



RHODE ISLAND
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

235 Promenade Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

June 6, 2024

Mr. Samuel Roberts, AICP
Land and Water Conservation Fund
National Park Service – Interior Region 2
100 Alabama Street SW Bldg. 1924
Atlanta, GA 30303

Via UPLOAD to DOI LWCF partner hub

RE: Conversion Request
Pawtucket, RI
LWCF Files: 44-00051 – Development (McCoy Stadium 1970)
44-00131 – Acquisition (3.1 a at South Woodlawn 1971)
44-00152 – Development (5.2 a at South Woodlawn 1971)
44-00207 – Development (Dunnell Park/Hank Soar Field 1980)

Dear Mr. Roberts:

The City of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, has submitted a proposal to convert portions of protected sites identified in the above-referenced files and establish replacement property at a single parcel. RIDEM staff including me in my capacity as State Liaison Officer (SLO) and Paul Jordan, Assistant SLO, have reviewed the materials. Throughout the application development process, Mr. Jordan and I maintained frequent coordination with appropriate NPS program staff. The City's application package is now complete.

APPLICATION MATERIALS

The City has provided a Compliance and Stewardship (C&S) Form as well as the following materials:

- a) Appendix A – Narrative
- b) Appendix B – Social Equity Discussion
- c) Appendix C – Morley Field Environmental Review (conversion site 44-00131; 44-00152)
- d) Appendix D – Dunnell Environmental Review (conversion site 44-00207)
- e) Appendix E – McCoy Environmental Review (conversion site, 44-00051)
- f) Appendix F – Riverside Environmental Review (replacement property)
- g) Notice of Intent to (RI) State Historic Preservation Officer (dated 1/4/2024)
- h) Notice of Intent to Mashantucket Pequot Indian Tribe (dated 1/4/2024)
- i) Appraisals for each site
- j) Review Appraisals
- k) LWCF Boundary Maps (existing/proposed)

In addition to the City's submitted materials, this request includes the following materials:

- This transmittal letter, briefly describing the conversion proposal and requesting NPS review and approval of the City's proposal.
- Relevant SF 424 forms

- Relevant appraisals, including review appraisals, provided by the City, in conformance with the Uniform Appraisal Standards for Federal Land Acquisitions. This material was previously provided to NPS.
- LWCF Project Amendment Forms
- LWCF boundary maps
- Description and Notification Forms (DNF)
- USFWS Verification Letter for Riverside Park (RE Long-eared Bat, Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) system)

TRAVEL

The City has been in communication with this office since approximately June 2022 regarding a potential conversion proposal which would address both a new (proposed) conversion and two historical (unapproved) conversions. Accordingly, this office has been in communication with the LWCF program staff at National Park Service throughout this same time period.

The City conducted appraisals and reviews of the affected properties and submitted those to this office in 2023. The appraisals and reviews were subsequently reviewed by LWCF program staff, and the proposal was invited to proceed. Local news reports indicate that the proposed new conversion was widely discussed during numerous municipal level meetings through 2022 and into 2023.

In January 2024, the City submitted their proposal for conversions. The City then published legal notices indicating that the submission had been prepared/submitted and posted the materials on their web site. The legal notices provided a link to that material. The notice was published in the Blackstone Valley Call & Times, a newspaper of regional distribution, on January 18, 2024. The notice was also published in the Providence Journal, a newspaper of statewide distribution, on January 24, 2024. Both notices indicated that the City would invite written comment on the proposal through February 2, 2024. The City indicates they received 184 comments during the public comment period.

Following the comment period, the City submitted a revised conversion proposal on February 28, 2024. The City provided a pdf of all comments on March 14, 2024. It is this material that is reviewed as the Conversion Proposal.

AFFECTED SITES

Conversion Sites:

The proposal seeks conversions from recreational property at 3 locations. DEM maintains an online mapping resource of all LWCF sites. This online map is available [here](#). The LWCF-protected properties affected by this proposal are as follows:

1. McCoy Stadium (44-00051)
Following development in the early 1970's which protected 9.8 acres of property at the 23.4-acre stadium site, a stadium expansion in 1990 resulted in removal of two (non-league) baseball fields. The City indicates they replaced those facilities at other locations but did not secure conversion approval or replacement authorization through the LWCF program.

