

Township of Mount Holly
NJ DEP Green Acres
Environmental Impact Assessment – West Side Park

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

The Project Area is Block 48.02, Lot 11.02 on the Mount Holly Township Tax Map, which is situated on the northern end of Tax Block 48.02 on the west side of the North Branch of Rancocas Creek (Creek) in the downtown oxbow area. This 0.95-acre (41,382-square foot) area is bound on the north-west by Commerce Place, on the northeast by the Creek, on the southeast by the back end of the Municipal Building and of other municipal properties, and to the southwest by Park Drive. As the site is publicly owned and located within the State and National Mount Holly Historic District, all future improvements will require review and approval by the State Historic Sites Council.

The project will involve the removal of existing bituminous asphalt and the replacement of concrete sidewalks and curbing. A historic cabin, relocated to the site between 1965 and 1970, is a key feature of the area. The project aims to enhance accessibility to the cabin and improve the exhibits surrounding it. The broader objective is to create an inviting open space near the Downtown area, serving as a multifunctional community asset. This space is envisioned as a shaded retreat for lunchtime breaks or a sunny spot for family picnics, a launch and landing site for canoes and kayaks, and a venue for outdoor farmers markets, craft fairs, poetry readings, musical performances, theatrical acts, outdoor movies, and dancing under the stars. Additionally, it will offer opportunities for visitors to learn about Mount Holly's history, seamlessly connect parking areas to the downtown, and provide a tranquil setting to enjoy the natural beauty of the creek.

Given the scope and cost of the proposed improvements, it is anticipated that this project will be completed in multiple phases. Currently, the Township has secured funding to remove existing asphalt and curbing, modify onsite electrical systems, install topsoil and seeding, and construct a bioretention area. Additional funding will be required to complete the remaining components of the project. Furthermore, the project will require NJDEP permitting before construction and bidding may proceed. In particular, the kayak launch depicted in the project plans has already received permitting approval but is expected to be constructed as part of the Downtown Parking Lot Green Space Conversion initiative. As depicted in the concept plan, there is potential for future enhancements to the parking areas adjacent to the project site. These improvements would aim to upgrade and consolidate existing parking facilities at the Mount Holly Police Station and the lot north of the proposed park. However, these enhancements are not included in the scope of this initial project and are not part of the Green Acres grant application.

The proposed development aims to transform the area into a dynamic and inviting public space that promotes community engagement while supporting local businesses and cultural events. Designed to enhance pedestrian and cyclist connectivity, the space will link key destinations within Mount Holly such as Trinity Lane, Washington Street, and the black steel rail pedestrian bridge, a functional crossing and tribute to the town's ironworks heritage. Additional connections include the Commerce Place Bridge, providing direct access to High Street's business district, and the Park Drive Bridge, linking to the County Courthouse. West Side Park is envisioned as both a standalone destination and a transitional hub, enhancing accessibility to downtown attractions and public parking. The project aims to preserve historical heritage and delivering environmental, social, and economic benefits that support Mount Holly's broader community goals.

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2 DESCRIPTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The site has experienced significant disturbance over the years, resulting in limited existing vegetation. Most of the current vegetation consists of commercially grown and human-installed plantings, including primarily turf grass, planted shrubs, and approximately 26 trees with diameters exceeding 6 inches. Mature vegetation on the site is minimal and primarily located adjacent to the project area. Wherever feasible, all existing vegetation that does not pose a hazard will be preserved.

The site is situated adjacent to the upper branch of the Rancocas Creek, with dense vegetation along the edge of the parking lot. As part of the permitting process for the kayak launch, several existing trees are expected to be removed to accommodate the construction of an accessible ramp. It should also be noted that several dead trees within the riparian buffer will need to be removed as part of these improvements. Additional trees are located around the perimeter of the property, including three trees within a central parking lot island and approximately six more surrounding the Shinn Cabin. The green space conversion is anticipated to require the removal of four trees. Most of the vegetation onsite consists of commercially grown species, which have been planted over time as part of previous site enhancements.

The most valuable vegetation on the site is located adjacent to the Rancocas Creek; however, it exhibits significant signs of stress due to past disturbances and the proximity of the existing parking lot to the creek. Many trees within the riparian buffer are dead, and the understory plant materials are increasingly being overtaken by vines and invasive species. It is anticipated that the dead and heavily stressed vegetation will be removed, with additional native plant species to be introduced as part of the bioretention area installation and the overall park improvement efforts.

The upland portion of the site is situated within the Piedmont Plains Region, adjacent to a section of Rancocas Creek that is classified with a Rank 5 Habitat Suitability Requirement and is part of the contiguous Riparian Corridor Patch. According to NJ GEOWEB, there are no records of federally or state-listed endangered species, threatened species, or critical habitats within the upland area of the site.

