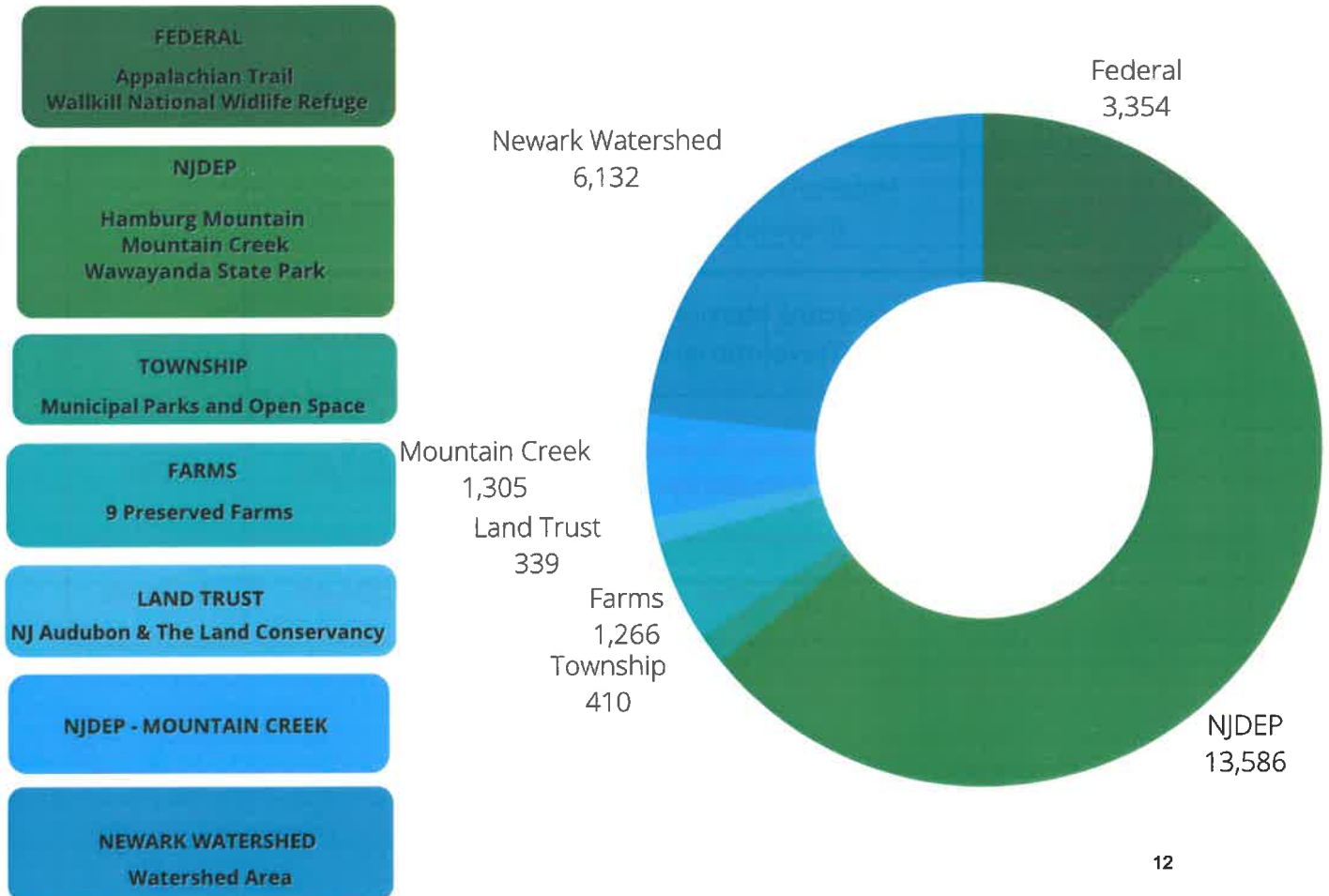
There are **26,391 acres** of permanently preserved land in Vernon Township, **58%** of the municipality. Of this, **52%** is protected by the State of New Jersey, **23%** is owned by the City of Newark, and **13%** by the federal government. The town owns **410 acres** of parkland. This includes

- Town Center Greenway on Black Creek Drive - 7 acres
- Masker Marsh on Wisteria Court - 19.5 acres
- Maple Grange Park on Maple Grange Road - 48 acres
- Veteran's Memorial Park on Vernon Crossing - 29 acres
- Old Orchard Park on Red Barn Drive - 11 acres

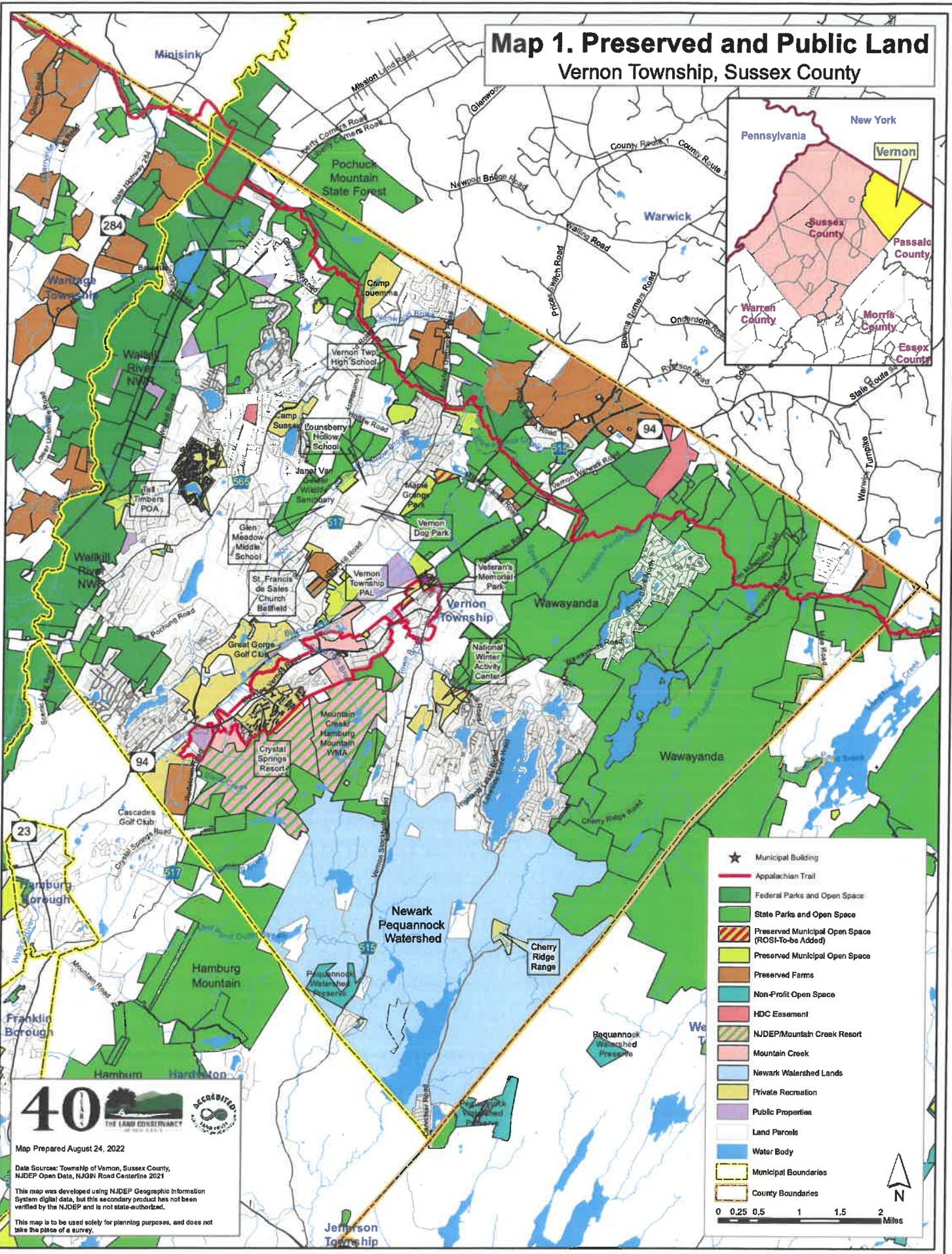
The Town has recently completed new facilities at the Town Center:

- Park & Pump Track
- Biking & Walking Trail

Preserved Land in Vernon Township



Map 1. Preserved and Public Land Vernon Township, Sussex County



- ★ Municipal Building
- Appalachian Trail
- Federal Parks and Open Space
- State Parks and Open Space
- ▨ Preserved Municipal Open Space (ROSI-To-be Added)
- Preserved Municipal Open Space
- Preserved Farms
- Non-Profit Open Space
- HDC Easement
- ▨ NJDEP/Mountain Creek Resort
- Mountain Creek
- Newark Watershed Lands
- Private Recreation
- Public Properties
- Land Parcels
- Water Body
- Municipal Boundaries
- County Boundaries

40 THE LAND CONSERVANCY

Map Prepared August 24, 2022

Date Sources: Township of Vernon, Sussex County, NJDEP Open Data, NJGIN Road Centerline 2021

This map was developed using NJDEP Geographic Information System digital data, but this secondary product has not been verified by the NJDEP and is not state-authorized.

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PARKS AND OPEN SPACE IN VERNON

The federal government, through the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service, owns 3,354 acres as part of the **Appalachian Trail and Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge**. New Jersey owns and manages 14,871 acres. The state holds an easement on a portion of Mountain Creek within the **Hamburg Mountain Wildlife Management Area** (1,305 acres). **Wawayanda State Park** totals 8,812 acres in Vernon Township.

The City of Newark owns approximately 35,000 acres across six municipalities, including Vernon, which encompass the **Newark-Pequannock Watershed**. This area was purchased in 1900 and has been the source of drinking water for residents in Newark and the surrounding region. The City's Division of Water and Sewer Utilities owns the land in Vernon Township and are under an easement held by the state's Division of Parks and Forestry. Surrounded by the Newark-Pequannock Watershed, The Land Conservancy owns 115 acres (known as the **Pequannock Watershed Preserve**).

NJ Audubon and the NJDEP co-own and manage the rugged 224 acre **Janet Van Gelder Wildlife Sanctuary** off of Lounsberry Hollow Road.

HIGHLANDS DEVELOPMENT CREDIT (HDC) EASEMENTS

The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act charged the Highlands Council with instituting a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program for the Highlands Region. The Highlands Council adopted the TDR Program as part of the Highlands Regional Master Plan and established the Highlands Development Credit Bank (HDC Bank) in June 2008 in support of the TDR Program. This mechanism addresses some of the equity concerns of property owners in the Preservation Area that have been affected by implementation of the Highlands Act.

The Highlands TDR Program allocates TDR credits called Highlands Development Credits or HDCs to sending zone property owners. HDCs may be sold to developers for use in appropriate voluntary receiving zones. Use of HDCs by developers in established receiving zones permit developers to increase the density or intensity of proposed projects in those zones. Under the Highlands Act, participation as a receiving zone is voluntary. One property owner (20 acres) in Vernon Township has received funding through the HDC Bank and has a conservation easement held by the state.

PRESERVED FARMLAND IN VERNON TOWNSHIP

Vernon Township has preserved nine farms since 1996, totaling **1,266 acres**. Overall, Sussex County and the State of New Jersey have expended \$4,469,951 to preserve farmland in Vernon. The State has contributed 74% of the cost share and Sussex County has contributed 26%.

Four farms were preserved through the County Easement Purchase program, one through the County Planning Incentive Grant, one directly by the County, and three through the State Easement Purchase program. The most recent farms were the Lyons Farm and Newport Bloom Farm which both closed in 2022.

Farm	Year	Acres	Total Cost	State Cost	County Cost
Borderland Farm	1998	69	\$155,196.89	\$79,816.89	\$75,380.00
Prices Switch Farm	2002	265	\$712,929.33	\$525,455.32	\$187,474.01
Glen Drew Farm	2009	20	\$435,128.40	\$0.00	\$435,128.40
Meadowburn Farm	2009	362	\$970,620	\$715,383.11	\$255,237.19
Sweet Water Farm	2009	70	\$215,530.60	\$157,128.76	\$58,401.84
Pochuk Valley Farm	2010	178	\$620,816.00	\$620,816	\$0.00
Vernon Valley Farm	2018	72	\$374,488.40	\$244,857.80	\$129,630.60
Lyons Farm	2022	114	\$858,090.00	\$858,090.00	\$0.00
Newport Bloom Farm	2022	115	\$127,151.20	\$127,151.20	\$0.00
Total:	9 Farms	1,266	\$4,469,951	\$3,328,699	\$1,141,252

PUBLIC & PRIVATE

PUBLIC & QUASI-PUBLIC

Vernon Township owns **633 acres** of land, a portion of which is developed for municipal services, such the municipal building and garage. Much of this was acquired through tax foreclosure and is undeveloped.

