

# FROM NEAT TO

# NATURAL

## Township Parks are Getting a **GREEN MAKEOVER**

BY JILL ERCOLINO / MANAGING EDITOR

### **EXPERTS SAY THERE IS SOMETHING MISSING**

from most township parks: nature. In fact, concern is growing that acres of perfectly mown lawns, dotted with playing fields and playground equipment, may be counterproductive. Sure, these parks promote exercise and relaxation, but some contend their maintenance may actually be degrading the environment. A green movement has started in Pennsylvania to take local parks from neat to natural. It's about protecting the landscape, but it's also about saving townships time and money.



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## FROM NEAT TO NATURAL

**M**ike Bertalino and Art Grguric haven't fished in years, but they still look forward to the first day of trout season.

The pair, usually up and at it by 4 a.m., make their way to BlackLeggs Creek Memorial Park, a popular camping and fishing spot in Indiana County's Young Township.

Bertalino, chairman of the board of supervisors, and Grguric, who brought the trout back to these once-polluted waters, get a fire started, and there by its crackling warmth, these two friends and a few others whip up breakfast for hungry anglers, young and old alike.

From dawn until about 2 in the afternoon, the cooks are smiling; they say they can't help it.

Seeing dozens of children decked out in boots, carrying pint-sized fishing poles, and excited about fishing makes them happy and confirms, over and over, they did the right thing: turning a creek, tarnished by acid mine drainage, into a fisherman's dream and the adjacent land into a gem of a community park that has stayed true to its rustic roots.

"It's just beautiful," Bertalino says.

Grguric, the wetlands coordinator for the BlackLeggs Creek Watershed Association, was the catalyst for the project in this small, rural municipality. However, he says many people — some of whom are now deceased but immortalized on a plaque at the park —

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**The state is encouraging townships to put aside traditional park designs and practices in favor of more natural, greener options, which minimize upkeep, are kinder to the land and wildlife, and still allow municipalities to provide places for sports, play, and other recreational activities. (Photo at left is courtesy of Springfield Township, York County, and features Hollowcreek Greenway, a 1.5-mile linear park.)**

“People think that if it’s a park, **it needs to be manicured,**  
but not all parks have to be perfectly mown.  
**Ninety percent of municipalities mow more than they should.”**

turned his vision into a reality.

And what a reality it is.

Today, families and outdoor enthusiasts from near and far come to this quiet four-acre retreat to camp, maybe catch a few trout for dinner, enjoy nature’s beauty, and share stories under a canopy of stars and trees before nodding off to sleep.

That’s all Grguric ever wanted.

“I wanted other people to be able to enjoy a place that I’ve enjoyed all these years,” he says. “There are no computers, no cell phones, no lights. Every once in a while, you’ll hear a train in the distance, but that’s it. The park is as close as you can get to the mountains without actually going to the mountains.”

Although the folks in this little corner of Indiana County may not realize it, they are at the forefront of a recreation trend, one that’s focused on getting local parks and trails back to nature.

### Too much mowing?

These days, there is a lot of talk

about carbon footprints, climate change, organics, alternative energy, and living off the grid.

Green, it seems, isn’t just a color anymore, it’s a way of life, influencing everything from the foods we eat to the products we buy. It’s even impacting where we play.

No one knows this better than Brenda Barrett, director of the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources’ Bureau of Recreation and Conservation, the agency that has funded hundreds of park and trail projects statewide.

After reviewing thousands of grant applications, Barrett and her staff came to a conclusion not long ago: “Our parks could be greener,” she says.

With that, the bureau set off on a mission to change the way municipalities approach and maintain their recreational areas.

The growing concern is that many parks are counterproductive. Sure, they promote exercise and relaxation, but their maintenance may actually be degrading the environment with chemi-

cals, promoting stormwater runoff, and destroying wildlife habitats.

Therefore, Barrett wants leaders to put aside traditional park designs and practices — you know, the well-manicured lawns dotted with playing fields that require lots of mowing, pesticides, and fertilizers. In their place, she suggests that townships adopt sustainable designs and practices, which minimize upkeep, are kinder to the land and wildlife, and still allow municipalities to provide places for sports and play.

