



**New York State
Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation**

KATHY HOCHUL
Governor

ERIK KULLESEID
Commissioner

**AGENCY DECISION
AND
STATEMENT OF FINDINGS**

Adoption of a Final Master Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement for James Baird State Park

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has prepared and released a Final Master Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), dated October 26, 2022, Revised January 25, 2023, for James Baird State Park located in the Town of LaGrange in Dutchess County, New York.

By the authority vested in me in State Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation Law, I do hereby adopt the Final Master Plan and FEIS for James Baird State Park.

This decision is based on the attached Findings Statement and the content of the Final Master Plan and FEIS, which have been prepared according to the provisions of Part 617, the regulations implementing Article 8 of Environmental Conservation Law - the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

Erik Kulleseid
Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

9.6.23

Date

**State Environmental Quality Review
FINDINGS STATEMENT
James Baird State Park Final Master Plan/FEIS**

March 14, 2023

Pursuant to Article 8 (State Environmental Quality Review Act – SEQRA) of the Environmental Conservation Law and 6 NYCRR Part 617, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), as lead agency, makes the following findings:

Title of the Action:

Adoption and Implementation of a Master Plan for James Baird State Park

Location:

James Baird State Park is located in the Town of LaGrange in Dutchess County, New York.

Description of the Action:

The Master Plan for James Baird State Park (Park) provides long term guidance for the development and management of the Park and protection of its resources as summarized below.

Date of Completion of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS): October 26, 2022,
Revised January 25, 2023

These findings consider the relevant environmental impacts, facts and conclusions disclosed in the Final EIS; weigh and balance relevant environmental impacts with social, economic and other considerations; provide a rationale for the agency’s decision; certify that the requirements of 6 NYCRR Part 617 have been met; and certify that consistent with social, economic and other essential considerations from among the reasonable alternatives available, the action is one which avoids or minimizes adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable, and that included within the Plan are those mitigation measures that will avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable.

Findings:

1. The Final Plan was subject to a complete Environmental Impact Statement process including an online public meeting. The Final EIS contains a chapter on responses to comments on the Draft EIS. This chapter provides information on modifications to the Final Master Plan (Plan) and FEIS as a result of comments received.
2. James Baird State Park is located in Dutchess County in the Town of LaGrange. The Park is located approximately ten miles east of Poughkeepsie. The Park is bounded by the Taconic State Parkway to the west and Mountain Road to the South.
3. James Baird State Park was established in 1939 when James Baird donated his 590-acre farm to New York State for construction of a park. The donation also enabled the state to route the Taconic State Parkway just north of Freedom Plains Road. The Park’s early infrastructure was initially developed through the use of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). World War II and the dissolution of the CCC interrupted construction until after the war, when work was taken

over by the Taconic State Park Commission. The Park opened officially in 1948. Additional purchases throughout the years bring the total Park area to 790 acres.

4. James Baird State Park is open year-round and hosts approximately 130,000 visitors annually. During the summer months, the main attractions to the Park are the bathhouse, bandshell, picnic areas, ball courts, walking paths, playground, and golf course.
5. James Baird State Park contains significant open space and natural areas in its woodlands, fields, and waterbodies. Nearly half of its total 790 acres is classified as “natural.” The Park’s largely rural setting and the forested corridor of the Taconic State Parkway provide open space with varying wildlife habitats. Baird’s most significant natural resource is its wetlands, which are part of ecologically important wetland complexes in the region that are home to rare turtle species.
6. One significant natural community is documented in the Park – Appalachian Oak-Hickory Forest. The Appalachian Oak-Hickory Forest is comprised of about 348 acres of forest that intersects with the Park’s eastern side. Approximately 222 acres of this forest fall within the boundaries of the Park.
7. James Baird State Park has a population of the State Threatened Blanding’s turtle, part of a larger population of these rare turtles in Dutchess County. There are no New York Natural Heritage Program tracked plant species currently documented at the Park. However, several locally uncommon plant species were documented in or near the Park.
8. There are a wide variety of recreation resources in the Park. Day use activities include a playground, a softball field, sand volleyball and tennis courts and pickleball. There are grills and tables for picnicking, two pavilions and a Bandshell for larger events. There are also diverse opportunities for park visitors to relax and enjoy the park’s natural and scenic beauty.
9. The Park’s 18-hole golf course complex includes a Clubhouse. The facility includes putting and driving ranges and has three acres of greens and 2.8 acres of tees. The total area of the fairways is about 30 acres. Approximately 30,000 to 40,000 rounds of golf are played at Baird’s course each year.
10. The Plan identifies a vision statement and goals for the Park. The vision for James Baird State Park is that the Park will be an accessible year-round destination offering diverse recreational opportunities and a variety of event spaces while providing a healthy natural ecosystem that protects and enhances habitat for sensitive and significant species.
11. The Plan presents a series of “preferred alternatives” for future development and operation of James Baird State Park. Status quo alternatives were evaluated for each element of the Plan as well. The Status Quo Alternative consists of the current facilities, programs, and practices. The various preferred alternatives were combined to create a single preferred alternative for recreation development and resource protection into one that best met the goals for the Park. This alternative represents the Final Master Plan. The actions described in the Plan present the long-term vision for the rehabilitation and enhancement of public use facilities and the protection and preservation of the cultural and natural resources at the Park.
12. The Plan considers the historic, cultural, natural, and recreational resources of the Park and responds to the recreational needs and safety of park patrons, protection of natural, cultural, and

