



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

SUNDOWN WILD FOREST

Amendment

to the

2019 Sundown Wild Forest and Vernooy Kill State Forest Unit Management Plan



NYS DEC, REGION 3, DIVISION OF LANDS AND FORESTS

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OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Record
FROM: Basil Seggos
SUBJECT: Sundown Wild Forest Unit Management Plan Amendment

The Unit Management Plan amendment for the Sundown Wild Forest has been completed.

The amendment is consistent with Environmental Conservation Law, and Department Rules, Regulations and Policies and is hereby approved and adopted.



Basil Seggos
Commissioner
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Date: 6/16/23



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I. Purpose of the Amendment

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor

A Unit Management Plan for the Sundown Wild Forest and Vernooey Kill State Forest was adopted by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) in 2019 (https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/sdwfump2.pdf). This amendment to the UMP proposes infrastructure changes in the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor (“Corridor”) to increase public safety, enhance natural resource protection, and to improve the visitor experience and appreciation of the wild setting afforded by the Forest Preserve.

The Corridor encompasses 275 acres of Forest Preserve lands in the approximately 30,000-acre Sundown Wild Forest. Since 2016, the Corridor has been subject to special regulations, including a permit system for the Blue Hole, that provide additional public safety and natural resource protections¹. Throughout recent years, despite the permit requirements, visitation has continued to increase throughout the Peekamoose Valley, with reports of up to 2,000 people per day attempting to access the Blue Hole and surrounding areas of the Corridor. The level of visitation currently occurring in the area during the summer months is unsustainable without long term impacts to natural resources. Additionally, the high levels of use have resulted in numerous public safety concerns.

The 2019 UMP contained a proposal to construct a 40-car parking lot and trail on the east side of County Rt. 42 (Peekamoose Road). This proposed management action would have required the removal of a significant number of mature trees as well as a large amount of soil disturbance. This amendment proposes an alternative solution for the parking and trail location which significantly reduces the tree cutting and terrain modifications necessary to construct the proposed infrastructure

Desired Conditions for the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor

The Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor presents a unique opportunity for the public to experience the Forest Preserve. Contrasted by the larger, more remote and rugged tracts of wilderness and wild forest within the Catskill Park, the Corridor’s gentle grades, pre-existing cleared areas and a paved public road provide easy access to a variety of existing and potential recreational opportunities with minimal impacts to the natural resources and wild setting. These characteristics combined with the Corridor’s proximity to the greater New York City metropolitan area make it uniquely suited to provide

¹ 6 NYCRR Part 190.35

people of all backgrounds and abilities the opportunity to experience the Forest Preserve in a positive way.

This amendment builds upon DEC's previous efforts to make the Corridor safe and welcoming to the public by alleviating congestion at points of interest, by creating safe conditions for pedestrians while accessing these areas, and by creating an experience that maximizes public appreciation of the wild setting created by the Forest Preserve.

Summary of Implementation

This amendment proposes the following management actions to fulfill the desired conditions for the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor. Additional detail and discussion are provided in Section III - Management Proposals.

Phase 1

- Construct an 80 car parking lot in the footprint of the Peekamoose Trailer Field to consolidate the parking in the Corridor to a single location.
- Construct an approximately 3,270 ft connector trail from the 80-car parking area to the point where retaining wall construction will be required for trail construction. Due to the challenging topography of the area, the section of trail requiring a retaining wall will be built in Phase 2.
- Close eight parking areas throughout the Corridor with the use of boulders, barriers, and gates. Parking will now be consolidated at the new parking area and trail, greatly reducing the amount of pedestrians within the roadway.
- The existing Peekamoose trailhead parking area will be permanently closed. The parking area will be relocated to the opposite side of county rt 42 in the area where the port-a-johns are currently located and will be referred to as the "Restricted Access Parking Area" and will provide 4 parking spaces for administrative use and parking for people with mobility impairments.
- Close 25 designated campsites throughout the western portion of the Corridor.

Phase 2

- Construct 2 new accessible campsites in a suitable location.
- Construct a foot bridge/ retaining wall near the wooded pathway entrance to the Blue Hole between the banks of the Rondout Creek and Peekamoose Road.
- Construct an accessible path from the Restricted & Accessible Parking area to the entrance of the Blue Hole and design to accessible standards to accommodate people with mobility impairments.
- Provide an accessible photo point for people on the accessible portion of the Blue Hole Trail
- Install a 10-step stone staircase to harden a section of trail leading to the Blue Hole to prevent additional erosion and soil loss.

Vernooy Kill Falls Region

In the vicinity of the Vernooy Kill State Forest and the Vernooy Kill Falls section of the Sundown Wild Forest, the Long Path traverses a significant amount of mileage on public motor vehicle roads. As a way to improve the safety and experience of hikers, the 2019 UMP proposed a new 10-mile trail segment of the Long Path to re-route the “trail” off public roads and onto the adjacent State land. The segment was identified in the UMP as a multiple-use trail, which included the proposed use of snowmobiles in order to connect the pre-existing Vernooy Kill Falls Snowmobile Trail to points south.

After further evaluation of the forest characteristics and the desired conditions for public use and experience of the Forest Preserve in the Vernooy Kill Falls region, DEC has concluded that constructing a trail to accommodate snowmobiling would not be appropriate for this reroute and is hereby removing snowmobiling as an allowed use on the proposed trail segment. Furthermore, the trail segment will be designed specifically to allow compatible activities such as hiking, biking, snowshoeing and skiing as originally identified in the 2019 UMP. Consistent with the DEC’s Management Guidance on the Siting, Construction, and Maintenance of Singletrack Bicycle Trails on Forest Preserve Lands in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks (“Bicycle Management Guidance”), this trail will offer a sense of solitude, remoteness, and self-reliance not only to hikers and bicyclists, but to all permitted user groups.