The state is heading in the right direction, says Judith Stern Goldstein, director of landscape architecture and planning for Boucher and James Inc., a consulting engineering firm based in Doylestown, Bucks County.

“People think that if it’s a park, it needs to be manicured,” she says, “but not all parks have to be perfectly mown. Ninety percent of municipalities mow more than they should.

“I’m not saying that townships need to tear down their playing fields and put in meadows instead,” she adds, “but too often in our zeal and zest to provide level playing fields, we forget about the natural areas. There’s nothing wrong with going back to meadows in certain places.”

A good green example is the 108-acre Central Park in Doylestown Township, Bucks County. There, an array of athletic fields and Kids’ Castle, an eight-story wooden playground, co-exist with a hill for sledding, preserved wetlands and woodlands, a small farm overseen by Delaware Valley College, and an environmental education center that features bluebird and bat houses. Children and adults alike wile away hours in this peaceful setting.

“We’ve balanced things out,” manager Stephanie Mason says, “and the park has become a focal point of our community.”

“Our goal,” board chair Barbara



## Want to build a green park?

### Regional DCNR offices offer help with grants and projects

The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has six regional offices that offer recreation and grant assistance to townships. To learn about options available to your community, contact the office that serves your county.

#### **Southeast Region** (*Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties*)

**Contacts:**

Carolyn Wallis, Natural Resource Program Supervisor

Fran Rubert, Recreation and Parks Adviser

**Phone:** (215) 560-1182 or (215) 560-1183

#### **Northeast Region** (*Berks, Bradford, Carbon, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne, and Wyoming counties*)

**Contacts:**

Dennis DeMara, Natural Resource Program Supervisor

Lorne Possinger, Recreation and Parks Adviser

**Phone:** (570) 963-4157

#### **Southcentral Region** (*Adams, Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Mifflin, Perry, Somerset, and York counties*)

**Contacts:**

Lori Kieffer Yeich, Natural Resource Program Supervisor

Mike Piaskowski, Recreation and Parks Adviser

**Phone:** (717) 705-5956 or (717) 772-4362

#### **Northcentral Region** (*Cameron, Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Potter, Snyder, Tioga, and Union counties*)

**Contact:**

Wes Fahringer, Recreation and Parks Adviser

**Phone:** (570) 326-3521

#### **Southwest Region** (*Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Lawrence, Mercer, Washington, and Westmoreland counties*)

**Contacts:**

Kathy Frankel, Natural Resource Program Supervisor

Tracy Stack, Environmental Planner

**Phone:** (412) 880-0486

#### **Northeast Region** (*Clarion, Clearfield, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, Jefferson, McKean, Venango, and Warren counties*)

**Contact:**

Kim McCullough, Recreation and Parks Adviser

**Phone:** (814) 332-6190

## FROM NEAT TO NATURAL

Lyons adds, “is to make the best use of the open space we have and use our natural resources in a positive way.”

And that’s the thing about green parks: Your township doesn’t have to give up its field hockey, soccer, and baseball fields or basketball and tennis courts. These have a place — some would argue an important place — in your community. By the same token, though, you should rethink what you mow, pave, and develop.

“Sustainable parks minimize the active area to the smallest area possible,” Goldstein says, “so if you’re developing a 127-acre park, think about putting all the activity on 27 acres and preserving the rest.”

In fact, the whole idea behind this facet of the green movement is to weave nature and naturalness into local parks. This means creating natural settings that rely on natural methods to manage stormwater, pests, and weeds. Why? Because it just makes sense from an economical and environmental standpoint.

Park expert Peter Harnik backs up this notion in his research paper, *The Excellent City Park System: What Makes it Great and How to Get There*, where he says “it is so much more expensive to create and operate ‘designed’ landscapes (*constructed parks that are mown or regularly cleaned up*) than natural landscapes.”

Barrett agrees, saying townships will realize a slew of benefits that range from saving money on labor and materials — fewer lawns and smarter turf choices mean less mowing and fertilizers — to encouraging children and adults to get outside, exercise, and enjoy nature.

