

## Recommendations for the Recreation and Open Space Element of the County Comprehensive Plan

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### Introduction and Context

The County plays an important role in open space protection. Open space protects important wildlife habitat, provides opportunities for physical activity and recreation, increases property values, provides clean water for drinking and for streams and bays, and allows connection of people with the natural world so that they may understand it and appreciate its services. Protection of natural habitats as high-quality open space in the Inland Bays watershed has slowed since 2003 and nearly plateaued due to reductions in State investment and focus of conservation organizations in other areas of the County and State. The latter helps to protect the most acreage of high quality natural lands and endangered species due to cost effective investments in areas with lower population densities and property values. However, this focuses open space away from population centers that might be most likely to derive recreational value from it, such as in the Inland Bays watershed. Thirty to forty percent of existing protected natural lands in the County is predicted to be inundated by sea level rise by the end of the century. As protected natural lands succumb to sea level rise and the County's population increases, a significant effort to preserve additional lands close that include lands close to population centers will be needed to sustain the existing level benefit of open space to residents of the County.

### Strategy Recommendations

*Objectives 3.1.1. Increase the County role in parks, recreation, and open space planning in Sussex County and Objective 3.1.2. Continue support of and increase coordination with the State and other entities to identify opportunities to increase public recreation lands and facilities in Sussex County.*

1. Continue and expand partnership with the Center for the Inland Bays and additional conservation organizations to manage preserves.
2. Create a Conservation and Recreation Planner position within County Offices to secure additional properties and expand partnerships and funding.
3. Create County-level financing mechanism and interest-bearing fund for open space preservation and management to leverage state and federal dollars (examples: impact fees, additional property tax, real estate transfer tax).

*Objective 3.1.4. Maintain and improve public access to parks and recreation facilities, including coastal areas and inland waterways.*

1. Recognize the Inland Bays, their tributaries and other waterbodies as open space areas of primary importance.
2. Partner with the Center for the Inland Bays, DNREC, and ecotourism businesses to produce a water access assessment and improvement plan for low-impact recreation including a water trail system.

*Objective 3.2.1 Encourage the preservation of open space parcels*

1. Prioritize for protection both large high-quality natural areas and small natural areas dispersed through the County.