Desired Conditions for the Vernooy Kill Falls

The Long Path is a trail extending from New York City to John Boyd Thatcher State Park outside of Albany, connecting a series of landmarks along the way. While road walking is an essential means of connecting the trail to communities along its route, every effort is made to keep the trail off roads where possible.

The proposed 10-mile reroute in the Vernooy Kill Falls region presents a unique opportunity to fulfill the spirit of the Long Path by highlighting the wild character of the Forest Preserve, one of New York’s most notable landmarks. The trail will follow the natural contours of the terrain as much as possible and will be laid out to balance and minimize tree-cutting, rock removal, and terrain alteration.

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II. Planning Area Overview

The Sundown Wild Forest Unit Management Plan consists of Forest Preserve Lands in the towns of Denning, Olive, Rochester, and Wawarsing in Ulster County, and the Town of Neversink in Sullivan County. These lands are in the New York City West-of-Hudson watershed. The unit is comprised of several contiguous, as well as non-contiguous, parcels which each belong to distinctive geographic areas detailed in depth in the 2019 Sundown Wild Forest and Vernooey Kill State Forest Unit Management Plan.

This unit lies within the south-central part of the Catskill Park and is near large metropolitan areas such as New York City and Albany. The Sundown Wild Forest is bordered to the north by the 47,442- acre Slide Mountain Wilderness and to the west by the 15,572-acre Willowemoc Wild Forest. Adjacent to the planning area, and not subject to this UMP, are privately-owned lands. There are also several private “rod and gun” clubs with small to moderate land holdings adjacent to or within the unit.

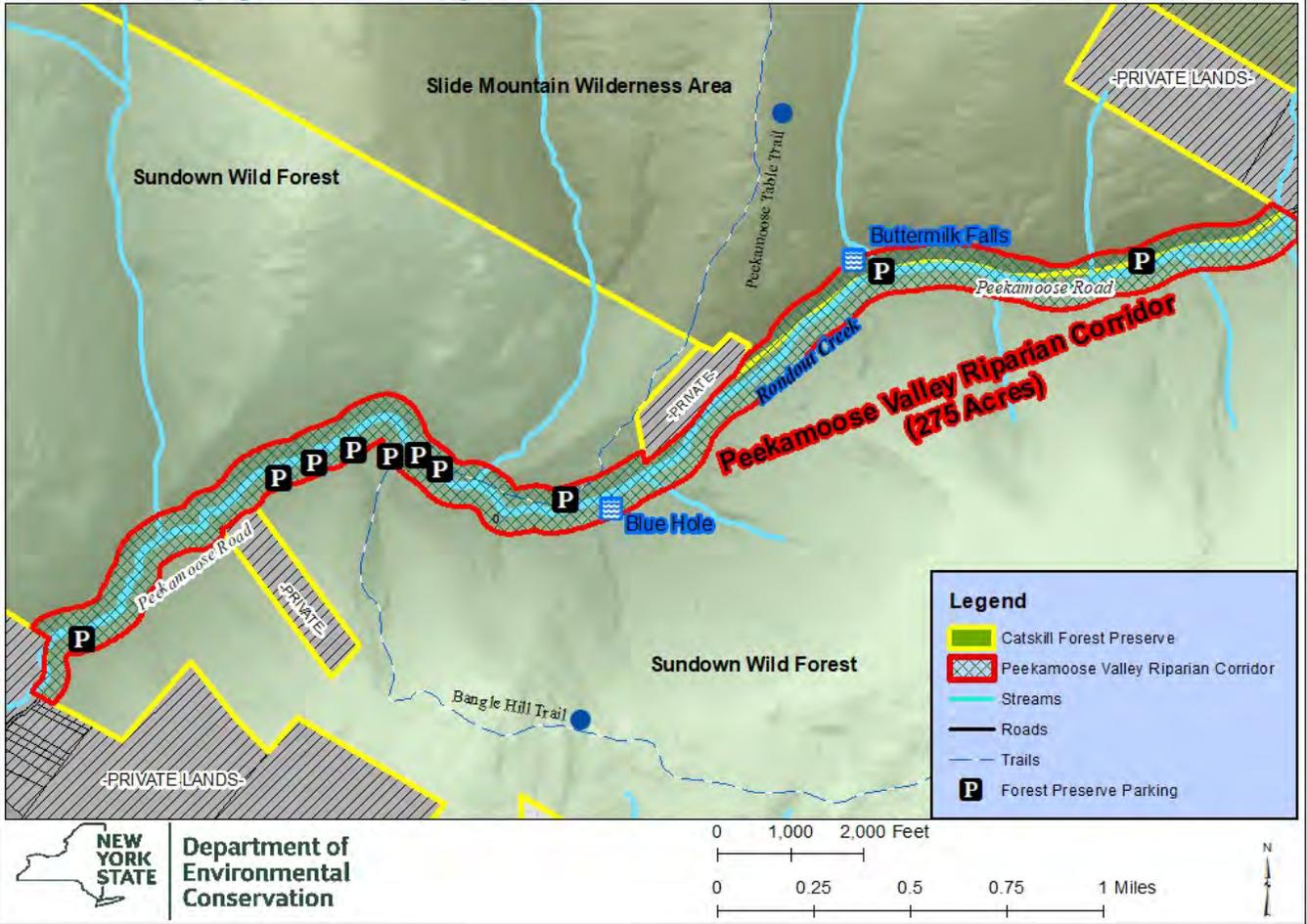
Beginning in the summer of 2015, public use of the area referred to as the “Blue Hole” increased significantly after the area was included in a publication that advertised it as one of the nicest swimming holes in the country. Visitation to the swimming area skyrocketed and improper disposal of human waste, garbage, fires, and broken glass became prevalent problems. In addition, parking lot capacities were significantly exceeded along Peekamoose Road. Substantial increases in visitation to the Peekamoose Valley within Sundown Wild Forest has resulted in significant parking problems that have on occasion obstructed portions of County Rt 42 and prevented passage of emergency response vehicles. In 2016, the intensively used portion of the Sundown Wild Forest including the Blue Hole and nearby campsites were delineated and designated as the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor. Adjacent landowners, members of the public, and local officials have demanded that action be taken within the corridor in the interest of public safety as well as to protect natural resources.