Six utilities own land in Vernon, including JCP&L, Suez Water, Sussex County MUA, Sussex Rural Electric Cooperative, United Water and Vernon Hills Water.

New York Susquehanna & Western Railroad owns **72 acres** in Vernon.

The Board of Education owns 249 acres for the High School, Glen Meadow Middle School, Walnut Middle School, Lounsberry Hollow School, and the 46-acre dog park/garden.

PRIVATELY OWNED LAND

Facility	Acres
Great Gorge Golf Club	344
Crystal Springs Resort	41
Mountain Creek	293
National Winter Activity Center (Winter 4 Kids)	128
Camp Sussex	92
Camp Louemma	133
Tall Timbers (Campground)	156
Vernon Township PAL	14
St. Francis de Sales Church Ballfield	5
Hickory Park Recreation Association	4
Cherry Ridge Range	42
Private Recreation	1,252

Vernon is a recreation destination. Mountain Creek is a water park, ski resort, catering facility and lodge. **1,305 acres** are protected through an easement held by the state, and **293 acres** are part of the park facility. There are camps and campground (Camp Louemma, Camp Sussex, Tall Timbers); ski centers, golf courses and resorts (Great Gorge Golf Club, Crystal Springs Resort, Mountain Creek, and National Winter Activity Center); and smaller recreational facilities (Cherry Ridge Range, Hickory Park Recreation, St. Francis de Sales ballfield, and the Vernon Police Athletic League).

PRIVATE COMMUNITY ASSOCIATIONS

Vernon is also a community of lakes. There are 21 different property owner associations who own land in the municipality, which is undeveloped, privately held, and is for the benefit of the residents living within those associations.

ASPEN CONDO	14	LAKE POCHUNG	301
BLACK CREEK SANCTUARY	12	LAKE WALLKILL COMMUNITY	97
CLIFFWOOD LAKE COUNTRY CLUB ASSOC	1	LAKE WANDA PROPERTY OWNERS ASSOC	39
GLEN HARBOR HOMEOWNERS	28	MOUNTAINSIDE CONDO COUNCIL % COMET	19
VILLAGE OF LAKE GLENWOOD	28	NORTHWOODS AT VERNON, LLC	7
GREAT GORGE TERRACE CONDO ASSN	5	PLEASANT VALLEY COUNTRY CLUB INC	52
HIGHLAND LAKES COUNTRY CLUB	728	SCENIC LAKES COMMUNITY ASSN	25
LAKE COMMUNITY PROPERTY OWNERS ASSN	89	VAIL CONDO COUNCIL C/O COMET MGMT	46
LAKE CONWAY COMMUNITY ASSN	8	WALNUT HILL COUNTRY CLUB INC	38
LAKE ISLE CORP	7	WIMBLEDON CONDO COUNCIL % COMET MGT	13
LAKE PANORAMA COMMUNITY ASSOC, INC	26	TOTAL	1,583 ACRES

OTHER PRIVATE LAND

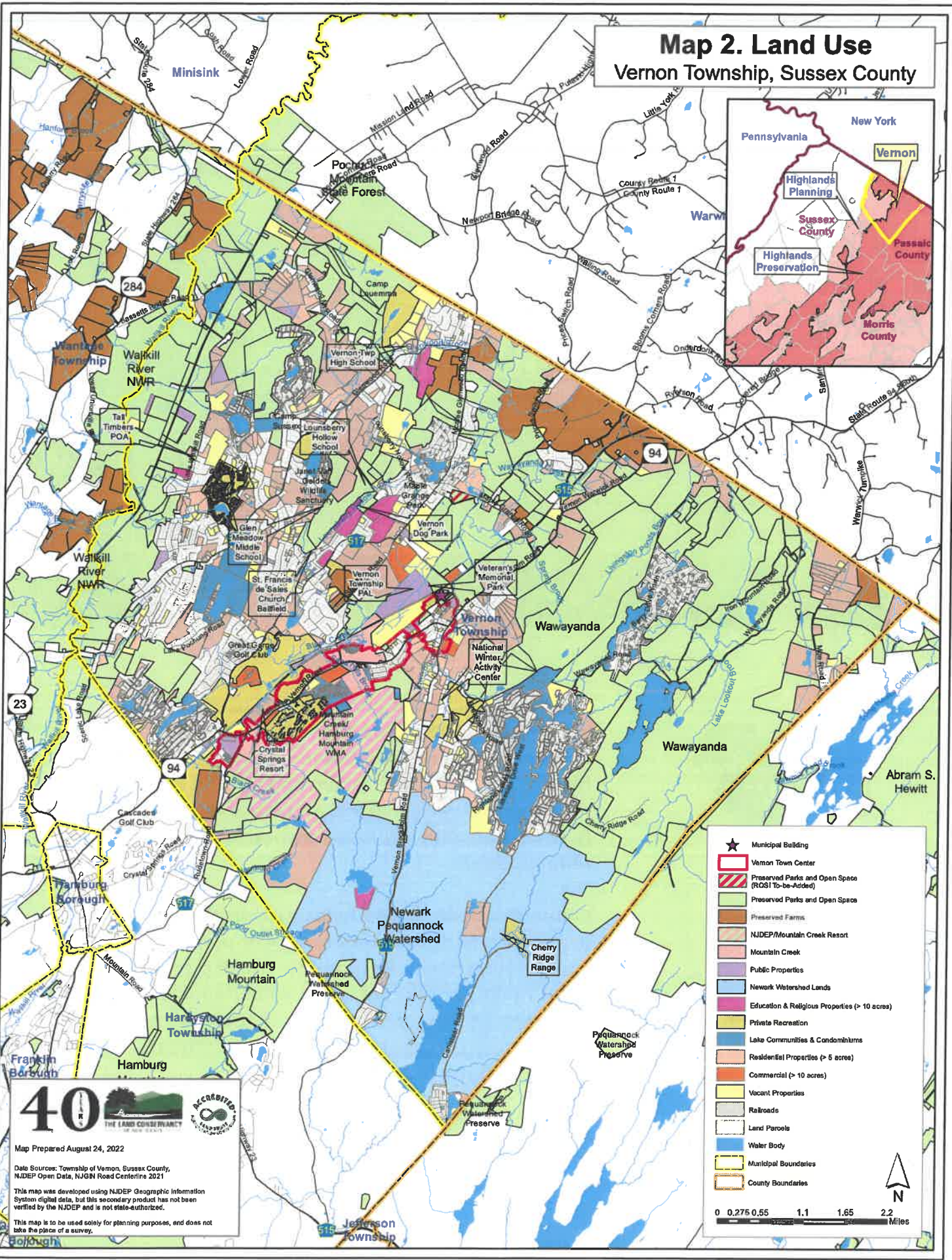
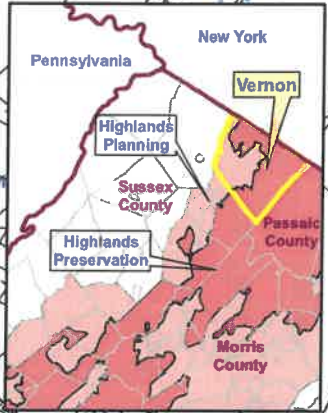
There are **4,351 acres** of farmland which is not preserved. Of these, there are 11 farms over 100 acres in size. These are located on Lake Wallkill Road, Owens, Warwick Turnpike, Pond Eddy Road, Breakneck Mountain, Glenwood, Alberta Drive, Sand Pond, Route 94, Edsall Drive, and Sand Hill Road.

There are **1,758 acres** of undeveloped, privately owned land in the Township. Most are under one acre in size, but several are close to or over 50 acres. Many of these larger properties are held by companies rather than individuals (such as the Glenwood Homes, Highland Lakes Real Estate LLC, and HR II Development Corporation, Sulake Corporation, and Vernon Partners). These properties are at greatest risk of being turned into housing.

There are also residential properties that are oversized and underutilized. Two properties are greater than fifty acres. These are located on Mac Peek Road and Goldenrod Place.



Map 2. Land Use Vernon Township, Sussex County



	Municipal Building
	Vernon Town Center
	Preserved Parks and Open Space (ROSI To-be-Added)
	Preserved Parks and Open Space
	Preserved Farms
	NJDEP/Mountain Creek Resort
	Mountain Creek
	Public Properties
	Newark Watershed Lands
	Education & Religious Properties (> 10 acres)
	Private Recreation
	Lake Communities & Condominiums
	Residential Properties (> 5 acres)
	Commercial (> 10 acres)
	Vacant Properties
	Railroads
	Land Parcels
	Water Body
	Municipal Boundaries
	County Boundaries

0 0.275 0.55 1.1 1.65 2.2 Miles

40 THE LAND CONSERVANCY

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RECREATION RESOURCES

Vernon is home to municipal, state, federal, non-profit, and private parks and open space. There are over **24,000 acres** of land for hiking, hunting, horseback riding, skiing, trail running, birdwatching, fishing, and other leisure activities. Local sports programs are enjoyed at several municipal parks.



"Recreation activities are beneficial to one's health no matter where you do them, but they reach another level in the great outdoors. In addition to helping lower blood pressure and fight obesity, time spent playing in parks and other green spaces is associated with improved mental health and reduced stress.



Outdoor recreation also helps support the economy and drives awareness of important conservation issues. Responsible use of public lands helps make people care about what happens to these places. Research suggests that when kids play outdoors, it leads to greater environmental awareness later in life."

The Wilderness Society

MUNICIPAL RECREATION

Vernon Township has several outdoor recreational facilities that are used by residents, the Board of Recreation, the Board of Education, the Vernon Police Athletic League (PAL), and other municipalities for games and practices. Recreational programs and events are hosted by volunteer groups, the PAL, the Board of Recreation, and private organizations. The town's dedication to being a 4-season community provides residents and visitors with ample recreational and athletic opportunities.

The Township Recreation Department works in conjunction with non-profit sports groups, the PAL, and the Board of Recreation to support and schedule the various athletic programs.

Games and practices use the municipal facilities, in addition to the school ball fields. Travel sports programs use other town's facilities for tournaments and games, but practices are hosted within Vernon.

There is a request process for municipal/private sports leagues, school sports, and sports leagues from other towns. Youth sports take first priority for scheduling, and it is uncommon that the schedule to allow for teams from other municipalities to use Vernon's fields. The most popular facilities are the turf fields, leading to some difficulty in scheduling for the Recreation Department. If this field is not available, there are additional and suitable facilities for teams to use.



MUNICIPAL PARKLAND

Vernon Township is home to five recreational areas.

Veterans' Memorial Field

Located on Vernon Crossing Road, Veterans' Memorial Park has been an enjoyable recreational area in Vernon for decades. The Park has three baseball fields, a multipurpose field, horseshoe pits, a paved ADA walking path, and a playground. Vernon is completing lighting improvements on the fields. An announcer booth has been added and dugout renovations were recently completed.

Maple Grange Community Park

Maple Grange Park is located on Maple Grange Road and is Vernon Township's largest park. It has three multipurpose turf fields, a large open field known as the "Great Lawn," a playground, basketball courts, a pavilion and snack bar, and a paved walking/biking path. The three multipurpose fields have been resurfaced, and the walking path has been filled and sealed.

Vernon Dog Park/Community Garden

The dog park, located on McAfee Glennwood Road near Lounsberry Hollow Middle School, opened in 2013. The property is owned by the Board of Education, but operated and maintained by the non-profit organization D.O.G.S. of Vernon. There is a large field open to all dogs off-leash as well as a small dog area. Adjacent to the dog park is the Vernon Community Garden, with plots available for rent.

Old Orchard Park

Old Orchard Park is an 11-acre park located on Eric Trail and has one large soccer field, a pond, grass area, and a walking/bike path.



Town Center Park & Pump Track

Located in the Town Center off of Black Creek Drive is the municipal Town Center Park and newly constructed state-of-the-art pump track. The pump track includes a track for beginners and a second for more advanced users. A 1,300 foot long ADA walking path surrounding the pump tracks is complete. The Town Center Park and pump track are in the final stage of development, and are scheduled to open later in the fall of 2022.

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Though most sports are hosted on town fields, many of the Board of Education's school ball fields are used for games and practices. Each of the four lower schools has 2 to 3 ball fields. The Recreation Department coordinates with the Board of Education in scheduling with the lower schools, and the high school has its own scheduling and request system.

