



MAKING JERSEY CITY'S PARK SYSTEM WORLD CLASS

Jersey City has a very good park system, but it could be elite and truly world class. To take the next step up to that elite class will require boldness, creativity, and investment. By renovating existing parks, following through with the new parks that are in various stages of planning or development, completing the Hackensack and Hudson River walkways, and taking the audacious initiative to connect our waterfronts by a series of greenways will enrich the lives of our citizens and make Jersey City's park system worthy of global attention.

A Public Private Partnership for Nonstop Renovation

Jersey City began the process of creating a parks master plan to rate the condition and then to renovate Jersey City's 67 municipal parks a little over a decade ago. In 2008, after numerous public meetings and robust public input, a 10 year detailed plan to improve Jersey City's park system was put in place that detailed every upgrade that every park needed and estimated the costs of these upgrades. Over the next several years, serious progress was seen.

Ercel Webb Park in Ward F, Muhammad Ali and Bayview parks in Ward A, Hamilton Park in Ward E and Ward B's Boyd McGuinness Park were all substantially improved under the plan. However, the City simply abandoned the plan shortly after Mayor Fulop took office, as he focused his attention, the City's resources and public relations on just a couple of park improvements.

Consequently, parks such as Pershing Field in the Heights have been left to deteriorate and plans to improve it have been shelved. Even improvements that were completely planned and fully funded, like Fulton Avenue Park off MLK Drive, were abandoned. The cancellation of the improvement of Fulton Avenue park is especially deleterious to its neighborhood. This parcel, which encompasses .29 acres, currently does not even deserve to be called park. While I was the City's chief attorney, I lead a bike tour to a variety of parks including Fulton Avenue Park, to show that, while the City had made seen much progress on parks, it had a long way to go. After input from residents and the local neighborhood association, a plan for a quiet garden with trees and flowers was devised to allow residents a place to relax in beauty and nature. Every time I get off the PATH Train at Manhattan's 9th Street Stop and walk through the beautiful Jefferson Market Park I think "why can't Fulton Avenue Park be a green refuge like this?" Thankfully, the City has recently announced a plan to renovate the park.

With the previous master plan abandoned, the City needs to go back to the drawing board to come up with a new parks master plan that will detail how each of the City's 67 municipal parks need to be renovated and what it will cost. There needs to be a dialogue with the public about

what each community views as their needs when coming up with priorities. The new open space tax will assure that there will be funds for the City to use on renovations to augment others sources of funding like grants from the State's Green Acres program and monies from the general fund.

Finally, the City needs to foster citizen care of parks. Neighborhood Conservancies and the Jersey City Park's Coalition do an excellent job keeping our parks in good shape and identifying needed improvements. The City must work with these groups on a regular basis to keep our parks pristine and also to inspire the formation of new neighborhood park conservancies.

Fulfill the Promise of the City's New Parks

In addition to its 67 municipally owned neighborhoods parks, Jersey City also boasts the regal Lincoln Park on the Westside, which is managed by Hudson County, and the glorious Liberty State park, from which one is a short ferry boat ride to Ellis Island and the Liberty Island, which are administered the National Park Service. Now Jersey City has a unique opportunity to augment this already impressive roster of parks.

The previously mentioned parks master plan delineated a number of new parks that Jersey City has the opportunity to create. Berry Lane Park recently opened in Bergen Lafayette and I was proud to play a roll in compelling PPG Industries to clean up the chromium contamination from its adjoining former facility on Garfield Avenue and to have secured substantial revenue from PPG that helped finance the park. This park has proven a great amenity to the neighborhood and enhanced the quality of life for its citizens, but more can be done.

Jersey City should now move forward with its other planned parks, several of which will be so unique and beautiful that they are bound to attract national attention. Jane Jacob's thought that too much was asked of parks and that "[f]ar from transforming any essential quality in their surroundings, far from automatically uplifting their neighborhoods, neighborhood parks themselves are directly and drastically affected by the way the neighborhoods act upon them." ⁱ Others think parks like the Highline in the Chelsea section of Manhattan are stalking horses of gentrification. ⁱⁱ Parks cannot be expected to entirely uplift a neighborhood and I think it is foolhardy to complain if a park enhancement has increased real estate value. Parks make life better but they do not relieve us from the obligation to confront other societal problems with other techniques, whether the problem is crime, poverty or income inequality. Yet we can't underestimate the power of nature and recreational upon people's lives. Indeed, "(f)rom Philadelphia to Seattle, other American Cities are also banking on parks and public spaces to drive social and economic progress."ⁱⁱⁱ

One thing we can do when planning our new parks is design them in a way that will ensure that access for all and that the recreational opportunities they offer take into consideration what is needed and lacking in a given neighborhood. If there is a community garden around the corner, or a group of basketball courts, you don't need to duplicate that use near by. Site conditions may also limit a site's use, whether that be environmental conditions or size.

