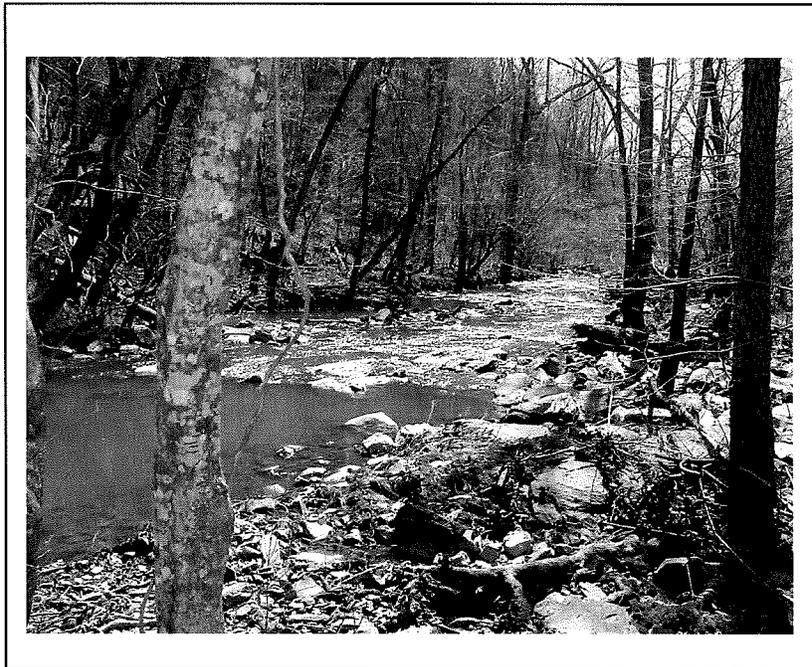


**Recommendations on Allowed Uses
in the
Little River Regional Park and Natural Area**

An Interim Report of the
Little River Park Advisory Committee

August 1, 2001



Project Partners:
Durham County
Orange County
Eno River Association
Triangle Land Conservancy

Recommendations on Allowed Uses in the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area

Executive Summary

This interim report from the Little River Park Advisory Committee includes a set of recommendations on what uses should be allowed within the new park. These recommendations are based on seven meetings held thus far by the committee (November 2000 to July 2001), during which members toured the park property, evaluated the property values and site limitations, received input from different user group representatives, and gathered citizen input on desired park uses and facilities.

The Committee recommendations for uses to be allowed within the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area are provided in three categories: a) allowed uses, b) conditional uses and c) prohibited uses.

Allowed Uses

The Committee recommends allowing the following uses in the park for reasons described in the report:

1. Hiking/Nature Trails
2. Picnic Area/Shelter
3. Hard Surface Trail/Picnic Loop
4. Playground
5. Open Play Meadows
6. Fishing

Conditional Uses

The Committee recommends allowing the following uses in the park, but only if certain conditions can be achieved in terms of identifying enough suitable land area to sustain the activity and appropriate operating funds to maintain and manage the activity in an appropriate fashion.

1. Horseback Riding
 2. Mountain Biking
 3. Camping
1. Proposed Conditions for Allowing Horseback Riding
 - a) *There are adequate funds available for any special facilities and to ensure proper site management and stewardship.*
 - b) *That there be at least 3-5 miles of suitable trails designated for public use.*
 - c) *That the equestrian trails are located and designed to minimize adverse impacts on natural and cultural resources.*

- d) *That the equestrian trails are located so as not to cause significant adverse impacts to other park users or adjacent landowners.*
 - e) *That there be a memorandum of agreement with a local group of horseback riders (an "equestrian council") for the provision of volunteer resources needed to design, construct and maintain equestrian trails within the park.*
2. Proposed Conditions for Allowing Mountain Biking
 - a) *There are adequate funds available for any special facilities and to ensure proper site management and stewardship.*
 - b) *That the bike trails are located and designed to minimize adverse impacts on natural and cultural resources.*
 - c) *That the bike trails are located so as not to cause significant adverse impacts to other park users or adjacent landowners.*
 - d) *That there be a memorandum of agreement with a local mountain bike club for the provision of volunteer resources needed to design, construct and maintain bike trails within the park.*
 3. Proposed Conditions for Allowing Camping
 - a) *That camping be allowed only for groups such as scouts, youth associations and church groups on a reservation basis.*
 - b) *There are adequate funds available for any special facilities and to ensure proper site management and stewardship.*
 - c) *That camp site(s) is located in area(s) that will not cause harm to adjacent private property or to natural/cultural resources found within the Park.*