VERNON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL

Vernon High School has one multipurpose turf field, a baseball field, two softball fields, six multipurpose fields, six tennis courts, and an outdoor track. The non-profit football league also uses Vernon High School's field. Some high school sports and after-school programs are hosted at the municipal fields.

CEDAR MOUNTAIN PRIMARY SCHOOL & GLEN MEADOW MIDDLE SCHOOL

These schools are located next to each other on Sammis Road. They share three baseball fields, two soccer fields, a swing set, playground, and a basketball court. The baseball fields are commonly used for Little League games.

ROLLING HILLS PRIMARY SCHOOL & LOUNSBERRY HOLLOW MIDDLE SCHOOL

These schools are also located on Sammis Road, across from Cedar Mountain and Glen Meadow Schools. They share two baseball/soccer fields and a playground.

WALNUT RIDGE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Located at 625 County Route 517, Walnut Ridge has two fields, a playground, and a basketball court.



RECREATION PROGRAMS

Traditional sports in Vernon are run by individual 501(c)(3) organizations who conduct their own fundraising. The leagues fundraise for gloves, uniforms, balls, and other sports equipment. The town covers maintenance of facilities, including permanent structures and safety improvements.

Sports offered are youth soccer, Little League, youth football and cheerleading, girls softball, lacrosse, men's softball, women's softball, co-ed adult softball, and a horseshoe league. All sports and recreational programs filter through the Recreation Department for assistance with coordination of maintenance and field schedules for municipal and BOE fields and facilities.

Vernon Police Athletic League

The Vernon Police Athletic League also manages sports programs and summer camps, including young child programs. They offer youth basketball, lacrosse, bowling, wrestling, ski club, floor hockey, youth soccer, horseback riding, t-ball, archery, men's basketball, tennis, adult soccer, Zumba/exercise classes, and after school and summer camp programs.

Vernon Board of Recreation

The Vernon Board of Recreation creates community-focused recreational programs and events. They manage programs like snowshoeing, arts, an annual Turkey Trot, hiking events, and other recreational and outdoor events. The 2021 Turkey Trot had over 200 participants and 50 volunteers, and the first hiking event hosted in 2019 had over 80 people attend. The Board of Recreation is restarted their hiking program in the spring of 2022.



OTHER RECREATIONAL PROGRAMS

Other recreational programs in Vernon are hosted by various state, federal, and non-profit organizations. The Wallkill River Wildlife Refuge hosts outdoor programs including kayaking, archery, astronomy, and bird-watching.

Wawayanda State Park and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy host hiking programs and events throughout the year. Vernon's Recreation Department also works with Mountain Creek Resort to host community events.

Participation in youth municipal recreation programs has increased over the past three years. This includes not only the traditional sports programs but one day family activities such as the youth fishing derby, which had the highest turnout in the last 10 years in 2021. As noted by the Recreation Director, scheduling and coordination of field use has become more difficult given the number of recreational facilities and steady and growing interest in recreational activities.

Additional program enhancements for Vernon include senior-focused recreational opportunities. Interest in pickleball has increased and the PAL hosts occasional games, though there is no formal program. Enhancements for adult-centered activities also include constructing the ADA compliant trail, so that seniors in Vernon can safely participate in a well-connected recreational area.

STATE PARKS



WAWAYANDA STATE PARK

Wawayanda State Park totals 34,350 acres in Vernon and West Milford Townships. It hosts a 19.6-mile section of the Appalachian Trail along with 40 miles of other marked trails. The entrance to the park is located off of Warwick Turnpike and there is a small parking lot and trailhead with signage along Route 94.

Wawayanda State Park has areas hiking, hunting, picnicking, swimming, boating/canoeing, camping, and offers an in-line skating area. In winter, visitors can go ice skating, ice fishing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing. Horseback riding and mountain biking are permitted in certain designated areas of the park. The High Breeze Farm Historic Site is located in the northern section of the Wawayanda. Additional state-owned lands in Vernon that act as a buffer for the Appalachian Trail and protect Pochuck Mountain are administered by Wawayanda State Park.

HAMBURG MOUNTAIN

Hamburg Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA) totals 2,858 acres in Vernon and Hardyston Townships. The WMA is administered by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Fish and Wildlife Service and is maintained by the division's Bureau of Land Management.

Fishing and ice-fishing, hunting, birdwatching, hiking, and cross-country skiing are permitted within Hamburg Mountain WMA. There are no marked trails but some woods roads for walking and hiking. A portion of the WMA is leased to Mountain Creek Resort for ski runs, and this area is closed to hunting year-round.

In Vernon, there is access to the WMA off County Route 515, but the main access point, parking area, and boat launch are located in Hardyston.

NATIONAL RECREATION



Vernon Township is home to a portion of one of the east coast's most popular National Scenic Trails - the Appalachian Trail.

APPALACHIAN TRAIL

The Appalachian National Scenic Trail is a 2,190-mile trail along the Appalachian Mountains from Maine to Georgia. 71.6 miles pass through New Jersey, with 19.6 miles in Vernon Township.

In New Jersey, the trail is mostly wooded with sections of marshland and stunning views of the Highlands Region.

The A.T. is managed by the National Park Service, National Forest Service, and Appalachian Trail Conservancy, along with numerous state agencies and volunteer organizations.

Boasting stunning views throughout the eastern U.S., the Appalachian Trail passes through 14 states.

WALLKILL RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) spans 2,696 acres in Vernon and extends into Wantage Township, Hardyston Township, and New York State. The Refuge headquarters is located in a renovated farmhouse at 1547 County Route 565 in Vernon. There is an environmental education center at 119 Owens Station Road with canoe access off County Route 565 near the Wantage border. The Refuge has three marked trails and allows hunting, fishing, birdwatching, hiking, cross-country skiing, canoeing, and kayaking.

The Wallkill River
NWR was
established in
1990 to conserve
and enhance
priority wildlife
and their habitats.

Photo by: Matt Zeitler via Wallkill River NWR Facebook, 2021

WESTERN HIGHLANDS NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY

In 2021, the Federal Highway Administration added almost 50 roads as scenic byways, the first since 2009. Among them was the impressive Western Highlands National Scenic Byway in Vernon and Hardyston Townships, one of four new scenic byways designated in New Jersey. Originally submitted by the Vernon Township Historical Society, the Western Highlands National Scenic Byway showcases the best of recreation in New Jersey.

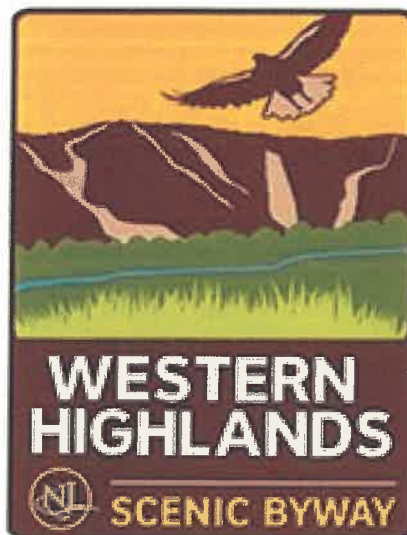
Over 21 miles long, the Scenic Byway passes through thousands of acres of protected open space from pastoral fields to marshes and woodlands. It consists of a 12.5-mile spine leading from Hardyston to the New York State border, and a 9-mile loop within Vernon Township. The Scenic Byway offers access to fishing, hunting, hiking, historical sites in Vernon, and stunning vistas overlooking geographical formations in New York State.

FEATURES

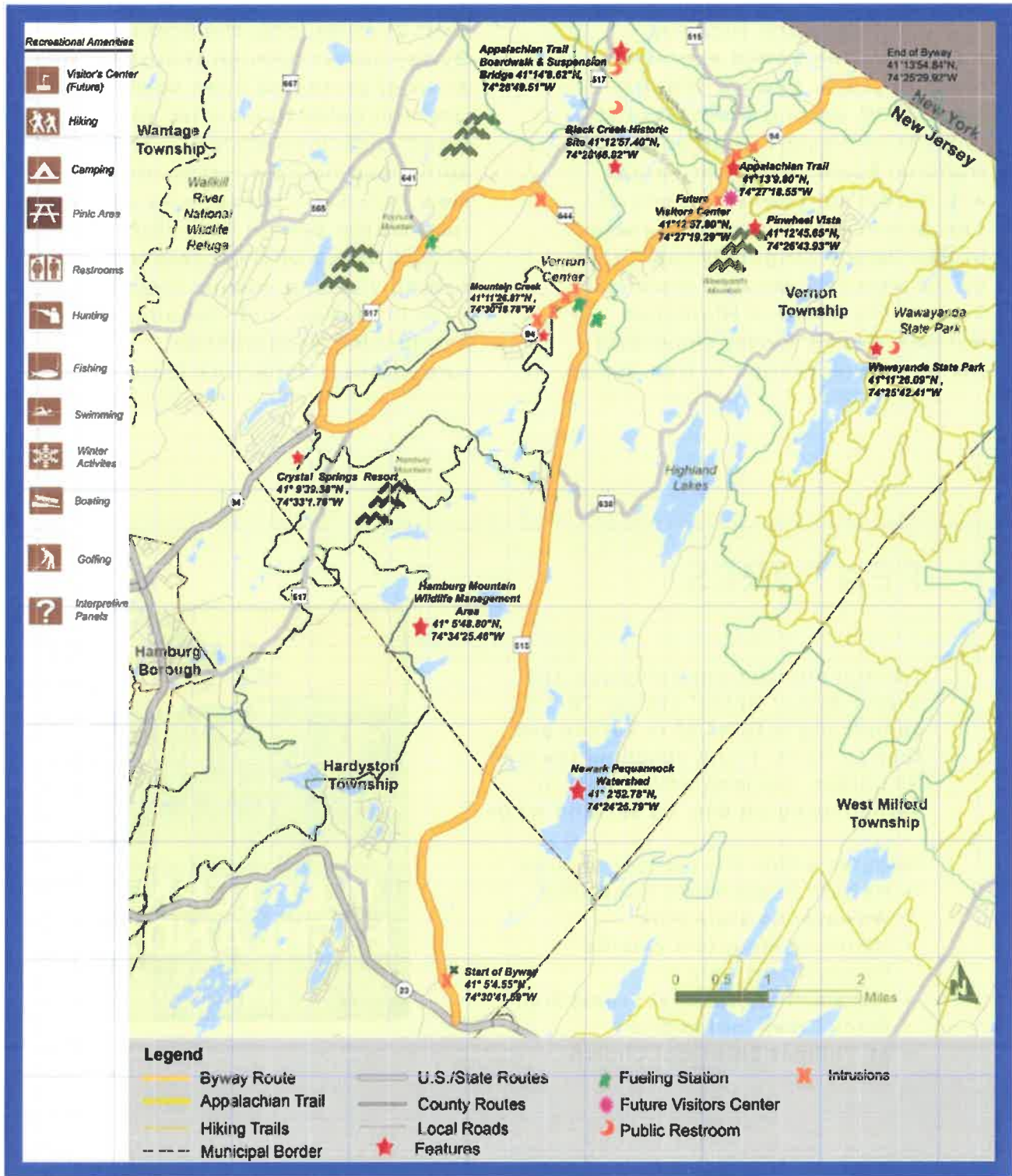
Traveling north from Hardyston, the Scenic Byway "spine" utilizes CR 515, connecting with NJ 23 in Vernon and then to NJ 94, finally touching the NY-NJ border. The loop travels west in Vernon using CR 644, CR 517, and NJ 94.

