

THE PARK SYSTEM OF NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



THE TRUST *for* PUBLIC LAND

CONSERVING LAND FOR PEOPLE

THE PARK SYSTEM OF NEW BRUNSWICK,
NEW JERSEY

Findings and Recommendations
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EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

New Brunswick is a historic city, a university city, a medical city, and home to a giant worldwide corporation. It has successfully weathered the economic travails of the 1960s and 70s that hammered other urban locales in New Jersey, and, against the odds, it is in the midst of a civic renaissance. The Trust for Public Land (TPL) believes that a conscious park, open space, and recreation strategy could help play a major role in New Brunswick’s ongoing revitalization efforts and help to further “brand” and sell the city as a great place to live, work, and visit.

The park network of the city of New Brunswick, while today meeting many of the city’s recreation and open space needs (*see Map 1*), could provide considerably more value if it were strategically enlarged, connected, and improved.



Middlesex County Department of Parks and Recreation

View of the Raritan River from the Raritan River Conservation Area.

In fact, a fully rounded park system could go a long way toward adding overall success to the city as a whole.

New Brunswick’s planners are impressively well versed on the numerical attributes of the park system, including how it measures up against state recommendations. We concur with their analysis that the city demonstrates good numbers regarding acreage. (Like many other cities, New Brunswick’s parks consist of lands operated by more than one agency—*see Table 1*.) After carrying out research on a number of comparable places, TPL found that on a per-capita basis New Brunswick has a better-than-average amount of parkland—more than Lawrence, Massachusetts; Bayonne, New Jersey; and Perth Amboy, New Jersey; though less than Wilmington, Delaware (*see Table 2*). As a percentage of the size of the city, New Brunswick’s park system is also above average: more than Wilmington, Bayonne, and Perth Amboy, though less than Lawrence (*see Table 3*).

The city also has a relatively balanced park system when measured by population density and by household income (*see Maps 2 and 3*).

But quantity doesn’t tell the whole story; access, quality, and layout are just as important, and our research found New Brunswick to be average in its number of recreation centers but somewhat underserved by playgrounds (*see Tables 4 and 5*). Beyond that, New Brunswick could incorporate parks into its overall city form in a more inviting, stimulating, and economically productive fashion. We also believe that New Brunswick needs to set forth a budget-driven and timeline-driven course of action to achieve its desires and plans.

Most significantly, the outstanding resource of the Raritan River is not fully capitalized. Moreover, the central business district has little parkland around which to organize its form and attract additional investment. As described below, we believe the city could work in coordination with Rutgers University, the Robert Wood Johnson Medical complex, the Johnson & Johnson Company, Middlesex County, the Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park, and other institutions and nonprofit groups to fully design, create, program, and maintain parkland to maximize the park system's all-around benefit.

Good strides toward parkland expansion were made in the eight years following the release of the 1995 park master plan. By 2003 the city had acquired an impressive 105 additional acres of conservation land¹ as well as another 31 acres of recreational parkland. In addition, improvements were made to Boyd Park that partly compensated for the expanded deleterious impact of Route 18 on the city. Numerous playground renovations have also occurred in the city's parks over the last decade.

Despite these accomplishments, there are still key opportunities where New Brunswick could score greater success by linking parks and, especially, by reestablishing an intimate relationship between the city and the Raritan River. The city would also benefit by going beyond a physical parks plan to a set of programmatic activities that promote a theme and a marketing strategy.

All these park revitalization and expansion efforts will require mayoral leadership, but this vitally important task is larger than any one person or entity can take on alone. It will require private sector partnership—both corporate and nonprofit—and may entail bureaucratic reorganization within city government. It will certainly require two things that are presently missing in the planning process: a budget and a timeline. Therefore, the recommendations in this report are aimed at *all* the stakeholders in New Brunswick's park system, including city political officials, city agency staff, private sector leaders, citizen park activists and, in fact, all citizens, both in and outside the city. Whether by responding to the long-term or short-term recommendations, everyone who cares about the future of New Brunswick has a role to play in revitalizing the city's parks.



