

## **Statement of the National Association for Olmsted Parks Opposing Plans for Development in South Mountain Reservation**

Essex County is the home of the first county-wide park system designed by the Olmsted firm. This jewel of Olmsted design – celebrating its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020 – provides restorative green and open space across diverse communities in a densely populated area.

In these challenging times, open green space has never been more important to the health and beauty of the entire community. Rather than focusing on a new pavilion to accommodate large crowds at the Turtle Back Zoo, the National Association for Olmsted Parks urges the County to prioritize the long-term health of the South Mountain Reservation through maintenance, conservation and preservation of its native flora and fauna and natural lands.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Background**

John Charles Olmsted supplied Essex County with the first South Mountain designs in June 1900. In addition to parks of various sizes to meet neighborhood needs, the firm planned several large reservations in the Essex County System to protect their unique natural scenery for the benefit and health of all county residents.

Olmsted presented planting notes, detailing woodland improvements and plans for minimally intrusive roads and paths in South Mountain. The extensive collection of designs, photographs and correspondence in the Olmsted Archives and at the Library of Congress reveal comprehensive long-term plans for a healthy wooded reservation, largely free of development. In 1920, the Essex County Park Commission even issued bonds, valued at \$500,000, to allow for the purchase of additional parcels. The property, writes local historian Jeanne Kolva, was needed “to prevent the erection of structures which would appear to the casual observer to be within the reservation itself, and thus greatly detract from its sylvan beauty.” (*Olmsted Parks in New Jersey*, 2011)

In the original Olmsted plans, there was no Turtle Back Zoo. Turtle Back figures in the drawings – not as the name of a building – but as a unique rock formation, named by the Lenape Indians who lived in the area. It was not until 1963 that the Zoo became part of the Reservation and now a well-enjoyed addition. Originally covering 15 acres, it has expanded significantly since that time, in what the Zoo Master Plan calls “an incredible growth trajectory,” requiring the deforestation of additional acres using State and County Open Space and Recreation Funds. According to [online research](#), the South Mountain Recreation Complex is now a 36-acre recreation facility within the Reservation including a “zoo, ice skating/hockey rinks, a safari-themed miniature golf course, a forest adventure park, a restaurant, paddle boats, a nautical theme playground and a walking loop.”

The County’s proposed development announced in 2019 would result in a new 500-seat “conservation pavilion,” expected to require another acre of open space and result in the clear

cutting of many trees. Long-term, the Zoo's master plans call for even more expansion – with new exhibits, new structures and likely impacts on traffic. At a minimum, no steps should be taken until independent parties have assessed the ecological and transportation impacts of the proposed development.

Given increasing urbanization, the value of natural green space is greater than ever, combatting heat, absorbing storm water and providing habitat for wildlife. In the face of the challenging impacts of the coronavirus on the economy and public health, there is even more reason to revisit this development plan. As thousands have, in recent weeks, flocked to open public parks around the country, the value of unstructured green space has been confirmed – as never before. Preserving, enhancing and expanding parkland is essential to public health by providing citizens opportunities for the relaxing and unstructured enjoyment of scenery.

The South Mountain Conservancy has been for many years engaged in urgent and painstaking maintenance, preservation and reforestation—management that the Olmsted firm emphasized as necessary in its early plans for Essex County. As the Conservancy knows well, management and maintenance require sustained attention and resources. These efforts should be vigorously supported and pursued. Indeed, as many Essex County residents have outlined, the Reservation itself offers an unmatched opportunity to teach sound conservation practices and their positive impact on environmental and public health.

In 2020, as Essex County celebrates the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this historic park system, it can honor the Olmsted legacy by prioritizing the maintenance of historic open space for the community.

June 1, 2020

*For 40 years, the National Association for Olmsted Parks has been dedicated to advancing Olmsted principles and the legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people's lives.*