The Corridor includes State Forest Preserve lands situated in the Town of Denning in Ulster County located within 300 feet on either side of the centerline of the Rondout Creek, beginning at the New York State land boundary where it crosses Ulster County Route 42 southwest of the lower field parking area, thence heading northeast for approximately 3.75 miles, and ending with the New York State land boundary approximately one mile east of the Buttermilk Falls parking area, encompassing lands designated by the department as the Sundown Wild Forest and Slide Mountain Wilderness Area of the Catskill Park.

Sundown Wild Forest

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor Map Overview

Catskill Forest Preserve



III. Management Proposals

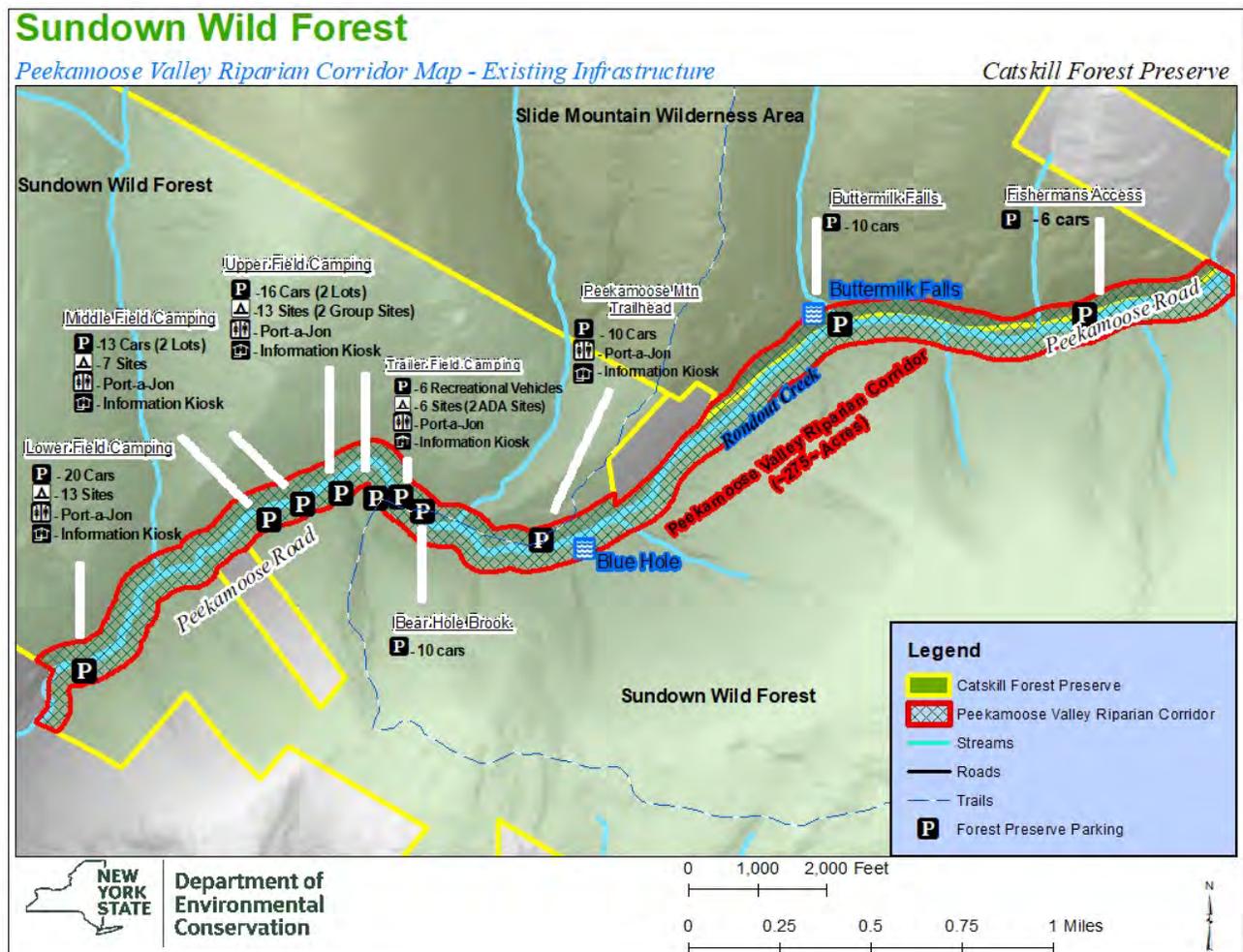
A. Motorized Access and Parking

Existing Conditions *(Motorized Access and Parking)*

There are currently ten parking areas open to public use throughout the 3-mile Corridor.