Prohibited Uses

The Committee recommends that the following uses be prohibited from the park for reasons described in the report:

- Motorized vehicles
- Hunting
- Firearms

The above recommendations are offered by the Little River Park Advisory Committee to the Durham and Orange county commissioners who will make final decisions on what uses will be allowed in the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area.

The Committee will meet again in the late Fall to review and comment on the initial conceptual design for the Park. A revised plan will come back to the Committee for consideration at a public meeting. A site plan will then be presented to the Durham and Orange county commissioners in Spring 2002 for approval.

In the coming months staff will continue to research the following internal management issues and make recommendations to their respective managers and boards of commissioners:

- Development of an interlocal agreement between Durham and Orange counties, which will address budget, management, staffing, security and other issues important for ensuring safe and enjoyable experiences for park visitors and adjacent landowners.
- A capital improvement plan for potential future parkland acquisition and development.
- A policy for the naming of park facilities and trails.
- The feasibility of providing an on-site caretaker residence to help address security and operational needs.

Copies of the full report on recommended uses are available from the Orange County ERCD at 919/245-2597 and from the Durham City/County Planning Department at 919/560-4137.

Recommendations on Allowed Uses in the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area

This interim report from the Little River Park Advisory Committee (hereafter, "the Committee") includes a set of recommendations on what uses should be allowed within the new park. These recommendations are based on seven meetings held thus far by the Committee (November 2000 to July 2001), during which members toured the park property, evaluated the property values and site limitations, received input from different user group representatives, and gathered citizen input on desired park uses and facilities. The Committee charge and list of members is provided at Attachment A.

I. Property description

The park property is comprised of 391 acres straddling the Orange/Durham county boundary (256 acres in Durham Co.; 135 acres in Orange). The main entrance to the park will be on Guess Road (NC 157). The areas to the west, north and east of the property are primarily woodlands. There is low-density residential development to the south along Summer Lane and within the adjacent North Fork Subdivision. There are two other public roads that provide access to the property: Summer Lane dead ends at the property and Runyan Road stubs out at the park boundary. Neither of those points is proposed for park access other than allowing pedestrian access for residents of those neighborhoods. A map of the property is provided as Attachment B.

There is a 15-acre meadow near the Guess Road entrance to the park property. This area was used for agricultural production until 1995. Most of the park amenities are proposed to be developed in the meadow area. The rest of the property is wooded, primarily with pine in the uplands and hardwoods in low-lying riparian areas. The property boundary includes over one mile of frontage along the North Fork of the Little River. The property is located five miles upstream from the Little River Reservoir, which supplies drinking water to Durham. There are two unnamed perennial streams that flow through the property and into the Little River. The grant from the NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund stipulates that the parkland within 300 feet of the river and streams be protected by permanent conservation easements. That protection will help ensure the continued excellent health of these waters. A contour map of the property is provided as Attachment C.

The property was once owned by Continental Can Company, which clear-cut most of the trees in the 1960s and replanted with loblolly pine. The pines were thinned in the early 1990s. Several of the old logging roads remain today, used as walking/riding trails. Today the wooded areas include 40-year-old pines with an understory of young hardwoods. The property is typical of a managed Piedmont

loblolly forest in succession to an upland oak-hickory forest, which should predominate within the next 100 years. The forest consists mostly of hardwoods along the Little River (sycamore, red maple, and river birch). Portions of the site have downed trees from Hurricane Fran (Sept. 1996) and a May 2000 windstorm.

II. Property Values

Riparian buffers established by forming the park will help protect aquatic species in the Little River. The river supports populations of four freshwater mussels listed by the state as "threatened" (yellow lampmussel, Atlantic pigtoe, triangle floater, squawfoot), and another that is "significantly rare" in NC (notched rainbow). Three of the five mussel species are candidates for federal listing as threatened or endangered species. The presence of these mussels is evidence of the high water quality of the Little River.

