The Parks Master Plan 2011

Executive Summary

THE PARK CITY

Bridgeport, Connecticut

THE FUTURE OF *THE PARK CITY*

What will the Park System look like for the next generation in Bridgeport?

*"Perhaps most importantly, Bridgeport should return to its heritage as **The Park City**."*

- Master Plan of Conservation & Development

As Connecticut's largest city with a growing population, Bridgeport's park system

will play a critical role in the future health of the City's ecosystem, economy, and community. More than just the sum of its forty-five parks, the plan for Bridgeport's park system represents a comprehensive understanding of the importance of green, healthy open spaces to the community and to city-wide revitalization.

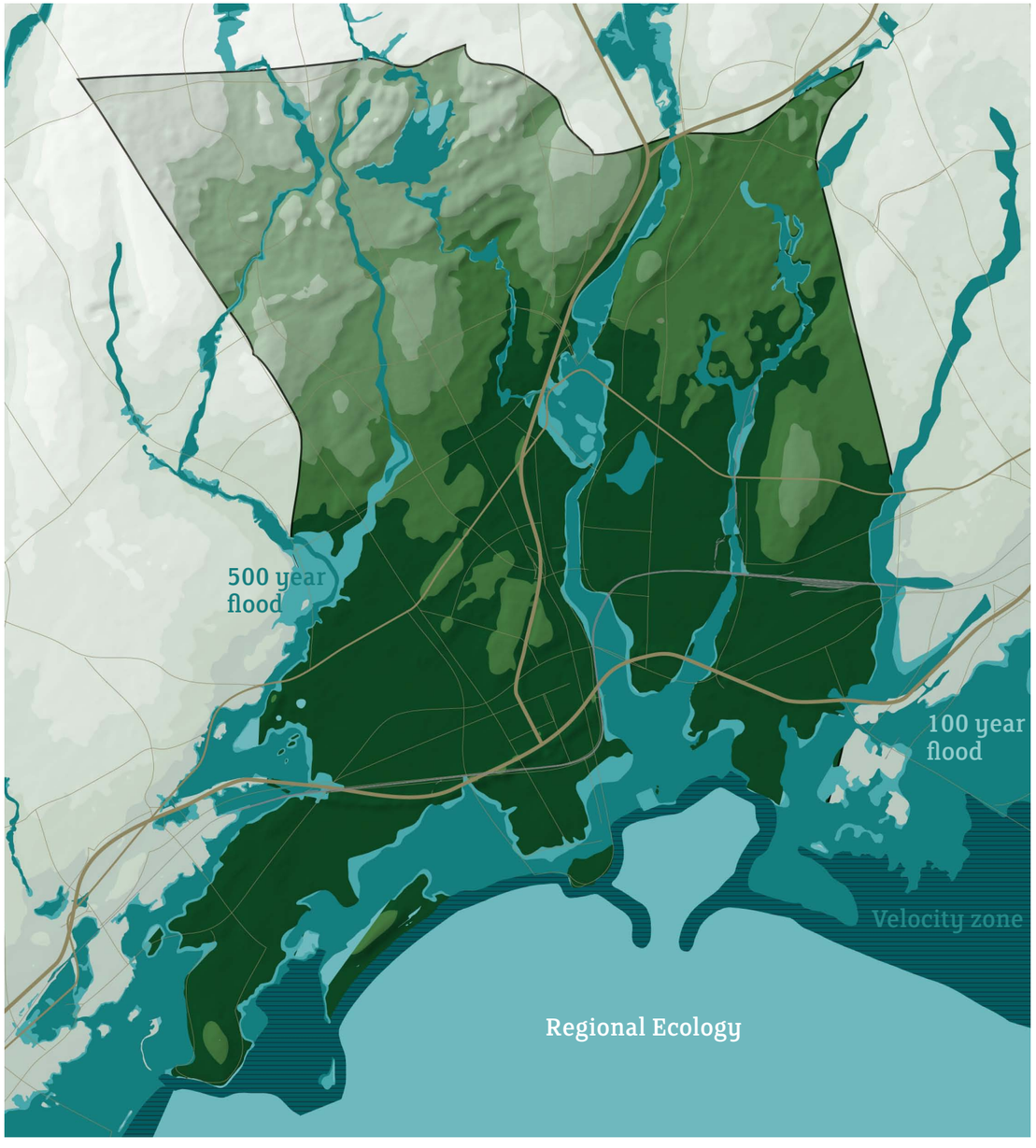
Above and Right:
Seaside Park hosts many well attended activities, from large events to daily use at the skatepark. Other high-quality parks throughout the city will help increase residents' quality of life.

