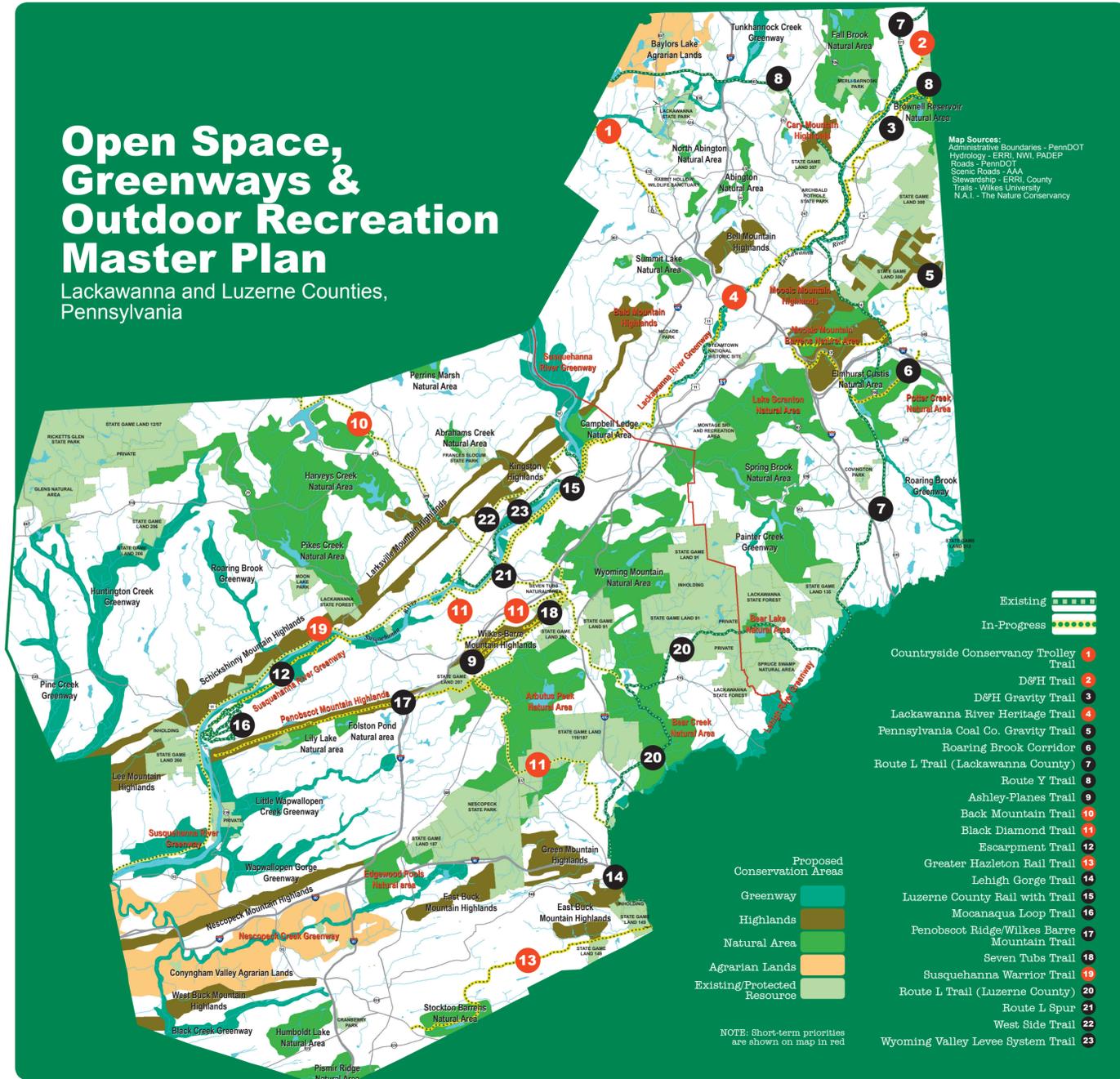


# Open Space, Greenways & Outdoor Recreation Master Plan

Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties, Pennsylvania



Together, Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties in northeastern Pennsylvania encompass almost 1,400 square miles of mountain ridges, forests, valleys and meandering waterways about 100 miles northwest of New York City. Originally settled to take advantage of the area's former abundant anthracite coal resource, the region is adapting to a diverse and multi-faceted economy. The effects of growth and development have been both positive and negative. Residents now place an increased value on the outstanding natural features and attractiveness of the area and want to protect these resources for future generations and attract new businesses, residents and visitors.