Within Rancocas Creek there have been sightings of Sturgeon, and it is a known location of foraging for Bald Eagles and Blue Heron; However, there are no known critical habitats.

According to the *Pre-Quaternary Geology of the Mount Holly Quadrangle, New Jersey*, the site is located within the Wenonah geologic formation, which consists primarily of marine sedimentary deposits. These formations are characterized by unconsolidated, interbedded clays, silts, sands, and gravels, and are relatively flat, forming a low-relief plain with modest altitude. The upland portion of the site ranges in elevation from approximately 8 feet to 10–11 feet, consistent with historical USGS topographic maps. Although it is difficult to precisely determine based on topographic mapping, the site appears to have been maintained at these elevations since around 1888. According to the USDA, the site primarily features FmhAt Fluvaquents, loamy soils with 0 to 3% slopes that are frequently flooded, a typical soil type for floodplain areas. Additionally, the

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location is likely to have a shallow water table, ranging from 6 to 18 inches in depth. Below is the typical soil profile for this area:

- A1 - 0 to 5 inches: loam
- A2 - 5 to 12 inches: silt loam
- C1 - 12 to 18 inches: sandy clay loam
- C2 - 18 to 24 inches: sandy clay loam
- C3 - 24 to 60 inches: sandy loam

It was found that the NJ GEOWEB includes a blanketed area through Mount Holly, indicating the potential for historic fill on-site. This would obviously require initial investigations to determine if the site does in fact contain historic fill materials.

As mentioned, the site has a relatively shallow water table, which is due to the site being located adjacent to the North Branch of the Rancocas Creek. This area is part of the North Branch of the Rancocas Creek Tributary. This portion of the creek is tidally influenced by the Delaware River and the Atlantic Ocean. Further north Rancocas Creek is dammed by Mill Dam.

The Shinn Family Log Cabin, relocated to the site between 1965 and 1970, occupies approximately 7,300 square feet, or one-sixth of Lot 11.02. This area, a small park, includes the relocated historic c.1712 cabin, a historic millstone monument, and a Quaker peace memorial. The building, listed on the Township, State, and National Registers of Historic Places, is in average condition.

Due to its raised elevation and use of exterior wooden steps, the cabin does not currently meet ADA accessibility standards. The cabin sits less than 15' from the adjacent parking lot, which does not provide sufficient physical and visual separation to appreciate the historic significance of this 18th century local landmark. The hope is to provide an accessible ramp up to the building and integrate it into the open space.

The Project Area is well connected to downtown Mount Holly. Park Drive connects Rancocas Road near the Burlington County Administration Building to Washington Street opposite the U.S. Post Office. Commerce Place connects Park Drive to High Street, roughly midway between its main intersections at Washington Street and Rancocas Road / Garden Street. Park Drive and Commerce Place both have 33'-wide rights-of-way, including a 24'-wide, 2-lane cartway and an elevated 4.5'-wide sidewalk on either side.

Due to the grade changes between the east and west sides of the Creek and of the bottom spans of the bridges over the Creek, a portion of the sidewalks along Park Drive and Commerce Place are too steep to meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards for handicapped accessibility. The sloping side-walk from the Project Area to the 6'-wide, steel rail Pedestrian Bridge across the Creek at the southeast side of the Project Area appears to comply with ADA standards. On the eastern side of the Pedestrian Bridge is the 1980s east side plaza linking the adjacent parking area to an alley off High Street. Just west of the Washington Street bridge is Trinity Lane, a 12'-wide paved public alley from Washington Street to the Project Area that provides vehicular access to 3 private properties but is also used by pedestrians.

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Visitors, old and new, can then stroll or roll down Trinity Lane to Washington Street or across the black steel rail Pedestrian Bridge, to a plaza behind High Street's businesses near Mill Race Village. One can also cross the Commerce Place bridge to the middle of High Street's business district or cross the Park Drive Bridge to the County Courthouse. This new West Side Park could become a Mount Holly destination on its own, as well as a welcoming transition area between the downtown's established destinations and free parking lots.

The perimeter of the project area is bordered by 4.5-foot-wide concrete sidewalks, which are generally in good condition. However, they are too narrow to comfortably accommodate pairs of pedestrians, wheelchair users, strollers, and others who require more space to pass each other. Additionally, the walkway from the creekside sidewalk to the Commerce Place bridge is too steep to meet ADA accessibility standards.