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor (West to East) (91 Parking Spots)

- Lower Field Parking Area – 20 Car Capacity
- Western Middle Field Parking Area – 6 Cars
- Eastern Middle Field Parking Area – 7 Cars
- Western Upper Field Parking Area – 8 Cars
- Eastern Upper Field Parking Area – 8 Cars
- Trailer Field (6 Recreational Vehicles)
- Bear Hole Brook Parking – 10 Cars
- Peekamoose Mountain Trailhead Parking Area – 10 Cars
- Buttermilk Falls Parking Area – 10 Cars
- Fisherman’s Access Parking Area – 6 Cars



Proposed Management *(Motorized Access and Parking)*

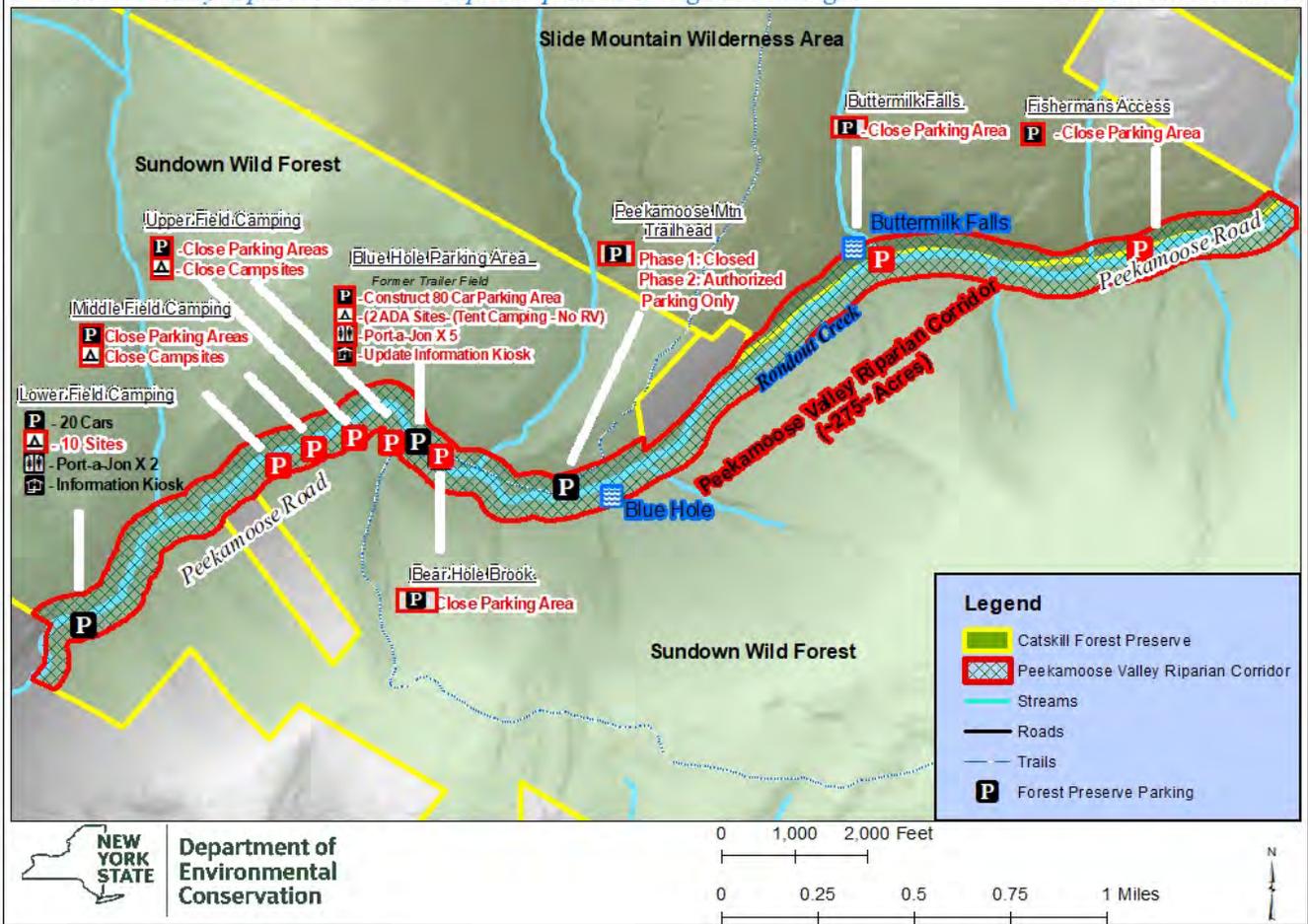
The proposed 80 car Blue Hole parking area proposed for the trailer field area is designed to accommodate most hikers and Blue Hole visitors on an average day of visitation. The proposed 80-car Trailer Field Parking area will service Blue Hole visitors and will both help improve pedestrian safety concerns along Peekamoose Road and alleviate congestion at parking areas traditionally used for hiker and camper access along the Route 42 corridor. Currently, a safety issue exists as many groups of visitors to the Blue Hole are parking and then walking distances of up to a mile and a half through the narrow roadway corridor. Many other visitors walk through the woods for a portion of the way which results in numerous braided social trails. A connector trail, in conjunction with the new parking area, will help redirect traffic and provide visitors a more defined and enjoyable hiking experience. By keeping visitors on hardened paths and durable surfaces we can concentrate use and better protect the riparian corridor while simultaneously providing safe access to the Blue Hole for visitors.