**This Plan provides a blueprint for protecting, conserving and improving:**

- Valuable natural resources
- Ecologically & environmentally sensitive areas
- The network of recreational opportunities

Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties are facing new challenges. As development continues to extend westward from the Poconos, development pressure will be placed on existing open spaces in the bi-county area. Already, access to the many streams, lakes and other important natural areas once enjoyed by the public is being limited. Areas regarded for their ecological importance in providing critical habitat for both plant and animal species are being subjected to fragmentation from development. As reflected in US Census data, demand for housing is strong and municipalities are struggling with how to achieve a balance between growth and protecting valued ecological and natural resources. This Open Space, Greenways and Outdoor Recreation Master Plan is a proactive effort that sets forth recommendations for achieving a balance between natural resources and the built environment so that the region may continue to thrive and benefit from its rich natural, recreational and cultural resources.



## The Importance of Open Space and Greenways

The movement to protect open space resources has gained increasing support throughout the United States. Across the country, Americans are voting in favor of measures that support conservation-related efforts, funding of parks, water supply protection, and farmland conservation that will protect their special places and enhance their quality of life.

Open space and greenways, including trails, are increasingly valued for their contribution in protecting the environment, their value as recreational assets and impact on quality of life, and their role in the fiscal health of a community. As stated in Local Greenprinting for Growth, a publication by the Trust for Public Land, open space has a number of recognizable and important benefits, including the following:

- Open space is good for the bottom line. Open space investments can save communities money by reducing infrastructure and public service costs associated with expensive, suburban-style development and bolster local tourism and agriculture economies.
- Open space attracts home buyers. Open space and trails are among the top community features home buyers look for when choosing a home.
- Open space protects public health. Land use practices that create runoff are some of the biggest threats to public drinking water supplies. As a result, communities are increasingly linking their conservation and planning efforts to protect public drinking supplies and public health.
- Open space can prevent costly flood damage.
- Open space can secure our quality of life and our lifestyle. With a community's most treasured places preserved, so too are its character and quality of life.

## The Vision, Goals and Objectives

Early in the planning process, members of the Open Space, Greenways, and Recreation Advisory Committee (OSRAC) and participants in stakeholder interviews and public meetings were asked to reflect on the resources and features of the landscape that they deemed as important and valuable. They shared concerns about losing access to nature's treasures and about losing the scenic beauty of the area. People expressed an interest in protecting water quality, wildlife and the rural character of the area. These discussions provided the basis for the following long-term Vision for the bi-county area:

**Residents of Lackawanna and Luzerne Counties are inspired by the verdant mountain ranges and fertile river valleys of the region and place a high priority on protecting and preserving important land and water resources that make the region unique. The amount of land under**

**protection continues to increase as existing resources are expanded, environmentally sensitive areas are protected, and development is directed away from complex ecosystems. The bi-county area supports a high quality of life and is an attractive destination for outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy a network of interconnected greenways and trails and a wide range of outdoor recreation activities.**

## The Evaluation Process

A four-step resource-based evaluation method was used to identify Proposed Conservation Areas. A major accomplishment of this Plan involved the creation of a Geographic Information System (GIS) of data that will be available to both counties and local jurisdictions for long-term planning efforts. Existing mapped data was obtained and compiled, including urban areas, already protected parks, forests, gamelands, easements, and various other natural features from several sources. Key data layers were identified based on input from the OSRAC, public meetings and stakeholder interviews and assigned an ecological value of high, medium, or low. High value was placed on resource areas that related to protecting water quality, specifically drinking water supplies, or critical habitat areas. Critical watersheds (those watersheds that drain into surface water drinking supplies), wetlands, and natural area inventory sites – sites identified by the Nature Conservancy as having global, federal, state, or local significance due to plant or wildlife habitat, received a high ecological assignment. Medium ecological value was assigned to slopes above 30%, ridgetop corridors, floodplains and high quality stream corridors, and mining related lands and prime agricultural soils were assigned a low ecological value.

Using the ecological index of each key data layer as a starting point, key data features were classified by size as large (500 acres or greater), medium (100-499 acres) or small (less than 100 acres). Protecting large land areas will lead to a more contiguous system and larger land areas are typically more effective in preserving and maintaining habitat and ecological functions. Those features that were medium and large in size and medium and high in ecological index, moved up in importance. Areas with low ecological value and less than 100 acres were excluded.

