CONCEPT PLAN REPORT

LORD STIRLING PARK
A NEW VISION

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INTRODUCTION

Lord Stirling Park is located along the Passaic River in Bernards Township along the western portion of the Great Swamp Wildlife Refuge, a significant wildlife oasis of grasslands, brushlands, mature forests, wetlands, marshes, and waterbodies, supporting many types of reptiles, amphibians, mammals, and waterfowl. The park is managed and maintained by the Somerset County Park Commission, and at 1,000 acres, it is the one of the largest park areas in Somerset County’s Park system, second only to the 6,000-acre Sourland Mountain Preserve. The park is home to Lord Stirling Stable, opened in 1969, Environmental Education Center (EEC), opened in 1971, and the historic Boudinot-Southard Farmstead (aka Boudinot-Southard Ross Estate, or Ross Farm), acquired in 2005. Along with its stable and environmental facilities the park boasts 9 miles of hiking trails, 14 miles of equestrian trails and historic buildings and sites that date back to the 18th and 19th centuries.

Due to rising maintenance costs, decreasing lesson programming, and the Covid 19 pandemic, the Park Commission made the decision to cease programs at Lord Stirling Stable in 2020 and reduce the herd of horses. The herd was disbursed and many of the horses were purchased by third parties who are boarding the horses at the Stable. Following the Stable’s reduction of public programming, the Park Commission took the time to consider options for the future of the facility. It was uncertain at the time whether Lord Stirling Stable would reopen under the management of the Park Commission, an outside entity or be permanently closed and redeveloped for non-equestrian uses. The Park Commissioners agreed that the future of the Stable needed to be studied in more detail.

In 2021, the Park Commission formed the Lord Stirling Stable Advisory Group to evaluate the programming, management, and operations of Lord Stirling Stable. The result of this evaluation was a document entitled The Stable at Lord Stirling Park, Recommendations for Reopening, Rebranding and Delivering Services to Somerset County. The Advisory Group’s report concluded that the Stable could reopen safely with an increase in activities and visitors while preserving the unique nature of Lord Stirling Park and proposed a sustainable business plan for the reintroduction and improvement of equestrian programs as well as non-equestrian activities and events.
The report identified key recommendations to reopening Lord Stirling Stable:

- Completion of capital improvements including a new, upgraded barn.
- Introduce beginner and intermediate equestrian programming for lessons, rides and pony program.
- Implement an outreach program to publicize all activities.
- Organize an open trails program for use by the general public as well as programming by the Environmental Education Center with a specifically designated entrance and parking area along Lord Stirling Road so as to effectively encourage hiking, nature walks, running, horse trail rides and other nonvehicular activities.
- Rebrand Lord Stirling Stable as “The Stable at Lord Stirling Park”.
- Designate event field along Lord Stirling Road, allowing events for scouts, schools, local organizations, art/music festivals, movie nights and any activity approved for county property.

VISION FOR LORD STIRLING PARK

The report prepared by the Lord Stirling Stable Advisory Group identified recommendations for rebranding, programming, and capital improvements for the Stable. The recommendation for rebranding the Stable as “The Stable at Lord Stirling Park” presents the unique opportunity to reimagine not just the Stable, but the entire 1,000-acre park. This idea is reinforced as a goal of the Somerset County Open Space Preservation Plan to provide open space for a diverse mix of high-quality recreational experiences appropriate for a county park system. The goal states that Somerset County’s parks “give an equal balance to recreation and conservation”. A strategy identified in the plan to achieve this goal is to “create parks for all” (appealing to interests of the wide variety of populations in the county). Long thought of and operated as three separate parks (Lord Stirling Stable, Lord Stirling Environmental Education Center and the Boudinot-Southard Farmstead), these facilities can now be viewed as key components of a large, multi-use park that can reach a broader segment of the population seeking a variety of experiences in a single park, thereby achieving the Open Space Preservation Plan’s goal.