And DCNR is offering a pretty nice incentive to encourage municipalities to jump on the green park bandwagon: \$10 million in grants.

“We really are the first state to incentivize and fund [these practices],” Barrett says. (*To learn about green park grants and others, log onto [www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/grants/indexgreen.aspx](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/grants/indexgreen.aspx) or call your regional DCNR office. Phone numbers and contacts are listed in the box at left.*)



# After reviewing **thousands of grant applications**, Brenda Barrett and her staff came to a conclusion not long ago: **“Our parks could be greener.”**

## What is a green park?

Before DCNR's Bureau of Recreation and Conservation could truly embrace and encourage sustainability, however, it had to define what the term “green” meant in the context of parks and recreation.

Enter the “green team,” a group led by Tom Ford, chief of the bureau's Regional Services Division, that studied what other states are doing to encourage a more naturalistic approach to their parks. The team was surprised by the findings, he says.

“When we looked at what was going on out there, we found that Pennsylvania was on the cutting edge,” he says

Eventually, the team honed in on the Sustainable Sites Initiative, a program that has established voluntary national standards for “greening up” landscapes, Ford says. These standards formed the foundation of the bureau's “green scorecard,” a self-assessment tool that helps municipalities, especially those interested in receiving a state grant, determine the greenness of a particular park or trail project.

The scorecard focuses on a handful of key areas, including enhancing wildlife habitats, conserving and protecting wetlands and streamside buffers, managing stormwater naturally, replacing invasive plants with hardier native

varieties when landscaping, and using green building materials and designs. (To download a PDF of DCNR's green scorecard, log onto [www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/grants/indexgreen.aspx](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/grants/indexgreen.aspx) and click on the link.)

While going green in a recreational sense may seem costly and even a little complicated, it isn't, Ford says. DCNR made certain that it was asking townships to adopt practical, affordable measures that will save them time and money while protecting natural areas.

For instance, your township could install a rain garden at the local park. These shallow depressions are

