

South Branch Preserve

2025 Master Plan



The Land Conservancy of New Jersey





Aerial view of South Branch Preserve, Budd Lake, and the headwaters of the South Branch River

This document presents a comprehensive master plan for the northern section of South Branch Preserve, focused on balancing increased public access to passive recreational opportunities with the critical need to preserve drinking water quality. It establishes a clear vision for improving existing facilities and identifying new, appropriate recreational spaces.

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Wildlife blind

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Spring pond at South Branch Preserve South

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Introduction

In January 2009, The Land Conservancy of New Jersey began work to acquire and preserve 1,000 undeveloped acres of the headwaters of the South Branch of the Raritan River, the source of clean drinking water for more than 1.5 million NJ residents.

We first focused on a 135-acre property in Mount Olive^[i] where construction had begun on a residential development. The land included springs, seeps, and wetlands that combine to form several streams flowing directly into the South Branch—in other words, critical headwaters of the Raritan.

The Land Conservancy purchased the property, establishing South Branch Preserve in 2010. It has since been expanded to 408 acres. The 208-acre North addition to South Branch Preserve was purchased in November 2011 and is the subject of this master plan.

The Conservancy's plans for the Preserve have included restoring several fields for agricultural use, planting others for reforestation and pollinator-friendly meadows, and caring for the riparian area above the river. The stewardship of this land is meant to be an invitation to the public for passive recreation—a safe, welcoming area to connect with nature.

This document has been developed to outline the next iteration of that vision for what this remarkable landscape can ultimately become.



Staghorn sumac

[i] The Land Conservancy of New Jersey acknowledges the Lenni Lenape and Hatacawanna tribes that stewarded this land. We honor their strength and their wisdom in relying upon and protecting the land's resilience. We restate our commitment to restoring that resilience. We also pledge to continue to seek opportunities to acquire recoverable lands in New Jersey where indigenous tribes can be reconnected to significant land they once occupied.

Goals

The goals of this master plan are to outline a vision for providing appropriate increased passive recreational opportunities and improving the quality of existing facilities, while continuing to preserve drinking water quality.



Autumn aspen leaf

Importance of the Land

People have lived in the Upper Delaware River Valley for at least 10,000 years. Long before European settlers arrived, the Mount Olive area was inhabited by the Lenni Lenape and Hatacawanna people, part of the larger Delaware Native Americans. The two tribes found the region's fertile land and plentiful water resources ideal for hunting, farming, and fishing. The Lenape knew the Raritan River as the Naraticong and referred to the downstream confluence of the South Branch and North Branch of the Raritan as the "Tucca-Ramma-Hacking," which means "the meeting place of waters."

The first European settlers established a farming community around Methodist and Presbyterian churches in the 1700s. Starting in the 1850s, Budd Lake (Lake Hatacawanna) developed as a summer resort and later grew into a year-round community when the nearby highway (Route 46) was expanded in the 1900s. Mount Olive was established as its own township in 1871, when it separated from Roxbury Township.

One of the prominent farms dating back to the early 1800s was the Wolfe Farm. It was primarily a dairy farm, with a location on Flanders-Netcong Road and another on Route 46, which is the property now known as South Branch Preserve North.^[ii]

In June of 1981, the Wolfe family sold the farm to residential developers West King Estates, which had built much of the surrounding land with garden apartments. The developers razed the farmhouse, silo, and outbuildings, and the five-acre field surrounding those structures was left to go fallow.

Before the signing of the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act in 2004, the intent of the owners was to build condominiums along both sides of Wolfe Road. But since the Wolfe Farm lies within the Highlands Preservation Area, those plans were quashed.

[ii] The Wolfe Farm spanned both sides of Route 46, requiring the Wolfe brothers to move their cows across the highway twice a day for grazing. On the morning of May 9, 1957, a tragic event occurred that changed their operation forever. As the brothers were moving the herd, a tractor-trailer came down the highway and collided with the cows. Tragically, nine cows were killed in the crash. After the accident, the brothers worked with the state to improve an existing tunnel under the highway, making it deep enough for both men and cows to walk through. It took some time, but they eventually the herd learned to follow a lead cow through. The cow tunnel still exists today.