The strategy of “parks for all” is further advanced by the concept of integrating the equestrian facility into a larger park, which seems to be unique in New Jersey. Although there are facilities throughout the state that are part of larger parks, most equestrian facilities that were researched are kept separate and removed from other recreational uses. Concern for horse and human
safety is a factor in the physical separation of uses. Although the concern is valid and will be considered throughout the planning process, it is believed that the integration of the equestrian uses with recreational uses can attract more patrons who can experience a level of controlled interaction with the horses along with other nature-based and historic activities. This can create a much broader park experience for the public.

The recommendations made in the report include public outreach, facility management, programming, and physical changes to the park. As a first step in the reimagining of the park, a wholistic approach was taken with the development of a Conceptual Park Development Plan which further analyzes the recommendations made in the report for physical changes and redevelopment.

1. **Organize an open trails program:**

Trails are an integral part of the Somerset County Park system and have been identified in both the 2005 *Somerset County Park Commission Capital Facilities Study* and 2019 *Somerset County Community Interest and Opinion Survey* as the top use desired by County residents. Paved walking and biking trails and nature trails ranked highest in both reports by users interested in a varied park experience. Somerset County’s *Walk Bike Hike; Connecting Vibrant Communities* and the recently adopted *Somerset County Preservation Plan* also prioritize trails within and between parks. Therefore, it makes sense that the starting point of the concept plan focus on the trail network within the park.

The concept plan shows all existing trails within the park, both equestrian and pedestrian. The primary goal is to connect the currently separate and independent Environmental Education Center and Stable trail networks. There are two locations shown on the plan that could be initially developed as trail connectors. In addition to connecting the existing trails within the park, the plan proposes connections to the Boudinot-Southard Farmstead, which is part of Lord Stirling Park; Southard Park which is a municipal park; the 12 square mile Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge to the east of the EEC; and the adjacent residential Basking Ridge neighborhoods west of the park. This will encourage more pedestrian access into the Lord Stirling Park, and between the park and adjacent park areas and neighborhoods.
The existing equestrian trails are proposed to be redesignated so that some are pedestrian only and some are equestrian only. Assuming that the desire is to physically separate the two trail types, the Conceptual Development Plan proposes redesignating a perimeter trail as pedestrian only while retaining all the interior trails as equestrian. This would require reconfiguring some of the interior equestrian trails to not interfere with the pedestrian trails but understanding that there may be points in the trail system that pedestrian and equestrian uses intersect. There may also be the need for some of the connector trails from off-site and from parking areas to serve both pedestrian and equestrian users to provide access.

It should be noted that any new trail development will likely impact on-site wetlands and streams, which may impact how the trails are designed and where they can be located.

To accommodate the new activities within the park, two new public parking areas have been identified. A main parking area is proposed at the pasture on Lord Stirling Road and a second parking area is proposed at the Boudinot-Southard Farmstead. The parking area at Boudinot could serve the historic and recreational uses on the farmstead as well as allow for another point of access to the trails.

2. **Designated event field along Lord Stirling Road:**

Creating a designated event space within the park further advances the “parks for all” strategy. The pasture along Lord Stirling Road that is identified as an event area in the report can accommodate uses identified in the report as well as other forms of entertainment to draw in a wider visitor base. The development of the adjacent parking area can be sized to accommodate these uses as well as regular park access.

An area of Lord Stirling Park that was not identified in the report but provides event opportunities is the 10-acre field on the Boudinot-Southard property. The field could be programmed for uses and activities like the Lord Stirling Road space and could be expanded to include uses consistent with the historic nature of the property. Certain activities could be coordinated with the Friends of Boudinot-Southard, the group that currently manages and programs the property.
As part of the conceptual development planning process, the scope was broadened to include elements of the park that were not included in the recommendations. Although not included in the report these elements seem to be consistent with the intent of the recommendations in the report and serve purposes that are complementary to the other existing park uses.