Features within the corridor include:

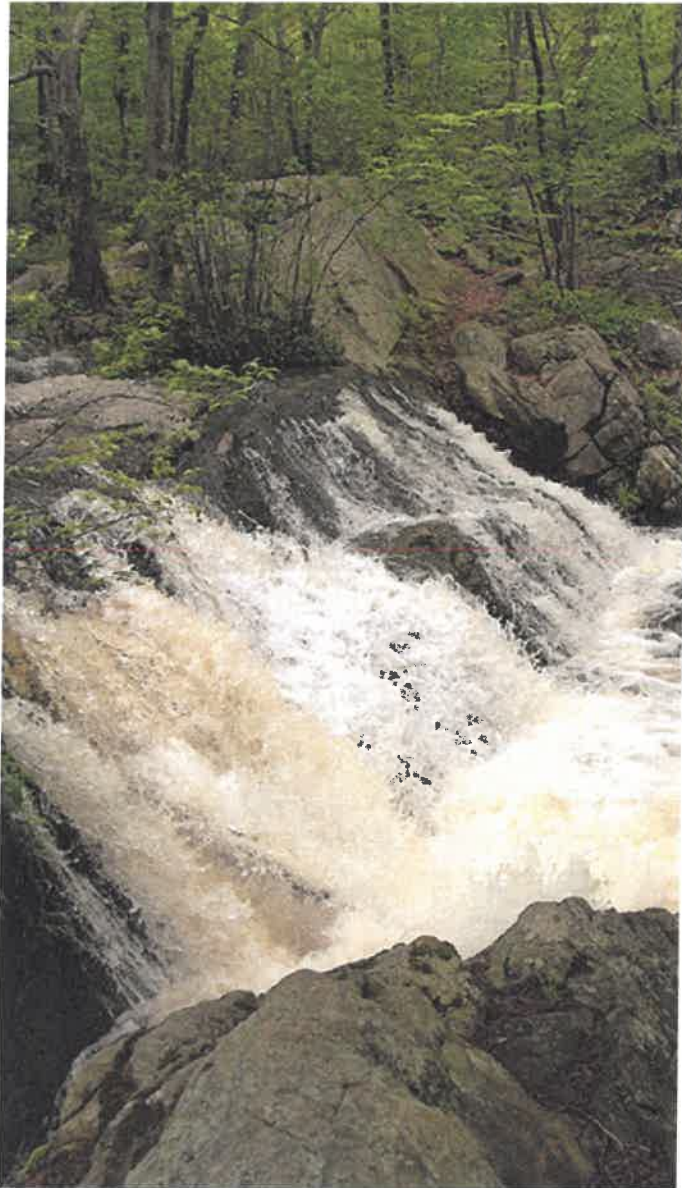
- Newark Pequannock Watershed
- Wawayanda State Park
- Hamburg Mountain Wildlife Management Area
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Black Creek Indian Site
- St. Thomas Episcopal Church



Western Highlands National Scenic Byway



NON-PROFIT PRESERVES



Pequannock Watershed Preserve

JANET VAN GELDER SANCTUARY

The Janet van Gelder Sanctuary is located in northwestern Vernon. It is owned jointly by New Jersey Audubon and the New Jersey DEP. Spanning 225 acres, the sanctuary is made up of rugged and forested land surrounded by Lounsberry Hollow Brook. The parking area is on state property along Lounsberry Hollow Road, providing access to its hiking trails and birdwatching areas.

PEQUANNOCK WATERSHED PRESERVE

Owned and managed by The Land Conservancy of New Jersey, the Pequannock Watershed Preserve has crystal clear streams and ponds; mature woodlands; rhododendron forests and stands of mountain laurels. Dunker Brook is the preserve's hidden gem. Surrounded by the Newark Pequannock Watershed owned by the City of Newark, the preserve does not have trails or parking. At 371 acres, it was preserved in 2010.

TRAILS

Vernon Township has a number of existing trails that connect to recreational areas throughout the town. These trails connect not only to municipal areas, but also to state and federal trail systems, creating **important greenways**. The town has long been interested in connecting these trails and recreational areas to form a continuous trail from north to south.

The **Appalachian Trail** spans 19.6 miles in northern Vernon within Wawayanda State Park before heading into West Milford Township and on to New York State. The Appalachian Trail passes through forested areas and marshes the impressive Pochuck Valley Boardwalk and Stairway to Heaven sections of the Trail.



LOCAL TRAILS

The Canal Road bike path (1.1 miles) travels between Masker Road and Route 515, intersecting with the Appalachian Trail. In the north, it connects to **Prices Switch Road bike path** (1.1 miles) and **Meadowburn Road bike path** (1.3 miles), both of which are along the road shoulders and extend to the New York State border. In addition, the **Sandhill Road Trail** extends from a trailhead adjacent to the Holy Counselor Lutheran Church to the Sandhill Road railroad crossing near Black Creek Sanctuary.

RECENTLY COMPLETED TRAILS

The newly completed **Town Center Bike and Walking Trail**, totals 0.6 miles (3,000 feet). With its starting point behind the Municipal Center Complex, it connects the Route 94 shopping center, Vernon Road Park, Church Street Park, multiple mixed-use shops, and the bicycle pump track area. The pump track facility includes two pump tracks, parking, a 1,300-foot ADA compliant **Pump Track Trail** loop, lighting, and a sitting/picnic area. The pump track is nearly complete, with plans to open early fall 2022.

Vernon Township recently completed the Town Center Trail and plans to add picnic tables and create a sitting area with scenic views of Vernon Valley. The complete trail is a safe way to walk and bicycle away from major roads. The new park provides plenty of recreational opportunities, with the future possibility of connecting the Town Center with Mountain Creek Resort. The Biking & Walking Trail are open.

Town Center Bike and Walking Trail



**VERNON TOWN CENTER
BIKE AND WALKING TRAIL**
VERNON TOWNSHIP - SUSSEX COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

LOCATION MAP

	DATE OF PREPARATION: 08/2022	DRAWN BY: C.L.S.	DATE: 08/2022
SCALE: 1" = 100'		PROJECT NO: 2022-001	

CORY L. STONER, P.E.
PROFESSIONAL ENGINEER No. 110, No. 41921

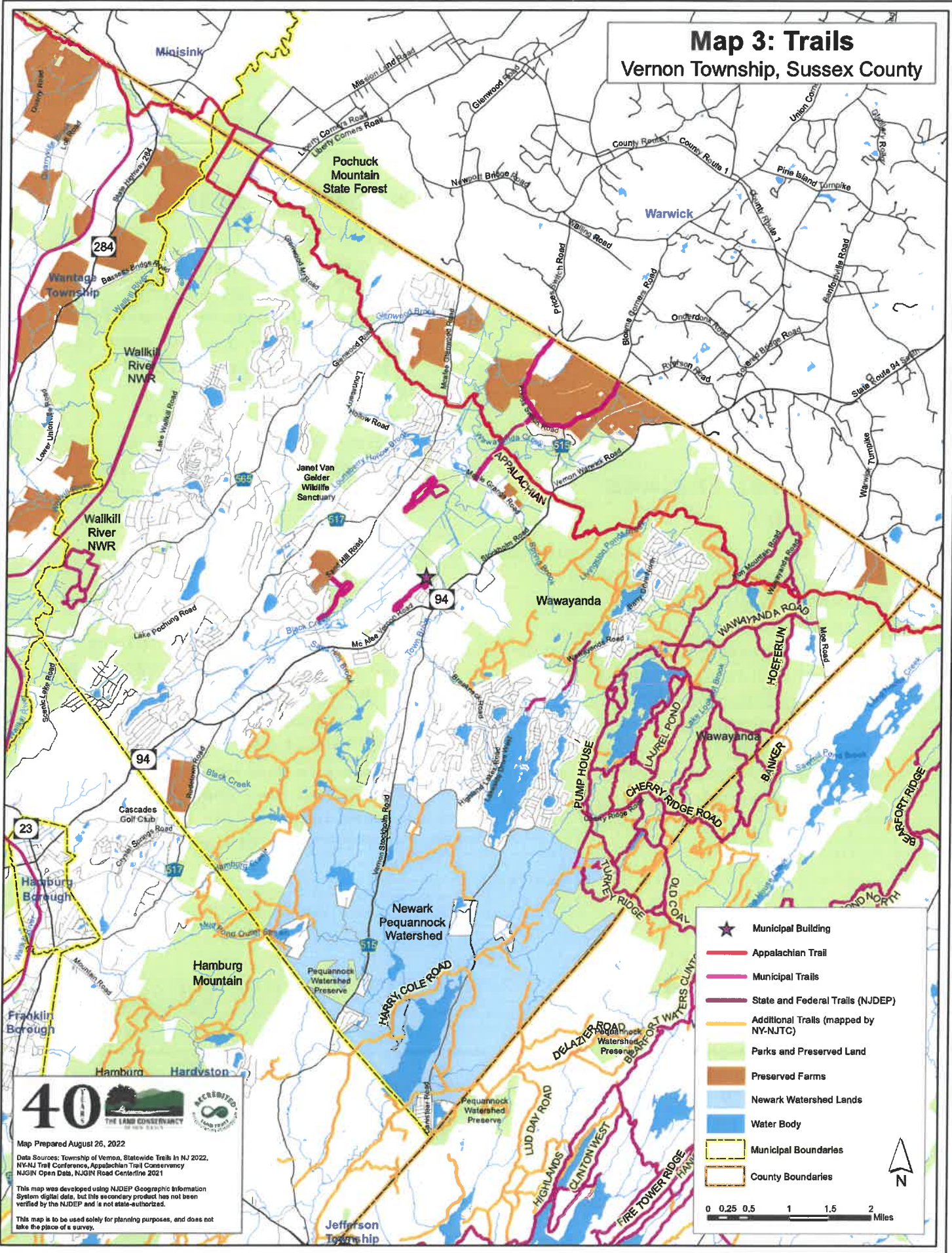
TRAILS IN VERNON

The Appalachian Trail	
Newark-Pequannock Watershed	
Cabin Trail	Harry Cole Road
Wallkill River National Wildlife Refuge	
Appalachian Trail	Dagmar Dale Trail - North Loop
Dagmar Dale Trail - South Loop	Liberty Loop Trail
Timberdoodle Extension	Timberdoodle Trail
Hamburg Mountain Wildlife Management Area	
Unnamed Trails	
Municipal Trails	
Canal Road Bike Path	Prices Switch Bike Path
Meadowburn Bike Path	Sandhill Road Trail
Town Center Bike and Walking Trail	

Wawayanda State Park		
Appalachian Trail	Double Pond Trail	Rattlesnake Trail
Bike Path Trail	Iron Mountain Trail	Red Dot Trail
Boulder Garden Trail	Laurel Pond Trail	Sitting Bear Trail
Black Creek Walking Trail	Little Bear Trail	South End Trail
Black Eagle Trail	Lookout Trail	Timber Trail
Boulder Garden Trail	Old Coal Trail	Turkey Ridge Trail
Cabin Trail	Pickle Trail	Twin Bridges Trail
Cedar Swamp Trail	Pines Trail	Wawayanda Lake Loop
Cherry Ridge Trail	Plymouth Trail	Wawayanda State Park
Connector - Hoeflerlin Trail, Appalachian Trail	Pump House Trail	William Hoeflerlin Trail

Map 3: Trails

Vernon Township, Sussex County



40 THE LAND CONSERVANCY

Map Prepared August 26, 2022

Data Sources: Township of Vernon, Statewide Trails in NJ 2022, NY-NJ Trail Conference, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, NGIN Open Data, NGIN Road Centerline 2021

This map was developed using NJDEP Geographic Information System digital data, but this secondary product has not been verified by the NJDEP and is not state-authorized.

This map is to be used solely for planning purposes, and does not take the place of a survey.

PRIVATE RECREATION

GREAT GORGE GOLF CLUB

The Great Gorge Golf Club, located at 414 County Road 517, has three 9-hole courses, a golf simulator, and a clubhouse with a restaurant. It is within close proximity to Mountain Creek Resort and Minerals Hotel and Spa in the southern portion of Vernon.

CRYSTAL SPRINGS RESORT

Crystal Springs Resort is a luxury golf resort located at 1 Wild Turkey Way. It has six championship golf courses, a natural grass course, quarry with catch and release fishing, nature trail, sports club, amphitheater, a children's "fun zone" with farm animals and recreational activities, the Mountaintop Lake and Recreation Center, and three pool complexes. Crystal Springs has two hotels, Minerals Hotel and Spa and the Grand Cascades Lodge.

NATIONAL WINTER ACTIVITY CENTER

Previously known as the Hidden Valley Ski Club, the National Winter Activity Center is run by Winter4Kids. Founded in 2014, it is the only non-profit winter activity facility in the country. They host programs giving a wide range of children access to outdoor winter recreation.

MOUNTAIN CREEK RESORT

Mountain Creek Resort is the largest private recreational facility in Vernon. With over 167 acres for skiing, a water park, and a bike park, Mountain Creek Resort has recreational opportunities year-round. Activities and facilities that Mountain Creek Resort supports include skiing and snowboarding, snow tubing, golf, ziplining, a ropes course, bike park, waterpark, and lodging and dining facilities.

Mountain Creek Resort utilizes five properties totaling 1,305 acres in the Hamburg Mountain WMA. Two properties were donated to the State of New Jersey and are under a 25 year lease to Mountain Creek, and the other three are co-owned by Mountain Creek Resort and the State of New Jersey DEP.

Photo by: Scenic Wild Delaware River



CAMPS AND CAMPGROUNDS

CAMP LOUEMMA

Camp Louemma is a private, recreational co-ed sleep-away summer camp located at 43 Louemma Lane. Set on 133 acres, the camp has a private lake for boating, various sports programs, and a climbing tower with a zip line. It is a medium-sized camp hosting 125 campers ages 7-15.

