

Downtown Trenton Assunpink Creek Revitalization



Summary Report from Sept. 15 Community Meeting

OVERVIEW:

On Monday, Sept. 15, 2014, from 5-7pm, New Jersey Future facilitated a community meeting at Thomas Edison State College in downtown Trenton. The meeting was an opportunity for community members to begin a dialogue with representatives from the City of Trenton and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers concerning several projects that are planned or currently under way in and around downtown Trenton's Assunpink Creek. Approximately 70 people attended.

The main focus of the meeting was on the restoration ("daylighting") of the Assunpink Creek between S. Warren and S. Broad streets, but the opportunity was also given to discuss the recent plans to improve Mill Hill Park (restoration of the Douglass House and the Jackson Street pedestrian bridge and the addition of interpretive and directional signage throughout the park) and the ongoing inaction over repairs to the historic S. Broad Street Bridge. Attendees were able to provide comments and ask questions. A walking tour of the restoration site followed the meeting.

From these discussions, five main themes emerged: maintenance and upkeep, safety and accessibility, aesthetics, recreation and education.

1. Maintenance and Upkeep

When the park is completed, it will be the city's responsibility to provide ongoing maintenance. One of the major concerns voiced by members of the public was over stewardship of the future park site -- specifically, the city's ability to keep the site clean and safe. Given that cuts were made to park maintenance funding under the previous mayoral administration, it is understandable that community members were concerned about the park's long-term upkeep. Additional parkland will require additional resources on the part of the city to keep the site properly landscaped, address incidents of vandalism and collect litter. City representatives explained that the natural design and the selection of low-maintenance meadow grasses are intended to minimize maintenance costs while providing an attractive environment. The new public works director has been briefed on the project.

2. Safety and Accessibility

Community members were also concerned about how the city would ensure the safety of those using the site. They asked questions regarding design, such as the use of lighting, but also about the active patrolling of the site by law enforcement or security personnel. As with the discussion of maintenance, community members stressed the need to delegate responsibilities clearly, especially given the numerous jurisdictions that could be involved with policing.

Community members also voiced concerns regarding safe access to the site, especially given the interest in connecting the site to the existing Mill Hill Park. Getting to the site from Mill Hill Park requires visitors to cross S. Broad Street, a one-way road where the existing grading makes it difficult for motorists, especially when traveling at high speeds, to see pedestrians crossing. Community members recommended that steps be taken to help "calm" traffic in the vicinity of the current and any future crosswalk between the two sites.

3. Aesthetics

Community members were especially vocal about the existing use of the site by the state and the neighboring utility, Veolia. They raised questions about why the project includes a preserved section of stream culvert, which would obscure the view of the historic S. Broad Street Bridge. This issue can be revisited when the S. Broad Street bridge reconstruction project begins moving again under the authority of the NJDOT. NJDOT is currently conducting engineering studies to understand better the existing but unexposed “second arch” of the bridge. No timetable has been set for completion of this study or for moving the project forward.

Presently the state uses the city-owned Lafayette Street plaza as a parking lot, although there is no agreement in place to do so. Meeting attendees questioned the inaction on the part of the city to address this concern and stressed that this use should be stopped, especially since virtually the entire block will be a public park.

Community members also made suggestions regarding the proposed landscaping of the site. These suggestions included the inclusion of native vegetation, especially flowering vegetation, as well as the possibility of incorporating historical elements into the site. One meeting attendee mentioned that the Old Barracks is in possession of numerous historical millstones that were once used by industries in the area, and it may be looking to dispense with them. She suggested that inclusion of these millstones could serve as a reminder of the historical importance the site once had for the area, and the millstones could become a seating area.

Community members also asked whether the highway guardrail located along Assunpink Drive, intended to protect motorists from entering the creek, is necessary, and if it is, whether it could be replaced with something more attractive.

4. Recreation

Several community members discussed the need for passive recreational opportunities on and near the newly daylighted creek, and expressed concern that the restoration plan includes the addition of riffles (areas where the water is agitated by stones), which could pose a hazard for anyone using the creek for kayaking or canoeing out to the Delaware River.

5. Education

City representatives were present to discuss the proposed interpretive signage that was being developed by Hunter Research for Mill Hill Park, a proposal that was generally well received. Community members offered several suggestions for how this signage could be expanded in subsequent stages, including ensuring that future signage follows a coherent theme throughout the city as a way to create learning opportunities; and incorporating technology, whether through smartphone-scannable QR code (barcode) images that would link to additional information to supplement the learning experience, or by reducing the amount of signage clutter through the development of a Historic Trenton “app.”

ACTION STEPS:

- **Encourage the city to develop a stewardship plan for the park property** that will include:
 - **Maintenance Schedule:** Develop a maintenance manual that provides a detailed maintenance schedule and description of the park’s regular and long-term maintenance tasks. In addition to providing planning guidance to assist with staffing and budgeting, the manual will help when there is turnover in city government personnel. During periods when the city is unable to perform these necessary tasks, having this plan publicly available could allow community and volunteer groups to offer assistance.

- **Assignment of Responsibility:** Determine which entities (city, Trenton Downtown Association, or state) will be responsible for policing, trash pickup, ongoing maintenance and landscaping at the site. Assign responsibilities and frequency of execution in accordance with the maintenance schedule.
- **Regulation of Uses:** The city can use the development of the park as an opportunity to create use policies for this and other parks as a way to complement and inform the cleanup, maintenance and safety plans. Coordinate these policies with police presence and enforcement.
- **Initiate police foot patrols** throughout Mill Hill Park and the new park, in particular to enforce against quality-of-life crimes and limit illegal activity when the parks are not open. Coordinate city, county and state police presence.
- **Include the park site in subsequent plans and capital projects.** For example, future transportation improvements around the area should consider traffic-calming measures, and future development projects should take advantage of the park as an amenity, which in turn will create more “eyes” on the park and more users.
- **Establish a working group to partner with NJDOT and Mercer County to advance the S. Broad Street Bridge reconstruction.** This critical project will improve the appearance, accessibility and safety of the park and support additional downtown redevelopment. A short-term goal of this project could be replacing the chain-link fence on the bridge with a decorative fence.
- **Create a new crosswalk at Assunpink Drive to allow pedestrians to get from Mill Hill Park to the new park** and install pedestrian signage, blinking lights or other measures to make both S. Broad Street crosswalks safer for pedestrians.
- **Continue discussions with Veolia** about eventual relocation of their pipes that currently cross the Assunpink.
- **Ensure that the final lighting plan is adequate** from both safety and aesthetic standpoints.
- **Explore the need to maintain the highway guardrail on Assunpink Drive.** If it must remain, consider alternatives such as bollards that will provide the same benefit but will be aesthetically more appealing and will allow pedestrian access into the park.
- **Design the riffles in the newly daylighted creek to allow passage of kayaks and canoes.**
- **Begin conversations with the state about alternative parking arrangements** that will allow the Lafayette Street Plaza once again to be a pedestrian and passive recreation amenity.
- **Develop a historic interpretation plan** for the site that links with the plans for Mill Hill Park. The plan may include physical improvements and signage. Ideally, it will be incorporated into the current landscape plan.
- **Consider partnerships** between the city and community and business groups as a way to leverage different funding sources in order to develop the site further.