New Brunswick Recreation

Big Chill 5K race on College Avenue. The event is held every December and has become the largest 5K in the state with almost 7,000 runners annually.

¹ This includes conservation land within the city acquired by Middlesex County.

FINDINGS

In order to produce this report, staff of The Trust for Public Land combed through considerable planning, historical, and analytical literature about the city of New Brunswick, including the excellent 2004 Master Plan; visited and toured the city on several occasions; studied numerous maps and aerial photographs; and interviewed 40 persons working for governmental and non-governmental offices in New Brunswick and elsewhere (see Acknowledgments). Naturally, all findings and recommendations are solely those of TPL, but we believe that they build upon the observations, ideas, plans, and objectives of the many people and institutions with whom we spoke.

1. A Small System with Good “Bones”

New Brunswick has much structural strength that can be built upon. The most impressive icon is 78-acre Buccleuch Park with its stately trees, attractive meadows, ample sports facilities, running trail, pergola, skating pond, and sledding hill. Also, the newly expanded and rebuilt Boyd Park represents an important attempt to create a better municipal interface with the Raritan River. The acquisition over the past 15 years of 105 acres of conservation wetlands downstream from downtown is an important step toward creating an ecological preserve. And the development of additional sports facilities at Alice Jennings Archibald Park and the new Youth Sports Complex helps to meet the great need for active recreational spaces in New Brunswick.

Nevertheless, the “bones” are not all developed or connected. While there is public land along much of the Raritan riverfront, a large part of it is unattractive, hidden and overwhelmed by Route 18. Another portion, downstream, has not been even minimally developed and has almost no public access. The river itself has one boat launch area in New Brunswick. An aggressive marketing campaign to promote use of the river could result in the need for increased access points. Moreover, there is no pedestrian or bicycle connection between New Brunswick and the Delaware and Raritan State Park’s canal trail. Finally, there is no safe and dedicated bicycle route between the two New Brunswick campuses of Rutgers University.

2. Inequity in Access to Parkland

While New Brunswick has a more equitable distribution of parks than many other cities, there are still neighborhoods less well served than others in terms of parks reachable by walking. Among the places short of parks are the neighborhoods between Roosevelt and Stirling schools and on both sides of Hamilton Street. Others, most notably downtown, have a smattering of tiny public spaces, but most are not well developed, offering scant benefits to users and few opportunities as seeds for urban redevelopment.

3. A Less-Than-Optimal Bureaucratic Structure

The fact that there is not a unified parks and recreation department with a single structure and director weakens New Brunswick’s ability to plan and manage its parks. The current structure also reduces the likelihood of ensuring that parks get as much attention as the rest of the city’s infrastructure and programs. Although no interviewee surfaced this issue, park structure is an important factor that TPL has studied over many years. At present, Parks is a division within the Department of Public Works, along with Street Trees, Clean Communities, Recycling, Sanitation, Central Vehicle Maintenance, and Sewer Utility. Recreation is a division with the Department of Social Services, along with Health, Senior Resource Center, Vital Statistics, Dial-A-Ride, Youth Services System, and Animal Control. While there may be good reasons for this structure, and it is not uncommon in many cities, it is not ideal from the perspective of parks and recreation, and it may merit internal analysis. Moreover, because of this fragmentation, there is inadequate integration of the city’s park and recreation role with its efforts to support non-motorized transportation—a source of planning and funding for many other cities’ trail systems.



New Brunswick Recreation

Annual Cardboard Canoe Race in Boyd Park as part of the Raritan River Festival.

4. An Inadequate Network of Park Advocacy Organizations

Beyond the Civic League of Greater New Brunswick, New Brunswick Tomorrow, Sustainable Raritan River, Devco, and a few other groups, there are not enough private organizations advocating for the various components that make up a great park system—bicycling promoters; advocates for soccer, baseball and football; children’s playground supporters; community garden promoters; even runners, walkers, and birdwatchers. Most cities with strong park systems have a strong network of advocates. In the case of New Brunswick, such organizations either do not exist or have not been able to effectively make themselves heard.