TALL TIMBERS

Tall Timbers is an owner occupied, seasonal campground. The campground has a private 15-acre lake with a sand beach, and hosts various events for children and adults.

CAMP SUSSEX

Camp Sussex, located at 1720 County Road 565, was a summer camp run by the Brooklyn Children's Fresh Air Camp Association. After closing in 2005, the camp was purchased in 2016 by an individual who plans to reopen the 92-acre property as a non-profit camp for children. In winter of 2019, the events company Hello Panda hosted the Vernon Lights Festival on the Camp Sussex property.



PRIVATE LAKE COMMUNITIES

There are 13 private lake communities in Vernon Township. Many of these communities provide private recreation such as water activities, playgrounds, and sports leagues.

The largest of the lake communities is Highland Lakes, with many volunteer-run recreational programs including softball, tennis, soccer, volleyball, and pickleball. They have five lakes for swimming, sailing, and fishing, along with trails for hiking and walking. Other lake communities that have private recreational programs and facilities include Barry Lake, Pleasant Valley Lakes, Lake Wallkill, Scenic Lake, Cliffwood Lake, Lake Panorama, Lake Glenwood, and Harborside.

**Lake Wanda Community is in the process of reforming as of January 2022.*

Barry Lake
Cliffwood Lake
Harborside
Highland Lakes
Lake Conway
Lake Glenwood
Lake Panorama
Lake Pochung
Lake Wallkill
Lake Wanda*
Pleasant Valley Lakes
Scenic Lakes
Vernon Valley Lake

HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Vernon Township is nearly a 230-year-old municipality covering 70 square miles of land and 2 square miles of lakes. As settlers moved into the area in the 1700s, they began to form villages around the farming communities and mining operation, forming McAfee, Glenwood and the Village of Vernon. Vernon was founded in 1793 after splitting from Hardyston Township.

In the 1930s, resort communities began to develop around the lakes as summer bungalow communities.

From the 1950s on, suburban residential growth began, much as it did across the United States. Suburbanization spawned rapid growth as the population in Vernon grew seventeen times larger during the period from 1950 to 2000.

Population exploded in the 1960s when the ski industry was introduced, attracting both tourists and new residents.

Vernon Township has protected numerous pieces of agricultural and indigenous history due to the efforts of the Vernon Township Historical Society. The Society has successfully listed several places on the state and national historic registers, and still works to add more including the Valley Farmers' Cooperative and the Native American Trade Post near Route 565.

From its small beginnings, Vernon has grown to nearly 23,000 residents, making it the most populous town in Sussex County. Vernon remains rich in its farming heritage and scenic beauty.





BLACK CREEK SITE

Black Creek Site is roughly 40 acres containing a field, partial woodland, a creek, and thousands of years of indigenous peoples' history. The first known inhabitants date back to 8,000 BCE. Upwards of 12,000 artifacts, traces of their tools and settlements, have been found dating from the Early Archaic to the Late Woodlands period. Native American historic sites are sparsely listed on the New Jersey historic register.

While archeologically important to Vernon's prehistory, some of the site's most notable feats have occurred in the 21st century. The area's indigenous group, the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape, along with Vernon residents worked together to nominate the Black Creek Site for state historic registry recognition.

Hearing of this, attorneys from Piper Rudnick, a Washington D.C. law firm, donated their legal services pro bono to advocate for the site's listing. Successfully listed in 2002, the site is listed nationally and is one of three Native sites listed on the New Jersey register.

Black Creek has not only been a cultural hub for the Nanticoke Lenni Lenape, but also a unifying site for visiting Native peoples from Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Canada. The site was acquired by Wawayanda State Park of Vernon Township, featuring a trail created by the historical society and an outdoor classroom.

HISTORIC FARMS

Photo by: Historic High Breeze Farm

EDSALL FARM

The Edsall family are one of Vernon's earliest settlers. Samuel Edsall was the first Edsall to come to the Americas, emigrating to New York in 1648. The family lived in New York and then Bergen County for some time before Richard Edsall, a land surveyor, moved to Vernon. His descendants went on to serve in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Many later served in local politics.



HIGH BREEZE FARM

High Breeze Farm, the last farm built on Wawayanda Mountain, is a 160-acre farm constructed circa 1828. This farm hosted four generations of the Barret family from the 1820s through 1980s, all without plumbing, central heat, or telephone service. The last Barret family member to inhabit the farm was Luther J. Barret. Luther Barret maintained the farm and its crops and worked as a blacksmith and farrier. He sold the property to the New Jersey DEP in 1981 before passing in 1986. In 2009, the Vernon Township Historical Society erected a sign commemorating the site and today they are working on the farm's restoration.

MEADOWBURN FARM

Meadowburn is the site of a 1760 farm that hosted one of Vernon's first settler families, the DeKay family. William DeKay and his family lived on the farm until 1853 and the farm has been operated commercially since 1881.

OTHER HISTORIC

RELIGIOUS

EDUCATION

Vernon Township BOE Building

The Vernon Board of Education building on Route 515 is notable for continuous public service in the Township for over a century. Built in 1903, this building started off as the new Vernon school to replace an older, smaller, and shoddier schoolhouse near the Methodist church. Its architectural design was produced by Thomas DeKay who created a one-story, T-shaped structure with an ancient Greek-inspired column-lined portico. The structure today is largely the same as when it was first constructed.

Price's Switch School House

This schoolhouse was built in 1840 near Route 94, but was later relocated to Price's Switch Road in 1883. Once at the Price's Switch Road location, the schoolhouse received a much-needed expansion. This long-running school operated until 1958, overseeing the education of many Vernon residents. Though no longer in use as a school, the schoolhouse is still involved in education as it is a popular site for children's field trips.

St. Thomas Episcopal Church

Built in 1847, this church is the oldest in Vernon Township. The church's architecture reflects a rural gothic style with board and batten walls and a tall belfry sitting towards the back of the church.

Vernon Cemeteries

Vernon Township has several historic cemeteries including the DeKay, Williamsville, Longwell Drew, Glenwood, Canistear, Cherry Ridge, McCamly, United Methodist Church, Episcopal Church, and the Edsall slave cemetery. The largest restoration effort began in 2007 as the combined effort of the historical society members, historian Bob Longcore, and members of the Sussex County Sheriff's Department to restore several cemeteries. Through these efforts, headstones and markers were located, dug up, and cleaned. Today, the cemeteries are maintained on an ongoing basis through the Vernon Township Historical Society.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Ring Quarry

The Ring Quarry was an important mining location within Vernon to prehistoric indigenous groups. It provided chert or flint that could be fashioned into spearheads or other tools.

HISTORIC SITES IN VERNON

LISTED ON THE STATE AND NATIONAL REGISTERS

Name	Location	National Register	State Register
Appalachian Trail	The 400-ft-wide right-of-way of the trail, from Warren to Passaic Counties	-	6/14/1978
Archaeological Site	-	-	4/1/1982
Black Creek Site	-	11/27/2002	8/4/1993
P.J. Brown Farmstead Site	-	-	4/28/1994
Cherry Ridge Historic Archaeological District	-	-	10/1/2010
William Crampton House	514 Stockholm Rd (CR 515)	-	4/16/2008
Dairy Barn & Milk House, Rickey Farmstead	442 Rt 94	-	COE: 10/28/2019
Erickson Lakeside Cabin	103 Lakeside Drive	11/3/2017	COE: 4/4/2014
Glenwood Mill	1806 Rt 565	-	6/10/1999
Hanke Site	-	-	3/28/2007
High Breeze Farm	(Wawayanda State Park) Barret Rd	7/27/1989	6/20/1989
Hunt Wood Parker Farmstead	483 Stockholm Rd	-	4/16/2008
Main House, Rickey Farmstead	442 Rt 94	-	COE: 10/28/2019
Meadowburn Farm	Meadowburn Rd	8/9/1993	6/28/1993
Park Log House	Glenwood Mountain Rd	-	COE: 12/22/1992
Rickey Farm	442 Rt 94	-	COE: 10/28/2019

Name	Location	National Register	State Register
Ring Quarry Prehistoric Mining Historic District	-	-	9/6/1996
Sand Hill Site	-	-	10/19/2005
"Sea Captain's House"	Route 515	-	9/12/1988
Stewart House	189 McAfee Vernon Road	-	10/19/2005
Stewart House Site	-	-	10/19/2005
St. Thomas' Church Complex	305-307 Route 94, Block 148, Lot 4 and southwestern portion of Lot 3	-	COE: 2/2/2017
Evan Waters Cottage	11 Grandview Road, Lake Wallkill	11/15/2016	COE: 8/9/2013
Winians Tavern ("Stage Coach Stop")	NJ Route 94	-	9/12/1988



Photo by: Meadowburn Farm

PLANNING REVIEW

Municipal Planning

2016 Update to the Master Plan

Vernon Township initially compiled their Master Plan in 1995, with a focus on obtaining and providing recreation facilities for active recreation and the senior citizen population. It also recommended developing a greenway system and pedestrian and bicycle paths to link residential neighborhoods with existing parks, open space areas, and the Appalachian Trail corridor.

The 2010 iteration of the Master Plan highlighted that recreation and open space are the single largest existing land use in the Township, covering over 54% of its land base.

The Master Plan was most recently updated in 2016. Goals were updated to include:

- Improving access to member-based recreational facilities and public spaces.
- Clarifying and defining ridgeline protection standards.
- Minimizing impacts on wetlands and stream corridors, as well impacts on lake-side residential properties.
- Directing the future growth to the Vernon Center, Redevelopment Areas, and appropriate existing resort areas of the Township.
- Ensuring that land use and development activities within the Highlands Preservation Area of the Township occur in a consistent manner with the Highlands Regional Master Plan.

Past municipal plans help guide the 2022 Open Space and Recreation Plan Update.

2010 Update to the Open Space & Recreation Plan

The 2003 Open Space & Recreation Plan emphasized providing adequate recreation facilities for all groups and preserving and protecting Vernon's natural resources. It focused on developing policies and ordinances that preserve, protect, and maximize the utility of natural resources as well as restrict development in critical environmental areas, such as floodplains, wetlands, and steep slopes.

In 2010, the Township updated the 2003 plan in accordance with the 2008 Highlands Regional Master Plan. The 2010 Update discussed how the Township can utilize other public and non-profit resources in the preservation of open space, with a focus on greenways, blueways, and scenic byways. Target areas included The Four Seasons Greenway, Vernon Grasslands Agricultural Areas I and II, Pochuck Mountain Greenway, Pochung Lake Natural Area, Town Brook Blueway, and Scenic Byways.

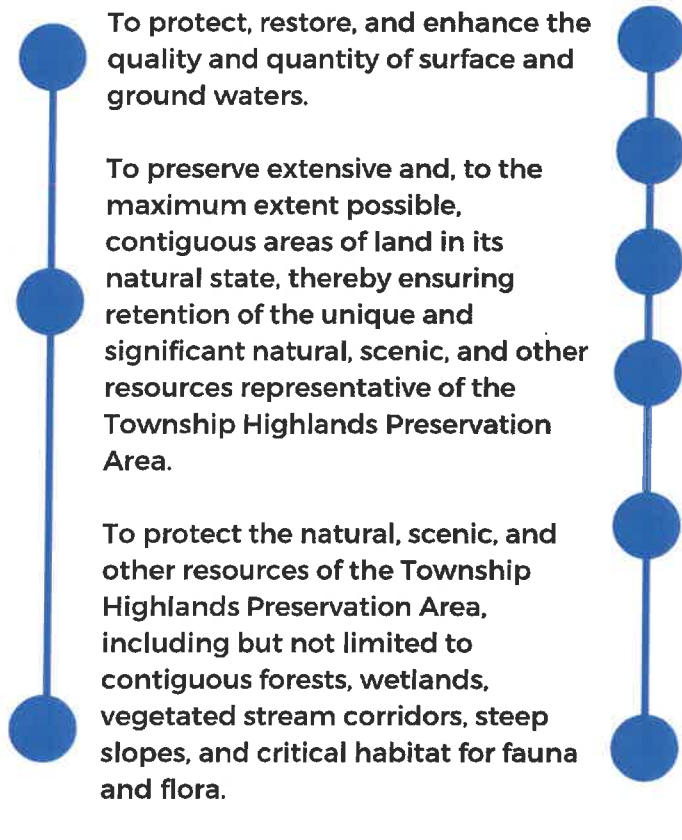
The 2010 Update identified a series of ongoing goals for the Township including reviewing and updating the plan, continuing to find opportunities to expand the town's multi-use trail system, and conducting outreach to adjacent municipalities, County officials, and landowners within the Township about open space and potential opportunities for preservation.

