

Chapter 1: Introduction

Study Area Description

The area which is the subject of this Plan document is an irregularly shaped area bounded on the westernmost edge by the Schuylkill River, extending from the border of Conshohocken Borough on the north and the City of Philadelphia on the south. The River frontage is approximately 2.5 miles long at 13,133 feet. The terrain along the River varies from being steep and rugged along the southern portion of the study area, to being almost flat from about Spring Mill toward Conshohocken on the north. The study area (and adjacent municipalities) is shown on Map 1, an aerial photograph (taken in 2005).

The study area includes several Whitemarsh Township parks, including Leeland Park (3 acres on North Lane and Jones Street), Kline Park (over 100 acres adjacent to Joshua Road and Ridge Pike, on former silt basin property), and Cedar Grove Park (25 acres on Cedar Grove Road near Spring Mill Road). In addition, on the southern end of the study area, the Township owns some land in the Miquon area (which can be seen on Map 2). The Township also owns the parcel of ground there known as ‘East 33’, a 32+-acre site, adjacent to the Manatawna Farm, which is owned by the Fairmont Park Commission (and which extends into the City of Philadelphia). East 33, seen as a critical natural area, was acquired by the Township at the end of 2008, fulfilling a recommendation of the 2006 *Whitemarsh Township Open Space Plan*.

A major PECO transmission line and right-of-way traverses the entire study area, generally paralleling the river from the Philadelphia border to Spring Mill, and from there, travelling “cross country” between North Lane and Cedar Grove Road, crossing Butler Pike and continuing out of the Township into Plymouth Township. This area has been identified in prior plans as a location for a footpath. Planning is underway for the first phase of this, from Hector Street to the Plymouth boundary at Butler Pike.

Significant additional private open space lands are also located in the study area. By far the largest such area, is the Ace Country Club (265 acres) situated in the southeastern portion of the study area, bordering Springfield Township, Harts Lane/Barren Hill Road and Ridge Pike. Also, clustered around Manor Road, east of the PECO right-of-way and up to the Springfield Township border, are several parcels which are privately held but protected either by ownership (a Girl Scout parcel) or by restrictive covenant or easement. Ashford Farm, located along the east side of River Road and traversed by the PECO right-of-way, is located north of Harts Lane; this is a facility recommended for preservation (non-acquisition) in the Township’s *Open Space Plan*. In the northeastern portion of the study area, a significant area of private open space is the lake and associated open space at the Sherry Lake apartment complex. Finally, a small privately held junk yard property is located in the Spring Mill area and separates the County’s Spring Mill Park from other County land to the south, between the Schuylkill River Trail and River Road. The Township’s *Open Space Plan* recommends that acquisition of this parcel be pursued in conjunction with Montgomery County.

An area is also shown on Map 2 north of Harts Lane along the river, identified as a “Special Concern Species Area”. That is an area identified in the Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory (PNDI) as a location where there are over 1,000 plants of an endangered sedge.

Map 1: Study Area Aerial

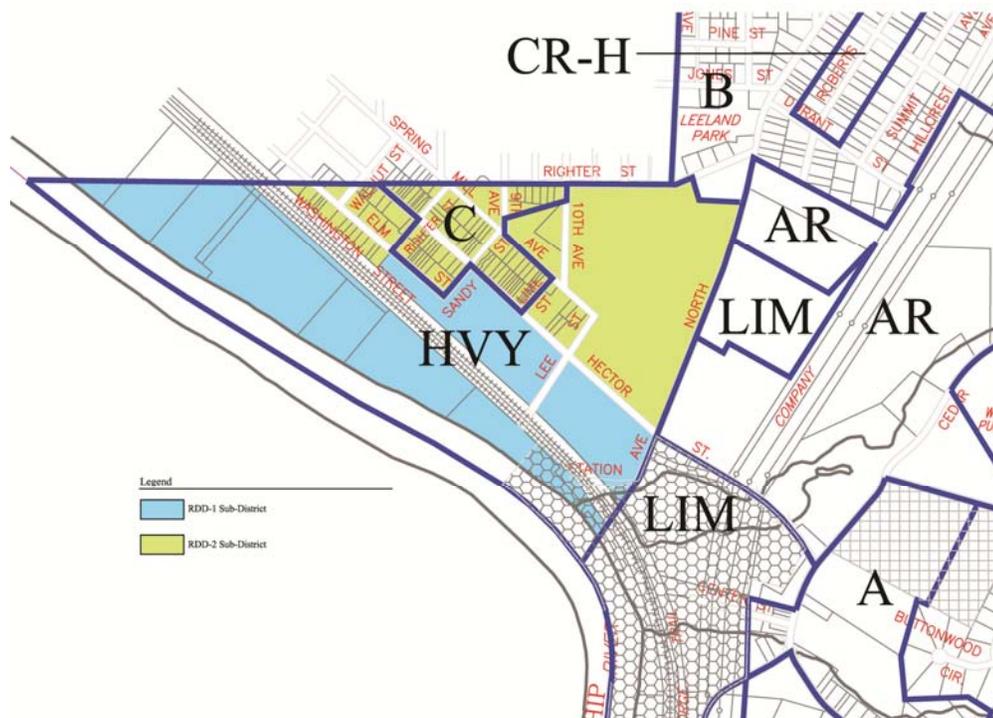
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Most of the riverfront area from Spring Mill down to Miquon is largely undeveloped, due to topographic constraints. In the Miquon area, there is an office campus known as 'River Park' which is a redevelopment of a former paper company facility. The Miquon R6 SEPTA station is also located in this area.