5. Lack of a Plan of Action

While the city has an impressive and comprehensive Park, Recreation and Open Space Plan, it contains goals without specific deadlines or any action plan outlining how to reach them. While the city is making progress implementing some goals, the current comprehensive plan now needs a specific action plan that gives deadlines and divides responsibility for accomplishments between various public and private entities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. New Brunswick’s public and private leadership should jointly and officially resolve to make the most of the city’s park and natural resource strengths—including the Raritan Riverfront, the conservation land, Buccleuch Park and Recreation Park—as well as improve downtown park spaces to provide an economic boost for the city.

Rationale: We heard more than once that different kinds of park and recreation advocates were so narrowly focused on one particular sport or facility that they frequently could not develop enough broad awareness to succeed on their issue. New Brunswick has consistently shown that it can solve problems once they are defined as part of a larger picture. Along those lines, the “problem” of general parkland and recreation insufficiency needs to be framed and highlighted before concerted action will be successful. Any official resolution to address this issue should set forth a timeline for action.

2. The city through its existing partnership with Rutgers University, the Civic League of Greater New Brunswick, and residents should continue to pursue a redesign strategy that re-conceptualizes and redesigns (and possibly renames) Recreation Park into a high-quality, well-programmed, and welcoming space for the people of the Pine Street and Nichol Avenue neighborhoods and the city as a whole. The redesign should particularly take into account the physical edges of the park, access points, and the relationship of the park to its surrounding streets.

Rationale: Of all the possible park improvements, Recreation Park seems the ripest for action, with apparent support from many stakeholders. We heard many promising comments from all sides, including advocates, Rutgers and the city. Challenging decisions are still required, but success with this park redesign could not only provide badly needed playing space, but also give momentum to other programs including an expanded farmers market.



A soccer clinic at the Youth Sports Complex on Joyce Kilmer Avenue.

New Brunswick Recreation



New Brunswick Recreation

Little League baseball game in the Youth Sports Complex.

3. The city should create an official Green Belt Task Force to plan, fund, and advocate for the development of an ecological and recreational green belt system in New Brunswick. The task force should include leaders who represent government and private interests in such diverse topics as bicycling, water quality, ecology, urban agriculture, running, smart growth, walking for health, trees, wildlife, railroad corridors, roadways, and economic development.

Over the long term, the green belt would consist of a series of planted physical spaces created through philanthropic donation, land purchase, land dedication, redevelopment, street closures, street redesign, flooding mitigation, and other changes within New Brunswick.

Over the short term, in preparation for the task force, the mayor should establish a special mailing address and ask those who are interested in New Brunswick to submit proposals, photographs from elsewhere, schematic drawings, personal stories, concepts, and other ideas that would stimulate thinking about an ideal “New Brunswick Future” green belt system. This should be supplemented by creative mapping of past, present, and future land uses plus other geological and geographical factors that should influence development.

Rationale: The creation of a connected green belt would be the single most revolutionary improvement to the park system of New Brunswick, with regional and even statewide ramifications. Done right, it would materially increase the attractiveness of the city to workers and of Rutgers to students, with all the resulting economic benefits. While this concept was not directly articulated during any of the interviews, it would help solve many of the smaller issues that were identified. Moreover, throughout the nation, it is a proven method of adding tremendous urban value at a reasonable cost, and it can be done incrementally.

4. Because of the particular difficulty in solving the problem of access to the river, the city should consider creating a nonprofit “Riverfront Recapture” organization similar to the highly successful group in Hartford, Connecticut, that has dramatically restored that city’s connec-

tion to the Connecticut River. Alternatively, an existing entity such as Devco might be interested in stepping into this role. The entity would lead a planning and implementation process to further breach the highway and other barriers between downtown New Brunswick and the Raritan River so as to improve the human and economic flow between the two. Among the major objectives would be reconnecting the D&R Canal Towpath with the city of New Brunswick and upgrading the safety and quality of the Raritan River Multi-Use Trail.