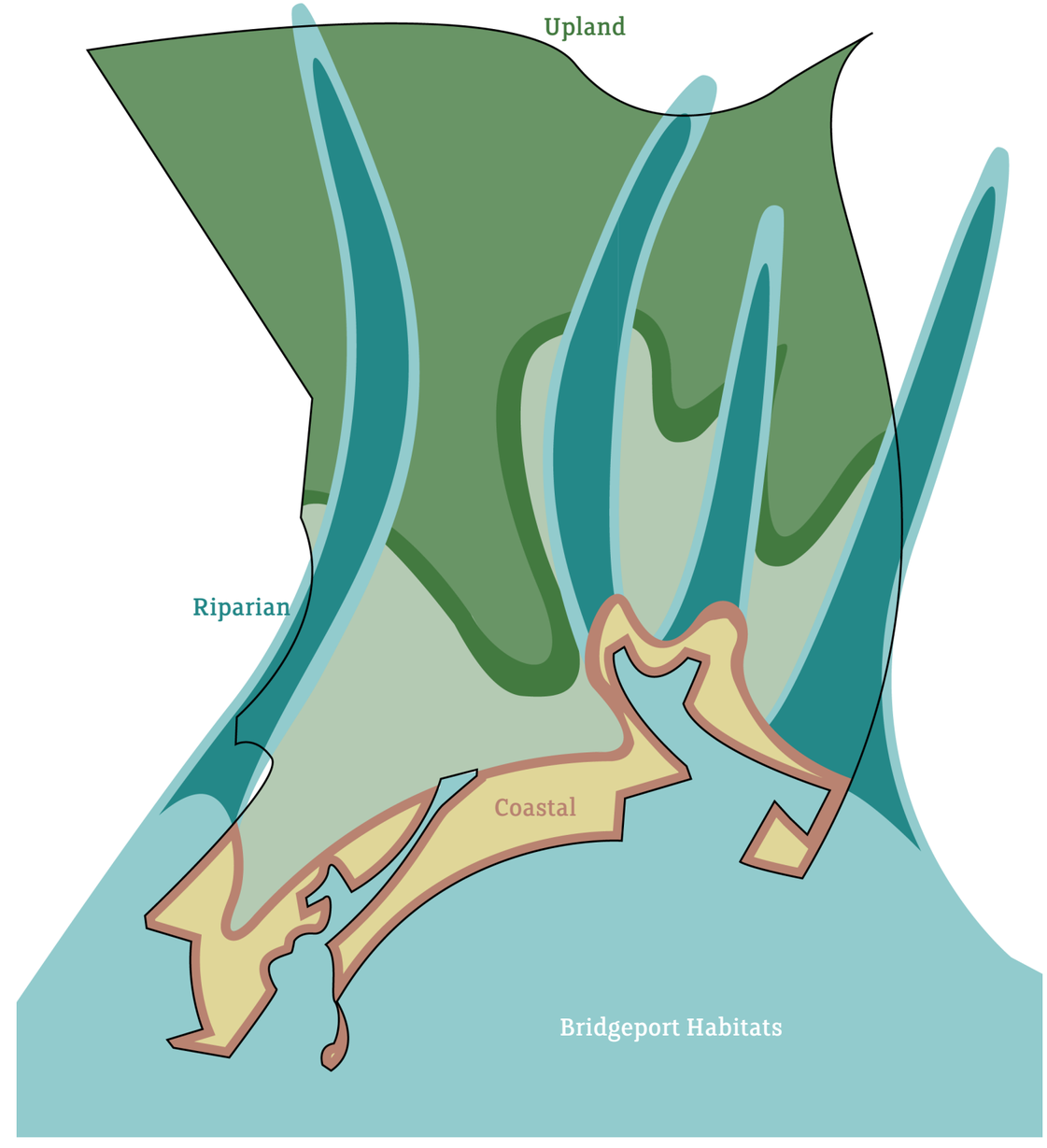
"Diverse waterfronts provide a new legacy for Bridgeport: an interconnected network that sustains the Park City tradition..."

The vision for the Bridgeport Parks System creates a vehicle for engaging citizens and new partners in the parks, revitalizing the City and the region, and reconnecting to the city's vast, but often hidden, waterfront. It achieves the key goals of the community: to enhance its existing parks, expand the system through creation of new parks, and provide better connections between parks and people.

Bridgeport's expansive waterfront includes the beloved, well-used Long Island Sound, the centrally located Pequonnock River, and future restoration of the Yellow Mill Creek, and Rooster River. These diverse waterfronts provide a new legacy for Bridgeport: an interconnected network that sustains the Park City tradition set by Frederick Law Olmsted at Beardsley and Seaside Parks, while endowing future generations with healthier ecological, social, and economic environments in their own neighborhoods. Most importantly, the plan seeks to ensure all citizens and visitors have easy access to the parks, through a new system of "hyper parks" and investment in the streets and pedestrian environment that connect people to parks. A high-quality Parks System will help to increase residents' quality of life, attract and retain the next-generation workforce, and encourage residential and business reinvestment as Bridgeport builds toward a future with a revitalized downtown, thriving neighborhoods, and parks that are accessible to all.