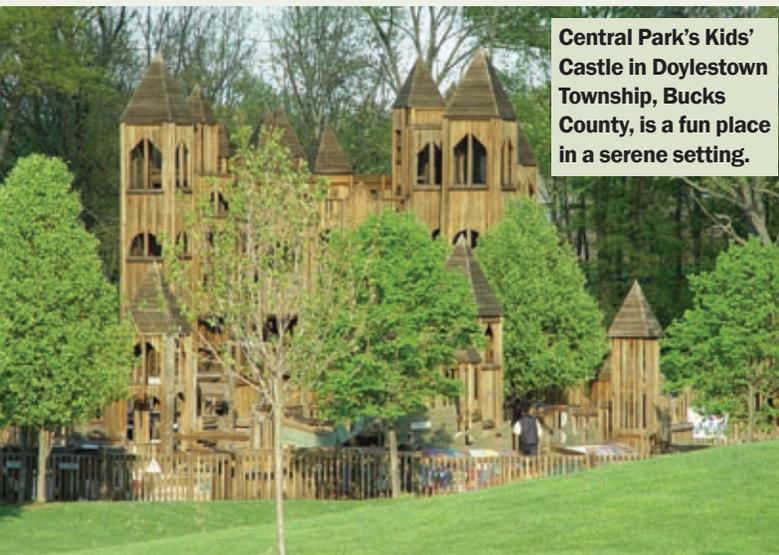
## Scenes from green parks



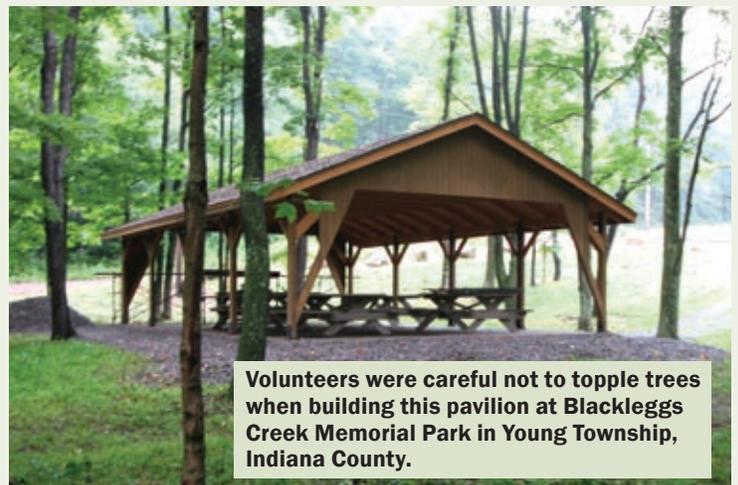
Visitors encounter this natural area at the Warwick Township Linear Park in Lancaster County.



Environmental education and farming take center stage at Harriet Wetherill Park in Plymouth Township, Montgomery County.



Central Park's Kids' Castle in Doylestown Township, Bucks County, is a fun place in a serene setting.



Volunteers were careful not to topple trees when building this pavilion at Blackleggs Creek Memorial Park in Young Township, Indiana County.

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filled with deep-rooted native plants and grasses that capture and filter stormwater runoff. You could also incorporate more trails into your park designs, and instead of paving them, opt to put down crushed stone or simply mow paths for walkers. Or, like Warwick Township in Lancaster County, you could designate “no-mow” zones at your parks.

“I have other managers say to me that people will complain if you don’t mow, but we let some areas go natural. Then we put up signs that say, ‘We don’t mow and here’s why.’ It’s all about public education,” Warwick Township manager Dan Zimmerman says.

Warwick, a township that went green before it was trendy, has a network of six public parks, which offer something for everyone: athletes, walk-

ers, bicyclists, fishing enthusiasts, and children eager to learn about nature. While visitors may not realize it, green techniques are used throughout the park system, Zimmerman says.

For instance, the township is managing stormwater naturally at the park next to the municipal building in a handful of ways.

Asphalt walkways and the 105-space

parking lot have been resurfaced with porous asphalt and concrete, which not only absorb stormwater but also recharge groundwater supplies. The site also features a large bioretention basin planted with vegetation that can withstand wet conditions. The basin serves as a natural storage tank for rain water, and the plants filter out the nutrients.

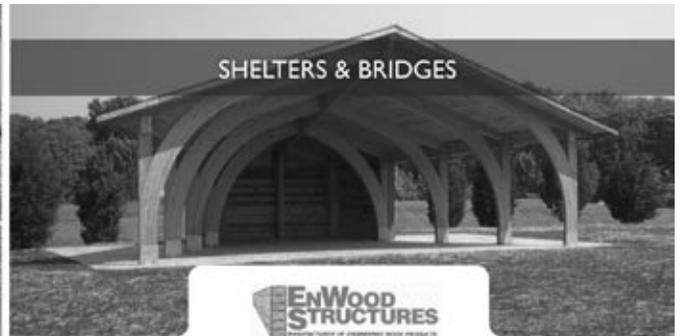
The township also operates a



Wildflower fields are beautiful and inviting at a park and have another benefit: They minimize the need for mowing.



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3.5-acre ecological park, featuring a wetlands area, a warm-season grass meadow, and a stone-dust walking trail that winds through this natural area. Zimmerman says the park was designed to provide a “living classroom” for area students and residents.

“We’ve always believed in being good stewards of the environment,” he says. “You get back what you put into it.”

### Letting spaces speak for themselves

The bottom line is that township officials should not be intimidated by the

word “green.” Instead, they should be motivated by it, DCNR’s Tom Ford says.

“Sustainability isn’t rocket science,” he says. “It doesn’t need to be a huge to-do. We’re not expecting every township to install huge detention basins. We’re just asking them to work with the resources and features on their site.”

But what does that mean exactly? Well, it all boils down to respecting the land, nurturing it, and teaching residents to appreciate it, too. And a growing number of townships, small and large, are doing just that, often with the help of grants, partnerships, and volunteers.

These communities had a dream to build a park, but rather than clearing every square inch of the property, they took a good thing and made it better — and greener.