Purpose of This Plan

Much of the riverfront area and area immediately adjacent to it, from Spring Mill to the Conshohocken boundary, is developed industrially, or contains partially utilized or abandoned industrial development. One of the industrial sites is currently occupied by the Whitmarsh Boat Club which actively operates from this location. Some of the sites in this area have been recently proposed for redevelopment either under the fairly new RDD Riverfront Development District (an overlay zoning district) or based on the underlying HVY Heavy Industrial District; no redevelopment has reached the point of final approval or construction, however. The RDD is designed to promote mixed use, intensive development in this area, and to do so in a manner that provides diversity and better exposure and use of the river frontage area. The district requires various public amenities, dependent upon the actual development scheme and intensity proposed. One of the purposes of this Plan is to determine the best amenity mix and preferred locations for various types of amenities. This will allow the Township to provide specific guidance to developers as to the most appropriate amenities to include when individual tracts are proposed for redevelopment under the RDD. (A copy of the RDD text is included in Appendix A of this Plan document. Figure 1 below is a map showing where this district is applied. The RDD is an overlay with two sub-districts; sub-district 1 covers the industrial area immediately adjacent to the River, where the underlying zoning is HVY, heavy industrial.)

Figure 1: Map of Riverfront Development District



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This plan is intended to provide a vision for the entire riverfront area in the Township. The Plan recognizes that a single vision for the entire area is not realistic, in view of the fact that portions of the riverfront have significantly distinct physical characteristics, as described in the previous section. There are, however, two man-made improvements common to the entire riverfront, which have an impact on future uses and development; these are the SEPTA train tracks and the County's Schuylkill River Trail. The R6 SEPTA tracks parallel the river throughout the study area, with two stations, one at Miquon and a much more active one at Spring Mill. The Schuylkill River Trail also parallels the river throughout, though it becomes more remote from the river north of Spring Mill. These two features separate the immediate riverfront area from residential areas on the inland side; the residential development from Spring Mill to Conshohocken is quite dense, while it is quite sparse from Spring Mill to Philadelphia. The improvements which will be recommended in this Plan will respect these physical and developmental differences.



River Road at Philadelphia boundary, southern end of study area



A view of the Schuylkill River from River Road

While this Plan is intended to recommend improvements and amenities for the riverfront, its purpose is not to recommend new land uses along the river. Rather, the recommendations will be made in the context of the existing uses and those uses which may change over time in accordance with the Township's Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance. The improvements and amenities which will be recommended are intended to enhance the anticipated land uses and respect existing physical constraints. Finally, the Plan is also intended to review those trail and open space recommendations made in prior planning documents prepared for the Township (discussed in Chapter 3). This Plan will 'tie together' the recommendations of those various plans, as they relate to the riverfront area.

Throughout the course of developing this Plan, the Planning Commission provided input and direction as the Steering Committee. Input was also provided by the Environmental Advisory Board, the Open Space Board, and the Parks and Recreation Committee. Bruce Horrocks, Township Manager, served as overall project coordinator and Doug Knauss, Director of Parks and Recreation was an on-going staff resource.