Next, key resources were reviewed for connectivity to each other and to already protected resources, such as forests, rivers or gamelands. In addition, an emphasis was placed on creating an interconnected system of open spaces by considering linear features like abandoned and active railroads, stream and river corridors, and existing and proposed trails as potential connectors or greenways.

## Proposed Conservation Areas

The Proposed Conservation Areas Map (above) incorporates existing protected resources and trails, and proposed trails and conservation areas identified during the four-step GIS analysis. Proposed conservation areas have a mix of high, medium and low ecological values, vary in size, and have been named and classified as highlands, natural areas, agrarian lands or greenways. Proposed conservation areas were evaluated for appropriate outdoor recreation activities based on the types of resources present, proximity to protected resources, and input from stakeholders and the public.

The proposed conservation areas account for over 250,000 acres of land in the bi-county area, excluding trails. When combined with resources that are already protected, the proposed open space network encompasses about 350,000 acres in the bi-county area.

## Priorities

The planning horizon for the Plan is 20 years; therefore it was necessary to prioritize Plan recommendations as short term, mid term or long term so the Counties and local jurisdictions could focus efforts and resources. County priority areas were determined based on conservation area attributes and the ability to create a connected network of open spaces and greenways. Trails received priority for being regional connectors. Approximately 86,000 acres of proposed conservation areas and 150 miles of trails were identified as short term priorities to be pursued in the first five years after Plan adoption.



Lackawanna River Corridor Association, 2003

## Implementation

Achieving the recommendations in the Plan will require an aggressive and targeted approach at both the County and local levels. Each County is vested with the responsibility for implementing the Plan through partnerships with local governments, the private sector, and the public. Local governments within each County play a very valuable role in the future open space, greenways and outdoor recreation program. As partners with the Counties, each municipal government should assist in the protection, acquisition and management of land for the open space system and the physical development and maintenance of facilities.

In the short term, Luzerne and Lackawanna Counties should work cooperatively with each other and with local governments to implement the recommendations of this Plan. In the long-term, the Plan recommends establishing a Luzerne-Lackawanna Regional Open Space, Greenways and Outdoor Recreation Authority (OSRA). The authority would be governed by a Board of Directors appointed from each County and the OSRAC would be transformed into a Friends of Open Space and Greenways organization supporting the implementation efforts of one authority.

	Lackawanna County	Luzerne County	Total
<b>Agrarian Lands</b>	5,788	19,889	25,677
<b>Greenways</b>	11,348	48,656	60,004
<b>Highlands</b>	16,673	34,776	51,449
<b>Natural Areas</b>	42,623	76,216	118,839
<b>Total Proposed Conservation Areas</b>	<b>75,332</b>	<b>178,436</b>	<b>253,768</b>
<b>Protected Resources</b>	28,235	71,749	99,984
<b>Total Open Space Network</b>	<b>103,567</b>	<b>250,185</b>	<b>353,752</b>

## Land Conservation Tools

A number of methods to encourage open space protection and preservation are available to local communities. The Plan recommends a number of different approaches for each conservation area that should be pursued by county and local governments, landowners, conservation groups, not-for-profit organizations and other interested parties, to protect, conserve or acquire the recommended conservation lands. Successful implementation will require a combination of conservation tools including land management plans and easements; regulatory methods like density transfers, zoning overlays, buffer zones, subdivision exactions; and land acquisition made possible through donation and purchase, and made more attractive to developers and landowners through incentives and purchase of development rights, among others.



Lackawanna River Corridor Association, 2003

## Funding Sources

Achieving the vision that is defined within this Plan will require, among other things, a stable and recurring source of funding. No single source of funding will meet the goals and objectives defined in the Plan; instead, the Counties will need to work cooperatively with each other and with many other private, local, state and federal partners to generate funds sufficient to implement the program. The Plan recommends the Counties immediately pursue a bond referendum, explore and establish a recurring source of revenue in partnership with local governments (such as sales tax, property tax or excise tax), and explore instituting a utility fee program.

## Developed in Collaboration with:

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The Willary Foundation

For more information about the Lackawanna & Luzerne Counties Open Space, Greenways, & Outdoor Recreation Master Plan, contact your County Planning Commission.