With over forty-five parks in the system, including two iconic Olmsted landscapes and dozens of neighborhood parks, the Plan celebrates unique places ranging from beachfront gathering spaces for hosting festivals and events to walkable playgrounds for the daily enjoyment by families in the East Side. Building on the path set out by BGreen 2020, Bridgeport's recent sustainability plan, the master plan envisions improved access to waterfront park resources and highly-programmed hyper-parks that will serve the City's highest need neighborhoods with diverse recreational options.





Bridgeport's Ecology
Bridgeport's parks are part of an ecological system and are defined within three distinct habitat zones. The Parks Master Plan seeks to restore the connection between urban parks and the City's rich natural environment.

Land Characteristics:
Physiography: Coastal plain along the Long Island Sound

Geology: Glacial till deposits

Soils: Disturbed urban soils, with some native soils inland

Water Characteristics:
Watershed: Southwest coast drainage basin

Ecological Region: Southern New England Coastal Lowland.

Upland Habitats:
Includes urban forest, urban shrub/scrub, and urban grassland.
Issues include runoff, pollution, nutrients, sediment, fragmented habitat, habitat loss, lost species diversity.

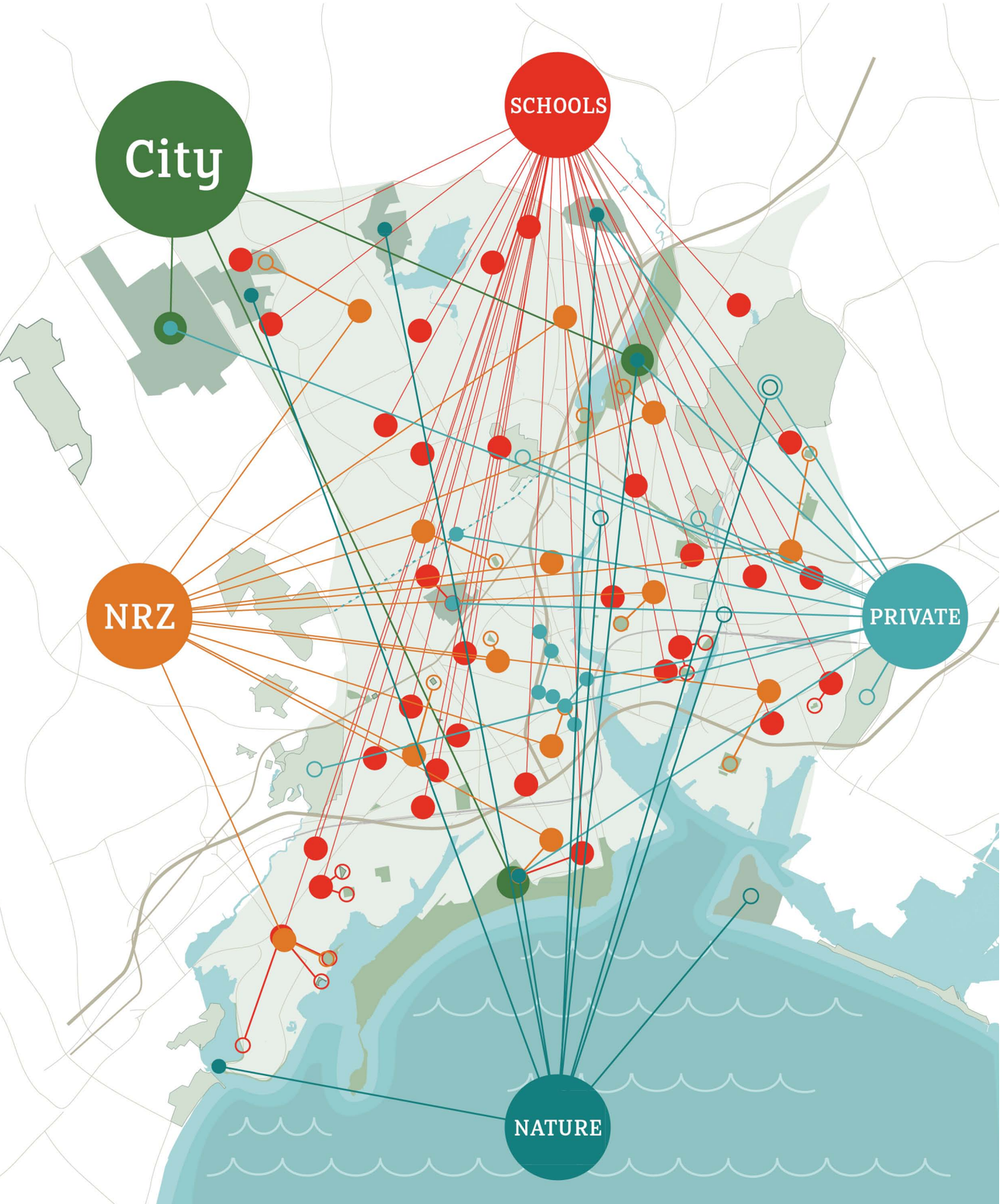
Riparian Corridors:
Defends against runoff, erosion, flooding, and filter pollutants.
Provides habitat and corridors for wildlife, shade for waters and scenic value and recreational opportunities for people.

