

Master Site Plan for Fort Halifax Park Moves Forward

Before a park can be developed, a Master Site Plan needs to be completed. A Master Site Plan includes a comprehensive analysis of the features and potential of the site, within the context of public interest and need. Landscape features of this site include river frontage, stream corridors, floodplains, wetlands, steep slopes, hillsides, ridge tops, and large areas of open meadow. These possess a wide variety of plant and animal life, which will require stewardship for future generations. Fort Halifax Park also contains geological, ecological, recreational, and historical resources. A Master Site Plan considers all of these features, and through a public-lead process outlines a strategy for park development and long-term sustainability.

The combined efforts of the State and County have resulted in the awarding of grants for Master Site Planning for Fort Halifax Park. The PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) awarded a grant for \$34,500 which was funded by the Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund Grant Program administered by DCNR's Bureau of Recreation and Conservation. The Bureau has certain requirements and standards that must be met by Halifax Township and its contracted consultant. Dauphin County also awarded \$30,000 in required matching funds, with the remaining \$4,500 coming from Halifax Township.

Once the grant monies were secured, a Study Committee was selected and approved by DCNR. Members of the Committee represent local businessmen, citizens, clergy, and outside recreational professionals. Their first assignment was to select a consultant qualified in the preparation of a Master Site Plan. After reviewing proposals submitted from five consultants, the Study Committee selected Larson Design Group to complete the Master Site Plan and the Halifax Township Board of Supervisors approved the action. The Plan is scheduled for completion during the project year 2011.

The Study Committee held its first meeting with Larson Design Group on June 25, 2009. Members shared their visions and discussed the potential opportunities and anticipated challenges associated with the proposed development of the site. The Committee explored aspects of the proposed development including the impact on the local economy and the area's quality of life. The most important part of this planning process was to gather information and opinions from local residents through interviews, public meetings and a community interest survey. Individuals who participated in the interview component of the study included community leaders, park neighbors and citizens with significant information about the park, the local community and the area's character.

The first public meeting was held on November 4, 2009 at the Halifax High School. Forty-three people were in attendance. Areas of concern that were discussed included land development issues, safety, cost and funding, park operation, education, conservation, connecting parts of the park to the town and the school, recreation, history, special events, operation and maintenance.

Another component of the Master Site Plan is the information gathering process, which was in part accomplished by means of a Community Recreation Interest Survey that was mailed to all households and businesses within the 17032 zip code area (a total of 3,354 pieces). This survey was developed by the consultant and approved by the Study Committee. The survey gathered information and opinions from the public. The consultant and the Study Committee will use this information to help explore which recreation areas are most valued by local residents, what recreation facilities and services are preferred, and how the park will be developed and maintained.

Concept Plans will be prepared based on the information gathered at the first public meeting (November 4) and the Community Recreation Interest Survey. The resulting Concept Plans will be presented at the second public meeting to be held in the spring of 2010.

Current special events such as the Fort Halifax Festival (May 1) and Dauphin County's Fort Halifax Music Fest (July) have demonstrated the value of cultural, historical and environmental exploration and education for area residents. These events also have encouraged increased tourism for the region.

With excellent planning and shared vision, the Fort Halifax Park will become one of the region's most valued assets.