The AAA baseball team that had long been housed at McCoy Stadium and which sparked great nexus with outdoor recreation has since relocated (out of State) and the City intends to develop the entire 23+-acre site, including the 9.8-acre portion which falls in LWCF protected status, for non-recreation purposes.

2. South Woodlawn, portion (44-00131; 44-00152)

Known locally as “Morley Field,” the site is comprised of two parcels. One parcel (2.1 acres) was donated to the City, involving no LWCF acquisition funding, and one (3.1 acres) was acquired with LWCF support (44-00131). A LWCF development grant was also provided to support development of recreational elements on the combined 5.2-acre site (44-00152).

The proposal is to convert the 3.1-acre portion of the property to non-recreation use. The remaining 2.1-acre portion of the site will be remediated to recreation standards and redeveloped for a variety of recreation opportunities. A conceptual plan for such development is provided and further discussed in the “Replacement Property” section below.

3. Prospect Heights / Dunnell Park, portion (44-00207)

Known locally as Hank Soar Field, the project included development of 9 acres of recreation property. At that time (1980), 4.7 acres of the property was to be transferred from the City Redevelopment Authority to the City (municipal entity) for recreation purposes. That transfer, however, did not take place and there is currently affordable housing developed on a portion (2.3 acres) of the 4.7-acre LWCF-protected site.

The proposal is to convert a 2.3-acre portion of the site to non-recreation use.

Replacement Property: Map of all LWCF sites in Rhode Island is available [here](#). Replacement property is proposed as follows:

a. Riverside Park. Acquisition and Development of 9.6 acres

Replacement property is proposed as a portion of what is currently known as Riverside Cemetery. Based on a review of aerial photos, it is clear that the site was previously disturbed, as it was an active gravel bank for many years.

The proposal shows recreation fields will be provided, as well as some walking trails / access to the Blackstone River, a designated America’s Heritage River.

b. South Woodlawn: While not directly a “replacement” site, the City has proposed redevelopment of remaining 2.1-acre section of South Woodlawn.

The City reports that use of the (existing) 5-acre property had steadily declined, as determined by permitting, and only one program utilized the site annually, August to November, since 2015 (from summer 2015 until the 2022 closure of the site). A portion of the property will be converted through this proposal to non-recreation purposes, and the remaining, 2.1-acre portion is proposed to be redeveloped for recreation purposes.

The City’s Compliance & Stewardship (C&S) form provides an analysis of these proposals through the lens of the State of RI Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP).

DISCUSSION

1. General – Future Use(s): LWCF conversion proposals expressly do not consider the proposed future use of the recreation resources proposed to be converted out of recreation use.
2. Environmental Issues at South Woodlawn

Based on news reports and a variety of inputs, it appears the City in 2022 took action to sell property and convert the entire 5.2-acre South Woodlawn / Morley Field site to non-recreational purposes. As part of that planned property transfer, the potential buyer performed Site Investigation, including sampling of the soil and groundwater on the property. The Site Investigation sampling revealed contaminants present. Accordingly,

the entire site was fenced off to prevent access / accidental exposure (City Council action, June 22, 2022). A Remedial Action Work Plan (RAWP) approved in July 2022 indicates a cap will be placed on the majority of the 5.2-acre site in the form of an asphalt paved parking area. The subsequent plan for remediation will be dependent upon the future land use(s) of the parcels.

It was perhaps in response to the property being closed / fenced off that the public became more widely aware of the City's proposal to convert the property to non-recreational uses. Following significant public response, the City later determined that a (2.1-acre) portion of the 5.2-acre site would be retained as a protected outdoor recreation site. Since the 2022 RAWP assumed the entire site would be converted to non-recreation purposes, that Plan must be revised to show the retained portion will be remediated to a recreation standard.

Remediation of the recreation area, as well as the portion proposed for conversion, is beneficial to park users and nearby residents alike. The degree of cleanup and remediation on the site will be aligned with the future use. As described below, the State is not prepared to recommend approval of the conversion at South Woodlawn.

3. Discussion – Conversion sites: One site (McCoy) results in loss of the property for recreational purposes; the other two areas are for *partial* conversion and retain significant recreational use at each site.

