

**OTTO PEHLE PARK INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND– Bergen County, New Jersey
Environmental Assessment – January 2, 2024**

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

- a. Briefly describe the total development project

Saddle River County Park – Otto C. Pehle Area Completely Inclusive Playground - This completely inclusive playground is being developed in the Otto C. Pehle Park Area of Saddle River County Park. Saddle River County Park is a 587-acre linear park with eight distinct areas connected by over ten miles of multi-use pathway. The heavily used bike and pedestrian path follows the Saddle River and runs through the municipalities of Ridgewood, Glen Rock, Fair Lawn, Paramus, Saddle Brook, and Rochelle Park. The Otto C. Pehle Area is in the Township of Saddle Brook and contains a lake with a sand beach, a basketball court, a baseball diamond, and an existing playground that has exceeded its useful life.

- b. State objectives of /need for the project.

The Bergen County Department of Parks seeks to construct a new Completely Inclusive Playground in the Otto C. Pehle Area as part of a long-range plan to update all playground facilities in Saddle River County Park as well as in our other parks. The Department has already designed one completely inclusive playground, for Riverside County Park South in the Borough of North Arlington, which is in the final procurement phase.

The Otto C. Pehle Area is in the southern section of Saddle River County Park. Otto C. Pehle Lake is in the center of the area and is surrounded by vegetation and a walking path with a number of benches. To the west of the lake is suburban housing and to the east is the Saddle River. In the northern portion of the Otto C. Pehle Area is the basketball court, baseball diamond, and existing playground. There is sand on one shore of the lake, which functions as a beach area. Two parking areas to the north provide vehicular access.

Bergen County has 952,997 residents and is the most populous in New Jersey, with the most municipalities (seventy) of any county in the State. The county's proximity to New York City continues to draw new residents, with each census seeing an increase in population.

In addition to the high population density, at 3,700 people per square mile, the population of the County continues to diversify. According to the United States Census Bureau (2022), 71.4% of Bergen County residents are White, 22.7% are Hispanic, 17.6% are Asian, 7.8% are Black or African American and 2.4% are Other or Two or More Races. The Hispanic/Latino population had the most growth, increasing by nearly 70% from 146,780 in 2012 to 216,150 in 2022.

The Township of Saddle Brook has been identified by Green Acres as a Highly and Densely Populated municipality; Bergen County is noted as a highly populated county. The Otto C. Pehle Area traverses an OBC Block Group (340030521006) in Saddle Brook which is 40% minority and 16.9% low income.

In a parkland availability analysis, the Bergen County Parks Master Plan (2019) indicated that there are sixteen existing playgrounds in the County Parks system that do not address children with special needs

or limited mobility. The Department of Parks follows American Disabilities Act (ADA) standards that ensure access for all users; however, these standards do not provide an equally rich experience for all user groups.

Based on our demographics and the Department of Parks goals to maintain parks to high standards and invest in infrastructure, the Otto C. Pehle Area Completely Inclusive playground is a well justified endeavor for the County.

c. Fully describe multi-phase projects

Not applicable as the proposed project is not a multi-phased project.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Describe existing environmental features.

a. Vegetation

The site contains a variety of habitats, some of which occur naturally, others that were planted and maintained, and others that are the result of degradation over time. The site is considered recreational land, which consists mostly of maintained lawn and deciduous forest.

b. Wildlife

Resident and migratory bird species are the most common wildlife species on the site.

c. Geology, topography, and soils

The Township of Saddle Brook, and most of central Bergen County, is part of the Piedmont Physiographic Province in Newark basin. It is underlain by bedrock of the Mesozoic age consisting of siltstone, shale, sandstone, pebbly sandstone, and conglomerate. The Otto C. Pehle Area of Saddle River Park is underlain by sandstone of the Passaic Formation. Topography of the area is relatively flat with little change in elevation, excepting the banks of the Saddle River which has eroded a channel into the landscape. The eastern half of the Otto C. Pehle Area contains Udorthents, wet substratum soil (UdwB), while the western half contains Dunellen-Urban land complex (DuuB) soils. Nearby soil types, within Saddle River County Park and surrounding the Otto C. Pehle Area, are DuuC and UdwuB. All of these are sub-classes of the Downer soils typical to northern New Jersey and formed in North Atlantic Coastal Plain.

d. Water resources/hydrology

The Saddle River flows through the northern and eastern edges of the park. The headwaters of the Saddle River originate in New York State, as water runs southward into Bergen County, NJ. The Saddle River cuts through a series of residential neighborhoods, commercial areas, cemeteries, small ponds, and parks.