Wildlife known to use the property includes deer, wild turkey, beaver, river otter, weasel, salamanders and numerous migratory birds.

The property includes a number of historic and archaeological features, including the old Law family farmhouse and outbuildings, remnants of old roads, and an old mill site, which likely served to meet the needs of the owners of this property and possibly some of the neighboring landowners. An archaeological survey of the entire property was recently completed to help identify the locations of important sites. The information from that survey will be used for siting future park facilities and for identifying areas of historic and cultural interest for interpretation.

III. Public Meeting

The Committee held a public meeting on March 1, 2001 at the Pleasant Green Community Center. The meeting started with short presentations about the park property, including the history of use, natural and cultural resources, site conditions, and proposed park facilities. Committee members and staff received comments and answered questions on topics ranging from site features to park design to future park management. Citizens were then provided an opportunity to "vote" on what uses they would like to see allowed in the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area. It was explained that the allowed uses would not be determined by popular vote, but the information would be useful to gauge the demand for certain kinds of proposed uses. A total of 44 people participated in the exercise. The results are provided as Attachment D. A summary of comments is provided as Attachment E.

IV. Discussion of Proposed Uses

The Little River parkland is being acquired with a combination of public and private funds. Since the beginning of the project the stated purposes of acquiring this land have been watershed protection, preservation of open space and wildlife habitat, and low-impact recreation, including hiking, picnic areas and nature study.

Horseback riding and mountain biking were also listed as potential uses on portions of the property that might accommodate those activities.

Those purposes and potential uses were also stated in the applications for state grant funds that were awarded to Durham and Orange counties for land acquisition and were listed as possible uses in applying for park development funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). LWCF awarded a total of \$262,000 for park development and further land acquisition. A preliminary site plan that was included in the LWCF application is provided as Attachment F.

With those parameters in mind, the Committee spent a considerable amount of time discussing the proposed uses of the park and the ability of the land to accommodate and sustain those uses. The Committee sought community input on what kinds of trails were desirable and should be established. The LRPAC also recognized the need for park policies and rules to manage those uses, and determined that the level of resources (i.e., staff and operating funds) afforded to the park would help determine the ability to manage the variety of uses that are envisioned. The Committee felt that while some uses could be allowed from the beginning, other uses might need to be phased in at a later date, as more resources become available. Some uses should not to be allowed at all.

Other factors were considered by the Committee, such as the possible effects that particular uses might have on neighboring properties. Some of those issues will enter into consideration during the design phase of the park. Also discussed was the fact that some uses, such as horseback riding, are considered by many as a traditional use of the property and the surrounding lands.

The Committee determined that some uses would be relatively easy for the property to accommodate without any substantial or long-term impact on the landscape and the native biota, and which could be attained with minimal management costs. Those include hiking trails, picnic areas, a playground, and open play areas in what is now field. The LWCF grant anticipated those uses and will provide funds necessary for the initial amenities for the park. Specifically, the grant budget identifies funds for the following facilities:

- Park entrance signage and landscaping
- Entrance road (gravel) to the rear portion of the meadow
- Parking lot and walkways
- Picnic shelter and restrooms
- Playground
- Play meadow
- Hard surface trail (1/4 mile) with picnic sites (ADA accessible)
- Trail improvements (bridges, culverts, water bars, etc.)

Each of the proposed facilities above received a high level of support from members of the public that attended the Committee's March 1, 2001 public input meeting.

The Committee determined that horseback riding, mountain biking and camping would also require some initial cost outlay, but would then also require a relatively greater long term investment in continual oversight, maintenance and enforcement of rules. The committee received good input from representatives of horseback riding and mountain biking user groups. Staff also provided information from a variety of sources, on the possible impacts to the park from these uses. Those sources included local park and recreation departments, equestrian and mountain biking clubs, N C State Parks, N C State University, N C Horse Council and extensive research by an intern working for the Durham Planning Department. A summary of that information is provided as Attachment G.

V. Recommended Uses

The Committee recommendations for uses to be allowed within the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area are provided in three categories: a) allowed uses, b) conditional uses and c) prohibited uses.