Coastal Habitat:
Tidal marsh, beaches and dunes are key for 45% of endangered species.
Provides habitat, shoreline stabilization, food storage and natural filltration and dampens storm surges.

SHARED RESOURCES & RESPONSIBILITIES

We need everyone's help to keep the parks safe, clean, active, and living up to the Park City legacy.

"A deep and abiding belief that the new urban dweller, recently transplanted from the countryside, had a need and right to public parks."
-Mayor Bill Finch



Successful implementation of the parks plan will be the result of collaboration of many partners.

The Plan is based on the philosophy that the park system belongs to the Bridgeport public, and that it requires ongoing commitment and investment from residents and private partners in order to endure. Planning, developing, and maintaining an extensive park system like Bridgeport's is an enormous task, particularly in today's economic climate of shrinking funding and budget austerity. Successful implementation of the parks plan will be the result of collaboration of many partners. Although the list will grow over time, critical partners have already been identified and include the City of Bridgeport staff and leaders, Bridgeport residents, neighborhood groups and Bridgeport's Neighborhood Revitalization Zones (NRZs), business leaders, non-profits and cultural organizations (such as the Trust for Public Land and the Bridgeport Arts + Cultural Council), and the Bridgeport Board of Education.

Each partner will be a steward of a different park or park type, helping to ensure that the park system is well-cared for and benefits from the vision and hard work of its many users and supporters. For example, the City will remain as the main steward of the major city and regional parks: Beardsley, Seaside and Fairchild Wheeler. They will continue to protect the Olmsted Parks legacy in Bridgeport, and think creatively about seeking future revenue-generating opportunities in the parks, through vendors, activities, or partnerships. Neighborhood groups and the NRZs will gain new responsibilities for the smaller parks within their geographic neighborhoods. Each group will "adopt" a neighborhood park, and be responsible for contributing 'sweat equity', regular improvements, daily care, and general stewardship of that park.

Future Partners in the Parks:
A critical first step in implementation of the parks master plan is developing partnerships with the many groups who will help care for the parks in the future, including the Board of Education, neighborhood groups, private businesses and nature conservancies.

Engaging the Bridgeport Community in the Master Plan

Below:
The planning process employed many tools for the community to provide feedback on the plan, including community forums and public outreach in the parks.

To gather support and input for the plan, and build a partnership base for future implementation, the City of Bridgeport led a diverse public outreach strategy as part of the parks plan. Public outreach was structured to ensure that the community not only contributed their voices to the planning process in order to shape the plan, but also found new ways to participate in the future maintenance and continuing implementation of the parks vision. To engage the broadest range of constituents outreach included traditional public meetings, but also reached beyond that format with an online survey, stakeholder interviews, in-park user interviews, and a charette with Seaside day-campers.

The project was launched in April 2011, with initial outreach that included focused stakeholder interviews, and a presentation to the Board of Park Commissioners. In late June, the City and stakeholders collectively reviewed the parks and recreation inventory of existing conditions and needs assessment.

An online survey was available openly throughout the process and distributed in hard copy to neighborhood groups and through City Hall. Hundreds of park users replied to the survey and used its interactive mapping tool to answer questions about park priorities, helping to shape the initial direction of the plan. From this survey, park users revealed that family-friendly parks and amenities, such as playgrounds, splash pads, picnic shelters, and swimming facilities are the most desired park improvements.

Above:
Community voices were heard at two public forums.

Top:
Children contribute to the planning process during a summer camp at Seaside Park.

The survey also showed that users understand the value of the City's unique, large park assets, voting that the top three parks for focused improvements are Seaside, Pleasure Beach, and Veteran's Memorial Park. However, it also revealed that visibility and marketing of parks and recreation programs is an area that needs improvement: a little more than half of households who completed the survey have not participated in Bridgeport recreation programs or events in the last 12 months.

Building off the survey feedback, Parks Master Plan Public Forums were held in the summer (August 10, 2011) and again in the fall (October 12, 2011). During the August meeting, over eighty members of the public gathered at Cesar Batalla School to discuss their vision for the plan and give feedback on three concepts for the parks master plan framework: 1) Connect; 2) Expand; and 3) Enhance. In October, a second public forum was held at Waltersville School to reveal and discuss the preferred master plan and implementation strategy for the future. The many participants who gave feedback on the City's parks and recreation needs have helped shape the comprehensive Parks Master Plan that will direct reinvestment in the park system for years to come.

MEET TODAY'S NEED & PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

What are the priorities of the community today?

"Sustainability strategies will transform the City's image from a rust-belt city with a post-industrial legacy to a clean, green community with a high quality of life."

– BGreen 2020: A Sustainability Plan for Bridgeport, Connecticut

Physically Connected
Envision Bridgeport's parks as part of a connected green infrastructure system throughout the city that keeps people and the environment healthy.

Connect Bridgeport's signature regional parks to its neighbors.

Ecologically diverse
Celebrate the range of open space types in Bridgeport's system.

Through environmental restoration, bring brownfields, vacant lots, and neglected lands into the open space system.

