

December 5, 2023

The Honorable Phil Murphy  
Governor of New Jersey  
Office of the Governor

Dear Governor Murphy,

As the nation's most densely populated state, New Jersey packs more people per square mile than anywhere else. The state's most vibrant cities and towns include compact, walkable downtowns and active streetscapes – complemented by accessible, green parks and trails for recreation, a respite from urban life, and healthy, carbon-free travel.

The Murphy administration has established a remarkable legacy of urban parks and trails, including world-class plans for Liberty State Park and the Essex-Hudson Greenway. It can build on these new jewels of the state park-and-trail system by supporting more neighborhood playgrounds, pocket parks, and trails in all communities, especially those where residents have been marginalized, experience environmental injustices, and lack access to green space.

New Jerseyans enthusiastically support and want more parks and trails. Since 1974, the NJ Trails Program has helped to facilitate a network of trails to provide outdoor recreation and active transportation opportunities that connect residents to nature, to each other, and to the places where they live, work, play, and go to school. The public input process for the new draft Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) included over 15,000 survey responses that identified hiking, walking, and gathering as top priorities, and the most important outdoor amenities to be trails, sitting areas, picnic areas, and playgrounds. Residents in focus groups mentioned several barriers to full participation in outdoor recreation. Among the most noted were limited transportation options, whereby participants could only comfortably travel to a few outdoor spaces.

The SCORP calls for a well-connected trail network that equitably connects New Jerseyans to all the parks and outdoor amenities the state offers. The Circuit Trail network in southwestern New Jersey and the greater Philadelphia region offers a model for a statewide network of multi-use trails that connects urban, suburban, and rural communities and keystone parks like the Essex Hudson Greenway, Liberty State Park, and canal towpaths.

The timing could not be more auspicious. Enhanced federal funding offers new opportunities for constructing the parks and trails residents desire. Unfortunately, many communities, especially under-resourced communities, lack the capacity to envision new parks and trails and conduct the planning and feasibility studies needed to prepare funding applications, which excludes them from applying for funding in the first place. It also means that New Jersey may leave

federal funds on the table. For its part, the NJ Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) needs more staff capacity to help local governments with the project application process.

As New Jersey works to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector, it must leverage federal funding opportunities to invest in the mixed-use trail network and trail connectors so people can get to and from their destinations without needing a car.

New Jersey can realize its vision for parks and recreational trails with modest but strategic investments to build capacity and jumpstart local park and trail projects. Given the Murphy administration's commitment to environmental justice, a safe climate future, and vibrant, healthy communities, we ask that you pledge to make safe, accessible green spaces and connecting recreational trails a reality for all of the state's residents.

We, the undersigned, call on the state of New Jersey to:

**Expand staffing and capacity at DEP to advance the state's network of trails to provide outdoor recreation and active transportation opportunities that connect residents to nature, to each other, and to the places where they live, work, play, and go to school.** The program has only one full-time staff member who must focus on trails within state parks. The Department needs a complementary full-time staff person to address the planning and coordination of trail development to parks and other destinations. This role is essential to help local governments envision trail projects and navigate the process of applying for funding.

**Provide \$10 million in new funding for trail planning and design at the DEP.** Increased funding will enable the DEP to support local governments, especially in underserved communities, to build out the state's trail network and access and leverage federal funding. The monies would support grants to local governments to envision, plan, and design trail projects and apply for funds. They might also provide small matching grants for construction and ongoing maintenance in underserved communities.

**Provide \$10 million in new funding for neighborhood park planning and design through the Green Acres program.** The monies would support grants to local governments, especially in underserved communities, to envision, plan, and design park projects and apply for funds. Funds might also provide small matching grants for construction and ongoing maintenance in underserved communities.

Now, more than ever, New Jersey needs to meet the wants and needs of its residents for the neighborhood parks and trails that provide equitable mobility. A modest investment will deliver multiple benefits to neighborhoods, communities, and the state as a whole. Therefore, we're counting on you to see the importance of well-connected parks and trail networks and support initiatives that improve and prioritize their development throughout New Jersey.

These changes will help ensure that all New Jerseyans have access to neighborhood parks and trail networks. If you have any questions, please contact Chris Sturm, Policy Director, Land Use ([csturm@njfuture.org](mailto:csturm@njfuture.org)).

Sincerely,

Tim Dillingham, American Littoral Society  
Jennifer Coffey, Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions  
Caitlyn Handlin, Appalachian Mountain Club  
John Boyle, Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia  
Ayla Schermer, Bike Jersey City  
Paul Mickiewicz, Bike and Walk Montclair  
Courtenay Mercer, Downtown New Jersey  
Daniel Paschall, East Coast Greenway Alliance  
Shereyl Snider, East Trenton Collaborative  
Doug O'Malley, Environment New Jersey  
Fred Akers, Great Egg Harbor Watershed Association  
Captain Bill Sheehan, Hackensack Riverkeeper  
Emmanuelle Morgen, Hudson County Complete Streets  
Laura Fenster Rothschild, Isles  
Heather Fenyk, Lower Raritan Watershed Partnership  
Debra Kagan, New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition  
Tom Gilbert, New Jersey Conservation Foundation  
Chris Sturm, New Jersey Future  
Elliot Ruga, New Jersey Highlands Coalition  
Ed Potosnak, New Jersey League of Conservation Voters  
Tenisha Malcolm, New Jersey Urban Mayors Association  
Jim Hunt, New Jersey Vision Zero Alliance  
Marissa Davis, New Jersey YMCA State Alliance  
Michael Shannon, Northern New Jersey Community Foundation  
Carleton Montgomery, Pinelands Preservation Alliance  
Anya Saretzky, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy  
Zoe Baldwin, Regional Plan Association  
Walter Lane, Somerset County Office of Planning, Policy and Economic Development  
Eric Olsen, The Nature Conservancy New Jersey  
Michael Pisauro, The Watershed Institute  
Kathleen Dieal, Trenton Cycling Revolution  
Helen Dudar, Trenton Cycling Revolution  
Corey Hannigan, Tri-State Transportation Campaign  
Justin Dennis, Trust for Public Land  
Stephen Dunn, Union County Connects  
Anne Clifton, West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance  
Silvia Ascarelli  
Lawrence Kleinz  
Andrew Kricun  
Matthew Lawson  
Jacqueline Romney

CC:

Commissioner Shawn LaTourette, NJ Department of Environmental Protection

Assistant Commissioner Elizabeth Dragon, NJ Department of Environmental Protection

Dennis Zeveloff, Chief Policy Officer, Office of the Governor

Preethy Thangaraj, Policy Advisor, Office of the Governor