Rationale: Pointing out the problem of disconnection to the Raritan River is not enough—others have done that over the years. Taking additional steps to remedy it, however, can seem like an overwhelming task. But New Brunswick does not have to invent a solution to the problem of river access—there are several successful models around the country, including Hartford, Denver, Providence, and Fort Lauderdale. To stimulate public discussion, this design challenge could be the focus of a design charrette led by landscape architecture or urban planning students from Rutgers.

5. New Brunswick is a small city within a densely populated and politically fragmented region. Because of this, and particularly since Rutgers has campuses in several different municipalities, the region should consider initiating a “New Brunswick Area Parks Collaborative” to facilitate conversations among the surrounding towns about municipal, county, and state park landscape improvements, maintenance, and event programming. The collaborative should include both citizens and agency staff, and it should concentrate on inter-jurisdictional challenges and opportunities.

Rationale: A regional approach to park issues is a natural concept for small cities surrounded by other small jurisdictions so as to avoid expensive duplication of facilities and programs. Since it is unlikely at present that the various governments would establish formal regional governance, a less formal “collaborative” is a more realistic approach.

6. Organizers of annual recreational events, such as marathons, 10Ks, fun runs, and bicycle rides, should consider routes that pass through every significant park in the city so as to begin stimulating the public’s thinking about connectivity, equity, and park economic spillover effects.

Rationale: It’s not enough to have big planning ideas—there must also be plenty of small, relatively easily implementable ideas that can actually educate and motivate people to seek changes. Making people aware of New Brunswick parks is a critical step in building a pro-parks constituency.

7. TPL recommends the establishment of a citizen-based “New Brunswick Parks Alliance” to function as an overall advocate and to support better-maintained and better-programmed parks. The alliance could serve as a sounding board for new ideas, a publicity forum for park improvement opportunities, a vehicle to provide data on maintenance and safety, and an outreach mechanism to the corporate and citizen communities that might want to partner with the city.

Rationale: Very few cities are able to improve their parks without the active involvement of citizens. While there are a few single-issue groups promoting activities like soccer and rowing or restoration of the Raritan River, there does not yet appear to be an effective overall park advocacy group in New Brunswick.

8. We also recommend the establishment of a corporate-based “New Brunswick Parks Partnership” to enable a closer working relationship between the business community, the city, and the D&R Canal State Park. This partnership could assure that the business community is even more closely aligned with park and recreation needs and solutions; in the long run it might also become an effective fundraising mechanism to partner with the public agencies and to supplement programs that the government cannot easily manage on its own.

Rationale: New Brunswick's business community has shown its effectiveness over the years, and it has been rewarded with a city that is a successful business location. A subset of that community—perhaps led by executives who care deeply about promoting healthy lifestyles and obesity reduction or recreational activities such as bicycling, youth soccer, rowing, tennis, running, etc.—could make a big difference.

9. New Brunswick may be able to acquire more parks funding from Trenton and Washington. One way of doing this is by linking parks with the needs and mandates of other city agencies and programs. For instance, police athletic programs can take place in parks. School, elderly, and mental health providers can undertake horticultural programs in parks. Water pollution mitigation demonstrations can be conducted on parkland. Non-motorized trails can be developed on parkland using Transportation Department funds. Parks can be maintained with the help of supervised ex-offenders who have recently reentered civilian life and who are learning new skills. Moreover, New Brunswick may be able to solicit and raise money for parks and recreation from a variety of private sources. Cities have received grants and gifts from the National Football League, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, National Basketball Association, and National Recreation Foundation, as well as local foundations and corporations.

Rationale: It is beneficial to think beyond the traditional “silo” of parkland and to consider all the different users and uses that complement parks in a city, thus making available other funding sources.

10. New Brunswick is already involved with urban agriculture, but we recommend that it do more. Health, nutrition and food security are real issues in New Brunswick, and there seem to be good opportunities for the park system to enable the establishment of community gardens, farmers markets, etc.