Cow tunnel under Route 46

Preservation of the Property



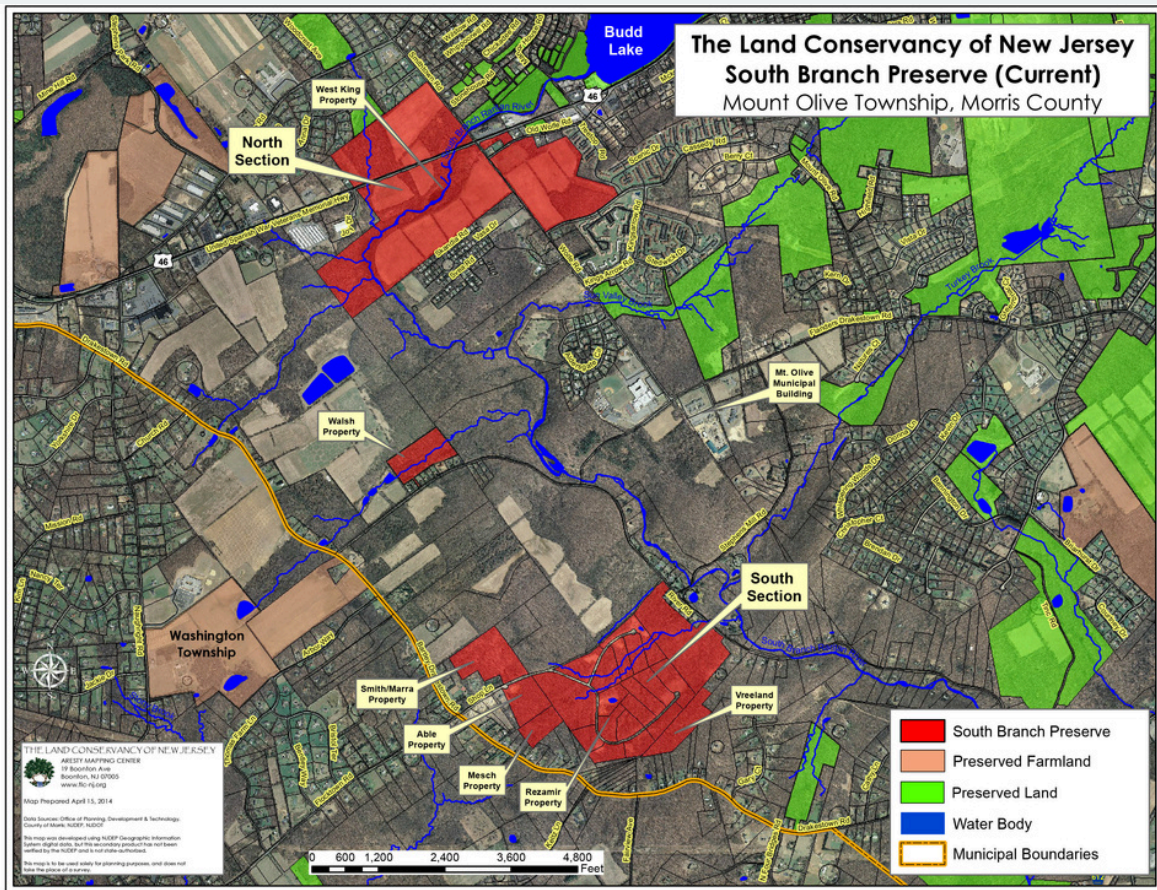
Bluebird box

On June 9, 2010, The Land Conservancy of New Jersey purchased 135 acres in Mount Olive and established the South Branch Preserve. This area is now known as South Branch Preserve South.

In November of 2011, The Land Conservancy purchased a 208-acre property from the developers of the planned West King Estates in partnership with Mount Olive Township, the Raritan Headwaters Association, and the New Jersey Water Supply Authority (NJWSA). The township and Raritan

Headwaters Association immediately divested their interests to The Conservancy, and the property is still owned by the Land Conservancy of New Jersey (78.5%) and the NJWSA (21.5%). Funding for the acquisition was made possible by grants from New Jersey Green Acres, Morris County Open Space Trust (MCOST), the Morris County Municipal Utilities Authority (MCMUA), the New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Trust, and private donors. This area is now known as South Branch Preserve North, and is the subject of this master plan.