scenic resources and the principles of sustainability. The Plan sets forth a long-term vision to guide future development of new and existing park facilities. The Plan also recognizes that the initiation of each specific action will be determined by the level of funding available to OPRHP in future years, as well as including priorities of implementing capital improvements to meet these goals.

13. James Baird State Park offers golfing, trails, hiking, a playground, a softball field, sand volleyball, tennis and pickleball courts, a basketball court, and picnicking. Improvements to these resources are documented throughout the Plan. The Plan calls for improvements to recreational facilities including retrofitting the bathhouse as an events venue to accommodate up to 500 guests; rehabilitating the Bandshell; making improvements to picnic shelters, comfort stations, utilities, and the playground; redeveloping the parking lot in the day-use area; conversion of a tennis court to more pickleball courts; repurposing the existing softball area as a fitness trail/exercise route; creation of a multi-purpose court at the former roller rink; developing low-maintenance winter recreation opportunities (e.g. snowshoeing and cross-country skiing); and providing a suitable location for fishing.
14. The Plan provides guidance for the upgrading, maintenance and expansion of the trail system. Key components include: construction of a park-wide accessible, multi-use path; repair of low, wet, and eroded areas in the Park's existing trail system; repair of culverts and bridges and improving trail markings; designation of a natural surface hiking/cross country ski trail system; and providing a pedestrian connection to trails in the Freedom Road Area.
15. Strategies for natural resource protection include: expanding and improving natural resource management practices by enhancing habitat, installing new wildlife protections and developing educational programs; implementing habitat enhancement for key species; investigating opportunities to implement riparian/streambank and wetland creation/expansion measures; enhancing buffers and creating greater connectivity along wildlife migration zones; constructing a berm and planting with native species to provide pollinator habitat; and developing and implementing an invasive species management program.
16. Interpretation, education and outreach opportunities throughout the Park will be expanded. These include: developing new visitor activity programs to utilize the Park's upgraded sports infrastructure; developing new partnerships for environmental education programs; and development of self-guided environmental educational content, including new signage, podcasts, QR codes, social media, and other platforms.
17. Cultural resource protection strategies include: developing interpretive content that tells the story of the establishment of the Park and the significance of its design and developing an annotated bibliography that catalogues original design documents and resources on the Park's historical and cultural elements.
18. The Plan calls for many improvements for operations, infrastructure and maintenance. These include: implementing traffic calming measures; developing and implementing a comprehensive, parkwide signage plan; improving the Park entrances; redeveloping the Park's maintenance area; upgrading the Park's electricity infrastructure, including phone and internet systems; upgrading the Park's water supply system; developing a staffing plan and corresponding operational budget; and constructing a new park manager's house.