Accessible to All
Offer more diverse programming.

Improve communications and ensure parks are highly visible.

Economically Viable
Support growing population trends with new parks to serve needs.

Create value for future development.

Bridgeport's Parks Master Plan is a blueprint to guide decisions about investments in park improvements and development and recreation programs over the next 15 years, and beyond. The plan's goals include ensuring that the park system leads the way to the future with goals to be physically connected, ecologically diverse, accessible to all, and economically viable.

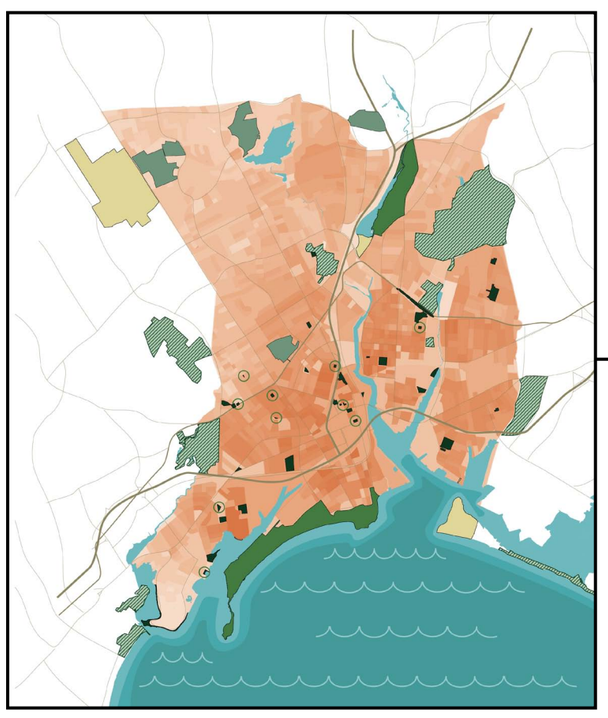
While these are long-term goals, they are balanced against an understanding that the master plan must also chart a path to meet the community's immediate needs today. A needs assessment of the City of Bridgeport's existing park system and recreation programs showed that there are existing deficits in many park amenities and recreation programs. The Bridgeport parks system was evaluated against national standards, peers, and model cities for overall system size, provision of different sports and play amenities, and park operations such as staffing and funding. The park system was organized into park types by scale or specialization: regional, community, neighborhood, mini, and special use. In terms of the overall system, accessibility and well-programmed neighborhood parks are the highest needs throughout the City. With Beardsley, Seaside, and Fairchild Wheeler as large, community wide assets, the City is well-served at the regional and community park scale. The focus of the plan is providing walkable neighborhood parks with family-friendly play activities and durable fields and courts. The most needed amenities were established to be playgrounds (with a need for over fifty more playgrounds) followed by tennis courts, and basketball courts.

The quantity of park and amenities is only part of the story around park need. The needs assessment was also supported by a demographic analysis of Bridgeport's population that combined access to a car, population density, income, and diversity. Using this metric, the plan identified a central belt of high need running east-west across the center of Bridgeport extending from either side of downtown. Addressing the open space and recreation needs in this high need area is a priority of the master plan.

Diverse Park Types
Bridgeport's park system benefits from a range of park types, from large regional parks like Seaside and Beardsley to local neighborhood playgrounds.