This said, Jersey City is poised to add several new extraordinary parks to it's inventory. If elected Mayor, part of my plan for Jersey City Parks will be to make the vision for the new parks below a reality within eight years:

Reservoir 3

This nearly 14 acre former reservoir in the Heights, that is surrounded by imposing 20 foot tall stone walls, was built over 140 years ago and provided drinking water into the 1980s. Since its decommission, a natural ecosystem has developed in the middle of a dense urban environment.

At the urging of the Reservoir Preservation Alliance, the city dedicated the Reservoir as open space and I am proud to have played a roll in urging the City to take this course. Since then, the Alliance secured funds to retain professionals and, in conjunction with the City, has developed plans to restore the historic walls and buildings in the Reservoir and to create a natural and wild urban oasis were city dwellers can hike, kayak and picnic.

The current Administration has refused to commit to completing the Reservoir, citing costs. The time has come to fund this plan and to make the vision of an urban oasis at Reservoir 3 a reality.

Skyway Park

For years, residents on Jersey City's West Side were subject to the toxic smoke that would frequently billow from the PJP Landfill on Routes 1&9 under the Pulaski Skyway when barrels of chemicals would spontaneously combust. After substantial environmental remediation, a massive 32 acre swath of the former landfill is now covered with native grasses and wild flowers stretching from the highway, under the Skyway, and all the way to the Hackensack River.

As Corporation Counsel I fought a plan that would have made this land a no-go zone cordoned by a barbwire fence, which had been endorsed the Department of Environmental Protection. I spearheaded an effort to acquire the property for parkland, which was aided by some \$7 million in grants. This Superfund site has been completed remediated and planted with wild flowers and native grasses, already making a beautiful site to behold. After a series of public meetings on public tours of the site, a design for a natural-passive park that would include the development of a portion of the Hackensack River Walkway was developed, and the City and Hackensack Riverkeeper jointly won a \$800,000 Green Acres grant to carry out the design. Mayor Fulop has done nothing to finish this park, thereby putting these Greenacre dollars at risk.

The people of Jersey City's West Side, and especially Marion, deserve the opportunity to be able to access nature. Indeed, Skyway Park will be world class gem that all of Jersey City will enjoy. Its time to make the vision of Skyway park a reality.

Bayfront Parks, the Hackensack and Hudson River Walkways

The Bayfront Redevelopment Plan calls for the development of 100 acres on the City's West Side between Route 440 and the Hackensack River, which includes 20 acres of open space. As Corporation Counsel, I initiated litigation against Honeywell, a Fortune 50 Corporation, which was responsible for chromium contamination on the City owned property that housed three Jersey City agencies, including the Department of Public Works. Thanks to a lawsuit brought by community activists, including the Hackensack Riverkeeper, Honeywell was already remediating a huge swath of adjoining contaminated land that many know as the former home of the Roosevelt Drive-In Movie Theater. Ultimately, the City entered into a settlement with Honeywell, joined by

the Hackensack Riverkeeper, that created the award winning Bayfront plan. The Bayfront plan calls for completion of a substantial portion of the Hackensack River Walkway, which is now only complete in a stretch at Society Hill and another patch behind the Prologis Distribution Center across from Holy Name Cemetery.

The Bayfront Plan will actually feature two linear parks stretching from the Hackensack River to the highway. When combined with Lincoln Park West, and a new park near Country Village recently announced by the City, the Hackensack River Walkway will be real and impressive. Ultimately, Jersey City's Hackensack Riverfront may be known as the Green Coast, when considering its connection to Lincoln Park and Skyway Park. Making parks like the Bayfront parks and the Hackensack River Walkway a reality should be a priority.

The Hudson River Walkway is one of Jersey City's greatest attractions. However, people who wish to walk the river into Liberty State Park are frustrated as the Walkway stops at the Goldman Sachs building, where plans for a park around the Colgate Clock have yet to be realized. The Hudson River Walkway should be extended to take pedestrians around the Morris Canal Basin and directly into Liberty State Park.