As of July
2022, there
are **26,391**
acres of
preserved
land in Vernon,
1,423 more
acres than at
the time of the
2010 OSRP
Update.

2013 Highlands Preservation Area Element of the Master Plan

The Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act, enacted in 2004, created planning boundaries within the Highlands area. These boundaries were split between Preservation Areas and Planning Areas, and mandate only Preservation Areas conform to the 2008 Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP). Vernon Township has 29,305 acres in the Preservation Area.

In 2013, Vernon adopted the Highlands Preservation Area Element of the Master Plan, in which Vernon Township further outlined their Preservation Areas goals:

- 
- To protect, restore, and enhance the quality and quantity of surface and ground waters.
 - To preserve extensive and, to the maximum extent possible, contiguous areas of land in its natural state, thereby ensuring retention of the unique and significant natural, scenic, and other resources representative of the Township Highlands Preservation Area.
 - To protect the natural, scenic, and other resources of the Township Highlands Preservation Area, including but not limited to contiguous forests, wetlands, vegetated stream corridors, steep slopes, and critical habitat for fauna and flora.
 - To preserve farmland, historic sites, and other historic resources.
 - To preserve outdoor recreation opportunities on publicly owned land.
 - To promote conservation of water resources.
 - To promote Brownfield remediation and redevelopment, where applicable.
 - To promote compatible agricultural, horticultural, recreational, and cultural uses and opportunities within the framework of protecting the environment of the Township Highlands Preservation Area
 - To prohibit or limit to the maximum extent possible construction or development which is incompatible with preservation of this unique area.

2019 Sustainable Economic Development Plan

The purpose of this plan is to identify and capitalize on economic opportunities, that will strengthen Vernon Township's standard of living. The 2019 plan highlights how a majority of the town's land is classified as open space, and that future development will take place in only one-third of the total municipal acreage (Highlands Planning Areas). The plan discusses how eco-tourism projects may be funded through the open space trust fund, and lists local recreational resources by federal, state, and municipal ownership. The Plan outlined the following goals:



Township Identity

To foster a strong sense of community through defining unique aspects of Vernon, beautification and streetscapes, and holding community input sessions.



Conservation

To preserve and protect Vernon's natural resources by ensuring existing environmental ordinances are adequate, adopting protections consistent with the Highlands Regional Master Plan, and encouraging clustering techniques to preserve open space areas with important historical, cultural, environmental, or agricultural significance.



Land Use

To encourage development that preserves and enhances the unique character of Vernon and direct the majority of future growth to the Town Center, redevelopment areas, and existing resort areas.



Economic Development

To create an economic development plan that promotes Vernon as a four-season recreation community while also looking at economic diversification, and identify opportunities for growth through the Commercial, Light Industrial, Commercial Recreation, and Agri-Eco Tourism Zones.

County Planning

2016

Update to the Open Space and Recreation Plan

First completed in 2003, Sussex County updated their Open Space and Recreation Plan in 2016 to further its goals to protect water resources, create regional greenways and trails, safeguard threatened and endangered species, offer passive and active recreational opportunities, promote tourism, enhance historical sites, and engage in land stewardship activities.

The Trails section of the 2003 Plan described the 200 miles of existing trails within Sussex County. Focus was also placed on the adaptive re-use of abandoned rail lines, and other greenway opportunities, including Black Creek Greenway in Vernon. This section outlined issues hampering trail implementation:

- Private property which causes trail interruptions.
- Illegal use of trails by motorized vehicles.
- Overuse on certain trail sections, including trailheads.
- Threat of development towards the Appalachian Trail, and its impact on Vernon Township.

The 2016 Update highlighted:

- **The opportunity for water trails, including the Vernon Canoe Trail off Maple Grange Road**
- **Vernon Township's 2015 foreclosure of 129 acres of land, proximate to the Vernon Recreational Center, and with high potential for trail construction.**
- **Increasing stewardship opportunities for the Vernon portion of the Appalachian Trail**

2008

Update to the Farmland Plan

For Vernon, the 2008 Plan recorded over 333 acres of preserved farmland, and lists the Township as being partially within Farmland Project Areas 1 & 2, as well as the Kittatinny Valley East Project Area. This plan furthered farmland preservation goals, by encouraging public agencies to coordinate much more with Sussex County and helping municipalities develop and strengthen their Right-to-Farm Ordinances. In Vernon, the Township's ordinance recognizes eight agricultural activities as a "natural right", including engaging agricultural operations during evenings, Sundays, and holidays.

2014

Update to the Strategic Growth Plan

Starting with the 2007 Strategic Growth Plan, Sussex County sought to use this document to detail inter-municipal approaches to eco-friendly economic growth. The plan highlights how not all municipalities want to encourage growth, and therefore regional/county initiatives will help preserve open space where necessary. The 2014 update continued in this theme by supporting the following goals:

- Support and expand tourism marketing and the hospitality industry
- Improve roadways and transit to make the County more attractive for residents and businesses
- Encourage mixed-use development and housing options for people with developmental and physical disabilities, mental illness, and the elderly
- Support economic development through education and awareness of current and potential business and industry needs such as workforce training and business retention efforts by the Sussex County Economic Development Partnership
- Coordinate with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection in accommodating targeted growth through a partnership with municipalities
- Support agriculture businesses through a partnership with the New Jersey Department of Agriculture

2014

Sussex County Complete Streets Policy & Implementation Plan

In this plan, Sussex County sought to encourage the development of transit infrastructure that improves mobility, circulation, safety, and equity for all users. It highlights the need to ensure safety and convenience for all modes of transportation, prioritizing bicycle and pedestrian accommodations and access for low mobility, seniors, children, and low-income populations. The Plan also reiterates the goals to ensure design solutions fit within the character of the community and to increase Sussex County's attractiveness as a destination for recreation opportunities. As part of the recommendations, the County will prioritize "locations where the Appalachian Trail crosses County roadways in both Frankford Township and Vernon Township".

The update also calls for the use of mixed-use housing, form-based zoning, and transfer of development rights as tools for open space preservation. Transit corridors, such as Route 94 in Vernon, will be most suitable for these uses. Further, the plan listed Vernon employers; Crystal Springs Golf and Spa Resort and the Mountain Creek Resort as the first and fourth-largest employers in the County.

State Planning

2008 Highlands Regional Master Plan

Published in 2008, this Plan serves as a planning reference tool to establish rules and regulations stemming from the 2004 Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act. Within the Highlands Region, the Plan outlines the general regional boundary, the Planning and Preservation Areas, as well as the Agricultural Resource and Priority Areas. Covering over 88 municipalities and seven counties, the Plan seeks to protect the drinking water for over half of the state's population. Municipalities and counties in the Preservation Areas must adhere to the Plan's conformance and development regulations, while those in the Planning Areas may voluntarily do so.

In Vernon Township, the Highlands Preservation Area encompasses 29,305 acres, or 65.5% of the Township's total acreage (44,769). This boundary covers the northern and south-east portions of the Township, including the northern Vernon Valley community. The remaining one-third of Vernon Township is within the Planning Area, at 15,464 acres (34.5%). As of 2008, 19,019 acres, or 42%, of the Township's land has been preserved as either open space or farmland.

2009 New Jersey Trails Plan

The 2009 New Jersey Trails Plan, among other objectives, provides a needs assessment of trail: maintenance, funding, and ability to handle multiple users. The plan prioritizes trail enhancement through the development of "community pathways", which entails having a recreational trail within a 10-minute walk of every state resident. Other recommendations include creating a dedicated funding source for trail management, which Vernon Township did through ordinance in 2018. The Plan also advocates for trail continuity, linkages, and acquiring right-of-ways to do so.

The Highlands Region of New Jersey hosts important ecological and water resources.

New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan

The New Jersey State Development and Redevelopment Plan (SDRP) was established by the state legislature in 2001 to provide an integrated statewide planning tool to help guide future planning in New Jersey. The plan delineates five planning areas that are “large masses of land that share a common set of conditions.” The Highlands Regional Master Plan (RMP) supersedes the SDRP in the Highlands Preservation Area, which encompasses 65% of the Township. Thus, the discussion below applies only to land within the Highlands Planning Area, covering 35% of the Township.

Rural Planning Area (PA4) (7,424 acres in Vernon’s Planning Area)

comprises much of the countryside of New Jersey, where large concentrations of cultivated or open lands surround regional, town, village, and hamlet centers. Identified goals for the Rural Planning Area include:

- Maintain the environs as large contiguous areas of farmland and other lands
- Revitalize cities and towns
- Accommodate growth in Centers
- Promote a viable agricultural industry
- Protect the character of existing, stable communities
- Confine programmed sewers and public water services to Centers

Environmentally Sensitive Planning Area (PA5) (2,719 acres in Vernon’s Planning Area)

contains “large contiguous land areas with valuable ecosystems, geological features, and wildlife habitats.” Goals for PA5 include:

- Protect environmental resources through the protection of large contiguous lands
- Accommodate growth in Centers
- Protect the character of existing stable communities
- Confine programmed sewers

The remaining land in Vernon Township’s Planning Area is delineated as **Parks and Natural Areas (PA8)**.

These lands constitute sections of Wallkill River National Wildlife, Hamburg Mountain Wildlife Management Area and lands administered by Wawayanda State Park. This includes 2,972 acres of federal parkland and 2,334 acres of state parkland. Within Parks and Natural Areas, the intention of the State Plan is to:

- Provide for the protection of critical natural resources
- Provide public recreational and educational opportunities
- Ensure the maintenance of associated facilities
- Ensure the connection of these areas into a system of open lands

Sustainable Jersey

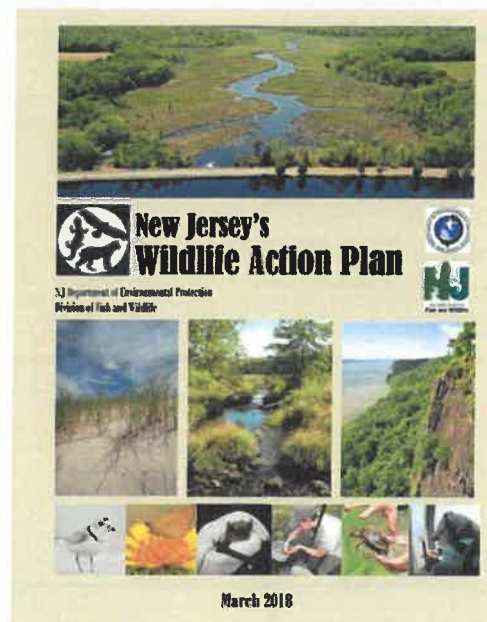
Sustainable Jersey is a program aimed at creating a network of municipalities that receive grant funding for their sustainable practices. Successful municipalities become certified and adhere to rigorous guidelines to maintain their certification. To achieve a sustainable future, the program offers financial and technical assistance for interested municipalities in areas such as emission reduction and sustainability education. While certification is voluntary, municipalities seek this designation given the cost savings and the stronger potential for natural resource preservation.

With over 455 registered municipalities, Vernon Township currently has a "Bronze" certification, as of November 3, 2017. Bronze status indicates that Vernon has taken the first important steps towards sustainability. The Township received points for initiatives such as creating the "Green Team" - a consortium of residents, businesses, and town officials who are actively working on the Town Center Greenway Project. Other actions taken include promoting the Mayor's Wellness Campaign for active recreation, the establishment of a recycling depot, and most importantly, the periodic publication of an Open Space and Recreation Plan.

2018 New Jersey Wildlife Action Plan

The New Jersey or State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) is focused on addressing and promoting wildlife preservation. Through a proactive approach, the 2018 SWAP aims to manage wildlife populations through 2028, in order to maintain federal grant compliance. The 2018 Plan covers the most at-risk species, including 107 high-priority, focal species.

The Plan also highlighted the Skylands Landscape Region, discussing the various conservation focal areas (CFAs) near and within the Vernon Valley, especially the Wallkill Headwaters Wetlands CFA. Within the Township and Sussex County, the Plan touches on the prevalence of bog turtles unique to the Ridge and Valley and Highlands Region.