When developing BlackLeggs Creek Memorial Park in Indiana County’s Young Township, volunteers cut the overgrown brush by hand to ensure the property remained as natural as possible. And when it came time to construct the pavilion, a recent addition, the building was wedged between a stand of hardwoods because no one wanted to topple a tree.

“We did our best to preserve the naturalness of the area,” park mastermind Art Grguric says.

The same goes for Harriet Wetherill Park, a 67-acre environmental haven in Plymouth Township, Montgomery County, that recently won the commonwealth’s first-ever Green Park Award, sponsored by DCNR and the Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society.

Resident Elkins Wetherill donated much of the land for the park — the site is named after his late wife — and very little has changed there since the property was converted into a place where residents commune with nature.

“It’s a natural site with a lot of vegetation,” Parks and Recreation Director Karen Franck says, “and the last thing we wanted to do was clear-cut the property, so we said, ‘Let’s use what we have.’”

Natural walking trails, a butterfly garden, wildflower fields, wooded areas with native trees, plants and shrubs, a stream observation platform, and a working farm are all part of the park experience. Franck says that 75 percent of the project was funded with grants. Eventually, the township hopes to open an environmental education center at the park, where lighting at the picnic pavilion is powered by solar energy, she says.

“We want the space to speak for itself,” she says. “It’s a peaceful retreat. It doesn’t say, ‘Mow me.’”

### Taking baby steps

The one thing to keep in mind about green parks is that you can do a little or a lot. However, before your township does anything, you should get educated and get advice, the experts say.

“Talk to other municipalities that have done green projects,” professional planner Judith Stern Goldstein advises, “and then you can ask yourself, ‘How can I do that back in my township?’” ➤

## Go to the Web before you go green

### Useful information on sustainable parks and trails is just a few clicks away

Sustainable parks and trails are a no-brainer. Not only will they save your township time and money, but they will also create safe, inviting havens for families and wildlife. To learn more about sustainable recreation practices, look no farther than the Web, where you will find a wealth of information.

For starters, be sure to check out the following sites:

[www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/grants/indexgreen.aspx](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/grants/indexgreen.aspx) — Sponsored by the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources’ Bureau of Recreation and Conservation, this site should be your first stop in learning about sustainable parks and trails. There, you’ll find information about state grants, how to apply for funding, and a variety of downloadable publications, including guides on *Creating Sustainable Community Parks* and *Financing Municipal Recreation and Parks*.

[www.pagreenways.org](http://www.pagreenways.org) — This site, also hosted by DCNR, is the state’s clearinghouse for trail information. Log on here to learn greenway basics and to check out the “greenways toolbox,” which features studies, presentations, and downloadable publications, including *Creating Connections: The Pennsylvania Greenways and Trails How-To Manual*.

[www.prps.org](http://www.prps.org) — The Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society hosts this site, where townships can find additional information about funding resources for park and recreation programs, among other things.

[www.railstotrails.org](http://www.railstotrails.org) — Sponsored by the Rails to Trails Conservancy, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit with an office in Pennsylvania, this site features rail-trail basics, useful articles, studies, and statistics, and a trail-building toolkit.

## Getting a handle on invasives

### Not all greenery is welcome at green parks

Some greenery just isn't welcome at a green park. There's a name for these plants: invasives, so labeled because they threaten to choke the life out of native ecosystems.

According to the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, invasive plants are those that grow aggressively, spread, and displace other plants. Usually, they are introduced accidentally or on purpose into a region far from their native habitat, DCNR says.

A small number of invasives are "native," meaning they occurred in Pennsylvania before settlement by Europeans but became aggressive after the landscape changed. However, DCNR says, most invasive plants arrived from other continents and are often referred to as "exotic," "alien," "introduced," or "nonnative" invasives.

Invasive plants can be trees, shrubs, vines, grasses, or flowers, which tend to:

- not be native to North America;
- spread, reproducing by roots or shoots;
- mature quickly;
- if spread by seed, produce numerous seeds that disperse and sprout easily; and
- grow in many different conditions.

