

Greystone turns green

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County turns former asylum into inclusive park, open space



Following years of neglect, the stately and ornate buildings on the 671-acre campus of [Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital](#) in Parsippany-Troy Hills, N.J., had given way to ramshackle structures, unkempt hedges and rotting shells of an historic past. When, in 2003, the state declared that 300 acres of the site would be sold, Morris County officials jumped at the chance to acquire and develop it for recreation and community service.

Serving North Central New Jersey since 1876, Greystone Park Psychiatric was once one of the largest asylums in the United States, housing more than 7,000 patients in the 1950s. The state's decision to close the psychiatric hospital and build a smaller facility on half of Greystone's campus gave county officials the opportunity to meet a growing need. "There has been a real move in New Jersey to conserve, preserve, purchase and maintain open space," says John Murphy, a Morris County freeholder. "It's good for quality of life, [and] that area in Morris County is already very intensely developed."

The county purchased 306 acres of the site from the state for \$1 and then set to work redeveloping the area into a park with active and passive recreation features. It devoted \$9 million in county funds to the project. The [Morris County Park Commission](#) planned the park's features after surveying community organizations from the five surrounding towns on their recreation deficiencies.

The park's centerpiece is an athletic complex that consists of two year-round hockey rinks and a flat, rubber-surfaced baseball diamond that can be used by athletes who are wheelchair-bound or mobility-impaired, as well as children's Tee-ball leagues. Walking paths, meadows, ponds and a natural amphitheatre that is handicapped accessible also are on the grounds. "We didn't want to do something where people were separated in segments and user groups," says David Helmer, executive director of the Morris County Park Commission. "The [field] and [rinks] will allow for those both able and disabled to play together."

The county renamed the area Central Park during a ribbon-cutting ceremony on July 23, 2008, and community organizations immediately began taking advantage of its features. A local high school cross country team has moved its tournament to the park; a professional soccer team sponsors a youth program at the athletic complex; and a local association for retarded citizens held its annual fundraiser on the site. Programs integrating volunteers and disabled groups also are holding baseball and kickball games. "You can just see the joy on the kids' faces when they're out there being a little leaguer just like any 10- or 12-year-old," Murphy says.

Future plans for the site call for trails and hiking paths, an off-leash dog park and three AstroTurf rectangular fields for rugby, football, soccer and lacrosse. In cooperation with local fire and police departments, Safety Town, a county-wide, community-based project designed to teach young children about life safety, is planning to develop a mini-town at Central Park, featuring mock buildings, sidewalks and streets to be used as a practice area for lessons.

The final piece of the redevelopment project will be a non-profit mall. The Central Avenue Complex, which had been housing Greystone patients until recently, will be renovated to host agencies that provide wellness and recovery services. The groups will use the space for a nominal fee, and county officials hope they will see significant savings from shared services because all the agencies are housed in one complex. "We'll be able to have a receptionist that may cover the whole building and two or three conference rooms that can be shared," Murphy says. "There will be all sorts of savings because everyone will be under the same roof."

County officials expect the full development of Central Park to take three to five years to complete. "It's an exciting project," Murphy says. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing."

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