Block 48.02, Lot 11.02, owned by Mount Holly Township, is approximately 1 acre in size and located within the downtown oxbow basin of the North Branch of Rancocas Creek, which forms the eastern boundary of the project area. To the south, the Municipal Building and other Township-owned properties are situated. Park Drive forms the western boundary, while Commerce Place lies to the north.

Mount Holly owns several parking areas to the north, east, and west of the project area. The Township leases Block 48.01, Lot 11, located to the north of the project area, to Burlington County for customer and employee parking, and leases Block 48, Lot 11.03, situated on the northwest corner of Park Drive and Commerce Place, to the County for juror parking. Additionally, the Township owns two other public parking areas east of the project area, on the north side of the creek. Behind the properties along High Street, there are additional free parking spaces available for downtown employees, visitors, and shoppers. Further parking facilities for Mount Holly Township and Mount Holly MUA customers and employees are located to the west of the project area, south of Commerce Place.

To the west of the site, the surrounding neighborhood contains the downtown business district along with various Township-owned parking lots. To the north side of the site is the County Courthouse and prison along with ancillary parking lots. To the west of the site, you will find some commercial businesses and a portion of the Rancocas creek. To the south of the site, along Washington, is the municipal complex, along with the commercial businesses of downtown district.

3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ANALYSIS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The impact of this project on stormwater management and water quality is one of its most significant components. The proposed development will reduce runoff and sediment while enhancing the filtration of potential contaminants. This reduction in runoff will lead to lower stormwater volumes and improved quality, ultimately benefiting the Rancocas Creek. Although there will be some reduction in existing vegetation, the plan includes the mitigation of stormwater onsite through vegetative management, with the replacement and addition of native plant species. Removing impervious surfaces and reducing vehicular use will lessen soil compaction and contamination, thereby promoting greater percolation and the capture of contaminants onsite,

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which will, in turn, reduce the impact on the Rancocas Creek. It is also anticipated that the reduction in vehicle emissions, along with the introduction of additional vegetation, will improve air quality in the area. Over the long term, the proposed enhancements are expected to increase biodiversity, drawing more wildlife to the area.

Short Term Impacts of this development is a net reduction in parking which may displace where some of the visitors and employees currently park. However, based on operational oversight the Township noted the existing parking lots are underutilized. Immediately there will be a net reduction in stormwater runoff and contamination, CO₂ emissions, reduction in soil compaction and introduction of new plant species. Long term there will be increase in wildlife habitat, improved water quality, runoff reductions, and increase in oxygen levels.

The conversion of the space from a parking lot to green space with a kayak/canoe launch provides additional activities for both passive and active recreation. Based on the anticipated uses previously stated this site becomes a destination and resource for visitors, business owners, their employees and residents.

This park development is expected to improve adjacent water quality by reducing polluted runoff and filtering stormwater. It will also increase biodiversity, benefiting the riparian zone of Rancocas Creek and its wildlife.

The kayak/canoe launch has been approved by the NJDEP, contingent upon approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), which the Township is currently awaiting. The remainder of the site has not yet been submitted for permitting; However, it is anticipated that a Waterfront Development Permit will be required. Given the site's listing on the National Historic Register, it will also be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Office. Located within the 100-year flood zone, the site is expected to comply with Flood Hazard Regulations. In addition to DEP permitting, local Soil Conservation District permits will also be required. The Township will apply for the necessary permits from both the DEP and the Soil Conservation District to proceed with the project.

Given the site's prior disturbance, it is not anticipated that a Natural Heritage Data Request Form will be necessary.

This project is not anticipated to be severely impacted by Sea Level Change. Due to the overall reduction in the impervious coverage, it would be anticipated that creating a green space will allow for more retention and purification of flood waters.

4 ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

While alternative locations for this development could be considered, this site is the most suitable due to its proximity to the downtown area, surrounding land uses, accessibility for both vehicles and pedestrians, historic significance, and access to a natural resource. Other potential sites within the downtown area only incorporate some of these key elements.

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An alternative development approach would involve retaining the existing impervious coverage while converting the space primarily to pedestrian use and eliminating vehicular access. Although this would offer limited water quality improvements and vegetation enhancements, it would not significantly reduce runoff rates, substantially improve water quality, or address soil compaction issues as effectively as the proposed development.

5 MITIGATING MEASURES

The development is expected to have minimal adverse impacts. However, proactive measures will be implemented to ensure the early establishment of permanent vegetation. Additionally, soil erosion control measures will be put in place to prevent the displacement of soil and silt until the vegetation is fully established and stabilized onsite.

6 AUTHOR(S) AND QUALIFICATIONS

Prepared by Neil Werket, Licensed Landscape Architect, Register Landscape Architect
20 years of experience in Land Development type projects with 17+ years in park development.