There's a growing movement in Pennsylvania to replace invasives with native plants, which once established, seldom need watering, mulching, protection from frost, or continuous mowing. (See the list below, which outlines some invasive and native species common to Pennsylvania.)

Townships can learn more about invasive and native plants in the DCNR guide, *Creating Sustainable Community Parks*, downloadable at [www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc).

#### Invasive plants in Pennsylvania

**Flowers:** goutweed, musk thistle, goatsrue, star-of-Bethlehem, wild parsnip, Japanese knotweed, and water chestnut

**Grasses:** cheatgrass, Japanese stilt grass, maiden grass, reed canary grass, common reed, and shattercane

**Shrubs:** Japanese barberry, Russian olive, winged euonymus, amur honeysuckle, glossy buckthorn, wineberry, and Japanese spiraea

**Trees:** Norway maple, sycamore maple, tree-of-heaven, princess tree, callery pear, and Siberian elm

**Vines:** fiveleaf akebia, Oriental bittersweet, Japanese honeysuckle, mile-a-minute vine, and kudzu

#### Native Pennsylvania plants

**Flowers:** wild columbine, wild geranium, black cohosh, common milkweed, sundrops, and black-eyed Susan

**Grasses:** little bluestem and Indian grass

**Shrubs:** mountain laurel, arrow wood, black chokeberry, highbush blueberry, spicebush, red-osier dogwood

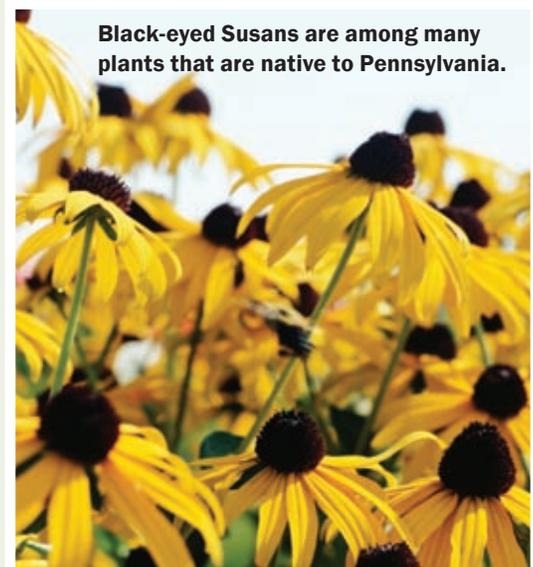
**Trees:** sugar maple, river birch, black gum, eastern white pine, white oak, sassafras, and serviceberry

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Of course, one of the best places to turn for help is the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which operates six regional offices in Pennsylvania. The staff can provide your township with technical assistance and information about grants and how to apply.

Tom Ford of the Bureau of Recreation and Conservation oversees the regional offices and assures townships they will find the help they need there. "The first thing they will get is a friendly smiling face, and then they'll get the technical assistance they need and learn how to get money for X, Y, and Z," he says. (For more information about the office that serves your county, turn to the sidebar on Page 12.)

Townships will also want to check out the bureau's Web site (see box on Page 16). This is your link to information about green park principles, training, and funding. At the site, you will also find a handful of publications, including a downloadable version of *Creating Sustainable Community Parks*. This free how-to guide covers every aspect of developing and maintaining a green



**Black-eyed Susans are among many plants that are native to Pennsylvania.**

park. It's also helpful for townships that want to introduce sustainable practices at an existing park.

Like many experts, the guide encourages townships to start with a few small projects and expand on those successes.

"It may help to do a small 'experiment' first in one area of the park to see how park visitors react, and to see the benefits firsthand," the handbook advises. "For example, this experiment could involve replacing an infrequently used ballfield with a children's garden. Once this smaller project is completed, a more comprehensive and labor-intensive project could be done."

Goldstein says this is a good approach for beginners: "Take baby steps by doing a small project at a time and then celebrate what you've done, whether it's a new trail or a new rain garden. Invite the public and have a ribbon cutting."