A. Allowed Uses

The Committee recommends allowing the following uses in the park for the reasons provided below:

- Hiking/Nature Trails
- Picnic Area/Shelter
- Hard Surface Trail/Picnic Loop
- Playground
- Open Play Meadows
- Fishing

1. Hiking/Nature Trails

Hiking trails have been identified as one of the primary uses of this park. The former logging roads provide a base for a future network of pedestrian trails that would allow people to experience different features of the property, including the upland forest, stream crossings, the North Fork Little River and floodplain, and some of the identified historic and cultural areas (e.g., mill site, house sites, old road beds, etc.). LWCF grant funds are earmarked for improvements to existing trails and the creation of new trails (Attachment F). Volunteers will be used for trail construction and maintenance through a proposed volunteer site steward program.

2. Picnic Area/Shelter

The meadow area (former agricultural field) would accommodate a picnic shelter and associated amenities in close proximity to the parking area and proposed restroom facilities. LWCF grant funds are allocated for a small picnic shelter, picnic

tables, well/pumphouse, toilet facility, and drinking fountain. These facilities should be located outside of the conservation easement area.

3. Hard Surface Trail/Picnic Loop

A short (1/4-mile) hard surface loop trail is recommended for construction through a portion of the woodlands closest to the meadow. An adjoining, natural surfaced loop trail could be added for a longer hike—perhaps a Figure 8. Such a trail would enable many people to experience a woodland walk without having to travel very far from the parking area and associated amenities. Along the trail, there could be special plantings of native wildflowers to attract birds and butterflies. This activity would be designed to accommodate people with special needs, including disabled persons and people with baby carriages and strollers.

4. Playground

Construction of a small playground is recommended close to the picnic shelter and toilet facilities. A non-traditional design would help it to blend in with the natural surroundings. LWCF grant funds are allocated for a small playground facility.

5. Open Play Meadows

It is recommended that large portions of the existing meadow remain open areas for informal playing of games and for aesthetic enjoyment. Some of the open areas near the picnic shelter and playground could be mowed on a regular basis to accommodate Frisbee, volleyball, and other games.

6. Fishing

It is recommended that fishing be allowed, but that no special facilities or management needs would be needed. People wanting to fish would need to carry their gear along the pedestrian trails to access the river. Depending on which part of the river is to be used, the walk could be from 1 to 2 miles.

B. Conditional Uses

The Committee recommends allowing the following uses in the park, but only if certain conditions can be achieved in terms of identifying enough suitable land area to sustain the activity and enough operating funds to maintain and manage the activity in an appropriate fashion.

- Horseback Riding
- Mountain Biking
- Camping

1. Horseback Riding

The Committee recommends allowing horseback riding within the park, but only under the following conditions:

- a) *There are adequate funds available for any special facilities and to ensure proper management and stewardship.* While most, if not all, facilities needs could be paid for using the LWCF grant, additional funds would be needed for operational needs. Issues include management for the trail system to avoid damage to resources and improper use.
- b) *That there be at least 3-5 miles of suitable trails designated for public use.* This would require the acquisition of additional adjacent land for inclusion in the park or establishing an equestrian trail easement agreement with adjoining landowners. [Initial discussions with adjacent landowners have been positive.]
- c) *That the equestrian trails are located and designed to minimize adverse impacts on natural and cultural resources.* Equestrian trails should avoid steep slopes and be located outside of the riparian areas and archaeological sites known to exist in the park. Any crossing of streams should be perpendicular to the corridor.
- d) *That the equestrian trails are located so as not to cause significant adverse impacts to other park users or adjacent landowners.*
- e) *That there be a memorandum of agreement with a local group of horseback riders (an "equestrian council") for the provision of volunteer resources needed to design, construct and maintain equestrian trails within the park.* Staff has met with a group that is interested in this proposal.