Easements & Restrictions



A key part of the Conservancy's plan for this Preserve was to keep the four agricultural fields that were hydrologically disconnected from the river in active organic agricultural use. When working with our funding partners on the joint deed restriction, we successfully advocated for language that ensures farming can continue:

"...The Land Conservancy of New Jersey, and its successors in interest, shall have the right to continue farming activities on existing acreage of the property currently in agricultural use and to implement a program of restoration activities to include reforestation of some agricultural acreage and

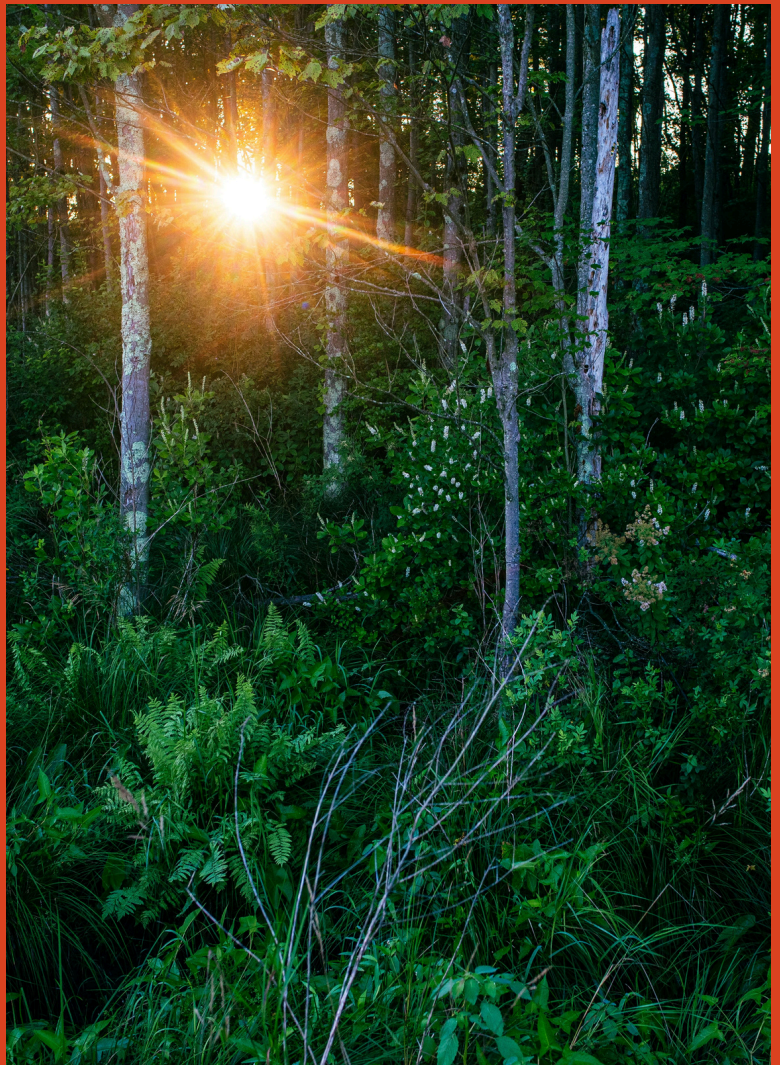
removal of invasive species on forested acreage. ..."

In addition to the main joint restriction, the property also has two other restrictions:

- A Deed of Conservation Restriction was given to the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.
- Funding from the New Jersey Environmental Infrastructure Trust came with a separate restriction on two forested wetland areas, limiting activities there to walking only. This is called an EIFP easement.

Property Detail

The South Branch Preserve North property consists of 208.893 acres and is located along both sides of Wolfe Road.



Landscape

The main part of the Preserve is on the west side of Wolfe Road, bordered by the river to the south. This area is home to all the Preserve's recreational amenities, including a central parking lot, a community garden, and a trail that spans most of the property. Visitors can also find a boardwalk leading to a bird blind on the South Branch of the Raritan River, picnic tables, a unique Land Art installation, and a horseshoe area.



Path from the wildlife blind

This section also includes four fenced reforestation fields, the riparian area along the river, and a fallow field where a house once stood. Additionally, a new project called Power Flowers is located under the power transmission lines (where trees cannot be planted). Here, we have seeded a variety of plants to attract pollinators.

Reforestation Area

In 2012, a major reforestation project began on the four fields west of Wolfe Road. We tilled the land, sowed native grasses and wildflowers, and installed a 37-acre fence to protect the area from deer. We planted 7,500 native trees and shrubs across the fields between 2013 and 2014.