Rationale: The urban agriculture movement is gaining traction throughout the country and the state. We heard frequent comments that the city should be doing more in this arena. We believe this is a fruitful opportunity to build alliances between many different groups and constituencies, particularly utilizing the knowledge and interest of Rutgers and the two main hospitals.

CONCLUSION

New Brunswick is an impressive small city that has absorbed many changes and challenges over its long history and has emerged as a vital and dynamic regional center. We believe that its strategic position could be further enhanced by a conscious effort at place-making based on an amplified and linked park system to serve present and future New Brunswick residents, workers, and visitors. We hope this report offers a blueprint for moving forward toward this goal.

Table 1: Acres of Parkland, by Agency
2010

City		Acres by Agency
Bayonne, New Jersey	Total:	173
Bayonne Department of Public Works, Parks and Recreation		69
Hudson County Division of Parks		104
Lawrence, Massachusetts	Total:	392
Lawrence Department of Public Works		312
Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation		80
New Brunswick, New Jersey	Total:	293
New Brunswick Division of Parks		272
Middlesex County Department of Parks and Recreation		21
Perth Amboy, New Jersey	Total:	111
Perth Amboy Office of Recreation		111
Wilmington, Delaware	Total:	443
Wilmington Department of Parks and Recreation		425
Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation		18

Table 2. Acres of Parkland per 1,000 Residents, by City
2010

City	Population	Total Park Acres*	Acres per 1,000 Residents
Wilmington, Delaware	73,069	443	6.1
New Brunswick, New Jersey	51,579	293	5.7
Lawrence, Massachusetts	70,592	392	5.6
Bayonne, New Jersey	58,359	173	3.0
Perth Amboy, New Jersey	48,711	111	2.3
Total, 5 Cities:	302,310	1,412	
		Average, 5 Cities	4.5
		Median, 5 Cities:	5.6

*Total park acres includes city, county, metro, state, and federal land within city limits.

Table 3. Acres of Parkland as Percentage of City Area
2010

City	Land Area (acres)	Total Park Acres*	Park Acres as Percent of Land Area
Lawrence, Massachusetts	3,840	392	10.2%
New Brunswick, New Jersey	3,200	293	9.2%
Wilmington, Delaware	6,400	443	6.9%
Bayonne, New Jersey	3,200	173	5.4%
Perth Amboy, New Jersey	2,560	111	4.3%
Total, 5 Cities:	19,200	1,412	
		Average, 5 Cities:	7.2%
		Median, 5 Cities:	6.9%

*Total park acres includes city, county, metro, state and federal land within city limits.

Table 4. Recreation and Senior Centers per 20,000 Residents, by City
2010

City	Population	Number of Centers*	Centers per 20,000 Residents
Wilmington, Delaware	73,069	8	2.2
Bayonne, New Jersey	58,359	4	1.4
New Brunswick, New Jersey	51,579	3	1.2
Perth Amboy, New Jersey	48,711	2	0.8
Lawrence, Massachusetts	70,592	1	0.3
		Average, 5 Cities:	1.2

*If a city has more than one park agency, their recreation and senior centers are combined.

