

Mianus River Park

Managing Natural Resources & Recreation: An Action Plan



A place to be good-natured and good to nature.

Recommendations by the
National Park Service
Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program
to
City of Stamford, Town of Greenwich, State of Connecticut and
the many Friends of Mianus River Park

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Brief Background

Over the past 20 years, regular visitors to Mianus River Park have seen conditions change as the number and types of uses have increased. There have been citizen efforts to deal with those changes, but despite hard work and good intentions, those efforts didn't lead to lasting improvements. In Stamford, lack of staffing and funding led to years of inadequate management. Wear and tear of heavy and damaging activity along the river has continued to increase along with tension among some visitors, even causing some to stop coming.

In 2003, the City of Stamford requested technical assistance from the National Park Service Rivers & Trails program. During the past three years, outside experts conducted assessments of river conditions (Jim McCartney), riparian trails (John Monroe) and vegetation (UCONN Landscape Architecture students). Plus, the City received a Recreational Trails Fund grant from Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection.

In a series of eight, facilitated public workshops over two years, residents, park visitors, municipal staff, and a range of user groups focused first on river and riverfront issues. They worked hard to identify key problems and possible solutions, plan on-the-ground improvements and agree on long-term management actions. Gradually, the focus broadened to include Greenwich and the park as a whole in the context of the Mianus River watershed.

Stamford Senior Planner Erin McKenna organized volunteers and other city staff in a series of trail work projects to improve trail drainage, re-route two trails, close two damaging trails by the river, build a kiosk informational sign, remove invasive vegetation and plant 53 native seedlings, and erect two 1,400-foot-long temporary fences (to protect seedlings from deer).

In 2006, volunteers launched an informal alliance of "Friends" to partner more effectively with the municipalities. Friends include individuals and non-profit groups, some who have been active on behalf of the park for many years. The Friends have begun to organize events to raise public awareness, such as hiking every trail in the park on National Trails Day. They also organize trail work days, open to all interested citizens.

To participate, you need only agree to work for the common good of the park and pitch in with ideas and energy.

- To volunteer for the Friends group, contact Pete Sofman at psofman@optonline.net, or 203-322-0724, for information about the next trail work day or meeting.
- To discuss a project in Stamford, call Erin McKenna at 203 977 4715, City Land Use Bureau.
- To discuss a project in Greenwich, call Denise Savageau at 203 622 6461, Town Conservation Director or Bruce Spaman at 203 622 6483, Parks and Trees Division.

A Precious Gem Entrusted to Us

Mianus River Park is a precious gem. A certain number of people have loved the park for decades; a growing number have fallen in love in the last decade; thousands more will discover the park in the next decade. **The right time to take better care of the park is right now.**

The primary mission of the City of Stamford and Town of Greenwich is to be good stewards of park natural resources, including water quality, wildlife habitat and forests. This demands that they manage the activities of thousands of visitors. As in all parks of this type and size, park managers rely on the support and cooperation of visitors and neighbors. Taking good care of resources for long-term and overall health and growth comes first; recreational enjoyment comes second. This is good stewardship and the key to survival of beautiful and healthy natural areas.

In Mianus River Park, good stewardship should look something like this:

- **The municipalities**, as legal owners of the park, coordinate their efforts to protect natural resources and public safety, set clear expectations, enforce rules, monitor changing conditions, respond to visitor comments, and work to promote recreational harmony. In short, Stamford and Greenwich are attentive landowners and good partners; they lead by example.
- **Park visitors** understand the need for safe and responsible recreation, respect this delicate public place, and see themselves as members of a park “community.”
- **The Friends Group** serves as an agile liaison among neighbors, visitors, non-profit groups, user groups and the municipalities. The Friends communicate, mobilize volunteers to work and cultivate a sense of community by transforming fractious disagreement into productive cooperation. While they may advocate strongly for park funding and staffing and hold municipal “feet to the fire,” mostly they cultivate collegial relations. Friends also build on long-standing efforts with new initiatives.

Successful partnerships depend upon on-going collaboration. In the list of actions below, a lead person or group is identified for accountability, but it is presumed that all interested partners will participate, too.

This Action Plan is written for all partners, both public and private. It highlights guiding principles and specific actions to manage park resources and recreation. Other park issues ought to be addressed in a comprehensive management plan. In the meantime, this Action Plan can get the ball rolling in the right direction. Actions are divided into three categories: Essential Ongoing Activities (page 4), Essential Projects (pages 5 and 6), and Recommended Projects (page 7). A map on page 9 provides more information. Appendices contain additional details and references.

Stewardship never ends, so this document recommends laying a foundation of long-term, working relationships. As you solve problems and make improvements not even dreamed of here, strong and flexible working relationships among partners, with attention to changing conditions, will carry you to success.

Essential Ongoing Activities - *do these always*

Note: The Appendices contain additional detail and suggestions for many of the actions on the following four pages.