19. At the golf course, improvements include redeveloping the clubhouse parking lot; improving and upgrading the golf practice facility and driving range; and developing a banquet facility in the former Pro Shop.
20. The Freedom Road area will be better incorporated into the overall park program by developing new recreational amenities in this area including installing a disc golf course, designating trails for all season use, providing fishing access, and implementing habitat enhancement strategies.
21. The implementation of the Final Master Plan for James Baird State Park is divided into three priority phases. The pace and sequencing of prioritized actions will be determined by the availability of funding, which is a function of the size of OPRHP's annual capital budgets and the need to balance investments throughout the park system.
22. Impacts associated with the implementation of the Plan and mitigation measures identified are as follows:
 - Implementation of the Plan will result in some physical changes to the land, particularly where new recreation facilities, buildings, and trails will be constructed. OPRHP makes every effort to minimize impacts and disturbance to land resources by repurposing existing structures rather than building new structures, and siting new construction in previously disturbed areas, when possible and appropriate. Some construction projects may require some vegetation removal and soil disturbance. To minimize the amount of grading needed, site specific design of these facilities will accommodate the existing grade levels where possible. For all projects, construction documents will include appropriate erosion and sediment controls.
 - For trail construction, disturbance of land will be limited to the required width of the trail corridor; some trails will utilize existing corridors to reduce impacts to currently vegetated areas. Trail construction will follow the policies and guidelines for trail building that have been established by recognized trail organizations and government agencies.
 - Some additional impervious surfaces will be added to develop new facilities such as the multi-use path and new shade structures. Mitigation such as use of porous paving and bioswales will be considered in projects to reduce overall potential impacts from stormwater runoff.
 - Implementation of the Plan will have minimal adverse impacts on water resources in the Park. All proposed projects will incorporate stormwater management measures; sediment and erosion control measures will be incorporated into design and construction documents, as appropriate. Implementation of the Plan will result in some beneficial impacts to water quality and aquatic habitat by proposing riparian and wetland creation and expansion, enhancing natural buffers, and creating more habitat with connectivity along wildlife migration corridors. Improved management of invasive species and restoration with native plantings where needed will help to restore and protect wetland health and biodiversity.
 - Implementation of the Plan will have minimal impacts on air quality in the Park. An increase in the number of vehicles travelling to the Park is expected to be minor and air quality impacts from an increase in traffic volume are not expected to be significant.

Short-term, temporary air quality impacts during large events and during construction are expected to be temporary and localized. Air quality impacts from construction vehicles will be mitigated by assuring that these vehicles are in good running condition and are not producing excessive exhaust.

- Implementation of the Plan will have a positive impact on the biological resources in the Park. The Final Master Plan's vision statement, strategies, and proposed actions serve to protect and enhance these sensitive resources. The Plan proposes to implement a more comprehensive approach to invasive species management, to restore and expand habitat when possible, and undertake new projects with wildlife considerations at the forefront. Limited new development is proposed in the Plan, and therefore direct impacts to biological elements are expected to be minimal. Projects have been primarily sited in previously developed areas with limited environmental sensitivity. All proposed projects will employ design strategies and protections that minimize impacts to sensitive areas.
- Implementation of the Plan will have some impacts on the ecological communities in the Park. The expansion of the parking area at the golf course may impact edges of the Appalachian Oak-Hickory Forest around the lot. Impacts will be mitigated by providing appropriate site design to reduce vegetation loss. To minimize impacts to sensitive areas, locations for new proposed pedestrian pathways and trails will be assessed and will incorporate sustainable design. Facility and infrastructure improvements outlined in the Plan, including improvements to utilities, the maintenance facility, Clubhouse, and day use area, are primarily in areas that are already developed or in culturally derived natural community types, such as lawn.
- There will be some impacts to flora in the Park. The construction of new facilities will require removal of some vegetation during construction. For buildings and other infrastructure, vegetation loss will be minimal and primarily within the building footprint and associated outdoor spaces, which are primarily in lawn or developed areas. Where new trail segments are proposed, impacts will be mitigated by requiring selection of the most appropriate routes, employing Best Management Practice's such as those found in established guidelines for sustainable trail design during layout and construction, and minimizing removal of vegetation to the required corridor width. Consideration for the protection of the Park's rare plant species and sensitive areas will be part of the final planning process when selecting preferred locations of new development. Rare plant surveys will be conducted when appropriate.
- Minimal impacts to fauna in the Park are expected due to the small amount of physical change being proposed in the Plan. Areas proposed for improvements through either rehabilitation or new construction are not located near sensitive environmental areas and are not expected to affect wildlife in the area. Consideration of potential impacts on the fauna of the Park was part of the planning process when selecting preferred alternatives and will also be considered during future implementation of new projects. Protection measures for focal species, particularly Blanding's Turtle, are in place and additional measures are proposed. Signage and monitoring will address any potential for overfishing the pond. Any tree removals will follow the OPRHP Tree Removal Timing Guidelines to avoid potential impacts to protected bats and migratory bird species.