- a. Discussion: McCoy Stadium Annex

The Annex was constructed in the early 1970's in a portion of the 23+-acre site. The LWCF-protected Annex area is 9.28 acres and included a track, football field, baseball field and open field area which later became an additional baseball field. In the 1990's the City expanded the Stadium in order to meet the standards of professional baseball (AAA level) and some of the Annex recreation facilities were removed at that time, converted to parking to support the AAA baseball stadium. At the time, the City notes, they established "replacement" baseball fields for public use at other locations. This replacement, however, was not approved through the LWCF conversion process.

The AAA baseball team, the Pawtucket Red Sox, known locally as the PawSox, moved out of the facility following the 2020 season. At that time, the entire complex, including the Stadium, Annex and recreation facilities, was closed.

- b. Discussion: Prospect Heights – Dunnell Park

The facility was developed in 1970 to create 3 baseball/softball fields. Those recreation resources were constructed and remain today. Additionally, the City, through the City's Housing Authority (which became the Housing Development Corporation), built affordable housing on the property. The plan at the time had been that the Housing Authority would deed the recreation acreage to the City. In fact, the City reports this action was authorized in 1970, but not executed. As a result, a portion of the LWCF-protected property is in fact utilized for affordable housing and has been for decades. Notably, however, the recreation activity still thrives as originally intended; the portion proposed for conversion does not impinge upon the active recreation of the site, which continues to include 3 baseball diamonds/fields.

- c. Discussion: South Woodlawn (aka Morley Field)

Over decades, the City of Pawtucket notes their investments in additional recreational sites throughout the City, and organizations which had previously used Morley Field relocated their events to other locations.

Notably, numerous comments received during the public comment period offered by the City raised concerns over environmental equity and justice of the proposed partial conversion of this site (see further specific discussion below).

At this time, the State is not prepared to recommend approval of the conversion at South Woodlawn since questions remain regarding Environmental Justice impacts.

4. Discussion – Replacement site

The proposal shows recreation fields will be provided, as well as some walking trails / access to the Blackstone River, which is a designated America’s Heritage River.

The site is part of what is known as Riverside Cemetery. The replacement property has not been used to date for cemetery purposes. In recent years, it appears to have had an active gravel removal operation there. The site elevations go from approximately 68 feet near Pleasant Street to 2 feet near the river; a change of more than 65 feet with unnatural contours (from the gravel removal operation).

On both sides of the Seekonk River, the City of Pawtucket has worked to acquire property and develop active recreation and riverside enhancements. Immediately north of the proposed replacement property is Max Read Field, a LWCF-protected site which provides football, track and baseball recreation resources.

North of Max Read field, the City is working with a private developer to establish a professional soccer stadium. On the north side of that facility, known locally as Tidewater Landing, a pedestrian bridge will cross the river, connecting with additional recreation resources on the east (river left) side of the river.

The City’s proposed “Riverside Development Plan” dated July 2022 shows the potential for 2 soccer fields. Narrative indicates interest in developing riverside walking trails. As provided, the plan is quite general in nature and lacks significant detail.

5. Discussion – Environmental Justice

At the present, the National Park Service does not have published guidance for evaluating equity impacts of proposed conversions. In lieu of such guidance from NPS, the definition and evaluation tools provided by the US Environmental Protection Agency were reviewed. US EPA defines Environmental Justice as follows:

“Environmental justice means the just treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of income, race, color, national origin Tribal affiliation, or disability, in agency decision-making and other Federal activities that affect human health and the environment so that people:

- Are fully protected from disproportionate and adverse human health and environmental effects (including risks) and hazards, including those related to climate change, the cumulative impacts of environmental and other burdens, and the legacy of racism of other structural or systemic barriers; and
- Have equitable access to a healthy, sustainable, and resilient environment in which to live, play, work, learn, grow, worship, and engage in cultural and subsistence practices.

(epa.gov/environmentaljustice)

Many of the comments received by the City on the proposal raised concerns about environmental justice.

The State reviewed data from the EPA’s “EJ Screen Environmental and Socioeconomic Indicators Data” tool as applied to a half-mile radius around each of the affected properties to help guide a discussion about the potential impact of the proposal, and particularly to help assess equity of the proposal.