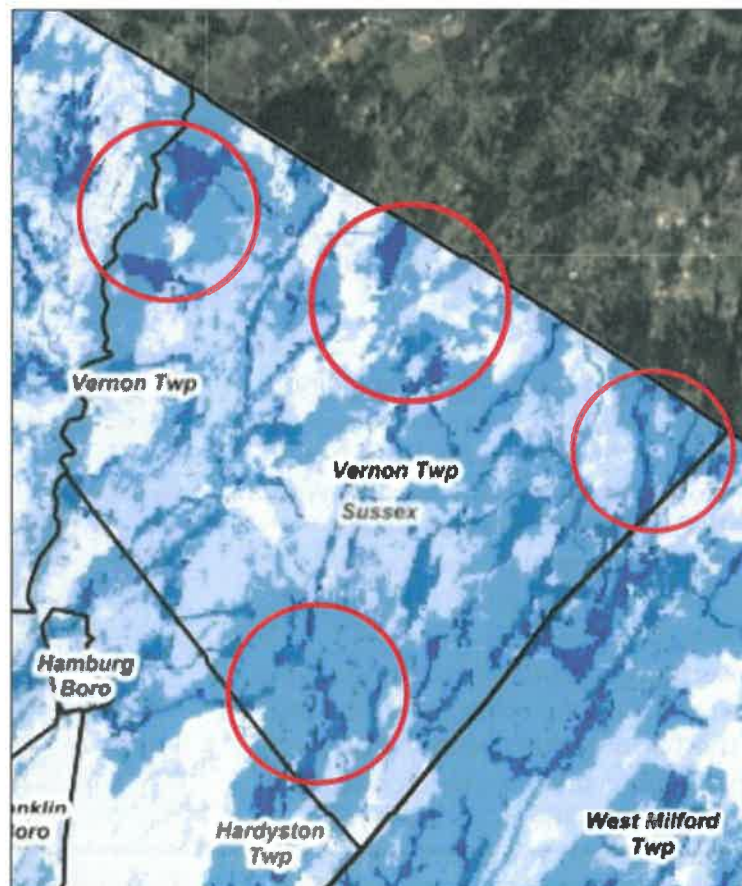


New Jersey Conservation Blueprint

This online source provides a live, customizable map to help identify land parcels by preservation priority. The map focuses on agriculture, water quality, ecological integrity, and community open space.

Vernon Township contains multiple water bodies, and has deemed those bodies that run along the north-western, central, and eastern portions of the Township as a high priority for water quality protection. (Figure 1) This includes the High Breeze, Highland Lakes, and the Glenwood/Vernon Valley communities, as well as homes surrounding the Wallkill River. These parcels are contiguous or overlap with wetland boundaries and high rates of groundwater recharge.




The ecological integrity of Vernon Township is important for the management of ecosystems, habitats, and climate change resilience. Areas of high ecological integrity (HCE) surround the Highland Lake and Glenwood communities, the Hamburg Mountain WMA, Wawayanda State Park, and the area surrounding the Wallkill River. Many of these valuable parcels exist along or to the west of US-94, mostly in the south-central and south-western portions of Vernon Township.



Source: New Jersey Conservation Blueprint

2018-2022 New Jersey Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan

The recent update to the Outdoor Recreation Plan discusses the opportunities and challenges facing the state's land preservation efforts. The 2018 SCORP provides an inventory of available open space, as well as forecasted demand for open space. Goals are to:

-  Encourage open space and recreation planning by local governments and conservation organizations.
-  Implement open space and recreation planning policies and projects that are consistent with DEP goals.
-  Effectively use funds from the Preserve New Jersey Act, Land and Water Conservation Fund, Forest Legacy Program and other sources of funding which may become available.

The SCORP continues by recommending strategies for state-municipal cooperation through funding assistance, regional partnerships, and technical/consulting assistance. These collaborative initiatives entail broad public participation and include creating environmental education facilities and programs as a main action item.

Federal Planning

Walkkill River National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan

In February 2009, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service released a Comprehensive Conservation Plan to enhance and expand the Walkkill River National Wildlife Refuge. The Plan, based on a 2008 Draft Comprehensive Plan and Environmental Assessment, proposes to add 9,550 acres to the Refuge through a combination of fee-simple acquisitions and conservation easements on adjoining lands. No lands have been identified for acquisition in Vernon Township, which currently includes the largest portion of the refuge, at 2,696 acres, followed by Wantage with 1,839 acres. However, the expanded acquisition area includes lands north, west and south of the existing refuge boundaries, in Warwick, New York, and Wantage, Frankford and Lafayette, New Jersey. In addition, a number of parcels within the original acquisition boundaries in Vernon Township remain of interest for acquisition from willing sellers, including an abandoned railroad bed.

Recommendations

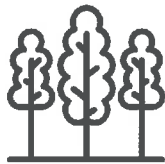
People live in Vernon for its outdoor lifestyle, stunning vistas and easy access to skiing, golf and family entertainment. Preservation of the municipality's natural beauty, rugged landscape, and history as living parts of the community contribute to maintaining the town's high quality of life and rural landscape.

Priorities for preservation include the protection of:



Farmland

Protecting agricultural land supports the farmer and town's farming heritage and historic sites.



Woodlands

Climate resiliency and sustainable landscapes are anchored in preserving our forests.



Critical Watershed Lands

Partnering to conserve our water resources ensures plentiful, clean water for our children.



Recreation and Trails

Providing opportunities for recreation, trails and playing fields promotes a healthy lifestyle and outdoor ethic.

FARMLAND PRESERVATION

Since 1998, **1,266 acres on 9 farms** have been preserved in Vernon Township. This is due to the support of local farmers who worked with the county and state to preserve their land. The most recently preserved farms closed in 2022.

Benefits of farmland preservation include:

- Maintains the rural nature of the municipality.
- Voluntary program for landowners.
- Permanently preserves agricultural land from development.
- Protects groundwater, which is the source of drinking water for residents.
- Protects forest and wildlife habitat.
- Preserved farmland continues-pay property taxes unlike lands owned by government.
- Significant state and county funds (\$3.5 million to date) directly to property owners.
- Improves the overall economy of the town.
- Improves the land value for neighboring property owners.
- Enables the viability of farm businesses, which in turn provides good local jobs.

7,921 acres

of the Township are identified by the Highlands Council as Agricultural Resource and Agricultural Priority Areas, with substantial sections ranked moderate to high priority.

4,352 acres

in Vernon Township are unpreserved, farm assessed land. The Township is completing its Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan which identifies those lands which meet the state's minimum eligibility criteria for productive soils and tillable land and may be potentially eligible for preservation.

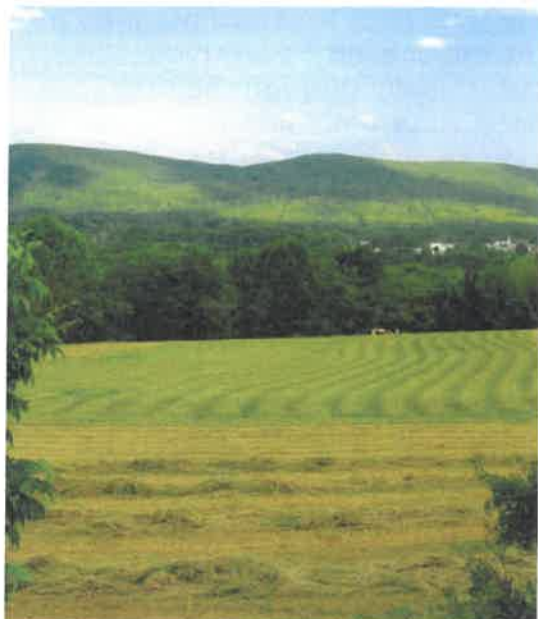


Photo by: Vernon Valley Farm

FOREST PROTECTION



Equally important to the traditional crop-managed farms are lands under woodland management which make up three-quarters of the total farm assessed property in the municipality. Preserved traditionally through the Green Acres program, these properties provide an important resource for water filtration and carbon sequestration, protecting the air we breathe and the water we drink.

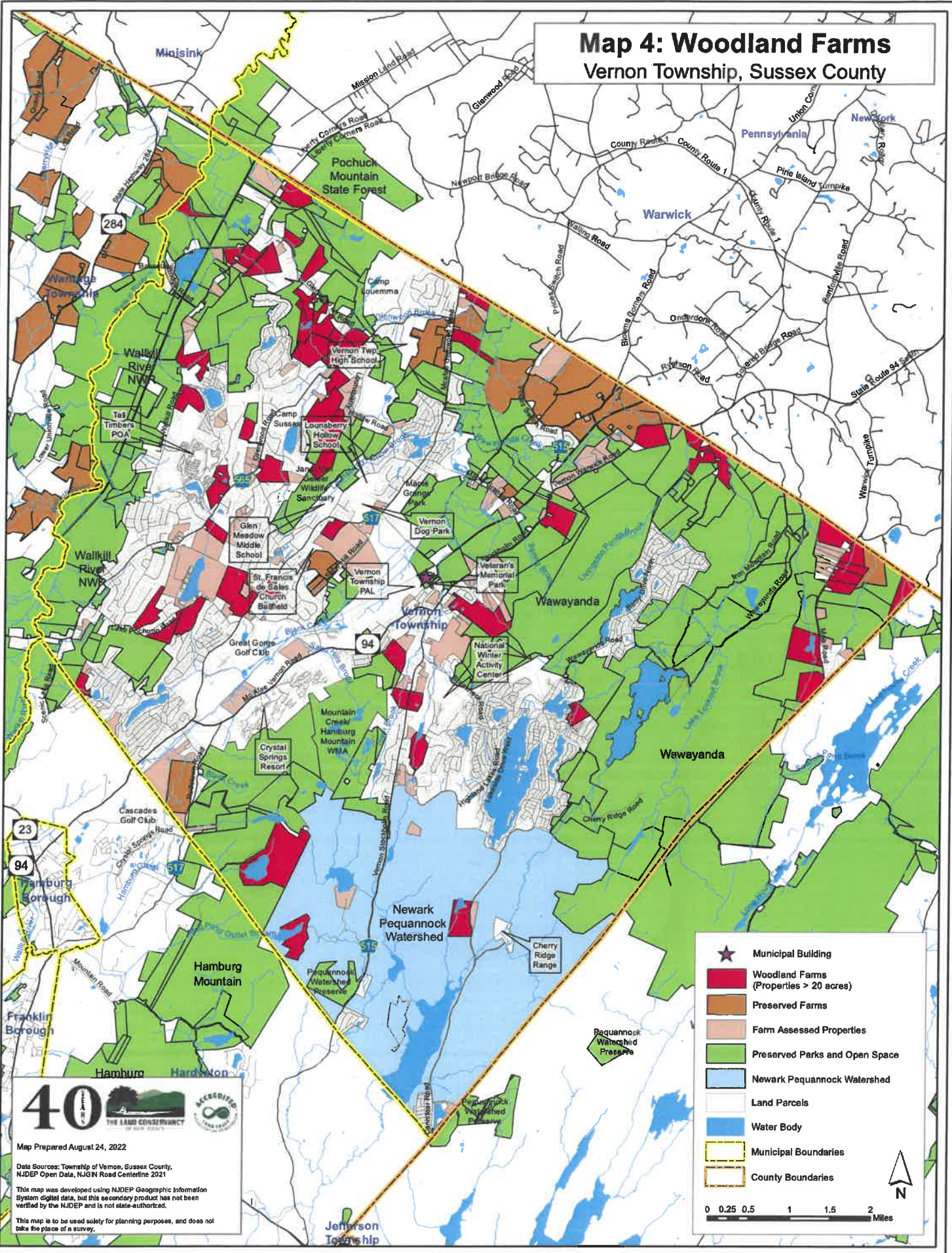
In Vernon Township there are 2,829 acres of land under woodland management. These large lots (greater than 20 acres in size) have the potential to expand existing public open space lands, providing opportunities for recreation, trails, and offering habitat for a myriad of plant and wildlife species.

Each year since 2000, forests are estimated to have removed an average of 2 billion metric tons of carbon from the atmosphere. Careful forest management can be an important strategy to help address climate change in the future.