- Implementation of the Plan will include the utilization of Best Management Practices to minimize the spread of invasive species. Surveying and monitoring for forest pest species will be included as part of a more proactive invasive species strategy. Educational information on natural resources in the Park will also be provided for visitors, with brochures, signs, posters, and other materials.
- The Plan recognizes and protects the historic and cultural resources within the Park. Adaptive reuse and/or rehabilitation of some of the Park's cultural elements has been proposed in the Plan. To assure that there are no adverse impacts on cultural or historic resources, projects will be reviewed under Section 14.09 by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). All changes to historic elements will follow the Department of Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.
- To assure that there are no adverse impacts to archaeological resources, any project that could result in ground disturbance and potentially affect the Park's cultural resources may require consultation with the Archaeology Unit of SHPO to determine if a site-specific archaeological survey is needed. The majority of the projects proposed in the Plan may require review under Section 14.09 for historic and/or archeological resource considerations. Based on consultation with SHPO, it was determined that some golf course maintenance activities are exempt from the Section 14.09 review requirement as they do not have the potential to directly or indirectly affect the character or qualities of a historic property.
- Portions of the Freedom Road Area are currently under agricultural use. In the future, some or all of that area may be allowed to revert to grassland, managed for successional growth, or managed for other similar ecosystem changes. The disc golf course may be developed in this area with minimal improvements needed.
- Recommendations in the Plan help to protect the Park's scenic resources and vistas. The Plan recommends continued monitoring and maintenance of current, as well as to-be-identified, scenic vistas throughout the Park, following Agency policy. Projects proposed in the Park will not have any significant effect on the view of the Park from off site.
- There will be temporary, minor adverse impacts to open space from implementation of the Plan; this will occur during construction projects where the project sites are temporarily closed off to public access. Overall, the implementation of the Final Master Plan will result in significant beneficial recreation and open space impacts. While current recreational opportunities at the Park will remain available, a variety of new and improved recreation facilities and visitor amenities are proposed. All improvements will follow ADA guidelines. Improvements and additions to the trail system will increase the variety of recreation experiences for walkers, hikers, cyclists, cross-country skiers, and snowshoers. If recommended acquisitions occur, the impact of adding open space acreage and protecting wildlife habitat in an area with increasing development pressure will also be beneficial.
- The Park has received funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which is administered by the National Park Service. Acceptance of this federal funding includes a requirement that these facilities remain in public outdoor recreational use in perpetuity. Any proposals for uses other than public outdoor recreation require prior

approval of the National Park Service to lift the use restriction through a process known as “conversion.” Actions proposed in the Plan will enhance the Park’s facilities for public outdoor recreational use. It is not anticipated that any proposed elements will require conversion.

- Implementation of the Plan will improve access to Baird, with proposed new entrance designs and signage. While full implementation of the Plan may result in some increased visitation to the facility, it was determined that the Park’s existing roadways will accommodate the anticipated added volume. The Plan proposes traffic calming measures to slow traffic moving within and through the Park. In addition, the Plan’s proposed addition of a park-wide multi-use path will separate pedestrian and vehicular traffic and provide a safer environment for pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles using the Park. The Plan proposes developing a comprehensive, parkwide signage plan to improve wayfinding, entry/arrival, traffic management, wildlife protection, and interpretative signage.
- The proposed re-design of the Clubhouse parking lot will result in a slight increase in the quantity of parking spaces at the facility, and overflow areas will be available during times of peak capacity. Clearly delineated ADA-compliant parking spots, as required, will be available.
- Public health and safety are vital to park operations and an important component of OPRHP’s mission. New or substantially rehabilitated facilities will be designed and constructed to meet all applicable health and safety codes.
- The increase in energy use is anticipated to be minor and represents only an insignificant increase at the facility over existing uses. Sustainability principles and energy efficiency will be incorporated into the design of all new Park buildings and rehabilitated structures, to the degree feasible. Lighting at new or rehabilitated Park facilities will be designed to be “dark sky” friendly and to minimize impacts on adjoining properties. There will be minor, temporary adverse noise and odor impacts (e.g., noise and exhaust from construction equipment and vehicles) associated with construction of proposed improvements.

23. The Plan describes the process for supplemental environmental review. The Plan also provides for guidance as to when additional environmental review may be required and identifies the types of actions that are likely to require additional review. These include: new actions not addressed within the EIS that are not Type II actions within Part 617; any change from the preferred alternative for natural resource protection, recreational and facility development, or other elements of the Plan that would result in significant adverse environmental impacts; any leases, easements, memoranda of understanding, or other agreements between OPRHP and other entities that would affect resources in a manner that is not sufficiently addressed in the Final Master Plan and FEIS; and any project determined through SHPO review to have an Adverse Impact on historic resources at the Park. The final trail alignment of the new multi-use trail and connection to the Freedom Road area is identified in the EIS to be evaluated as to the need for additional review dependent on the outcome of more detailed planning.

Certification To Approve/Fund/Undertake:

Having considered the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement and having considered the preceding written facts and conclusions relied on to meet the requirements of 6 NYCRR Part 617.11, this Statement of Findings certifies that:

1. The requirements of 6 NYCRR Part 617 have been met; and
2. Consistent with social, economic and other essential considerations from among the reasonable alternatives available, the action is the one that avoids or minimizes adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable, and that adverse impacts will be avoided or minimized to the maximum extent practicable by incorporating as conditions to the decision those mitigative measures that were identified as practicable.