Native trees for forest restoration

After a severe winter, we had to replant the first field in 2015 due to vole damage. Since then, many more native trees and shrubs have naturally taken root, contributing to the effort. Today, some of the trees are over 25 feet tall.

Organic Farm Fields: City Green Farm

After consulting with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), we identified the four fields on the east side of Wolfe Road as the best location for our organic farm. These fields are hydrologically disconnected from the river, which allows us to continue farming them without any negative impact on water quality in the river. Our partners at the MCMUA and the NJWSA agreed.

We installed a 28-acre deer-exclusion fence, a new well, and an irrigation system. We then partnered with City Green, a nonprofit organization based in Clifton, NJ that offers practical, technical and financial resources to foster equitable access to local food and green spaces in support of sustainable, healthy communities. City Green grows produce and distributes it to local urban communities through a network of farmers' markets and drop spots. To maintain the long-term use of the remaining land, we mow the fields once a year as the farm slowly expands. We have plans to plant an organic orchard in this area as well, but the arrival of the spotted lanternfly has put that on hold for now.

We've also placed three sheds near the front gate for storing tractors, tools, supplies, and refrigeration for the crops. We split the cost of a mid-sized tractor with City Green to help with their work.

We created a public trail that runs along the outside of the farm fence, through the forest, and ends near the nearby apartment complex, providing a direct off-road connection between residents and the rest of the recreation opportunities at South Branch Preserve.



Harvesting kale at City Green Farm



City Green farmers

Biological Controls for Invasive Species

Project Chew

When The Land Conservancy acquired the property in 2010, one four-acre field was in a state of early succession, meaning it was no longer farmed but not yet a forest. Located between our reforestation area and the river, this area had been actively farmed until the early 1990s. Unfortunately, by 2017 the entire field was completely overtaken by highly invasive mile-a-minute weed. Because of its proximity to the South Branch of the Raritan River, we were determined to find a non-chemical solution to eradicate the invasive plant. Our answer was Project Chew.

In partnership with the former Antler Ridge Wildlife Sanctuary, we developed a plan to use livestock to graze the entire four-acre area. Antler Ridge provided the animals, who became known as the “Chew Crew.”



Chew Crew member



The Chew Crew

From 2018 to 2020, the Chew Crew grazed the four-acre area next to the parking lot, eating all the invasive vines and shrubs that had taken over. The goats especially loved the mile-a-minute weed! As they cleared one section, we would move them to another. Once a section was mostly clear of non-native plants, our stewardship team would spread native wildflower and grass seeds. Once native plants began to populate the field, the Chew Crew was removed to prevent them from eating the new growth.

Weevils

While we were developing Project Chew, we also looked into biological controls for the mile-a-minute weed. We are grateful to the New Jersey State Entomologist for deploying thousands of weevils, known as *Rhinoncomimus latipes*, on the Preserve. These weevils are a long-term solution—taking up to a decade to have a significant impact—because they damage the plants and prevent them from producing seeds.

Today, we still find small patches of mile-a-minute, but we believe that the combination of Project Chew during the early years and the ongoing biological control has prevented this noxious weed from taking over the entire Preserve.



Weevil trap (left) and weevil damage (right)

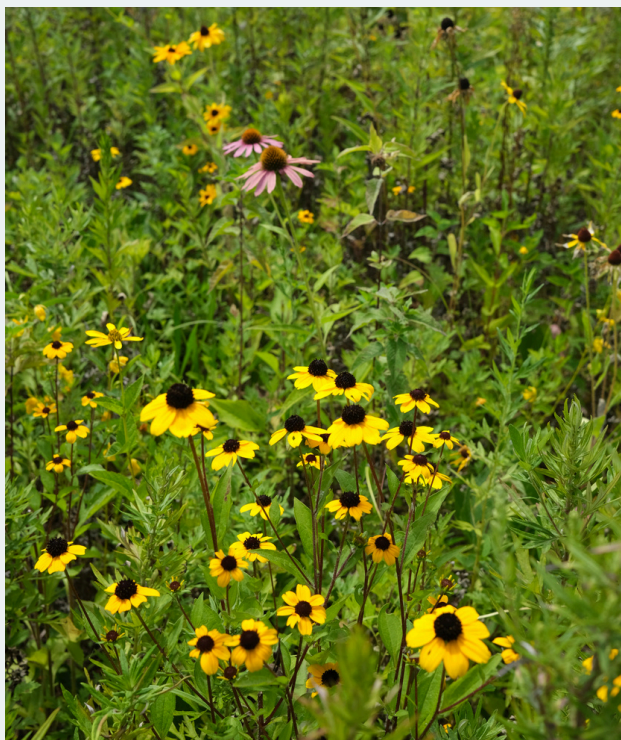
Power Flowers Meadow

Another unique area of our Preserve is a two-acre field between the community garden and the parking lot. Because of overhead transmission lines, we can't plant trees here. When we first acquired the property, we made an agreement with JCP&L that the power line right-of-way through our property would not be sprayed or treated with chemicals.