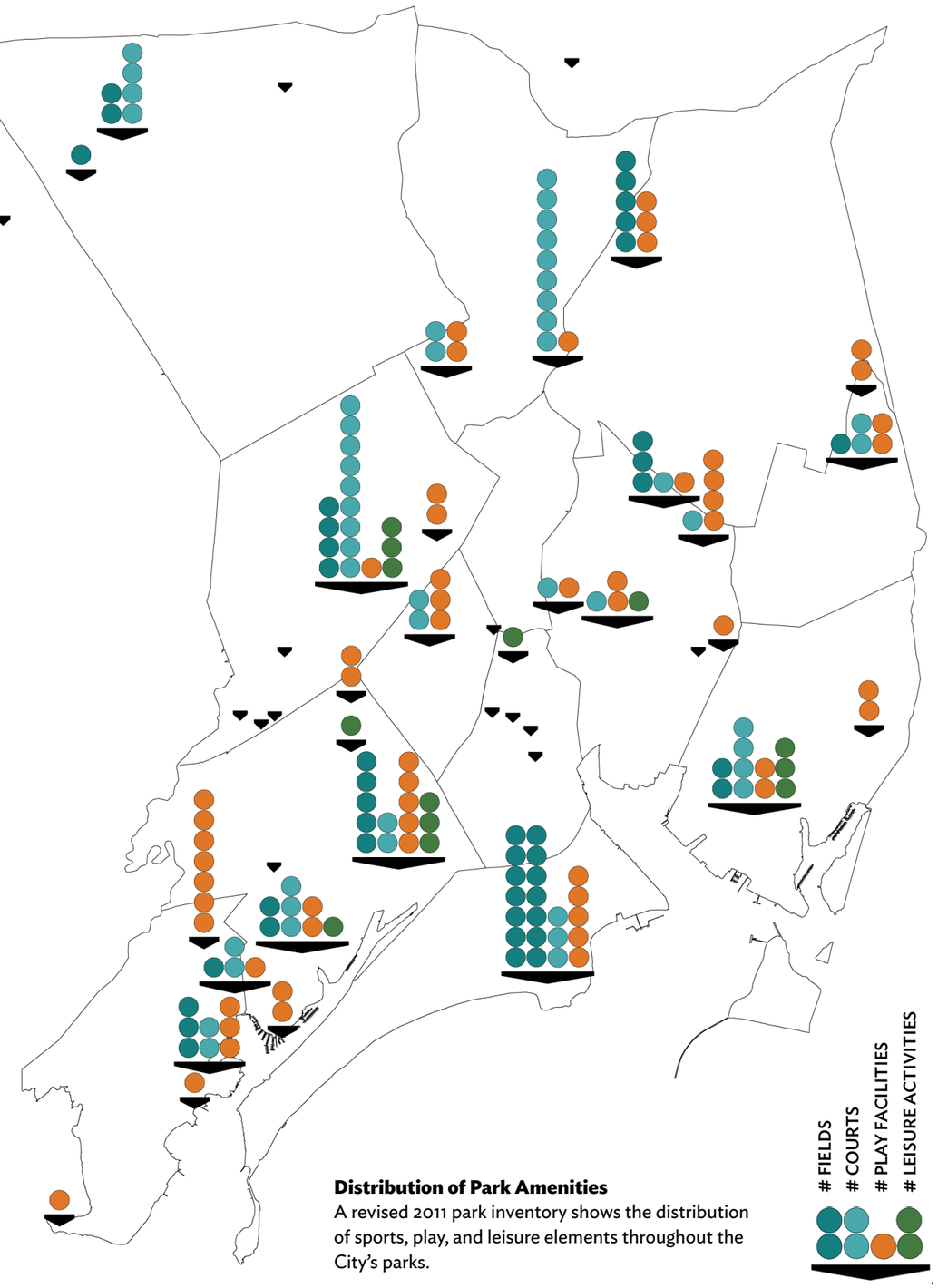
Park System
1,346 acres
45+ parks

- REGIONAL PARKS
- COMMUNITY PARKS
- NEIGHBORHOOD PARKS
- MINI PARKS
- SPECIAL USE



City-wide Park Need
Neighborhood need analysis combined car access, population density, income and diversity to show a high need belt through the center of the City

- HIGH NEED
- LOW NEED



Distribution of Park Amenities
A revised 2011 park inventory shows the distribution of sports, play, and leisure elements throughout the City's parks.

THE MASTER PLAN

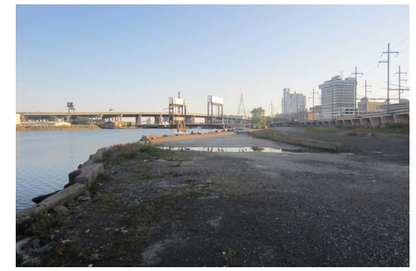
Bridgeport's parks will become the green infrastructure of the city.

"Cleaning this land isn't only necessary for economic development, but also to achieve healthy neighborhoods."

– BGreen 2020: A Sustainability Plan for Bridgeport, Connecticut

The Parks Master Plan envisions new connections to Bridgeport's waterfronts – with continuous public access along the Pequonnock River and restoration of the Yellow Mill Creek corridor.

Above:
The *Sliver by the River* site provides a potential future location for individuals and families to relax downtown and access the waterfront.



Left:
Sliver by the River today

Right:
A new downtown park, at night.

These waterfronts will draw people and investment to the downtown and east side neighborhoods, and provide recreation that benefit the entire city. They will be complemented by investment in durable, high-quality amenities in neighborhood parks. Together, Bridgeport's parks will become the green infrastructure of the city, supporting the ecological, social, and economic health of the City. The following section highlights some of the priority projects that will be transformative for the community, including a new park at "Sliver by the River, restoration of the Yellow Mill Creek, designation of five "hyper parks," and improved signage and wayfinding within and between parks.

Physically Connected

Bridgeport's parks will be part of a connected open space system of parks, streets, regional trails, and linear waterfronts. In the future, Bridgeport's significant waterfronts will become an even more important part of the park system, as a public access trail along the Pequonnock continues to take shape and a new partnership initiative is explored to restore ecological health and public access to the east side's Yellow Mill Creek. Knowlton Park will open soon on the east side of the Pequonnock River, and the master plan has also identified a new downtown waterfront park location at the *"Sliver by the River"* site. A public park at this critical site north of the intermodal station will offer new gathering spaces for large concerts or summer movies, a launch site for kayakers, and play facilities – all within blocks of downtown.

