Pascack Brook County Park Completely Inclusive Playground – Bergen County, New Jersey
Environmental Assessment – December 16, 2024

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

a. Project Overview

The proposed project will create a fully inclusive playground within Pascack Brook County Park, located in Westwood, New Jersey. This transformative project will replace the existing 5,300 square foot playground with a universally designed, sensory-rich play environment that enables children of all abilities to develop physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. Located within Census Block Group 340030591001006 (Bergen County), this area has been identified as a highly populated County according to Green Acres criteria. The park property is located within an Overburdened Community, Minority (Block Group identifier 340030140001) area. Interpolated Longitude (X) Coordinates: -74.007497502826, Interpolated Latitude (Y) Coordinates: 40.986031517416.

b. Project Objectives

The primary goal of this project is to create an inclusive play environment that welcomes and supports users of all abilities. Through thoughtful design and specialized equipment selection, the playground will provide multi-sensory play experiences while ensuring safe access and comfortable use for both children and caregivers. The design incorporates quiet spaces for sensory retreat alongside active play areas, creating a balanced environment that serves diverse needs. All elements will be carefully integrated with existing park amenities and natural features while meeting or exceeding ADA accessibility guidelines and inclusive design best practices.

The project aims to:

- Create a fully accessible and inclusive playground serving children of all abilities
- Provide multi-sensory play experiences through specialized equipment and surfaces
- Ensure safe access and comfortable use for children and caregivers
- Incorporate quiet/calm spaces alongside active play areas
- Maintain compatibility with existing park amenities and natural features
- Meet or exceed ADA accessibility guidelines and inclusive design best practices

c. Project Phases

The project will be implemented in three distinct phases over an estimated 120 day period, dependent upon optimal construction conditions. The anticipated construction work would involve, but not limited to:

Phase 1 - Site Preparation - The initial phase will involve removing existing equipment, completing necessary grading work, and installing drainage improvements. Site protection measures including erosion control and tree protection will be established during this phase.

Phase 2 - Construction - The main construction phase will include installation of:

- Safety surfacing combining poured-in-place rubber and/or engineered wood fiber
- New playground equipment selected for inclusive play value
- Site amenities including seating and shade structures if necessary
- Fencing and accessible path connections

Phase 3 - Final Site Work - The project will conclude with:

- Landscape restoration using native plants
- Comprehensive safety inspections
- Site cleanup and preparation for public use
- Installation of educational and wayfinding signage

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

a. Vegetation

The project area consists primarily of maintained lawn areas with scattered mature trees around the perimeter. Tree species include Sugar Maple (Acer saccharum), Red Maple (Acer rubrum), Pin Oak (Quercus palustris), and White Oak (Quercus alba). Pending results of the Natural Heritage Data Request, no rare, threatened or endangered plant species are expected to exist within the project boundaries.

b. Wildlife

The park provides urban wildlife habitat typical of suburban Bergen County parks. Common species include Eastern Gray Squirrel, American Robin, Northern Cardinal, and various migratory songbirds. The site is part of the Atlantic Flyway migratory bird corridor. Pending results of the Natural Heritage Data Request, no critical wildlife habitats or threatened/endangered species are expected to exist within the project area.

c. Geology, Topography and Soils

The site has gentle slopes with elevations ranging from approximately 23 to 36 feet above sea level. Surface soils are classified as urban land complex, suitable for recreational development with proper drainage design. Subsurface investigations confirm adequate bearing capacity for playground equipment foundations.

d. Water Resources/Hydrology

Pascack Brook forms the northern boundary of the park. The project area lies within the 100-year floodplain (Zone AE) and 500-year floodplain areas. The site's stormwater currently drains to existing catch basins that discharge to Pascack Brook. Groundwater is anticipated to be encountered at depths of 8-10 feet during geotechnical investigation.

e. Historic/Archaeological Resources

No known historic or archaeological resources exist within the project boundaries based on consultation with the NJ Historic Preservation Office (HPO), per LUCY Online Map Viewer. The project area has been previously disturbed through park development, reducing the likelihood of archaeological resources.

f. Transportation/Access

The site is accessed via Emerson Road, with existing parking areas providing 130 spaces including 4 ADA-compliant spaces. Pedestrian paths connect the playground area to parking and other park amenities. Public transportation access is available via NJ Transit bus routes along Old Hook Road (Route 165). From the Westwood Trail Station on the Pascack Valley Line, it is a car ride less than ten minutes to the park.

g. Adjacent Land Uses

The park is surrounded by:

- North: Pascack Brook and residential areas
- East: Emerson Road and residential areas
- South: Westwood Boulevard and Pascack Valley Medical Center
- West: Residential areas and Borough of Westwood's Westvale Park

3. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ANALYSIS

a. Resource Impacts

The design and implementation of the inclusive playground has been carefully planned to minimize environmental impacts while maximizing community benefits. Vegetation impacts will be limited to the removal of approximately 5,300 square feet of existing mulched area or grass, with preservation of all mature trees around the perimeter of the play area. Tree protection measures will ensure the survival of approximately 60 mature specimens that provide valuable shade and wildlife habitat. A Tree Survey & Assessment along with the Green Acres Tree Removal Evaluation Form will be completed by a NJ Licensed Tree Expert.

Wildlife in the immediate area may experience temporary displacement during the construction period, but no long-term negative impacts are anticipated due to the previously developed nature of the site and the urban park setting. Post-construction native plantings will enhance habitat value for local wildlife.

The project requires minimal grading work, with cut and fill balanced on site. Comprehensive erosion control measures including silt fencing, inlet protection, and stabilized construction entrance will be implemented throughout construction to protect soil stability and water quality. While the site lies within the flood hazard area of Pascack Brook, no direct impacts to the waterway are anticipated. The project will enhance current conditions through improved stormwater management systems including bio-infiltration areas and permeable safety surfacing.

b. Short-term vs Long-term Impacts

During construction, the community will experience temporary impacts including construction noise during daytime hours, potential dust generation (to be controlled through standard construction practices), and temporary closure of the playground area. Some wildlife may temporarily relocate during construction activities, and there will be minor vegetation disturbance within the immediate project area.

Short-term impacts during the construction period include:

- Construction noise during daytime hours (8:00 AM - 5:00 PM weekdays, to be confirmed with the Borough of Westwood)
- Potential dust generation (controlled through site watering)
- Temporary closure of playground area, approximately 180 days
- Minor vegetation disturbance within the 5,300 SF project area
- Temporary wildlife displacement
- Construction vehicle traffic (approximately 2-3 vehicles per day)

Long-term positive impacts include:

The long-term impacts of the project will be overwhelmingly positive. The inclusive playground will significantly expand recreational opportunities for children of all abilities, creating a valuable community resource that promotes social interaction and development. The new design incorporates improved site drainage features and enhanced safety measures. The project will serve as a model for inclusive recreation, demonstrating Bergen County's commitment to serving all residents.

- Improved recreational opportunities for all abilities
- Enhanced stormwater management through planned bio-infiltration
- Native habitat enhancement through restoration plantings
- Improved site accessibility and safety
- Strengthened community connections through inclusive design

c. Recreation Impact

The transformation of the existing playground into an inclusive play space will markedly enhance recreational opportunities within Pascack Brook County Park. The thoughtfully designed play environment will accommodate users of varying abilities, providing diverse play experiences that support physical, social, and cognitive development. The playground's location adjacent to other park amenities creates a comprehensive recreation zone that serves multiple age groups and abilities.

Integration with existing park features including the picnic pavilion, restroom facilities, and walking paths creates a cohesive recreation area that supports extended visits and family gatherings. The playground's design promotes social interaction between children of all abilities while providing spaces for quiet retreat when needed.

The transformation of the existing playground into an inclusive play space will significantly enhance recreational opportunities within Pascack Brook County Park. The new design will feature:

- Multi-sensory play experiences
- Accessible routes throughout the play area
- Quiet spaces for sensory retreat
- Social gathering areas for families
- Age-appropriate challenges for various developmental levels
- Integration with existing park amenities

Annual usage is expected to increase from approximately 15,000 to 25,000 visitors based on comparable inclusive playground projects in the region.

d. Adjacent Features Impact

The project has been designed with careful consideration of surrounding park uses and adjacent residential areas. The playground's location maintains appropriate buffers from neighboring properties, and enhanced landscape plantings will be added where needed to provide additional screening. The design team has carefully considered noise factors to prevent any negative impacts on nearby residents. The project complements existing park amenities and enhances the overall recreational value of this public space.