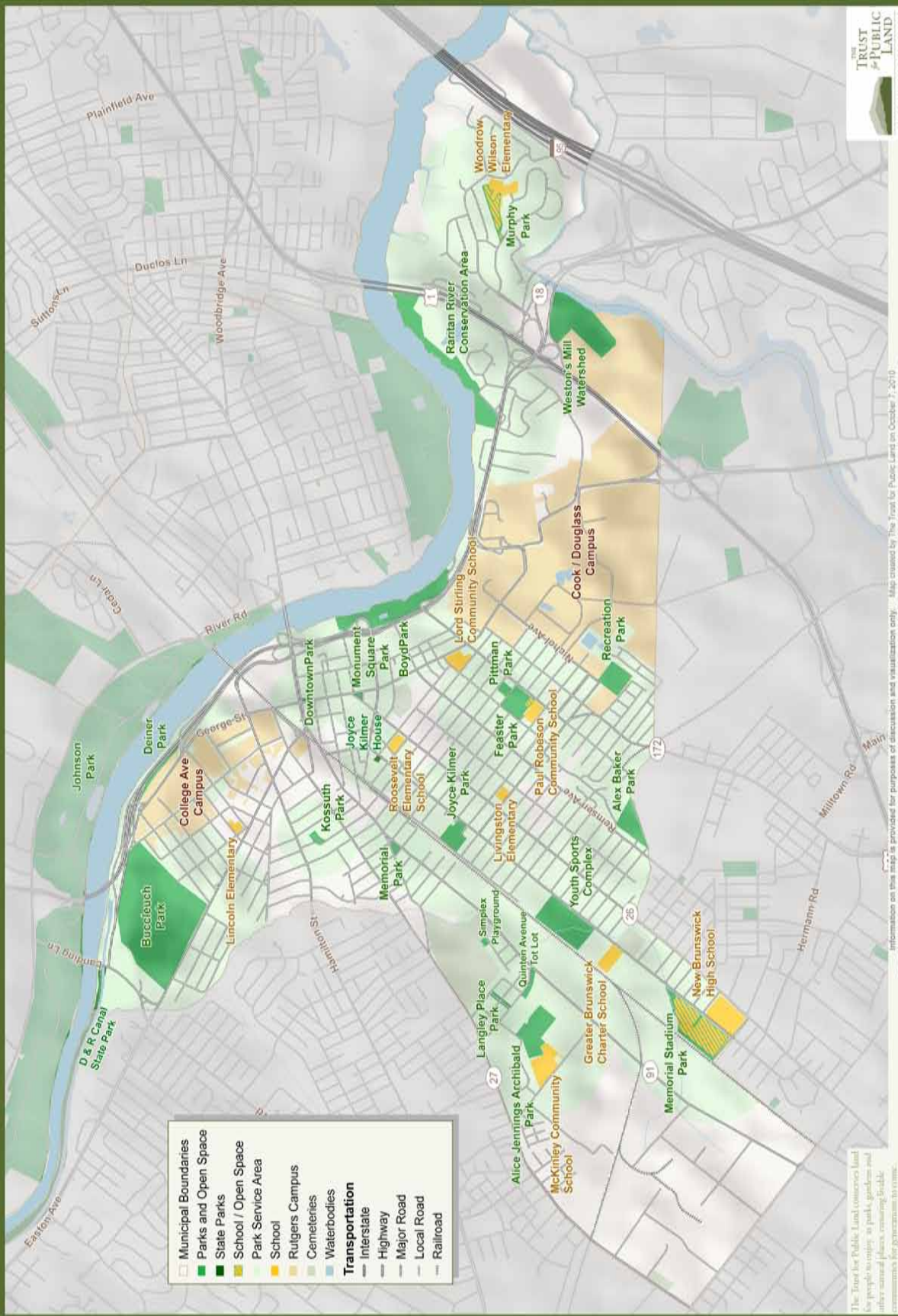
Table 5. Park Playgrounds per 10,000 Residents, by City
2010

City	Population	Number of Playgrounds*	Playgrounds per 10,000 Residents
Bayonne, New Jersey	58,359	21	3.6
Wilmington, Delaware	73,069	26	3.6
Perth Amboy, New Jersey	48,711	13	2.7
Lawrence, Massachusetts	70,592	17	2.4
New Brunswick, New Jersey	51,579	11	2.1
		Average, 5 Cities:	2.9

*If a city has more than one park agency, their playgrounds are combined.

