Project Description:

Over the past 50 years, Wolfe Park and Great Hollow Lake have become an integral part of living in Monroe, Connecticut. Generations of families have fond memories of swimming, boating, fishing, hiking, biking, and ballgames through the 379 acres of preserved open space. Proximity to the park has become a major selling point for home buyers.

Few visitors realize that the tranquility of the wooded slopes and serene watercourses are anything but natural. Starting with fallow farmland and a grotesque gravel pit, a multidisciplinary team of designers transformed these disconnected landscapes into a multi-purpose recreational facility. The plan took decades to realize, with each phase building public trust in the process and inviting residents to become stakeholders in its success.

Federal funds under Section 6 (F) (8) of the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act were used to acquire and develop the land. In the initial phase, former pastures became active recreation fields. Subsequent phases moved deeper into the park, creating hiking trails along the ridges and streams. Conversion of the gravel pit into a lake added more amenities to the park. The addition of a bikeway along the former Housatonic Railroad right-of-way provided a link to green spaces in other communities.

The combined facility has been immensely popular with town residents and outside visitors alike. In 2019, the Town counted almost 17,000 uses of the pool and 15,000 of Great Hollow Lake. The corresponding user fees and concession sales have helped support maintenance and upgrades of the park.
Wolfe Park and Great Hollow Lake are located in the rural community of Monroe, Connecticut. The town’s approximately 20,000 residents are primarily commuters to Bridgeport, New Haven, and New York City. Access to open space and the natural character of the land are a major selling point for home buyers.
Wolfe Park and Great Hollow Lake were built separately in phases, but now function as a unified multi-purpose facility. Visitors can hike, bike, boat, fish, swim, picnic, and play in a variety of settings. Sports teams use the park for practice as well as games and competitions.
The park began with a generous gift of land by the Harshbarger family in 1967. Neighbors were already accustomed to visiting the swimming holes and fishing ponds on the property. The Town strategically acquired abutting farmland because the level terrain and open clearings were ideal for recreational fields.
The town's population boom also made operation of the site’s defunct gravel pit a profitable enterprise. At the recommendation of the design team, the Town invited bidders to extract 750,000 cubic yards of sand, gravel, and aggregate material when demand was at its highest. Royalties were put towards park development costs.
Mining royalties, along with LWCF grant funds, supported development of a master plan. The initial phase of construction in 1972 included the majority of planned active recreation facilities because taxpayers were eager to finally have proper fields for youth sports. A bath house and pool proved to be immediately popular.
The early years of Wolfe Park were crucial in winning public support for the next phases of the project. Traditions such as tailgating and ice skating began enriching the informal spaces included in the master plan. Enthusiastic participation by Recreation Department ensured that visitor experiences of the park were positive.
Mining operations concluded in 1976, and Great Hollow Lake was created under the guidance of the mining engineer. The resulting landscape was lacking in spirit and purpose. The landscape architects worked with the Town to develop a comprehensive master plan that incorporated community feedback and the needs of different users.
The bath house, playground, and concession stand appeal to families and young children. A quieter section of beach with connections to nearby picnic areas is screened by plantings and large boulders. Boat launching occurs safely on the opposite bank. Anglers have several choice spots along the lake and Pequonnock River.
Native vegetation was used to restore the riparian edge, articulate views, disperse parking, and separate noncompatible uses. Glacial erratics leftover from quarrying were repurposed for roadway guiderails, waterfront barriers, and public seating. The landscape architects used studies in section view to strike the right balance between natural and manmade materials.
Walking trails around Great Hollow Lake let visitors experience several different habitats including hardwood forests, wetlands, meadows, and riparian buffers. Boardwalks and bridges minimize land disturbance. Periodic viewsheds back towards the lake facilities help keep visitors oriented and assured of their location along the trail network.
More LWCF funding in 1996 added 4 miles of bikeway to the park. Adaptive reuse of old bridges, culverts, and rails alludes to the Housatonic Railroad which ran along the same path. Subsequent phases now connect all the way down to the city of Bridgeport, 10 miles to the south.
Demand for sports fields and practice spaces continues to grow, especially for high school teams. The landscape architects have developed plans for future phases that account for wetlands, residential buffers, and steep topography. As funding becomes available, the Town hopes to transform these sileage and hay fields into new facilities.
The park remains a popular destination year-round. Traditional events include a polar plunge, trout fishing derbies, summer concerts, and fall foliage hikes. In all seasons, residents enjoy opportunities to play ball, hike, ride bicycles, and other activities. Users of all ages have plenty of enticing options from which to choose.
Wolfe Park and Great Hollow Lake have become identifiable symbols of pride for the Town. Their likeness is featured in a mural at the town library. Hundreds of Google reviews attest to the park’s appeal. A 2013 New York Times article cited the park as a major attraction for homebuyers.
379 acres of public open space have been essential in maintaining mental health and wellness during the pandemic. The surfeit of space has let residents use the facilities in accordance with state health guidelines and social distancing protocols. Nearby towns with smaller parks have had to close until further notice.