3. Historic Preservation:

As part of the recently adopted Preservation Plan, Somerset County adopted a new Historic Preservation Plan that encourages county-wide preservation. The Open Space Preservation Plan added a new goal to preserve county-owned historic sites within the county parks and steps have already been taken to evaluate and restore these historic resources and find suitable uses. Lord Stirling Park is one of the many county parks with historic resources.

The Conceptual Park Development Plan proposes connecting the trail network to the Boudinot-Southard Farmstead. In addition to the farmstead as an added amenity to Lord Stirling Park for its potential parking, access to trails, and event space, there is the opportunity to highlight the historic value of the property and the overall historic stature of the park. In 2009, Somerset County had a Historic Structures Report prepared to document the historic value of the property. It turns out that the property was once owned by a prominent figure in the country’s history.

Elias Boudinot purchased the property in 1771 when he moved from Elizabethtown to escape the coastal threat of the British. Educated in Princeton, Boudinot was a leading attorney for the Colonies. In November, 1782 he was elected President of the Continental Congress and is credited with signing “The Preliminary Articles of Peace Between Great Britain and the United States of America”, the precursor to the Treaty of Paris which ended the Revolutionary War. Henry Southard, who served in Congress from 1801 to 1821, purchased the property from Boudinot in 1785. His son, Samuel Lewis Southard had a distinguished career as a US Senator, Secretary of the Navy, Governor of New Jersey and acting Vice-President of the United States under President Tyler. The Boudinot-Southard property is a stop on Journey Through the Past.
The site of Lord Stirling Manor is another historic site located within the park. It was the home of William Alexander, Lord Stirling, who was commissioned a Colonel in a regiment of troops in 1775 and became deeply involved in the Revolutionary cause. He was promoted to Brigadier General in 1776 and was in close communication with George Washington. An early 20th century residence sits atop of a portion of the foundation of the original manor house, but little else remains of the original manor. To highlight the significance of this property, the Park Commission holds its annual 1770’s Festival at Lord Stirling Manor.

With such resources of historic significance located within the boundaries of the park, as well as an ongoing, Environmental Center-managed archaeological dig near the Passaic River, opportunities exist to highlight the historic value of the park with more history related public events.

4. “Crane House”:

The Crane House is a small, two-story residential structure located adjacent to the Crane Farmstand on South Maple Avenue, both owned by the County. The Park Commission controls the use of the Crane House, and it is currently used for storage for the Stable. When the property was acquired, there was a desire for the farm stand and residence to remain to retain the character of the streetscape in the area. A need was identified by Stable staff for additional office space. In 2012, plans were prepared to renovate the structure to create office space and flexible meeting space, however, the improvements have not been made. The plan proposed ADA upgrades including an accessible restroom, flexible meeting space for one or two meeting rooms, and three offices on the second floor. Adjacent parking was also proposed to accommodate the new use. As the detailed plans for the park are developed, this building may serve as valuable space for a variety of new or expanded uses and the current plans could be implemented, or new plans developed.
CONCLUSION

Lord Stirling Park is a well-established park with the individual facilities well known and well utilized. However, these facilities operate separate and independent of each other, fragmenting the park. The uses are disconnected internally and from the areas surrounding the park. The development of an overall plan for the park presents an opportunity to highlight the park in its entirety as a unique regional scale park with interconnected and varied uses that will attract a wider segment of the population. What began as the rebranding of the Lord Stirling Stable has evolved into a new vision for all of Lord Stirling Park that includes equestrian, natural, and historic experiences. Unifying the park further advances the goals of the Somerset County Preservation Plan by highlighting environmental resources, providing a wide range of recreational experiences, and encouraging historic and environmental preservation. The plan outlines conceptually how all uses can be integrated into a single experience that highlights the valuable assets that exist in this portion of Somerset County – one park, many paths.