- Every January, Friends convene a meeting and party (no kidding!) of all partners to:
 - Review the past year
 - Affirm City, Town and Friends points of contact for the coming year
 - Update The Matrix in Appendix A (a comprehensive spreadsheet of identified conservation problems, with suggested solutions, and a record of actions taken)
 - Make plans for projects, activities and events and
 - Celebrate accomplishments.

- In February, City and Town staff update relevant park officials and commissions to:
 - Report on previous year's activities and
 - Inform them of upcoming activities.

- Friends organize a trail work day (timed to avoid seed distribution) to remove Winged Euonymus and other invasives:
 - In Stamford, begin along River Road, from the main entrance at Merriebrook Road to the Flats and
 - Pull invasive plants every year (pile the slash for wildlife habitat).

- On the first Saturday in June, Friends hold a National Trails Day event to:
 - Celebrate the park
 - Do trail work
 - Listen to park visitors and tell them about current conservation projects, and
 - Recruit volunteers.

- Year-round, all partners look for ways to build stronger and more productive working relationships. For example:
 - City and Town staff keep Friends up to date with ideas and opportunities,
 - Friends convene working groups to consider and distill recommendations, or to work with municipal staff on specific projects.

- Stamford staff maintain fences to protect native plantings.
 - Provide Friends with materials to make minor repairs on their own.

- Municipal staff organize a walk in early winter with Friends to:
 - Review the year's work and assess overall conditions.
 - Enjoy the park.

- Annually, photo-document the condition of key sites, such as erosion sites, vegetation restoration sites, status of closed trails, etc.

Essential Projects - *do these first*

Note: Where it makes sense, a specific entity is listed as the lead; in other cases, it is the responsibility of **all** partners to take the initiative when the time is right.

- Municipal staff meet with Town and City officials and legislators to present this Action Plan for endorsement and implementation.
 - Draft a letter of agreement between the municipalities and Friends group to formalize the working relationship.
- Friends launch a peer-to-peer Ambassador Program to chat with visitors about the role visitors play in protecting land, water and wildlife in the park.
 - Start with one or two groups, but eventually recruit volunteer ambassadors from all user groups.
- Friends organize a scheduled series of outings for the general public.
 - Establish themes based on the interests of volunteers who lead the outings.
- Municipal staff simplify the complexity and names of the trail system. See the map on page 9 for a graphic summary of suggestions.
 - Direct posting of trail name signs by Eagle Scout candidate Tom Connolly.
- Stamford and Greenwich staff work with a professional designer to produce and install a high-quality and coherent signage system to:
 - Make it clear how conservation of the park depends on visitor behavior and support.
 - Describe current conservation measures: removal of invasives and planting of native species; riverbank restoration; buffer zones, etc.
 - Point out the partnership approach and key role of volunteers (invite more to join the effort).
 - Describe the healthy park and the satisfying visitor experiences we wish to sustain.
 - Include directional and highly engaging educational signs from the upper parking lot to the main entry (at the gated road).
- Print (and put online) a provisional Trail Guide using language and maps from the signage project.
 - Make editorial improvements annually.
 - If you wish to promote the park more broadly, publish it formally.
- With site improvements (and signage), municipal staff create an engaging, high quality and educational gateway experience for visitors arriving from Merriebrook Road and Cognewaugh Road.
 - Grade the Merriebrook Road parking lot and formalize parking spaces along the road.
 - Find a champion to put the Barn into a productive and compatible use.

More Essential Projects

- To reduce wear and tear on the riverfront and protect fish habitat and the public water supply, Stamford demarcates a shoreline buffer zone from Merriebrook Road to Hemlock Gorge that excludes dogs and bikes.
 - In consultation with Friends, set the width based on landscape cues, existing trails and slope.
 - Identify the zone on trail maps and small signs.
 - Promote respect for the buffer through Ambassadors and public events, such as an information table during a busy fall weekend.

- To protect the public water supply, Stamford works with a professional river specialist (possibly funded by Trout Unlimited) to replace “the weir” with state-of-the-art bank stabilization.

- In consultation with Trout Unlimited members and a professional river specialist, Stamford and Friends initiate restoration of one or more eroded sites each year with state-of-the-art measures either to eliminate access or create permanent access, depending on conditions at each site.

- In consultation with NEMBA members, consider installing a mountain bike “playground,” to concentrate technical mountain bike riding in a certain area and to relieve pressure on the rest of the park.
 - Friends will play the key role in researching results at existing sites, considering the pros and cons of such a proposal, and in forming a recommendation.
 - This may or may not be a good idea for this park, but the Friends should clearly be the forum in which you learn enough to make an informed decision.

- Deal positively and decisively with the “dog problem.” The problem is that unleashed dogs often rush up to other visitors and, even if friendly, leave some visitors annoyed, frightened and covered with muddy paw prints. This is illegal, unreasonable and unsafe.
 - Dog owners must learn from the success stories of other recreation groups ~ such as snowmobilers and mountain bikers ~ who recognized that growing negative public opinion and potential enforcement of existing laws could exclude them from their favorite places.
 - The Friends can support communication and cooperation among dog owners.