DEC will monitor parking to determine if current parking facilities meet public demand or if additional parking is needed within the corridor. The Department will reassess the parking capacity needs after all management proposals affecting the area have been implemented and new use patterns are established. Actions such as prohibiting parking to protect public safety and/or natural resources and opening or closing parking lots may be necessary for effective natural resource management and to provide access for hunters and anglers.

Sundown Wild Forest

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor Map - Proposed Parking Area Changes

Catskill Forest Preserve



Objectives:

- Design parking areas to manage visitor use within the Peekamoose Riparian Corridor. Availability and final number of parking spots will be based on protecting resource values and accommodating visitor needs.
- To ensure all new or expanded parking lots have accessible spaces pursuant to ADA and ADAAG guidelines

Management Actions:

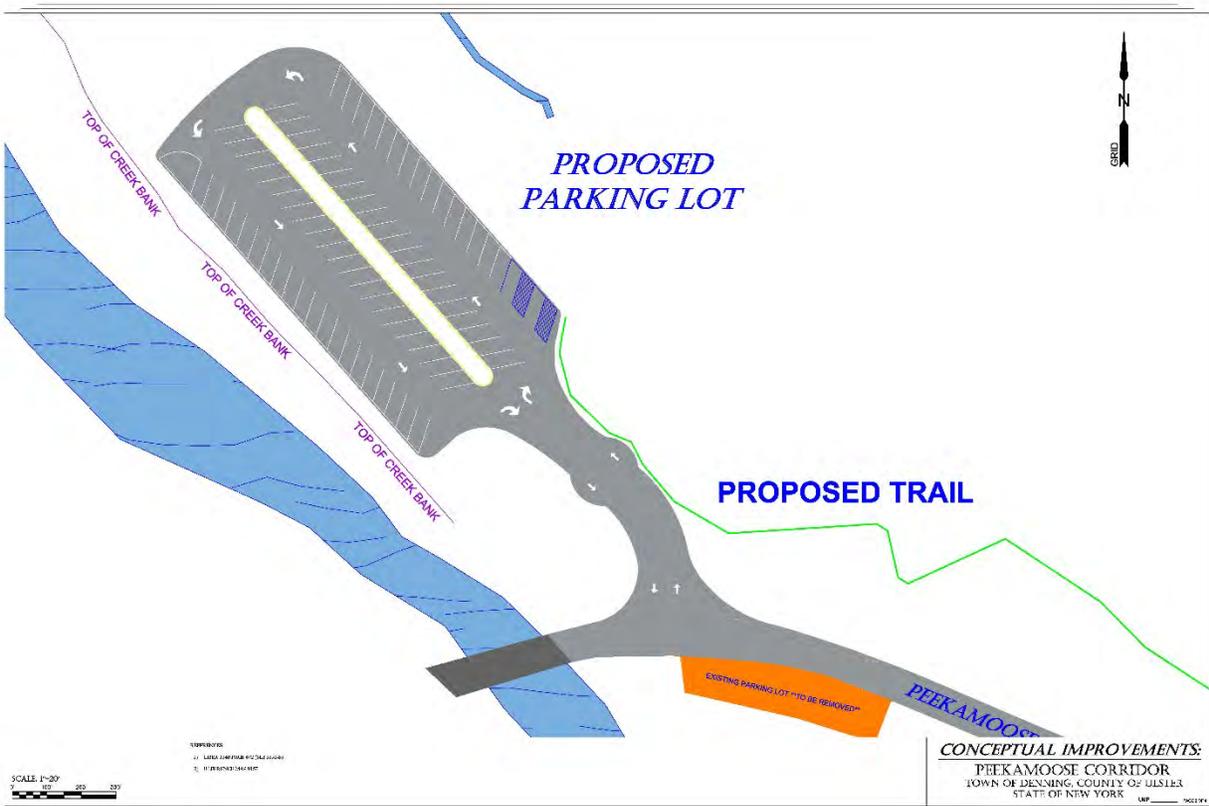
(Phase 1):

- Convert trailer camping field into 80 car parking area.
- Close eight parking areas (67 parking spots) throughout the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor using gates, jersey barriers or boulders:
- Close two Middle Field Camping Parking Areas
- Close two Upper Field Camping Parking Area

- Close Bear Hole Brook Parking Area
- Close Peekamoose Trailhead Parking Area
- Close Buttermilk Falls Parking Area
- Close Fishermans Access Parking Area
- Redesignate the hardened area directly across the road from the Peekamoose Trailhead parking area for administrative use and accessible parking only.

(Phase 2):

- Routinely monitor, evaluate and open and close parking areas as necessary to provide safe access for visitors to the corridor.



The proposed 80 car “Blue Hole” Parking area is part of the Phase 1 implementation and is designed to accommodate visitors to the Blue Hole, the hiking community who wish to access the Long Path, as well as hunters and anglers. This parking area will feature accessible parking spots, an accessible information kiosk, and access to an accessible trail connecting the parking area to the Blue Hole. Access to the Long Path will be provided via a short reroute and connector trail from the newly proposed trail to the existing Peekamoose-Table Trail (Long Path).

B. Trail Development

Existing Conditions *(Trail Development)*

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor

The Corridor offers access to the Long Path off County Route 42 in two locations. The Peekamoose Trailhead offers access to the Long Path heading north through Sundown Wild Forest into the Slide Mountain Wilderness Area. The Eastern Upper Field Parking Area offers access to the Long Path heading south towards Bangle Hill.