In 2019, JCP&L offered to include the Preserve in a pilot program to seed native wildflowers under the lines. They planted an L-shaped strip, about 20 feet wide, along the edge of the field. It took a few years for the flowers to really take hold, but for the last couple of years, this strip has been producing a very nice show of blooms.



Power Flowers meadow



Power Flowers meadow in bloom

For the rest of the field, we used a non-chemical method of constant tilling during the summer to eliminate invasive mugwort roots, followed by harrowing to smooth the soil like our partners at City Green do across the street. We successfully cleared the field for planting, and in the fall of 2023, we drilled native wildflower seeds into the soil.

We're happy to report that despite the drought in 2024, the native wildflowers came back strong in the spring and summer of 2025. There's some mugwort creeping in from the edges, but we're hopeful that our native plants will be able to outcompete it. We've also noticed that the original L-shaped planting from 2020 is looking better than ever, with more blooms each year.

Wildlife

South Branch Preserve is home to a rich variety of wildlife. We've seen a great assortment of mammals, including bobcat, black bear, red fox, eastern coyote, beaver, mink, muskrat, and recently, river otter. We also have a healthy population of snapping turtles, and to protect their nests, we've installed fencing. The rare wood turtle has also been observed.

Our fields and forests provide essential habitat for many birds. Killdeer have nested in the community garden and now have several pairs at the City Green farm. Our reforested fields offer nesting and food for migratory birds like the northern harrier, American kestrel, and bobolink. The wet forests along the river are home to wood thrush, barred owls, and even bobcats. You can also spot red squirrels in the mature trees near the parking lot and trail. Red-tailed hawks nest here and often use the transmission line poles as perches.

While we work hard to protect this habitat, managing it can be a challenge. We occasionally find that a bear has climbed over the 37-acre fence, so it frequently needs repairs. On a few occasions, deer have also gotten into our farm area, and we have to gather a group of people to help drive them out through the rear gate.



Stag with velvet antlers

Recreation & Amenities



Path through the reforestation meadow, 2021

Trails

We've built and maintained a trail that winds through the reforestation area. This path gives visitors a close-up view of how the land is transforming from an open field into a dense forest. The trail begins at the parking area, runs along the outside of the fence, and follows the upper edge of the river and marsh. It eventually connects to a trail inside the fence through a swinging gate.

From the trail visitors can also access the recently renovated boardwalk that leads to a bird blind along the river. This is a very special location for observing the wildlife that are now thriving here.

Community Garden

The community garden, located within the 37-acre fenced area near Wolfe Road, was completed in the fall of 2013 and has had a waiting list for plots ever since. It features 144 plots, which members can purchase to grow their own vegetables or flowers.

During peak harvest season, many gardeners donate their extra produce to a local food pantry, helping to feed those in need.

The garden has several amenities, including:

- One shed for storing tools, as well as electrical and well equipment. Another shed houses the riding mower and serves as a small repair workshop.
- Two picnic tables.
- A pergola and a Little Library, which was an Eagle Scout project.
- Two compost areas for garden debris.



Misty morning at the Community Garden at South Branch (left); veggie-loving garden member (right)



Land Art installation



Chestnut tree workshop in the picnic area

Arts & Leisure

By the parking lot, an interactive area known as the Land Art installation has been developed. Bins of natural materials are available in this maker space for visitors to realize their artistic vision. Picnic tables have been placed under a large tree, and an area to play horseshoes has been set up.

Maintenance



The stewardship team builds nesting boxes

Our Preserve is maintained by Stewardship Manager Dennis Briede, who works with a dedicated team of seasonal interns each year. These paid internships typically run from April to November, with most interns—often college students—working from May to mid-August.