The playground's location and design carefully consider impacts on surrounding uses:

- 50-foot minimum buffer to residential properties
- Enhanced landscape screening where needed
- No lighting impacts on adjacent properties
- Stormwater management to prevent off-site impacts
- Maintained sight lines for supervision
- Compatible with existing park uses

e. Required Permits

The following permits and approvals will be obtained:

- NJDEP Flood Hazard Area Permit (Application pending)
- Bergen County Soil Conservation District Certification (Application pending)

- Borough of Westwood Building Permit (To be determined)

f. Natural Heritage Review

A Natural Heritage Data Request form was submitted to NJDEP Office of Natural Lands Management on December 16, 2024. It is anticipated that:

- No rare plant species or ecological communities within project area
- No threatened/endangered species habitat within 0.25 mile radius
- Standard construction timing restrictions recommended for migratory birds

g. Sea Level Rise Considerations

Given the project's location within the flood hazard area of Pascack Brook, careful consideration has been given to potential impacts of sea level rise and increased flooding frequency. The design incorporates several resilience measures including elevated equipment foundations where appropriate, selection of flood-resistant materials, and enhanced drainage systems. The maintenance plan includes specific protocols for post-flood inspection and cleanup to ensure long-term sustainability of the playground.

The project addresses potential sea level rise impacts through:

- Equipment foundations elevated as required
- Flood-resistant material selection
- Enhanced drainage design for increased precipitation
- Flexible adaptation strategies in long-term maintenance plan
- Regular monitoring of flood impacts and adaptation needs

4. ALTERNATIVES ANALYSIS

A comprehensive evaluation of potential locations within Pascack Brook County Park was conducted during the planning phase. While several alternative sites were considered, the selected location proved optimal for several reasons. The site's proximity to existing parking areas and restroom facilities supports convenient access for families and caregivers. The relatively level topography minimizes the need for extensive grading, while existing utility infrastructure can support any needed amenities. While flood hazard considerations affect the entire park area, the selected location allows for appropriate design adaptations while maintaining good accessibility.

5. MITIGATING MEASURES

Construction Phase Mitigation

The project will implement a comprehensive erosion and sediment control plan meeting Bergen County Soil Conservation District requirements. Measures include installation of silt fencing, temporary construction entrance stabilization, and inlet protection devices. Tree protection fencing will be installed around all trees to be preserved, extending to the dripline to prevent soil

compaction and root damage. Dust control measures including site watering will be implemented during dry conditions.

To minimize impacts on wildlife, major construction activities will be planned to meet peak bird nesting seasons as appropriate. Daily construction activities will be limited to weekday hours between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM to minimize disruption to park users and nearby residents.

Operational Phase Mitigation

The playground design is anticipated to incorporate several measures to ensure long-term sustainability and minimize environmental impacts. The safety surfacing system contemplated could include poured-in-place rubber with engineered wood fiber materials, providing superior accessibility while maintaining adequate stormwater infiltration. The surfacing system, finalized in plan design development, would look to handle the 2-year storm event without ponding, with overflow directed to enhanced bio-infiltration areas around the playground perimeter.

Native plant species selected for the restoration areas are adapted to local conditions and provide wildlife habitat value. Species considered include Eastern Red Cedar (Juniperus virginiana), Bayberry (Myrica pensylvanica), and native wildflowers that support pollinators while requiring minimal maintenance.

A detailed maintenance program has been developed to ensure the playground remains safe and accessible throughout its lifespan. The program includes daily safety inspections, weekly maintenance of safety surfacing, monthly equipment inspections, and seasonal comprehensive evaluations. Special protocols address maintenance needs following flood events, including inspection and cleaning procedures.

6. CONCLUSION

The proposed inclusive playground at Pascack Brook County Park represents a thoughtfully designed project that balances recreational needs with environmental considerations. The project will serve a densely populated area where inclusive recreation opportunities are currently limited. The design incorporates current best practices in inclusive play while respecting the site's environmental constraints and flood hazard considerations.

The project's environmental impacts will be minimal and largely temporary in nature, limited to the construction period. These impacts will be appropriately mitigated through careful planning and implementation of protection measures. The long-term benefits include:

- Enhanced recreational opportunities for users of all abilities
- Improved site drainage and stormwater management
- Native habitat enhancement through restoration plantings
- Strengthened community connections through inclusive design

The project team has conducted thorough due diligence, pending results of the Natural Heritage Database review, flood hazard analysis, and evaluation of alternatives. All necessary permits will be

obtained prior to construction, and appropriate mitigation measures will be implemented throughout the project lifecycle.

This project advances Bergen County's commitment to inclusive recreation while demonstrating environmental stewardship through careful site planning and sustainable design practices. The inclusive playground will serve as a valuable community resource while protecting and enhancing the natural systems of Pascack Brook County Park.

7. AUTHOR AND QUALIFICATIONS

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