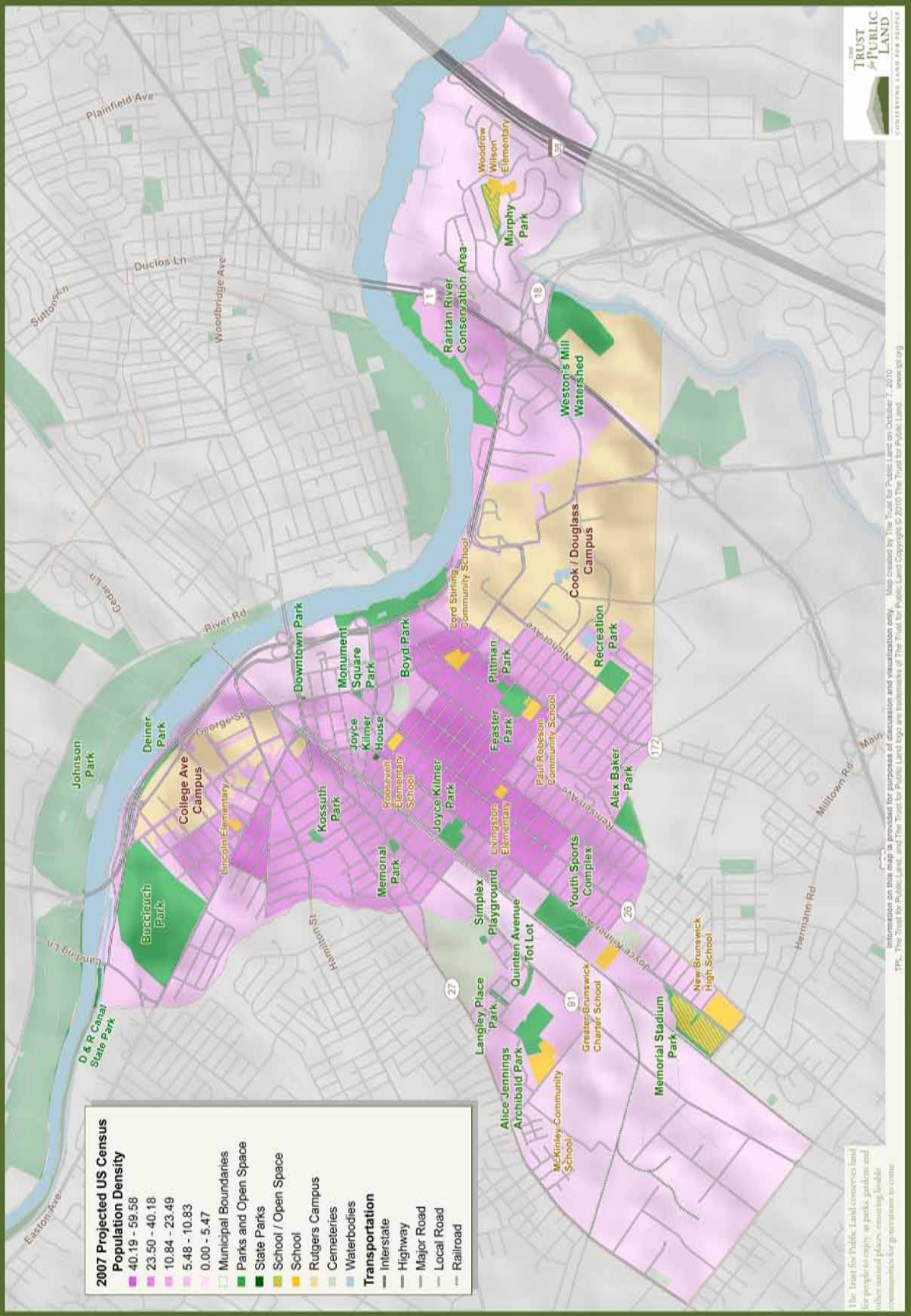
NEW BRUNSWICK PARK SCAN

MAP I - PARK SERVICE AREAS



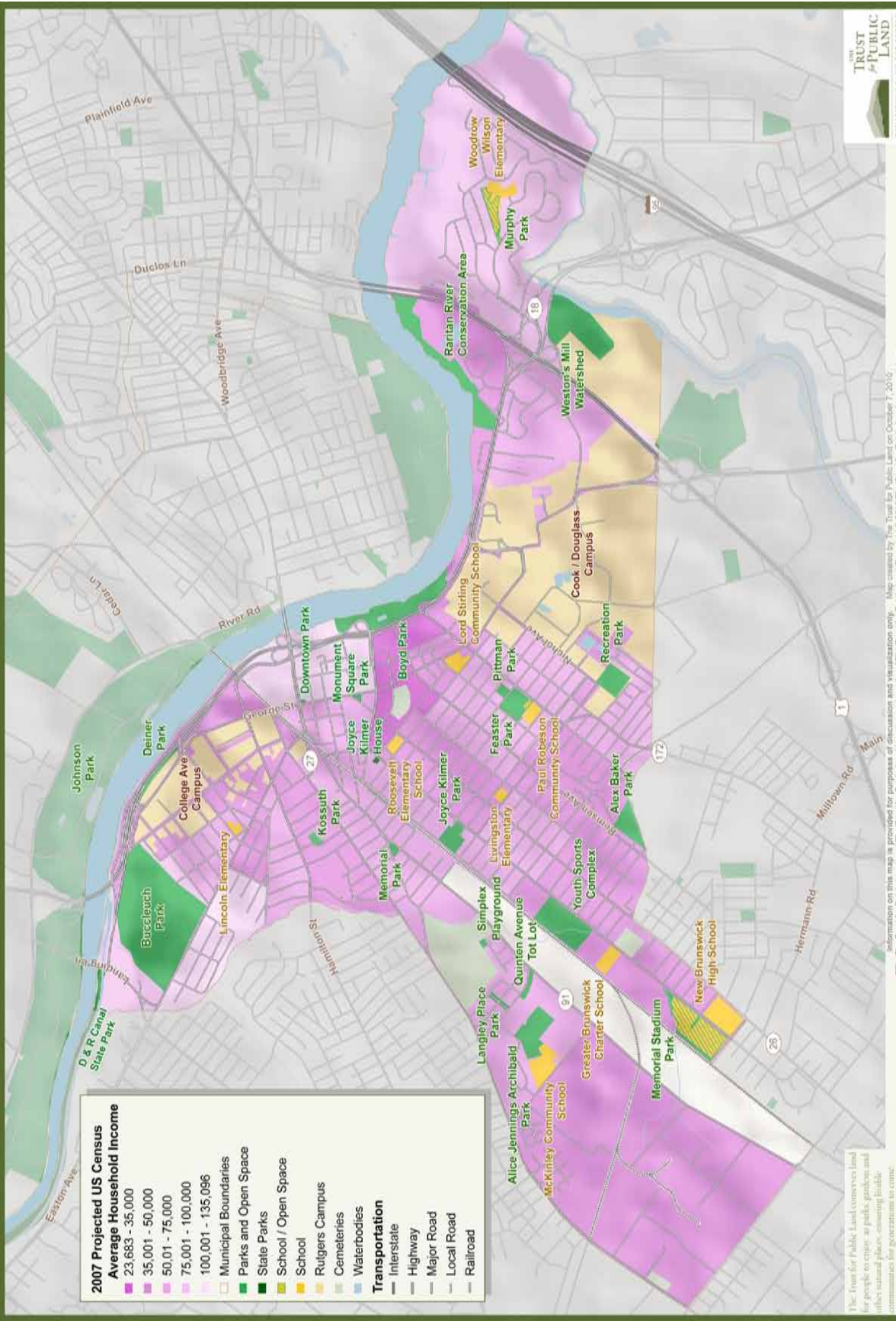
NEW BRUNSWICK PARK SCAN

MAP 2 - 2007 PROJECTED US CENSUS POPULATION DENSITY



NEW BRUNSWICK PARK SCAN

MAP 3 - 2007 PROJECTED US CENSUS AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME



The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy, so parks, gardens and other natural places can co-exist with communities for generations to come.

Information on this map is provided for purposes of discussion and visualization only. Map created by The Trust for Public Land on October 7, 2010.

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CENTER FOR CITY PARK EXCELLENCE
THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND
660 PENNSYLVANIA AVE. SE, SUITE 401
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20003
202.543-7552

NATIONAL OFFICE
THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND
101 MONTGOMERY ST., SUITE 900
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94104
415.495.4014

tpl.org