The interns gain invaluable experience from Dennis, who is committed to developing his team members into knowledgeable environmental stewards. He provides an outstanding education on all aspects of sustainable natural lands management, including:

- Plant, animal, and insect identification
- Distinguishing between native and invasive plants
- Trends in forest ecology

Most importantly, Dennis shares his tremendous appreciation and respect for the natural world. We've had several students return for two or three seasons throughout their college careers.

Maintenance of South Branch Preserve involves:

- Mowing the walking trails monthly
- Invasive species controls in reforestation areas
- Repairing Land Art and horse shoe areas and benches and picnic tables
- Assisting the gardeners by mulching the garden beds and removing weeds
- Repairing the fence around the community garden, City Green Farm, and reforestation area



Stewardship interns building fences



Bluebird on the garden spigot

- Mowing the pollinator meadow fields annually
- Mowing the edges of all fields
- Maintaining irrigation systems
- Woodchipping paths
- Addressing erosion problems
- Removing dead trees
- Maintenance of mulch pile that supplies garden
- Creating new visitor viewpoints (i.e., beaver overlook)
- Cleaning out bird and bat boxes
- Protecting snapping turtle nests
- Straightening tree tubes and stakes
- Trimming around planted trees

Vision for the Future



400-year-old ash tree

“Our vision for South Branch Preserve is to expand the public’s opportunities to enjoy first-hand the many benefits that preserving open space can provide and, through these experiences, enhance their support for protecting the environment.”

David Epstein, President

Phase I: Outdoor Education Area

Planning & Design

The master plan's primary focus is to develop a new Outdoor Education Area at South Branch Preserve. This multi-phase initiative will create a dedicated space for programming, events, and visitor comfort. The initial phase, which will lay the groundwork for all future development, is comprised of three key components:

Survey, Design, and Permitting

We will develop a detailed survey of the entire project area, including the former Project Chew field, the parking lot, and existing amenities like the Land Art and picnic tables. This survey will inform the creation of a comprehensive architectural drawing, which will be used to secure all necessary permits from local agencies. **Estimated cost: \$40,000**

Site Preparation

This crucial step involves preparing the four-acre field for construction. The exact details of this work will be determined during the design phase but will include necessary actions to make the site ready for the new facilities. **Estimated cost: \$60,000**



Outdoor Ambassadors study water quality

Parking Area Improvements

The master plan includes a necessary upgrade to the parking area, which will be completed after the construction of the Outdoor Education Area. The project focuses on improving accessibility and overall quality. Work will include roughing the existing surface and spreading new gravel on the front half of the lot.

Additionally, the back of the parking area will be re-graded to address existing issues, and the log and pole barriers will be rearranged, particularly near the new, fully accessible Outdoor Education Area.

Estimated cost: \$15,000



Earth-moving at South Branch Preserve

Phase II: Capital Improvement Construction

Phase II of the master plan will address the physical construction and implementation of new facilities and visitor amenities. This phase is comprehensive and aims to significantly improve the user experience and expand the Preserve's offerings.

Outdoor Education Area

The centerpiece of this phase is a new open-air pavilion. This sheltered space will support the Outdoor Ambassador Program, staff meetings, and public events. The area will also feature new, multi-functional furniture and an adjacent storage building to house the furniture, educational supplies, and potentially, two all-terrain wheelchairs. We intend to name this pavilion. **Estimated cost: \$106,000** (\$56,000 for the pavilion, \$25,000 for the storage building, and \$25,000 for furniture)



Rendering of outdoor education pavilion



Rendering of shade kites

Shade Kites

To create a more comfortable and visually appealing space, we will be installing shade kites on permanent poles anchored into the ground. These shades will provide relief from the sun in an area where trees cannot be planted. This area will be connected to nearby amenities by a new wood-chip path. **Estimated cost: \$60,000**

Phase III: Accessibility & Infrastructure

Phase III of the master plan focuses on three key areas: improving accessibility and creating a new adaptive trail, upgrading the site's infrastructure, and enhancing overall wayfinding and the visitor experience.

Trails & Accessibility Improvements

- **Barrier-Free Trail:** Construction of a new adaptive trail will create a more inclusive and engaging recreational experience. This closed-loop trail will wind through a four-acre field, starting and ending at the Outdoor Education Pavilion. The trail will be surfaced with compacted stone dust or a similar permeable material, providing a natural look that is accessible to all users, including those with adaptive equipment. Our goal is for the trail to be at least one mile long, pending final design and measurements.
- **Art, Education, and Cultural Installations:** This includes adding QR codes to existing trees and shrubs, as well as installing small art pieces and interpretive signs. A key objective is to create a rotating program of installations to keep the experience fresh and engaging for visitors. Partnerships with other non-profits will be explored to make this a sustainable effort and to enrich the space for a broader audience.