Bridgeport's local parks will be linked to regional open space resources along transportation corridors. Completion of a final link on the Housatonic Railway Trail system will connect many Bridgeport assets via a multi-use trail that spans fifteen miles and connects Bridgeport, Trumbull, and Monroe. The Water Street dock at the mouth of the Pequonnock River, Glenwood Park, Beardsley, and Fairchild Memorial Park will all be connected along this trail.

Future "complete streets" throughout Bridgeport will also help improve walking or biking environments between parks and park users. Complete streets are roads that are designed or retro-fitted to enable safe travel for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and public transport users. Increasingly, street design also includes green infrastructure elements, such as bioswales, that treat water on site and promote environmental sustainability and awareness.

In Bridgeport, Park Avenue and Lincoln Avenue are envisioned as future complete streets, and each will serve to connect park assets. Park Avenue will ultimately connect major, regional and community parks on the west side of Bridgeport, linking Seaside Park to Fairchild Wheeler Golf Course, Veteran's Memorial Park, and Puglio Park. Although it spans a shorter distance, Lincoln Avenue's complete street project will improve neighborhood access to Kennedy Stadium and Leroy Brown Jr. "BJ" Memorial Park.

Ecologically Diverse

Bridgeport's parks are part of a connected green infrastructure system, and will play an important role in improving the ecological health and diversity of the City over the next decades. Current and on-going restoration projects at Pleasure Beach Park and St. Mary's by the Sea demonstrate the city's commitment to protecting key habitat areas, while also providing public access to their natural resources. Re-naturalization of the edges of large parks such as Beardsley will support increased environmental health, while serving the dual purpose of minimizing maintenance over time for Parks staff. Additionally, continuation of a city-wide tree planting program will reinforce the tree canopy that provides critical shade and micro-climate along the streets.

Through concerted partnership efforts, restoration of the Yellow Mill Creek Corridor will be a transformative project for high need neighborhoods on the east side, providing rehabilitated riparian corridors that improve wildlife habitat, water quality, and increase biodiversity. Public access paths are incorporated into the design vision to ensure this future park asset can be accessed and enjoyed by the community. Restoration of the Yellow Mill Creek can also generate social benefits and contribute to re-development of the East Side corridor by improving amenity and views, and opening up space for recreation.

Top: A future vision for a restored Yellow Mill Creek, with public access paths and new open spaces.

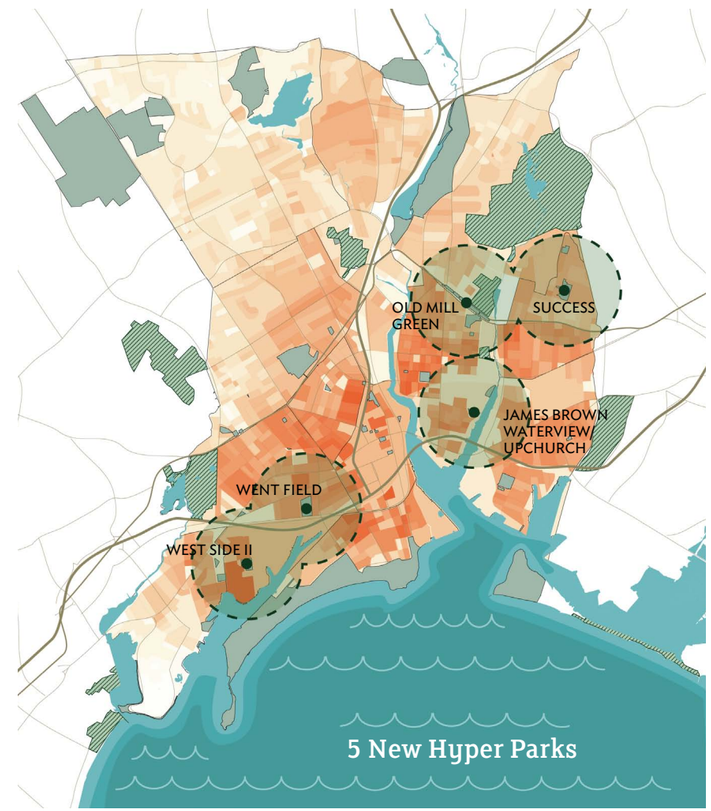
Bottom: Yellow Mill Creek, today.

Accessible to All

The Bridgeport Parks Master Plan will offer more diverse programs and services to all, improve communications and visibility of the parks system, and focus service improvements on the central high need neighborhoods of the city through creation of five *"hyper-parks"* that are strategically located. Design of the hyper-parks includes concentrating play and sports opportunities for families and selecting highly durable materials that anticipate high use and minimize maintenance. The strategy for these five parks includes expanded amenities at Success Park, West Side II, and Went Field, and new designs for Old Mill Green and a combined Upchurch Park and James Brown Waterview Park.