- Establish a Quiet/Wilderness Area to give natural stillness and silence a place in the park, too.
 - As important as setting aside the actual space is sending out the message: this is a place for exercise, fresh air, calm and nature left alone.
 - Locate this area away from heavy traffic patterns and major “desire lines” (between major destinations where people really **want** to go).

- Conduct and implement a Comprehensive Management Plan for the full range of multiple uses in the park: forest resources, water quality, habitat, vernal pools, etc.

Recommended Projects - *do these later*

- Maintain and repair signage deterioration due to weather and vandalism.
 - Replace vandalized signs right away; it discourages the culprits.
 - Replace faded sign faces to signal high maintenance standards to visitors.
- Design and install steps from the Barn down the steep slope to Merriebrook Road.
- Organize, or recruit other groups to organize, additional events that bring desirable activities to the park. For example:
 - Dog obedience demonstration.
 - Trading Places Day - a “festival” to try out unfamiliar park activities: mountain biking, fly fishing, birding, trail running, Nordic walking, archaeology tour, *plein air* (outdoor) artwork, trail work, erosion control, bank stabilization, etc.
- Send press releases about upcoming events to build broader public awareness through news articles.
- Depending on how much you wish to attract more visitors, consider putting out an annual “feature release” to celebrate recent successes and personal stories through news and magazine feature stories.
- Transplant fences to new restoration areas on the advice of a consulting Landscape Architect.
- Consider establishing memorial benches, funded by private donations, to raise money for conservation projects.
 - Work with the City and Town to verify the viability under municipal rules.

Suggestions for the Friends of Mianus River Park

Who is Responsible?

Often, people unaccustomed to partnership arrangements wish for more organizational structure. In certain situations (such as Friends must formally request municipal permission before holding events and doing trail work), the chain of command is clear. However, it is useless to predict which of the partners will have the gumption and resources to take on a project several years from now. Partnerships may have ambiguity, but they also have agility to seize opportunities presented by energetic volunteers, community spirit, generous donors and changing conditions in the park.

Forging Consensus

It can be hard work finding agreement on problems and solutions among diverse partners and park users, yet that diversity is also your strength as a Friends group. Your success will depend on effective meetings (see below) and willingness to find common interests that serve the park mission.

Good Communication with Stamford and Greenwich is Essential

Remember that the City and Town own the parks and control activities there. The old maxim about asking for forgiveness rather than permission **does not apply here**. You are partners who, thanks to open communication and trust, solve problems and **help** to manage a park. All events and physical changes to the park need to be considered first at a Friends meeting and then submitted to the City and Town for approval.

How to Run Better Meetings

Before drafting an agenda, list the understandings and decisions you wish to leave the meeting with. See the **Let's Leave With List** in Appendix C.

Always, always, begin your meetings with the following warm-ups:

- Welcome
- Introductions
- Agreement on a Let's Leave With List, a preview of the agenda, and
- Agreement on behavior that will Help and what will Hinder your work together.

If you handle warm-ups confidently and clearly, they will set expectations for respect, good listening and economical speaking (shorter meetings!). The track record of citizens at Mianus River workshops over two years shows that you clearly need warm-ups. Don't skip them.

How to Recruit Volunteers

Always introduce attendees by name at meetings and outdoor events. One-on-one, recognize and appreciate participation and work. Ask Friends what interests them most about the

park, then invite them to help in a specific way. Periodically, send emailed invitations to volunteer for upcoming events.

How to Build an Organization

The key both to raising money and building leadership is simple: ask for it. Start with small and short-term requests. Let results and individual satisfaction make the case for more giving and more leadership. Don't wait for a more elaborate process, just go ask someone to help. Provide a reasonable amount of responsibility, be sure to have a satisfying, good time and soon your group will grow. In general, follow the Guiding Principles found on the next page.

Guiding Principles for All Mianus River Park Partners

These points emerged during public workshops and trail work days from 2004 to 2006. They form a valuable credo for building powerful partnerships that lead to lasting change and good stewardship.

- ✧ Maintain an **open door** to all user groups in planning, decision-making and implementation while demanding **respectful behavior** - in meeting rooms and in the park.
- ✧ **Take action** more often than **talking** about taking action. Hold meetings **often enough** to solve problems, make important decisions, understand and points of view and plan upcoming activities.
- ✧ **Lead with positives:** guide activities and behavior with encouragement rather than with prohibitions.
- ✧ Build momentum for change at **all levels of the community**, from individual visitors, to City Hall, to mass media.
- ✧ Changing behavior **takes time** and requires consistent, clear messages and role models.
- ✧ Run volunteer work days with **safety as top priority** to produce city-approved **tangible results**, so that volunteers leave **satisfied, healthy and eager** to return.
- ✧ Approach problems from a Plus/Delta point of view.
 - Plus: What works well?** and
 - Delta: What solutions and improvements we can think of?**While it is important at times to dissect problems to generate solutions, it's disabling to be preoccupied with what's wrong. A focus on potential changes (known as "deltas" in science) harnesses creative power and builds momentum.