6th Street Embankment

The half mile long, 100 foot wide, and, at points, 27 foot high stone former railroad embankment that is a border between the Harsimus Cove and Hamilton Park neighborhoods, which stretches between Marin Boulevard and Brunswick Street, has the potential to be an extraordinary elevated park, even greater than the world's most famous elevated park, the Highline in Manhattan. If you are lucky enough to get on top of the Embankment or look down at it, even in its un-manicured state, overgrown with wild foliage, you can understand that this will be a special place to provide Jersey City residents with an easily accessible entry into a natural green environment and a respite from the hubbub of busy urban life on the street below. Moreover, preserving these imposing historic walls is an act of preservation and a testament to our City's past, which centered so much on railroads.

Like so many of Jersey City's parks, the 6th Street Embankment owes its prospects to citizen activists. Indeed, the Embankment Preservation Coalition conceived of the very notion of saving the Embankment, of educating the public and officials of its importance and of spearheading the fight against plans to destroy it. As Corporation Counsel, I worked with the Coalition in a legal fight against a would-be developer who claims to want to tear down the Embankment to build townhouses. Jersey City is seeking to acquire the property, correctly arguing that the transfer from the previous owner, Conrail, to the developer, is unlawful. It is a complex, tuff legal fight that the City and Coalition can win and which seemed resolvable several times. The Current Administration has continued the dozen year legal fight with vigor.

Making the 6th Street Embankment a park is not a question to me. The only questions are when and at what cost? As mayor, I would aggressively continue the fight to acquire the Embankment, making sure that any compromise was endorsed by the City's co-travelers in this legal odyssey, the Embankment Coalition, while simultaneously working on a real plan to build out this park expeditiously, when the City finally gets possession.

Officially Endorse a Plan of Greenways Connecting the Hackensack and Hudson Rivers and Then Execute the Plan

Imagine walking or riding a bike along the Hudson River walkway, with its astounding views of the Manhattan Skyline, and then turning west, and traveling up and along a tree-lined 6th Street Embankment, until you descend on to another green trail that takes you through the awesomely imposing former rail tunnel known as the Bergen Arches, and then continuing along a trail all the way to Lincoln Park and the Hackensack river, where you find another waterfront walkway that you can follow down to the Newark Bay. A group of local activists have been developing this very idea, naming the conceptual pathway “Crossroads^{iv}.”

Another possible east to west connection is the Morris Canal Greenway, which would trace, to the extent possible, the six-mile former right-of-way of the historic Morris Canal in Jersey City. The Morris Canal was an engineering marvel of its time that brought goods from Pennsylvania to the Hudson River waterfront and operated between 1831 and 1924. The City conducted a number of public meetings on this concept and issued a “Morris Canal Greenway Plan” in May 2013 that calls for a continuous greenway along short term and, ultimately, long term alignments that would be developed in segments.^v The idea is for a dedicated path for pedestrians and bicyclists that would connect our waterfront walkways, as well as provide a link to the East Coast Greenway, while celebrating the remarkable history of the Morris Canal with public art and interpretative signs. Its an ambitious plan, but it should not be left on the shelf.

Connecting Jersey City’s waterfronts with a series of greenways is very possible, *if* the City has leadership that is committed to it. Similar urban trails, like the Beltway in Atlanta, have proven to be wildly successful. As mayor, I would work with our planners and the public to come up with an achievable development plan so that residents from across Jersey City would have access to all parts of the City and our two waterfronts by foot or bike.

Conclusion

John Muir was right when he said “(e)verybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.^{vi}” Creating more green spaces, improving our existing parks, and connecting our waterfronts with greenways will not only increase the quality of our lives, but raise our City’s spirit. Accomplishing this goal can be done in a fiscally sound way, by doing it incrementally, with community input, by leveraging private philanthropic support, and grants. The new open space tax will also assist. As mayor, I will make this a priority. Undertaking such initiatives cannot be done overnight, but will only happen if there is a plan and a corresponding commitment.

ⁱ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961).

ⁱⁱ Aaron Betsky, *The Highline Effect*, [Metropolis Magazine](#), December 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Kimmelman, *The Difference a park can Make*, [The New York Times](#), March 13, 2017.

^{iv} Chris Fry, *Sixth Street Embankment Aims To Create “Crossroads” Green Space*, [Jersey Digs Website](#), February 17, 2017. <https://jerseydigs.com/sixth-street-embankment-aims-to-create-crossroads-green-space/>

^v http://www.njtpa.org/planning/regional-studies/bicycle-pedestrian/morris-canal-working-group/morris-canal-greenway-final-plan-11x17_reduced.aspx

^{vi} John Muir, *The Yosemitee*, (1912).