Rendering of accessible trail

- Landscaping: The landscaping around the new Education Pavilion and along the adaptive trail will prioritize native, low-maintenance plants. Dogwood trees, which are native and ornamental, will be planted around the pavilion. For the wider four-acre field, we will plant large circles of native berry shrubs like blackberry and raspberry within the trail's path to create accessible picking opportunities. The area along the riverbank will be left largely undisturbed, with an emphasis on non-chemical methods to control invasive species. The trail will be designed to meander around existing mature trees, and recently planted trees can be relocated if necessary to accommodate the trail or berry plots.

Estimated cost: \$75,000 (\$50,000 for the trail and \$25,000 for installations and landscaping)



Mountain mint in bloom

Signage System

A new signage system will be designed to enhance wayfinding while minimizing maintenance. A key element of this is to consolidate interpretive information on a central kiosk. The plan outlines a package of new signs that will share a unifying theme, with consistent colors and fonts, to be submitted for local approval.

Specifically, new signs will include:

- A sign for the new, named pavilion.
- Interpretive signage at the adaptive trail trailhead.
- Updated QR codes along all trails.
- Signs indicating reforestation areas.
- A free-standing sign identifying the City Green Farm at the Wolfe Road entrance.

Estimated Cost: \$8,000



Old QR code educational tags



Outdoor Ambassador at City Green Farm

City Green Farm Expansion

In partnership with City Green, the master plan includes an expansion of the organic farm. This project requires new infrastructure to support increased agricultural operations. Key elements include drilling an additional well and installing a new electric line and hydrants to provide irrigation for the remaining fields. A new shed will also be constructed to house a larger tractor, and several temporary hoop houses will be installed for use as a drying area for harvests.

Estimated Cost: \$60,000

Phase IV: Evaluation for Future Enhancements

Reforestation Area Enhancements

The master plan includes several additional projects for further evaluation that aim to improve the overall park experience:

- **Bench Replacement:** The aging bench in field four, which was not part of a previous update, will require near-term replacement.
- **Reforestation Fence Evaluation:** Within the next 10 years, the reforestation fence may need to be repaired, replaced, or removed. The decision will be based on the size of existing trees and the need to protect saplings from deer damage.
- **Sensory Garden:** A new sensory garden will be established within the reforestation fence, next to the berry patch. The garden will feature a variety of plants and elements to engage all five senses, with an ultimate goal of adding a water feature. The existing berry patch will be incorporated as the “taste” component of the garden.



Visitors enjoy the stone bench on a sunny day

Pollinator Meadow Reforestation

The master plan includes the evaluation of a future project to reforest the two pollinator meadows located on the eastbound side of Route 46. This initiative addresses the difficulty and safety risks associated with maintaining these fields with a tractor. The chosen location is also appropriate for reforestation due to its proximity to the river.

An estimated 1,000 trees, including mast-producing species like chestnuts, oaks, and hickories, will be planted. As the fields are not fenced, each tree will require a protective tube and stake. A partnership with US Fish and Wildlife has already secured approximately 150 trees for planting this fall. The pollinator meadows on the westbound side of Route 46 will remain fields for the time being, as they are more accessible for maintenance.



Native chestnut seedling planted by volunteers

Additionally, the plan includes a long-term goal to partner with organizations researching blight-resistant American Chestnut trees. The two fields along the south side of Route 46 are being considered as potential sites for growing these experimental trees.

Budget

PHASE I

Survey, Design, & Permitting	\$40,000
Site Preparation	\$60,000
Parking area	\$15,000

Phase I Total	\$115,000
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PHASE II

Pavilion	\$56,000
Storage Building	\$25,000
Furniture	\$25,000
Shade Kites	\$60,000

Phase II Total	\$166,000
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PHASE III

Barrier-free Trail	\$50,000
Landscaping	\$25,000
Signage	\$8,000
Farm Expansion	\$60,000

Phase III Total	\$143,000
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Want to learn more?

Check out The Land Conservancy of New Jersey's website.



tlc-nj.org/south-branch-preserve