An unmarked trail leads visitors approximately one tenth of a mile from County Route 42 to the Blue Hole. This informal, user-created trail will require some work to stabilization and rehabilitation work. Eventually, the rehabilitated trail be utilized as a portion of the final official Blue Hole trail to the east of the proposed retaining wall area.

Vernooy Kill Falls Region

The 2019 UMP proposed a new 10-mile trail segment of the Long Path in the vicinity of Vernooy Kill Falls to re-route the “trail” off public roads and onto the Sundown Wild Forest and adjacent Vernooy Kill State Forest. The segment was identified in the UMP as a multiple-use trail, which included the proposed use of snowmobiles.

Proposed Management *(Trail Development)*

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor

A 5-foot-wide connector trail will extend east from the 80-car parking lot through a short section of forested area to a bridge that will cross Bear Hole Brook, a tributary of the Rondout Creek. The 60-foot bridge will be constructed over the abutments of a former bridge north of County Route 42. Shortly after the bridged area, the trail will cross to the south of County Route 42 traversing east towards the Blue Hole. The final 300-foot approach to the existing Blue Hole entrance and trail will require a retaining wall due to short distance between the road and extreme slope of the stream bank directly off the roadway. The connector trail, in conjunction with the new parking area, will help redirect traffic and visitors providing a more direct route to the Blue Hole through a picturesque, wooded area. By keeping visitors on hardened paths and durable surfaces we can concentrate use and better protect the riparian corridor.

Vernooy Kill Falls Region

After further evaluation of the forest characteristics and the desired conditions for public use and experience of the Forest Preserve in the Vernooy Kill Falls region, DEC has concluded that constructing a trail to accommodate snowmobiling would not be

appropriate for this reroute and is hereby removing snowmobiling as an allowed use on the proposed trail segment.

Objectives:

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor

- Keep visitors on hardened paths and durable surfaces in order to concentrate use and better protect the natural resources within the riparian corridor.
- Keep visitors out of the roadway by providing a safe, accessible connector trail from the trailer field parking area to the Blue Hole.

Vernooy Kill Falls Region

- Maintain a sense of solitude, remoteness, and self-reliance not only to bicyclists but to all permitted user groups. Trail development will follow the natural contours of the terrain as much as possible and will be laid out to balance and minimize tree-cutting, rock removal, and terrain alteration.

Management Actions:

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor

- Construct a 0.6 mile, 5 foot wide, trail for the purposes of connecting the new 80 car parking area to the Blue Hole. The trail will include a foot bridge over Bear Hole Brook & foot bridge/ retaining wall in narrow section near the currently unmarked trail entrance to the Blue Hole.
- A short trail reroute will connect the newly built Blue Hole connector trail to the existing Peekamoose Table Trail in order to provide hiking access to the Long Path.

Vernooy Kill Falls Region

- Construct the Long Path reroute in the vicinity of Vernooy Kill Falls as a single track bicycle trail, consistent with the Bicycle Management Guidance. The location will be generally the same as identified in the 2019 UMP. The trail segment will also be open to hiking, showshoeing and skiing, but not snowmobiling.

Discussion of Alternatives for Trail Placement

The Department has considered several trail and parking proposals to provide a safer route for the public to travel to the popular swimming area. Three alternative management scenarios have been considered and a preferred trail-route alternative was identified.

Both alternatives include building an 80-car parking area at the trailer field with a trail connecting to a bridge crossing over Bear Hole Brook on the northern side of Peekamoose Road. After crossing Bear Hole Brook, in both alternative proposals, the trail will cross Peekamoose Road. This alternative analysis focuses on whether the trail, after crossing Peekamoose Road, will traverse through a wooded section of land or be placed directly along the roadway before meeting with the 300-foot section of trail requiring a retaining wall

Alternative 1 – Forested Access (Preferred Alternative)

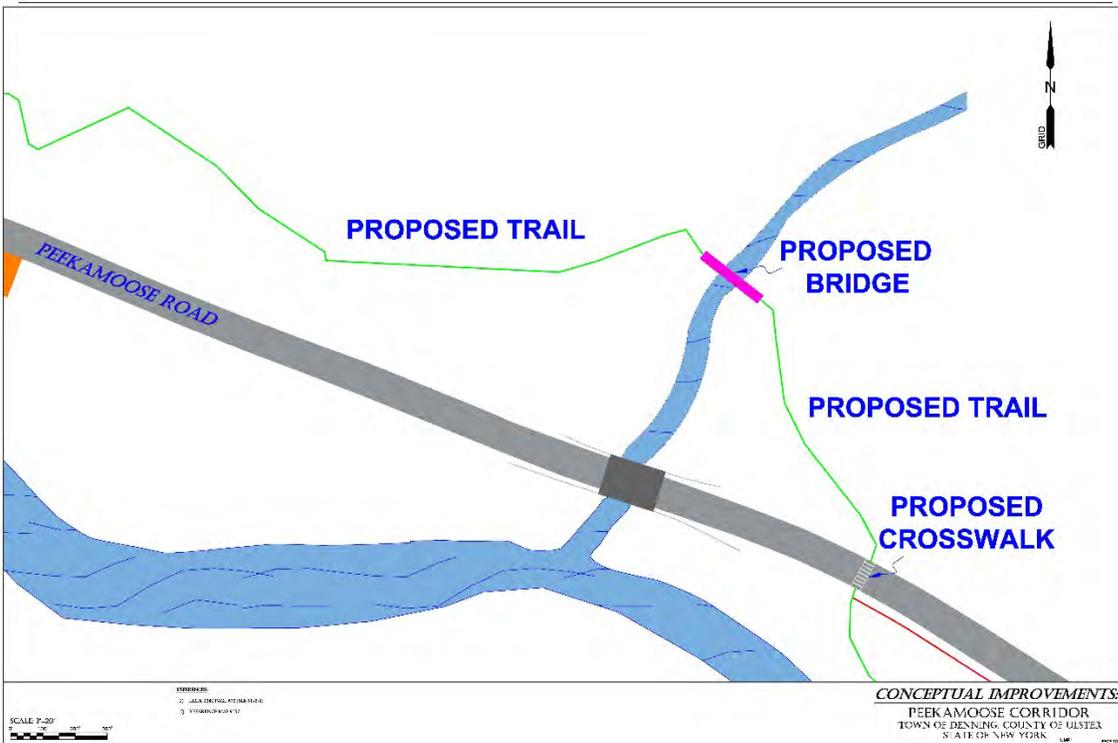
The preferred alternative proposal calls for the trail to be built through forested area after crossing Peekamoose Road. This proposal would adequately address safety concerns by removing pedestrians from the roadway area.