The handbook also offers suggestions for townships that have limited time, staff, and budgets but still want to make their parks more sustainable, including:

- Plant native trees or shrubs that produce food for wildlife. Incorporate these plants into a naturalistic landscape design that mimics the surrounding habitat.

- Plant a riparian buffer around waterways. These buffers help to protect the water from erosion by stabilizing the banks, and they offer wildlife habitat and discourage geese. For the best results, the buffer should be at least 35 feet wide on each side of the water and feature native warm-season grasses, herbaceous plants, trees, and shrubs. The wider the buffer, the better the results.

- Minimize impermeable surfaces, such as roads, parking lots, and paved trails. Consider replacing asphalt and concrete with permeable pavement, mulch paths, gravel lots, and areas of native vegetation. Permeable surfaces will help recharge groundwater, reduce erosion and flooding, and filter out pollutants before they reach a source of water.

- Remove invasive plants (*defined as those that aren't native to Pennsylvania and could potentially harm the environment and people*). These include



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Japanese knotweed, mile-a-minute vine, Japanese stiltgrass, and Japanese barberry. Volunteers can help the township with this project, as well as with monitoring the park to ensure that when new invasives appear, they are controlled immediately. (To learn more about invasive and native plants, turn to the sidebar on Page 18.)

“The key for townships is to latch on to a couple of green things for their parks and incrementally save the environment and save money,” says Jim Pashek, president of Pittsburgh’s Pashek Associates, which specializes in landscape architecture and recreation planning.

### Desire and commitment

The reality is, any township, regardless of its size or budget, can have greener parks and trails. The board of supervisors simply has to have the desire and the commitment.

Case in point: Springfield Township in York County, population 3,889.

Through sheer determination, the township has secured \$1.5 million in state grants to create the Hollowcreek Greenway, a 1.5-mile hiking trail that winds through a wooded area full of wildlife before connecting with neighboring Loganville Borough. The goal is to expand the trail by another 6.5 miles and eventually connect it to the Borough of Jacobus.

“The trail goes up and down and over the bridges we put in. It’s very scenic,” supervisor Tom Wolfe says. The township went easy on the land when constructing the trail, following its natural course and surfacing paths with aggregate, instead of asphalt. “We didn’t disturb any more trees than we had to, and if we did have to take a tree down,

we planted a native one in its place.”

Although the township’s staff had a hand in building the trail, Wolfe says the project was purely the vision of one woman: Mary Kline, a landscape architect and member of the township’s planning commission. Her hope is that one day the region will have a trail system that connects families with area schools and parks.

“I’d love to see the children walking to school,” Kline says.

Of course, she admits, this project is going to take years to complete, but you can bet that Mary Kline will be there,

behind the scenes, making sure it happens. “Every project needs that person to gently nudge and prod,” she says. “In this case, I guess that’s me.”

Passion helps, too, says Art Grguric, the man behind BlackLeggs Creek Memorial Park.

“People will ask me, ‘How do you do these things?’ ‘How much does it cost?’ But it doesn’t take money to accomplish your goals,” he says. “What it takes is commitment. Businesses will donate materials, and people will donate their time. Where there’s a will, there is definitely a way.” ♦

## DCNR’s top 10 best ‘green’ practices for recreation sites

The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources says the following 10 steps will help townships develop sustainable parks that are practical, conserve resources, and have a positive impact on the environment:

- 1) Promote groundwater infiltration and manage stormwater naturally on-site.
- 2) Create and enhance streamside and wetland buffers.
- 3) Minimize the impacts on and changes to the natural landscape.
- 4) Include an abundance of trees on the site.
- 5) Maintain and enhance native wildlife habitat.
- 6) Manage invasive species and introduce native plants, trees, and shrubs.
- 7) Minimize unnecessary and costly maintenance practices, such as mowing, watering, and applying pesticides and fertilizers.
- 8) Review “green” certification guidelines from the U.S. Green Building Council and implement those that are practical.
- 9) Maximize walkability to and within the site.
- 10) Provide opportunities for passive recreation, such as walking, nature watching, photography, and picnicking.



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to accomplish your goals. **What it takes is commitment.**”