2. Mountain Biking

The Committee recommends allowing mountain biking within the park, but only under the following conditions:

- a) *There are adequate funds available for any special facilities and to ensure proper management and stewardship.* While most, if not all, facilities needs could be paid for with the LWCF grant, additional funds would be needed to insure proper management and oversight of both the trails and trail users.
- b) *That the bike trails are located and designed to minimize adverse impacts on natural and cultural resources.* Bike trails should avoid steep slopes and riparian areas, should not impair or "fragment" the more sensitive natural areas, and should avoid archaeological sites known to exist in the park.
- c) *That the bike trails are located so as not to cause significant adverse impacts to other park users or adjacent landowners.*
- d) *That there be a memorandum of agreement with a local mountain bike club for the provision of volunteer resources needed to design, construct and maintain bike trails within the park.* A Durham-based group has been developed and is interested in performing this function. This type of agreement has been successful at Parks managed by Wake County.

3. Camping

The Committee recommends allowing primitive group camping within the park, but only under the following conditions:

- a) *That camping be allowed only for groups such as scouts, youth associations and church groups on a reservation basis.* Camping for general public use is not recommended, as camping sites are readily available at Eno River State Park, Falls Lake and Jordan Lake.
- b) *There are adequate funds available for any special facilities and to ensure proper management and stewardship.* No funds are budgeted for developing camping areas within the park. A site manager would be needed to reserve the camp site(s), provide user education, enforce campsite use and oversee campfires.
- c) *That camp site(s) is located in area(s) that will not cause harm to adjacent private property or to natural/cultural resources found within the Park.*

C. Prohibited Uses

The Committee recommends that the following uses be prohibited from the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area for the reasons provided below:

- Motorized vehicles
- Hunting
- Firearms

1. Motorized vehicles

The use of motorized vehicles, such as "all terrain vehicles" (ATVs) or motorcycles, is considered an incompatible use of parkland that was acquired for protecting water quality and wildlife habitat. There is evidence of recent ATV use on the park property, some of which is causing erosion along riverbanks and the sedimentation of streams. These activities are not consistent with the intended use of the park for low-impact recreation use.

2. Hunting

Hunting is a traditional use of this property and some of the neighboring properties. The land was managed for many years as gamelands under the supervision of the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. Changing this particular property from private woodlands to a public park with hiking trails and picnic areas creates an environment within which hunting would be an incompatible use. The potential danger to Park users far outweighs the need to allow hunting on the property.

The Committee notes, however, that the exploding nature of the White tailed Deer population in this area may warrant the counties to consider allowing periodic managed hunting to reduce the population and thereby reduce the negative impacts that population has on the park resources. Mecklenburg County Parks in Charlotte has this type of program.

3. Firearms

The same factors that make this property unsuitable for hunting make it unsuitable for the use of firearms of any kind except by authorized law enforcement personnel.

* * * * *

The above recommendations are offered to the Durham and Orange boards of commissioners who will make final decisions on what uses will be allowed in the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area.

VI. Park Development Timetable

The following are current estimates for the length of time needed to complete each step of the way toward opening the new park for public use and enjoyment.

- April 2001: Cultural Survey of park property completed
- August 2001: LRPAC recommendations on use conveyed to Orange/Durham BOCCs
- Sept/Oct. 2001: Bidding/selection process completed for Conceptual Design/Site Plan
- Dec. 2001: Conceptual Design presented to LRPAC for Review and Comment
- Jan. 2002: Revised Conceptual Design presented to LRPAC (Public Meeting)
- March 2002: Site Plan submitted to Orange/Durham BOCCs
- April 2002: Construction bidding and selection process completed
- August 2002: Construction completed
- October 2002: Park opens to public (dedication ceremony)

VII. Future Issues

In the coming months, the Little River Park Advisory Committee will discuss and make recommendations on the design and construction of facilities for the Little River Regional Park and Natural Area. An initial conceptual design for the park will be presented to the Committee in December 2001. A revised plan will come back to the Committee for review at a public meeting. The site plan will then go to the Durham and Orange county boards of commissioners for their consideration and ultimate approval.

In the meantime staff will continue to research the following internal management issues and make recommendations to their respective managers and boards of commissioners:

- Development of an interlocal agreement between Durham and Orange counties that will address budget, management, security, staffing, and operational needs etc.
- Capital improvement plan for potential future parkland acquisition and development.
- Policy decision on the naming of park facilities and trails.
- Feasibility of providing a caretaker residence to provide security and operational needs.