Alternative 2 – Roadside Access

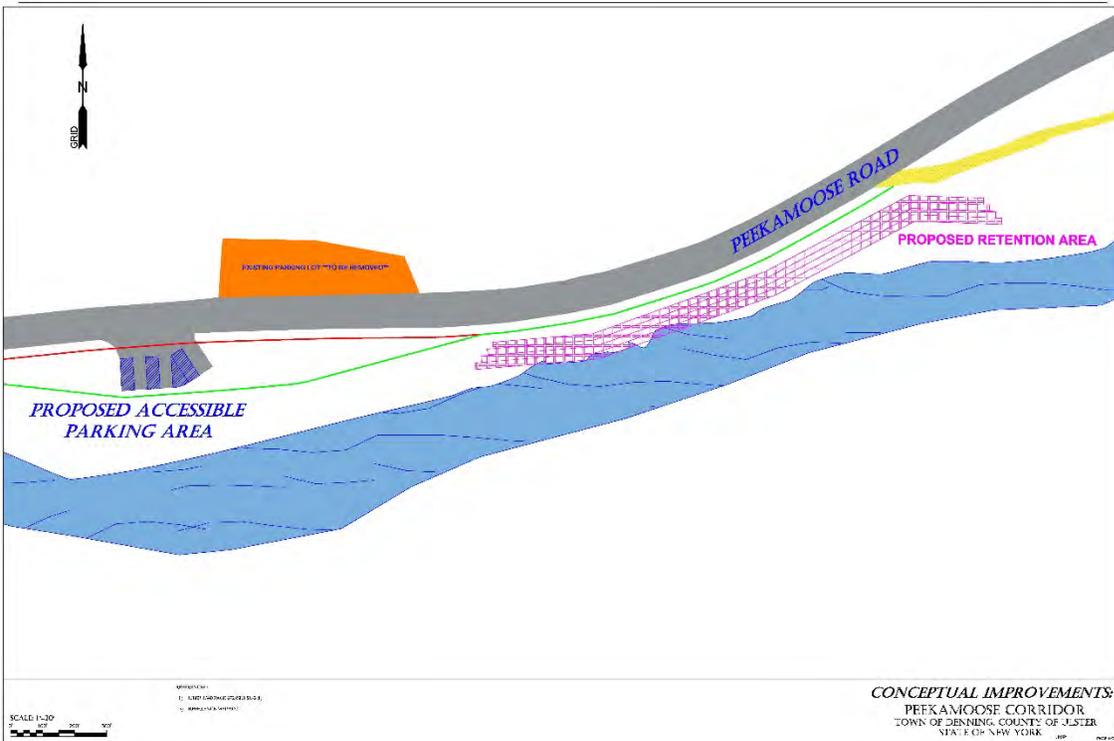
The roadside-access, proposal calls for the trail to be built directly off the roadway after crossing Peekamoose Road. This option was not selected due to the lack of buffer between pedestrians and roadway. This proposal would not adequately address safety concerns of removing pedestrians from the roadway.

Alternative 3 – No Action Alternative - Build No Trail

The historical use of the area will remain unchanged, and visitors will continue to walk along the road to access the Blue Hole. This option poses many public safety concerns. The No Action Alternative is not the preferred alternative because the threat to public safety will persist if people continue to walk on County Route 42 to access the Blue Hole.



Conceptual phase 1 improvements include a 60-foot bridge that crosses Bear Hole Brook, a tributary of the Rondout Creek. The bridge will require construction of new abutments and will be built directly over the old existing bridge abutments. The trail will then traverse south, crossing Peekamoose Road, before winding east through a short section of forested area and eventually connecting with the scheduled phase 2 retention area improvements.



Phase 2 implementation includes a 300 foot section of retaining wall and trail that connects the newly built Blue Hole connector trail to the existing Blue Hole entrance and trailway. A short reroute and connector trail will provide access to the Long Path trail that traverses north from Peekamoose Road.