The hyper-parks help Bridgeport close the gap between amenities that are provided in existing parks, and the high demand that was demonstrated through the parks survey and needs assessment. The plan allocates new amenities - particularly high-demand court sports, splash pads, sports fields - within Bridgeport's parks by considering a combination of neighborhood need, the existing distribution of amenities across the city, and the physical potential of each park to accommodate more intense use. The five "hyper-parks" in the core need belt of the City will help address geographic inequalities throughout the system. Efforts were made to focus amenities in these parks across the center of the city so that highly programmed spaces are centrally accessible, and amenities are concentrated in order to help minimize maintenance logistics. Beyond the five hyper-parks, additional amenities are recommended for each of the City's other parks, as appropriate, in order to serve individual neighborhood needs.

To ensure the community can take advantage of existing and future park resources, it is important to increase the visibility of parks within the community through improved website legibility, marketing, clarity and availability of parks and amenities maps, publications, and signage and way-finding throughout the park system. The survey showed that many community members are not aware of the parks and recreation resources that the City already offers. An improved website with a clear hierarchy of information and a comprehensive, printed recreation programming guide will help better communicate the Parks Department's offerings to the community.



McLevy Green provides a scenic setting for the City Trust Building, demonstrating that parks add value to downtown development.

Economically Viable

A renewed Bridgeport parks system will also be a critical contributor to the City's economic health, and efforts should be made to minimize maintenance costs, increase revenue and vendor opportunities, and create private partnerships so that open space can be integrated into new development to increase value. The City should seek to increase vendor opportunities at Seaside Park and continue operating the Fairchild Wheeler Golf Course.

As has been shown in many other cities, increasing public access and waterfront revitalization is strongly linked to creating value for redevelopment. Restoration of the Pequonnock River and Yellow Mill Creek can be used to help stimulate redevelopment efforts on the east side, linking to strategic sites such as Steel Pointe, the Lake Success Eco-Business Park, or waterfront developments. In Bridgeport's downtown, partnerships with local businesses and downtown arts or cultural groups can create stewardship opportunities for parks like McLevy Green and Baldwin Plaza that are essential to downtown activities and events.

Realizing the Vision

The Park City: Future parks will live up to the legacy set by Olmsted at Beardsley, above.

The Parks Master Plan charts a long-term vision for Bridgeport that will unfold over time. Yet, critical to long-term success is creating early implementation steps that can generate excitement among the community and set the stage for larger projects. Three immediate steps have been identified:

1. Develop and secure partnerships. Begin by developing partnerships with the Board of Education and the existing, established neighborhood groups (NRZs). Clarify the opportunities in each relationship, and define the current and future roles and responsibilities for each party. The City should continue building regional partnerships with the Trust for Public Land, the Fairfield County Community Foundation, and others to begin putting together a multi-partner initiative to restore and redevelop Yellow Mill Creek. The Yellow Mill Creek initiative will be a complex, multi-year effort, but it is important to build on current support and momentum and lay the groundwork now.

2. The East Side has been identified as a high need area for parks, and hyper-parks will be a key element of meeting this need. Early on, the City should identify the site of the first designated hyper-park on the east side and invest in these improvements. Depending on future conversations regarding Route 1/ Boston Avenue, either Old Mill Green or the Upchurch/James Brown Waterview composite park would be a catalytic first step toward providing much needed amenities and investment on the east side.

3. Downtown represents the civic, employment, and activity center of Bridgeport and is an important place to show demonstrated progress. Early progress on a new downtown park at "Sliver by the River" will mark a very public and visible project that links to the ongoing work on access to the Pequonnock River and serves as a gateway for arrival to Bridgeport at the intermodal station. Additionally, a wayfinding & signage study should be undertaken, with first steps to include a downtown signage and wayfinding system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mayor Bill Finch

Charles Carroll, Parks Director & Public Facilities Director

Ted Grabarz, Sustainability Director & Deputy Director of Public Works

Steve Hladun, Project Coordinator

Mike Nidoh, Director of Planning

Board of Parks Commissioners: James Brideau, James Giles, Banjed Labrador, Mark Marko, Frank A. Mercaldi, Ann E. Owens, Rosa Cruz

Andy Valeri, Parks Manager

Luann Conine, Recreation Superintendent

Bill Coleman, Planning & Economic Development

Donald Eversley, Director of Planning and Economic Development

Angie Staltero, Neighborhood/NRZ Coordination

Rick Myers, Downtown Special Services District

Michael Moore, Downtown Special Services District

Paul Timpanelli, Bridgeport Regional Business Council

Brian Bidolli, Greater Bridgeport Regional Business Council

Stuart Sachs, Historic Preservation Commission

Deborah Caviness, Small and Minority Business Resource Office

Tammy Pappa, Lighthouse Program, Office of Education and Youth

City Council: Lydia Martinez, Martin C. McCarthy, Susan Brannelly, Denese Taylor-Moye, Anderson Ayala, Robert S. Walsh, M. Evette Brantley, Howard Austin, Sr., Thomas C. McCarthy, Michelle Lyons, AmyMarie Vizzo-Paniccia, Warren Blunt, Richard Bonney, Angel M. DePara, Jr., Carlos Silva, Manuel Ayala, Richard M. Paoletto, Jr., Robert Curwen, James Holloway, Andre F. Baker

SASAKI