

Save the Putnam Trail

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SPT Position on the Putnam Trail Re-Design and Other Major Projects Proposed in the VCP 20-year Master Plan

We are community members of the Save the Putnam Trail volunteer group who want to see nature in Van Cortlandt Park preserved to the maximum extent possible, along the lines of the park's historical roots, purpose in the city's network of parks, and in accordance with environmental priorities set by the city.^{1, 2, 3}

This paper states our position on changes proposed by the VCP 20-year Master Plan. From its start, the park was designed to be kept as natural as possible (with a complement of ball fields, etc.) to differentiate it from the more landscaped and planned parks in the city, e.g. Central Park. The intention was to give residents access to nature, which was considered by Olmstead and others a superior form of recreation and relaxation for busy New Yorkers. The city has a network of parks; each of them with its own ambience, history, and features, to be enjoyed by residents in their leisure time.

In 1987, DEC described the wetlands around the Putnam Trail this way: "This wetland has a diversity of wetland communities seldom equaled in Bronx County and contains habitat types found nowhere else in the Bronx."

In addition, more than 250 species of birds have been documented in the park. Lifelong birder John Young has documented 221 of these. A 2013 Wildflower, Shrub and Tree Bloom List compiled by the Nature Group boasted 170 species in Van Cortlandt Park. Such a variety of flora and fauna is staggering, considering that the park sits in the heart of the Bronx. What makes it possible for the park to support such a diversity of life is the vast expanse of woodlands which are, for the most part, left undeveloped and unlandscaped - woodlands (and wetlands) which are protected and which were designated Forever Wild in 2001, 30 years after the rail line ceased to operate. The four Forever Wild Preserves designations in the park are the lake/brook/marsh, Vault Hill, Northwest Forest and Northeast Forest.

As recently as 2009, the City Council and now-Mayor De Blasio signed Local Law 31, which states that when there are competing land uses, it is in the best interests of the future of the city that wetlands be preserved to the maximum extent possible. This is consistent with the EPA's rules which state that not only major, navigable waterways are protected under law, but also smaller streams, rivers, and wetlands have a sufficiently "significant nexus" to the larger network of watersheds and therefore should be equally

¹ <http://www.nycgovparks.org/greening/nature-preserves> and http://www.nycgovparks.org/pagefiles/50/forever_wild_brochure.pdf: In designating Forever Wild Preserves in 2001 (20 years after the Putnam Rail Line ceased operating), the city said FWP highlighted the city's most valuable natural ecosystems.

² New York State defined "environmentally sensitive areas" as: "...areas of aquifer recharge, exceptional scenic beauty, exceptional forest character, open space, pine barrens, public access, trailways, unique character, wetlands and wildlife habitat..." (see e.g. NYS Environmental Quality Bond Act of 1986).

³ Local Law 31: http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/downloads/pdf/wetlands_strategy.pdf, pp 58-59: "The Council finds that to the maximum extent possible in consideration of competing land uses, preserving the remaining wetlands, creating new wetlands and undertaking action designed to improve the functions of wetlands to the maximum extent possible is in the best interests of the City, and offers a way to respond to the challenges that will be presented by climate change and rising sea levels."

protected and treated according to Best Management Practices of conservation and restoration¹.

Our concern about the Putnam Trail is that changes to the trail will affect the woodland and wetlands areas around it. DPR's design document has spelled the intention to pave and widen the trail without any environmental impact assessment. The 20-Year Master Plan does not mention impermeable asphalt directly, but implies its use or the use of a permeable variation - something referred to as "porous brown asphalt." We strongly oppose any pavement - whether regular asphalt/concrete or porous pavement made of some kind of combination of recycled pavement, shredded tires, and/or synthetic polymer binders. All pavements currently on the market release toxins into the environment and these toxins - including PAHs and substances that alter human hormonal functions - are released into the air and leached into groundwater for the duration of the material's lifecycle (see references 2 through 4 for examples of research available on the subject). The SPT position on the Putnam Trail is this: the widening and paving of the Putnam Trail would be the first of many projects proposed in the Master Plan which would increase noise, heat, pollution and, in addition, take away from the community the access to unpaved, unlandscaped nature that the Putnam and other trails in the park provide.

With three to four Parkways already fragmenting the park, and Broadway, Jerome, and Van Cortlandt Park South not far away, this paving would cause further fragmentation and erosion of parkland in what has been called "the lungs of NYC."

SPT submitted to the Community Board 8 in March 2013, a copy of the letter that NYC Audubon wrote to the administrator of Van Cortlandt Park about proposed Putnam Trail changes - more specifically, the widening and paving aspects of the design. Audubon pointed out that the Putnam Trail offered a unique chance for New Yorkers "to connect with nature," and strongly hinted that this "improvement" would not only impact this experience but would have significant impacts throughout the park.

There is also currently a Tibbetts Brook Bluebelt/Daylighting Plan on the table which would improve the water quality of the brook and lake and prevent sewage from escaping into the Bronx River. This would involve daylighting the brook in Van Cortlandt Park. We believe that paving trails with asphalt or porous asphalt would work against this plan, because both produce high water runoff, and because these projects - costly and invasive in themselves - would discourage the Bluebelt plan from being implemented because it would involve tearing up freshly-poured asphalt paths.