- MIT Climate Primer

Map 4: Woodland Farms

Vernon Township, Sussex County



- ★ Municipal Building
- Woodland Farms (Properties > 20 acres)
- Preserved Farms
- Farm Assessed Properties
- Preserved Parks and Open Space
- Newark Pequanock Watershed
- Land Parcels
- Water Body
- Municipal Boundaries
- County Boundaries

0 0.25 0.5 1 1.5 2 Miles

40 THE LAND CONSERVANCY

Map Prepared August 24, 2022

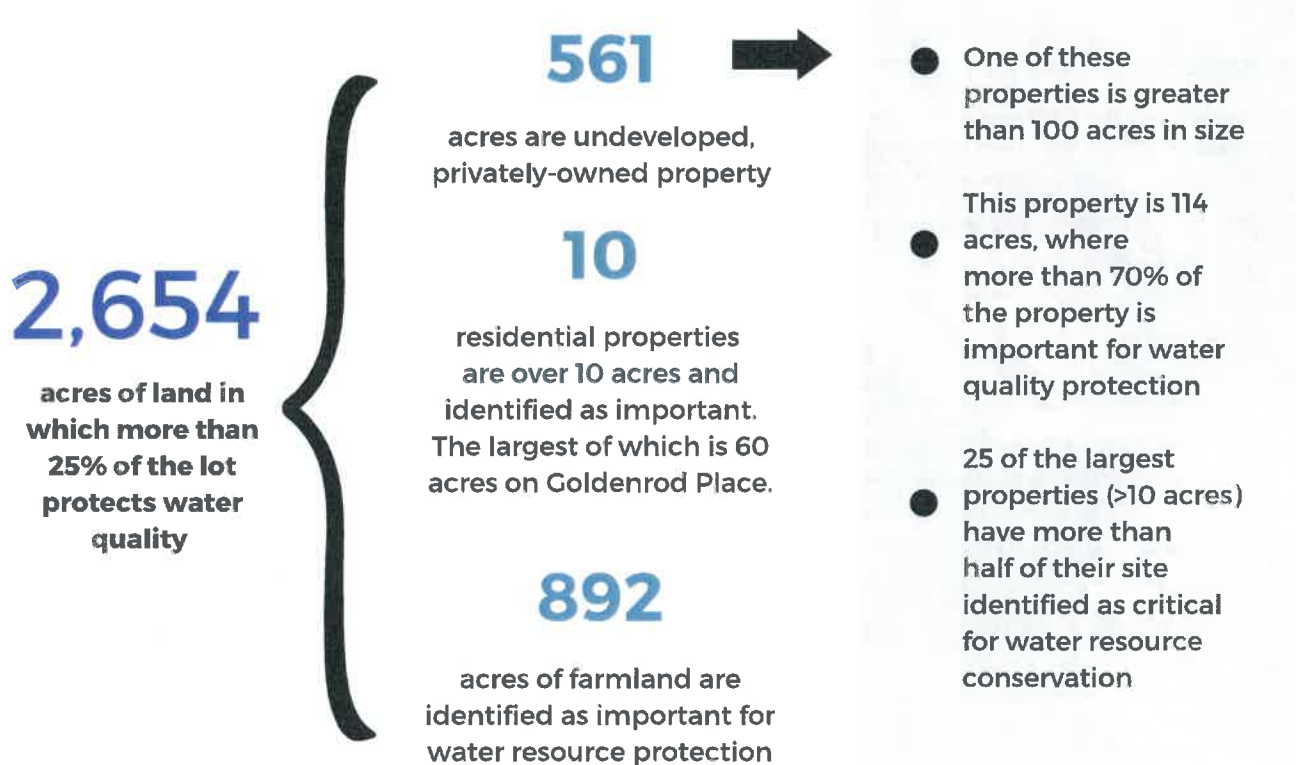
Data Sources: Township of Vernon, Sussex County, NJDEP Open Data, NJGN Road Centerline 2021

This map was developed using NJDEP Geographic Information System digital data, but this secondary product has not been verified by the NJDEP and is not state-authorized.

This map is to be used solely for planning purposes, and does not take the place of a survey.

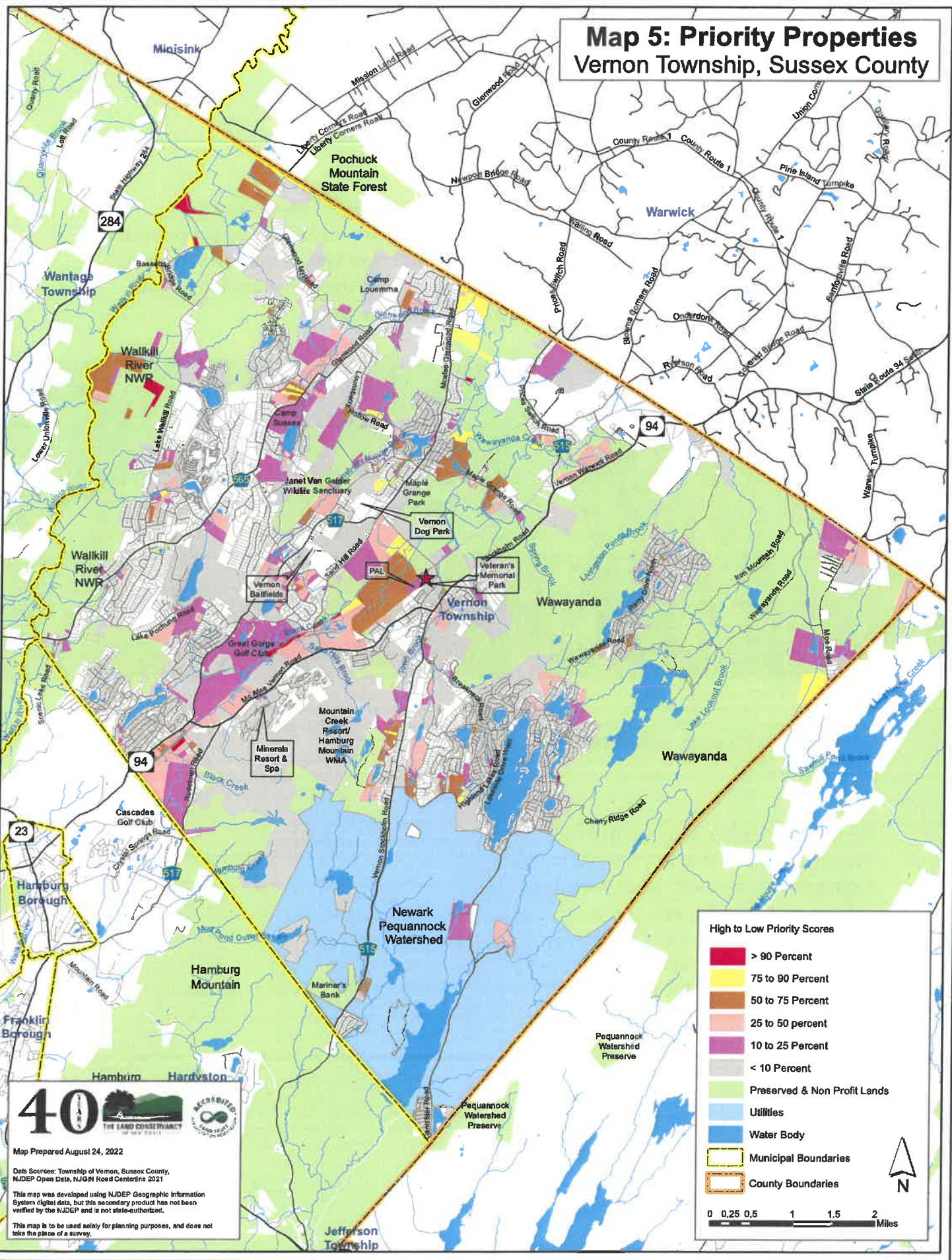
WATER RESOURCE PROTECTION

The **2016 Update to Sussex County's Open Space and Recreation Plan** identified land important for the conservation of water quality and water recharge. The mapping analyzed the properties based on their unique water quality and/or water resource attributes. This resulted in the identification of property in which more than 90% of the lot protects water quality/quantity. **Vernon recognizes that there are many factors that must be considered when deciding whether to preserve a particular property. The Sussex County data can be helpful factors in making these decisions.**



98 acres on 13 properties are in the highest priority category in which more than 90% of the lot is important for water resource protection. Two of these properties are greater than 25 acres in size.

Map 5: Priority Properties Vernon Township, Sussex County



40 THE LAND CONSERVANCY

Map Prepared August 24, 2022

Data Sources: Township of Vernon, Sussex County, NJDEP Open Data, NJGN Road Centerline 2021

This map was developed using NJDEP Geographic Information System digital data, but this secondary product has not been verified by the NJDEP and is not state-authorized.

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High to Low Priority Scores

- > 90 Percent
- 75 to 90 Percent
- 50 to 75 Percent
- 25 to 50 percent
- 10 to 25 Percent
- < 10 Percent
- Preserved & Non Profit Lands
- Utilities
- Water Body
- Municipal Boundaries
- County Boundaries

0 0.25 0.5 1 1.5 2 Miles

TRAILS

Trails are the total package: they provide public health, economic and transportation benefits. They reflect a community's identity and connect people to places they want to go and see. Hiking the Appalachian Trail in Vernon Township brings you to gorgeous views, challenging terrain, and the knowledge that you have hiked one of the most renowned trails in the country.



Connecting People and Places

Vernon Township is committed to building trails that bring people to local parks and resort areas. Merging Vernon's greenways will connect people to parks, and will be enjoyed by families, friends, and visitors. Trails can be wooded or paved, on the road for cyclists, or rivers for kayakers. Vernon has opportunities to partner with Mountain Creek and Crystal Springs. The town has plans to construct trails to the PAL building, Black Creek Sanctuary, Veterans' Park, and Maple Grange Park.

Greenways are "corridors of protected public and private land established along rivers, stream valleys, ridges, abandoned railroad corridors, utility rights-of-way, canals, scenic roads, or other linear features. They link recreational, cultural, and natural features, provide pathways for people and wildlife, protect forests, wetlands, and grasslands, and improve the quality of life for everyone."

American Greenways Program

Proposed Trails

The 0.6-mile **Maple Grange bike path** will connect Canal Road to Maple Grange Park along Masker Road. Maple Grange Community Park has a 1.1-mile bike path that loops around the fields and facilities at the park. Completion of the Maple Grange bike path will allow pedestrians and cyclists to travel from the New York State border to the Appalachian Trail and Maple Grange Community Park.

Proposed Maple Grange Bike Path



ACTION PLAN

The Open Space and Recreation Plan Update offers an updated set of strategies and a timetable to implement the goals and recommendations for Vernon Township. The action program suggests specific tasks that the town may undertake in order to implement the Plan Update.



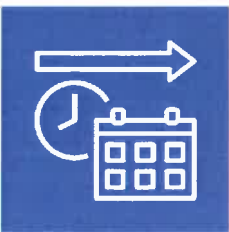
Short Term

Within one year, Vernon Township should formally adopt the *Open Space and Recreation Plan Update* and submit it to Green Acres for their files



Mid-Term

Next steps are to complete pending projects, trails and identify and evaluate opportunities for preservation to reach out to landowners in coordination with the state, county and non-profit organizations.



Long Term

Vernon should focus on large-scale decisions and programs for acquisition, recreation and stewardship, working within the municipality, its business partners, and with neighboring towns.

Ongoing efforts in Vernon Township should include educating residents on the benefits of land preservation, publicizing successful projects, and maintaining up-to-date target lists.

SHORT-TERM

To be completed within one year



Adopt the Open Space and Recreation Plan as an element to the Township of Vernon's Master Plan.



Submit the final *Open Space and Recreation Plan Update* to Green Acres.



Complete the town's pending property acquisition.

MID-TERM

Trails and Funding Action Items	Community Engagement Action Items	Partnership Opportunity Action Items
<p>Complete the Maple Grange and Town Center Trails.</p>	<p>Work with historic organizations to expand local opportunities for historic conservation and education.</p>	<p>Develop materials and programs that educate owners of forested lands about conservation easements to permanently protect their lands.</p>
<p>Link the Masker Marsh property to Canal Road and Maple Grange Park. Connect the Maple Grange trail network with the end of the Lenape trail for a looping trail segment.</p>	<p>Offer educational opportunities to create home-based stewardship programs benefitting local wildlife and ecosystems,</p>	<p>Develop an Adopt a Park program.</p>
<p>Continue collecting a portion of the hotel tax for open space projects. Investigate opportunities to reestablish the municipal Open Space Trust Fund.</p>	<p>Pursue opportunities along streams to protect the health of these resources and increase their value for public recreation.</p>	<p>Create a regular process to contact large landowners regarding granting the Township "first refusal" rights on future sales of their properties.</p>

LONG-TERM

Extend the Town Trail to the Mountain Creek property to connect the Town center with Canal Road - Masker Marsh - Maple Grange Park. Consider adding on-road bike lanes along Route 517, Sand Hill Road, Drew Road, and MacPeek Road.

Work with the County Chamber of Commerce to examine eco-tourism initiatives and "green" economic development.

Establish park management volunteer days to engage residents in stewardship programs.

Continue to improve lighting and facilities at Veterans' Memorial Park, add additional parking at Maple Grange.

ONGOING

Celebrate and publicize all successful open space projects with community events.



Continue to offer ongoing and diverse recreational programs for all Township residents.



Promote best management practices near environmentally sensitive lands, including rivers, streams and wetlands.



Continue to apply for and investigate grant opportunities to protect the Township's open space areas,

