

Central Park Green Acres Disposal Proposal

The subject parcel to be disposed consists of 2.056 acres and is part of lot 3 in block 11301. The portion to be disposed lies along Valley Road. The remainder of the parcel abuts over 52 acres of additional parkland in lots 1 and 2 in block 11301. The land to be disposed will be transferred in fee to the owner of adjacent lot 4. It is assumed that this lot will ultimately be the subject of an application to the Township for a commercial development.

In exchange for the disposal land, the Township will obtain from the owner of lot 4 all of lot 23 in block 11401 (approx. 3.7 acres) and approximately 3.8 acres of lot 4. The land to be obtained by the Township is contiguous to the bulk of the existing Central Park property and, most importantly, contains an existing access road. The road intersects Valley Road at an existing traffic signal. The road provides access to the commercial development on the portion of lot 4 that will be retained by the owner.

The traffic signal is an improvement that provides much safer access to the existing Central Park property. The park is bordered on the east by Morristown Road, however virtually all of the land along that frontage is floodplain, wetlands or transition area. Access to the portion of Central Park to be improved for active recreation is difficult, if not impossible, from Morristown Road due to the regulated areas and steep slopes that lead up to the portion of the park that has potential for development as a future recreation site.

The remainder of the park has frontage on Valley Road, a County highway under the jurisdiction of the County of Morris. Without the intersection at the traffic signal, Morris County has advised that access from Valley Road would be limited to a right in/right out configuration. The requirement for the right in/right out is based on two elements of the existing Valley Road. The western frontage of the park would require left turn in and left turn out traffic to cross the dedicated left turn slot at the Plainfield Road traffic signal. This is a conflict that is considered a hazard under general traffic engineering standards. The eastern frontage of the park has a center median in the County road with dedicated turn lanes into the shopping center across the street. The left in/left out of the park would present a traffic hazard at this location.

With this configuration, the access to the park is extremely limited. There are no proximate areas for eastbound traffic to make a U-turn and travel west and enter the site. Conversely, there is no location to the west that allows traffic leaving the site to turn around to travel east. Vehicles would be forced to make U-turns in adjoining shopping areas or make long, circuitous loops through the residential areas to the east and west of the site.

The traffic signal at Plainfield Road provides the best possible access to the site since it is a signalized intersection with dedicated left turn lanes. This will be a significant public benefit by providing safe access to the site and fulfill the compelling public need of access to the park.

The parkland will be disposed by transferring it to the owner of adjacent lot 4, ?????. The property will be transferred in fee with all title interest to the owner. The Township will have the title of the compensation parcels transferred to it in fee along with all the improvements that exist on the land. The disposed land may be used by the new owner in a manner that is consistent with any approvals required by the Township Planning Board or Board of Adjustment.

The existing land to be diverted is improved with the remains of an unpaved driveway and an abandoned garage. The land slopes uphill from Valley Road to the north. The disposal of the land will not have an impact on the park property since the park is unimproved at this point. The conceptual use for the parcel of land for disposal was for access from Valley Road to the park. As part of the disposal, one of the compensation parcels contains an existing, improved driveway that intersects Valley Road at the Plainfield Road traffic signal which will greatly enhance access to any future development of the park.

The Township has investigated potential alternatives to the disposal in order to provide access to the park. The alternatives are as follows:

Alternative 1 – Park Access from Morristown Road

Access to the park from Morristown Road would require the construction of a new access road that would intersect with Morristown Road. The access road would need to be in excess of 1,000 feet long and would divide the most improvable section of the park limiting its usefulness. The roadway would need to cross through steep slopes, flood plains, riparian buffers, freshwater wetlands and wetlands transition areas. Given the amount of disturbance to these environmentally sensitive areas, the NJDEP permitting process would be lengthy and uncertain since alternatives are available.

Alternative 2 – Park Access from eastern Valley Road frontage

An access road could be constructed from Valley Road to the developable area of the park along the eastern frontage of the park. The access in this location would require the crossing of flood plains, riparian buffers, wetlands transition areas and steep slopes. The significant disturbance would make the permitting process long and uncertain since alternatives are available. The access road in this location would also need to pass through the area of the park that could potentially be improved with active recreational facilities and reduce the usefulness of the area. The access in this location is further complicated by the fact that the access would be an unsignalized access to a county road. Morris County has indicated that they would permit right in/right out access only in this area. This would result in very long routes into and out of the park for vehicles that would need to make left turns into or out of the site. These vehicles would need to make a circuitous route to or from the park or make unauthorized U-turns in the various commercial parking lots in the area.

Alternative 3 – Park Access through Disposal Parcel (no action alternative)

The access to the park through the land for disposal will not require NJDEP permits for Flood Hazard Areas or Freshwater Wetlands. The route will be substantially shorter than alternatives 1 and 2. The access in this location will still be subject to the county restrictions identified in Alternative 2 - namely the right in/right out only driveway. This would result in very long routes into and out of the park for vehicles that would need to make left turns into or out of the site. These vehicles would need to make a circuitous route to or from the park or make unauthorized U-turns in the various commercial parking lots in the area.

Alternative 4 – Park Access at Plainfield Road traffic signal (proposed disposal/land exchange)

The proposed disposal will result in the exchange of land with the adjoining property owner. The Township will dispose of its land with frontage on Valley Road in exchange for land that includes the existing improved access and traffic signal. The access at this location is ideal since the traffic signal provides controlled access to Valley Road and has two southbound lanes out of the park to facilitate moves in both directions on Valley Road as well as Plainfield Road. The construction cost for the access is substantially reduced because so much of the road is in place. The traffic signal has already been modernized and is fully operational. The proposed disposal/land exchange results in the Township taking ownership of the access road and traffic signal as well as an additional parcel of land contiguous to the park.

Alternative 4a – Park Access at Plainfield Road traffic signal (purchase of traffic signal property)

This alternative would have the same access advantages as Alternative 4, however the cost is substantially higher. The land would need to be purchased from an unwilling seller and be part of a condemnation action. The associated land and legal costs are substantial. The compensation to the land owner in this case would be higher since the remainder land east of the access drive would have little development potential under the Township ordinance.