Community Board 8 had been asked by the parks department to approve the Master Plan 10 days before the public comments period ended. We ask that blanket approval not be given for these reasons:

1. The plan prioritizes embellishment projects such as re-landscaping trails over major water restoration plans. The priorities of the plan are inconsistent with best management practices of wetland protection and efficient use of funding. If there are funds, first things first - clean up litter, patrol and enforcement for safety and vandalism prevention, improve the health of the forest without prioritizing artificial landscaping and beautification.
2. Not enough concrete information about plans exists because of vague language, in other words, open to interpretation. On trails, wording is used such as "creating", "building," "improving", or restoring" is a red flag. There is no disclosure as to tree and plant destruction and with that, animal habitat destruction. Notice the absence of the term "widen" in describing trail "improvements", and the absence of width and surface disclosures in describing trail "building". This is consistent with past

misinformation pertaining to the Putnam Trail development plans. For example, NYC Parks still states on its website that only 7 live trees will be removed.

3. It is hard to tell at times from graphics or text, but it seems these places are subject to paving:

- the Putnam Trail which runs through sensitive wetlands
- a path around the lake
- a path to the lake/brook
- a perimeter path
- a revised Moshulu Park Avenue near the stables
- a new east-west park path that cuts through the entire park and which they say will be hard porous pavement
- the John Kieran Trail
- the Ghetty northern bike path
- the northern loop path from Saratoga Avenue to Sawmill Parkway

We believe changes should be to natural surfaces as suggested in the Van Cortlandt Park Woodland Trail Master Plan (NY-NJ Trail Conference).⁴ This way, trails would be ADA-compliant and usable by everyone without causing harm to the soil or wetlands or Forever Wild forests. When opportunities arise, we believe asphalt in natural areas should be removed to preserve the park's environment and character. This includes crumbling asphalt in the Northwest Forest, which has not been maintained for many years.

If DPR is given blanket approval, we strongly believe it will begin a slow gradual but certain decline of the park's unique characteristics, which are its respect and efforts to preserve nature-scapes, wildlife preserves, wetlands for science and education, and recreation for the entire city. We know these lands are important to lessen climate change.

For a more detailed analysis of some areas of greatest concern, please see the following pages.

References

1. New Rule Would Protect Streams and Wetlands.
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2. Hazardous organic chemicals in rubber recycled tire playgrounds and pavers.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0045653512009848?via=ihub&cc=y>. Llompart, et al. www.sciencedirect.com. January 2013. Accessed April 20, 2014.
3. An Assessment of Environmental Toxicity and Potential Contamination from Artificial Turf using Shredded or Crumb Rubber.
http://www.ardeacon.com/pdf/Assessment_Environmental_Toxicity_Report.pdf
Sullivan, Joseph. www.ardeacon.com. March 2006. Accessed April 20, 2014.
4. Artificial Turf: Exposures to Ground Up Rubber Tires - Athletic Fields, Playgrounds, Garden Mulch. Accessed April 20, 2014.
http://www.ehhi.org/reports/turf/health_effects.shtml

⁴ <http://vancortlandt.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/VanCortlandtReport12-1-09.pdf>. Pg. 57: "Trails at any site must uniquely suit the site and the trails users. Trail improvements in this plan are guided by that principle. And, on page 8, " Throughout this document the terms "Accessible Trail", "ADA Trail", and "Universal Access Trail" refer to a trail standard that meets current United States Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG). The FSTAG is used as the typical ADA standard for trails by Federal Agencies as well as most state, local and private land management agencies."

5. Point Pleasant Park, Canada, Oct. 2008. "Chapter 05: Park Development Plan, the overall park plan builds upon the symbolic and well-known nature of the park as a naturalistic forest in the city." Accessed July 15, 2014.
<http://www.pointpleasantpark.ca/site-ppp/media/pointpleasantpark/PPP%20CP%20Chapter%205%20Park%20Development%20Plan%2010-2008%20web.pdf>

Here's a list of some detailed concerns:

On page 61 is a photo of the paved "Proposed park loop path", looking identical to Central Park. The oft-repeated premise that Van Cortlandt Park should not look like Central Park is contradicted by this image. We don't know how many trees and plants would be destroyed in the construction of this many-mile long perimeter trail.

The John Kieran Nature Trail plans (p. 63) are of great concern. The narrow trail is fragile habitat running entirely through Forever Wild wetlands. It has irregular surfaces and tree roots criss-crossing it. It shouldn't be messed with at all. In order to make it ADA compliant, major leveling and widening would be necessary. We completely disagree with the assessment that there is "Lack of attractive landscaping and connection to lake and brook" (p. 62), which corresponds to the lower right picture on p. 63: "Proposed character of path leading to the lake area". As with so many of these trail proposals, we must ask what material and what environmental cost? The John Kieran Trail as it meanders along lake and marsh is very beautiful in its natural state. To elaborate on the fragility of the John Kieran Trail, it provides habitat for hummingbirds and numerous other birds that nest there and should not be disturbed. Snapping turtles live near this trail. Swallowtail butterflies are plentiful in summer. The flora include Spicebush, Sweet Pepperbush, Maple Leaf Viburnum, Pussy Willows, Shadbush, Marsh Marigold, Solomon's Plume, Lady's Thumb, Lizard's Tail, Buttonbush, Joe-Pye, Jewelweed and Arrowhead.

Page 61, Northeast Forest, shows an arrow pointing to a circled area and the text reads: "Protect and expand sensitive bird habitat in the wetland zone." However right above this, the text reads: "New east-west path of hard porous pavement". Later, there's "Relocate entrance to John Muir trail and shift path to traverse wetland on board walk." Then there's a north-south "bike path" running the length of the Northeast Forest. Such trail expansion plans are the opposite of protecting and expanding sensitive bird habitat in this wetland zone, which are part of a Forever Wild Preserve. Token respect for the Forever Wild Preserve designation does not mitigate destruction of natural areas inherent in construction plans.

Page 59, Croton Woods: photo at lower right with caption "New east-west park path", of what material? Again, for what purpose and at what cost to the environment?