	Dunnell/ Prosp.Hts	McCoy	South Woodlawn	Replacement - Riverside
Race – % White	45	45	50	60
% Population Ages 1-18	21	23	19	21

Only the McCoy site will be entirely removed from outdoor recreation (both Dunnell and South Woodlawn retain recreation uses as described by the proposal). The analysis of the EPA data focusses on McCoy since that site is being proposed for full conversion from public recreational use. The Riverside parcel shows lesser relative levels of key EJ indexes. The environmental and socioeconomic indicators data are similar between the two sites.

The South Woodlawn and Dunnell data show higher percentiles of the cited EJ Indexes than the Replacement parcel at Riverside. However, it is important to note that recreation facilities will remain at these locations. Further, at Dunnell there is no reduction in recreation access.

It is important to note that the US EPA tools and data provide information on community demographics and potential sources of environmental pollution in the proximity of the area under evaluation. The EPA tool does not address the equitability of recreational value or other socio-economic concerns that may arise from replacing one recreational resource with another in a different geographic location. Those issues were raised in comments submitted to the city by members of the public on this proposal.

At this time, the State is not prepared to recommend approval of the conversion at South Woodlawn since questions remain regarding Environmental Justice impacts.

6. Park and Recreation Areas, General:

Parks and recreation areas offer numerous benefits to individuals, communities and ecosystems.

Numerous comments submitted to the City noted the value of having a safe space for physical activity as well as natural resources which help cleanse air and water.

The United Nations UN Chronicle article titled “Green Spaces: An Invaluable Resource for Delivering Sustainable Urban Health” (<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/green-spaces-invaluable-resource-delivering-sustainable-urban-health>) states in part:

“Urban green areas offer great opportunities for positive change and the sustainable development of our cities. Public green spaces that are accessible for walking, cycling, playing and other outdoor activities can improve safe mobility and access to basic services for women, older adults and children, as well as low-income population groups, thus improving health equity.”

The single loss of recreation facility is proposed at McCoy Stadium, to be replaced by the proposed replacement property at Riverside. It is a critical consideration that the South Woodlawn and Prospect Heights properties are proposed for change, but not removal of the entirety of recreation facilities at those locations. However, it is also critical to note that the proposed changes at South Woodlawn have not been clearly the result of public input into the process and proposed design elements.

South Woodlawn – Proximity to replacement site and other parks.

The State is not prepared to recommend approval of the conversion at South Woodlawn at this time.

McCoy – Proximity to replacement site and other parks

The Riverside (replacement) site is approximately 1.25 miles from the McCoy parcel. En route to Riverside from McCoy, Town Landing and Max Read Field provide a variety of passive and active recreation opportunities.

The McCoy site is within approximately a half-mile of 3 other public city parks (Agnes Little School, Ayotte Park and Pawtucket Soccer Complex). Within about a mile of McCoy, all on the east side of the River and the south or east side of the Interstate Highway (which means there is no physical impediment to accessing them), are the Seekonk River, Dunnell and Slater Memorial Parks.

REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR APPROVAL OF PROPOSAL

This proposal, if approved, will resolve 2 long-standing, unapproved conversions, being those relating to McCoy Stadium (44-00051) and Dunnell Park (44-00207). Approval of the conversion proposal may be considered with the following conditions:

- 1) The City proposes to retain recreation facilities at the South Woodlawn property. At this time, the State is not prepared to recommend approval of the conversion at South Woodlawn since questions remain regarding Environmental Justice impacts. The State proposes “banking” the overmatch of \$390,000 from the Riverside acquisition for possible future consideration of the conversion.
- 2) Within 180 days of approval of the conversion, if granted, the City shall provide a recreation easement to DEM, recorded in the City’s land evidence records, ensuring that the replacement parcel at Riverside shall remain in recreation use. This time period reflects that the City has yet to acquire the replacement property. While the relevant program requirements stipulate that these remaining (or replacement) parcels shall remain forever as publicly accessible outdoor recreation, recording a recreation easement will establish a trail of such requirements in the land evidence records, and will provide the City with the opportunity to demonstrate publicly their commitment to the permanent availability of the recreation resources.
- 3) The City’s proposal to retain recreation facilities at the South Woodlawn property is being deferred by the State at this time.
- 4) The City’s proposed “Riverside Recreation Site” plan appears extremely preliminary. It currently shows 2 soccer fields, although the fields are pictured end-to-end across a significant grade change. Additionally, while a general access and parking area is presumably shown in the dark gray shaded area, there is no detail provided. A number of comments received expressed an interest in the opportunity to participate in the planning process for this site. Finally, although the City has remarked on the opportunity to provide river-side recreation, no detail is provided. Within 120 days following approval of the conversion, if granted, the City shall submit to the SLO a plan for meaningful public engagement to inform development of final plans for the replacement parcel.
- 5) Not less than 6 months prior to construction of improvements at Riverside Recreation Site, the designated replacement parcel, the City shall submit to the SLO the final design plans and shall describe:
 - a. how the final proposed plan for the site is consistent with (or varies from) this approval, if granted
 - b. what public engagement was led by the City.
 - c. how the information acquired through the public engagement helped to inform and was integrated with the final proposed plan for the site.
- 6) No construction shall commence unless and until the State Historic Preservation Officer approves, in writing, such plan in accordance with the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act, a copy of which shall be provided to the SLO.
- 7) This is a conversion proposal required by federal and State regulation due to the investment of public dollars. Accordingly, no LWCF funds shall be utilized for carrying out the provisions of this proposal, including the acquisition or development of Riverside Park, nor shall such funds be used for redevelopment of the remaining portion of South Woodlawn.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Upon review and with the conditions stipulated herein, it is my determination that:

- the submitted materials document fair market value of the affected properties.

- the submitted materials describe the proposed for replacement, the development of Riverside. However, the State is not prepared to recommend approval of the conversion at South Woodlawn at this time.
- the submitted materials describe how the proposed replacement property meets eligibility requirements.
- this recommendation will provide opportunity for the City to ensure equity in this conversion proposal.
- the submitted materials describe compliance with the RI SCORP.
- the City represents that no coordination with federal agencies is required.
- the submitted materials include Environmental Assessments to comply with NEPA review requirements.

Note: The City provided DEM with copies of letters dated January 4, 2024, whereby it initiated consultation on with the RI SHPO and with the Mashantucket Pequot Indian Tribe. The RI SHPO has provided correspondence seeking further information about the replacement site, which may impact its development.

Note: There is *no evidence of consultation* with the Narragansett Indian Tribe. It is our understanding that the Narragansetts are the only federally-recognized tribe in the area and therefore consultation with that organization is anticipated to be important.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, the proposal describes property identified for conversion, to be replaced by 9.6 acres of land at Riverside, to be developed primarily as active recreation and including passive recreation along the river.

At this time, the National Park Service does not have published guidance for evaluating equity impacts of proposed conversions.

Based on the significance of the comments received from the community and the concerns about environmental equity and justice of the proposed conversation of the South Woodlawn site, the State is not prepared to recommend approval of the conversion at South Woodlawn at this time.

Based on the information provided, it appears the proposal shows replacement property meets or exceeds both the appraised values and the recreation resources of the properties to be converted. Therefore, given the adequacy of value of the replacement property in this proposal, the State proposes “banking” the overmatch of \$390,000 from the Riverside / Replacement parcel for possible future consideration of the conversion in order to provide the City with the opportunity to revisit their proposal with meaningful attention to environmental justice.

The Director of the RI Department of Environmental Management respectfully requests the opportunity to discuss the environmental justice issues related to the conversion of the South Woodlawn site with the appropriate individuals in leadership positions in the US Department of Interior and/or the National Park Service. In particular, the State seeks guidance on the applicability and process to address the elements of the various executive orders issued by the Biden-Harris administration, and previous Presidents, including but not limited to EO 14008 establishing the national Justice 40 effort. RI DEM has also published a Policy on Environmental Justice and wants to fully and adequately evaluate the proposed partial conversion of the South Woodlawn under both national and Departmental frameworks.

Therefore, the State requests the National Park Service to review and approve the proposed conversion(s) **as described including the above-referenced conditions.**

Signed

Megan DiPrete, AICP
State Liaison Officer

cc: Donald Grebien, Mayor, City of Pawtucket
Gay Vietzke, Director, Region 1, US National Park Service