After the Otto C. Pehle Area, the river feeds into the Passaic River and eventually Newark Bay. Most of the site falls within the 100-year Floodplain/Flood Zones A and AE.

e. Historic/archeological resources

When the Bergen County Parks Commission was established in 1947, they quickly set out to identify property for parkland along waterways with the intent to preserve access for the public, protect against pollution, and mitigate flooding concerns. The Saddle River was one of the first three waterways identified and the first piece of land in Saddle River Township, present day Saddle Brook, was purchased in 1948. Throughout the 1950s projects were undertaken to realign the Saddle River and reclaim swampland for passive recreation along the western bank. Originally called the Saddle Brook area of Saddle River County Park, it was renamed in recognition of Otto C. Pehle in 1977. Pehle served on the Saddle Brook Township Council for 15 years, serving as Mayor for thirteen. He also served on the Parks Commission from 1960 until his death in September of 1980. Over those twenty years, he served eight terms as President of the Commission.

f. Transportation/access to site

Access to Otto Pehle Park Area is available through one formalized entrance from Saddle River Road that leads to two parking lots within the park. Transit access is provided by New Jersey Transit bus lines 144 and 164 that run along Saddle River Road. Otto Pehle Park Area is also accessible from other areas of Saddle River County Park via the internal multi-use pathway. The pathway's southern terminus is Railroad Avenue in Rochelle Park, approximately one-half mile away, and its northern terminus is East Ridgewood Avenue in Ridgewood, at approximately five miles. In between there are numerous access points to the pathway from local and arterial roadways, making all of Saddle River County Park accessible for pedestrians and bicyclists once they enter the park at any point.

g. Adjacent land uses/description of the surrounding neighborhood

The project site is bounded to the east and south by Garden State Parkway, to the west by Saddle River Road, and to the north by Red Mill Road. Land use adjacent to the site is predominately single-family residential, interspersed with some commercial properties. Land uses within the park include both passive and active recreation with resources including the pond, a pavilion, picnic tables, paved and unpaved trails, a memorial, a comfort station, and the existing playground.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ANALYSIS OF PROPOSED ACTION

a. Discuss all affected resources and the significance of each impact.

The existing playground area is in a regulated floodway of the Saddle River. Currently, after major storm events, the playground is inundated with floodwater causing the playground to be closed until Parks staff can clean it and make necessary repairs. Planning for the new playground prompted the Department of Parks to examine the layout of amenities and consider the of alignment of parking lots, walkways, and new locations for existing infrastructure such as the comfort station. The new Completely Inclusive Playground

will be in an improved location less vulnerable to flooding, more visible, and intended to generate greater use by the public.

b. Discuss the short-term and long-term project impacts.

The Completely Inclusive Playground will be situated in a new location, and until it is open to the public, the existing playground will be left in place. While the current playground needs replacement, it is still functional and will be removed only when its replacement has opened. The Completely Inclusive Playground will attract both current and new park users, with an anticipated increase in use by families looking for new opportunities for their children.

c. Discuss anticipated increase in recreation and overall use of the site over time.

It is anticipated that public interest for the park will be renewed with the installation of a new park facility. The Completely Inclusive Playground will be the only one of its kind in this area of the County and is expected to attract families from adjacent towns and beyond. Saddle River County Park is, and will remain, popular with local residents as well as the broader population of the County. The Department of Parks will continue to evaluate the layout of the park to achieve greater efficiency and increase public use and enjoyment.

d. Identify adjacent environmental features that may be affected by the proposal.

Construction may present short-term visual and noise effects on adjacent property owners and park users. Construction will be managed with sequencing and other measures to ensure the least amount of disturbance.

e. List any permits required for project and brief status (i.e., waterfront development)

Soil Erosion & Sediment Control Certification & 5G3 Construction Activity Stormwater (GP) for construction; NJDEP Land Use Permits to be determined.

b. Natural Heritage Data - Lands Management Form -- Report Pending

c. Discuss if/how the project will be impacted by sea level rise and any related design considerations.

The project site is approximately forty to fifty feet above sea level, and we do not anticipate that it will be impacted by sea level rise.

4. ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

- a. Identify alternative sites.

Three other sites within Saddle River County Park are being evaluated for new playground facilities. The Department anticipates eventual replacement of all the current playgrounds in the park.

- b. Discuss alternative levels and type of development.

The conceptual design of the new Completely Inclusive Playground proposes colorful park amenities for all ages and abilities, such as: swings, sensory play panels, a musical instrumental area, two-to-five, and five-to-twelve-year-old adventure play areas, and a soft surface under all elements. The playground will be surrounded by a four-foot fence and plantings of native trees, rain gardens, shrubs, perennials, and ornamental grasses. Alternative park amenities could include the use of natural materials such as wood, rather than the colorful park equipment made of hard durable plastic and metal. The range of play areas could be singular age groups rather than the two age groups mentioned.

- c. Compare environmental impacts of each alternative.

The colorful park equipment is smaller in scale, while the natural wood play equipment is bulkier and may need additional space to construct. The wood play equipment would involve on-site adjustments for each element as it typically does not have exacting design specifications as it is special and unique.

5. MITIGATING MEASURES

The final park design will be developed by a landscape architect/engineering team responsible for ensuring that the project adheres to professional standards of design. There will be a public engagement process to solicit community input, allow their participation in the design, and their acceptance of the final construction plan. The landscape architect/engineering team will assist in the procurement of a competent firm to perform the construction work. The County will hire a dedicated construction manager to oversee the work, to ensure the project is built according to construction plans, and also to assess any unanticipated issues and recommend a course of action to mitigate any potential negative impacts to the project timeline, quality or cost.