C. Camping

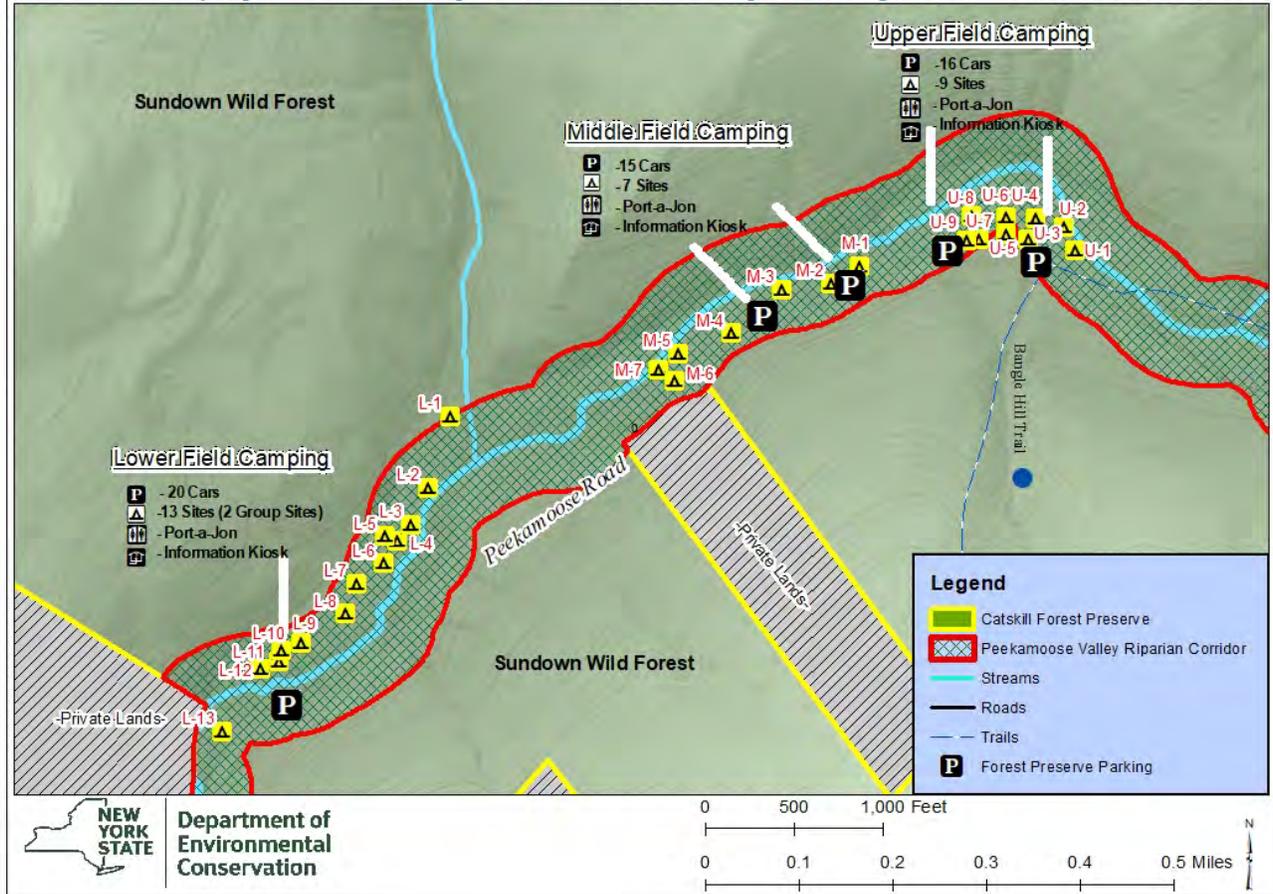
Existing Conditions *(Camping)*

There are currently 35 designated campsites within the western portion of the corridor. Campsites are split between the lower, middle, upper and trailer fields.

- Lower Field – 13 Campsites
- Middle Field – 7 Campsites
- Upper Field – 9 Campsites
- Trailer Field – 6 Campsites (2 are accessible for persons with disabilities)

Sundown Wild Forest

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor Map - Western Corridor - Campsite Parking Areas Catskill Forest Preserve



Campsites as of September 2022 (Trailer Field not pictured). Camping is by permit only from May 15th – September 15th of each year. See management proposals below.

Proposed Management (Camping)

DEC proposes to regulate camping within the Corridor to protect the water quality of the Rondout Creek, to minimize negative interactions between humans and wildlife, and to provide a small number of designated tent sites to minimize impacts to the area while providing an enjoyable experience for the user.

Camping sites are closely monitored and are available to the public as long as their use does not result in a significant negative impact on the surrounding natural resources. The ability for the corridor to accommodate public demand for primitive camping at designated sites requires a reduction in campsites due to persistent sanitation, enforcement, and natural resource issues. Monitoring sites for natural resource damage will be necessary in order to determine a long-term management strategy of these sites. Campsites may be occasionally opened, closed, or moved in order to achieve desired conditions.

Camping in the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor will continue to be by reservation only from May 15th – September 15th of each year. Camping and day-use permits can be obtained through the Reserve America website at:

<https://www.reserveamerica.com/explore/peekamoose-blue-hole/NY/5935/overview>

Camping is permitted elsewhere throughout the Sundown Wild Forest and Catskill Forest Preserve at large without a reservation, but must occur more than 150 feet from road, trail or water and below 3500 feet in elevation, or at other sites designated by the Department.

Objectives:

- Continue to monitor the designated campsites for adverse impacts. Campsites will be subject to management actions which may include: permanent closure, temporary closure for site rehabilitation purposes, or they may be utilized on a rotating basis with other sites to allow for a continual rehabilitation and improvement of all sites.
- Build and maintain new accessible primitive tent sites with associated infrastructure (access trails, fire rings, and cleared level areas for tents).
- Provide designated tent sites in favorable locations in a manner which minimizes natural resource impacts to the site

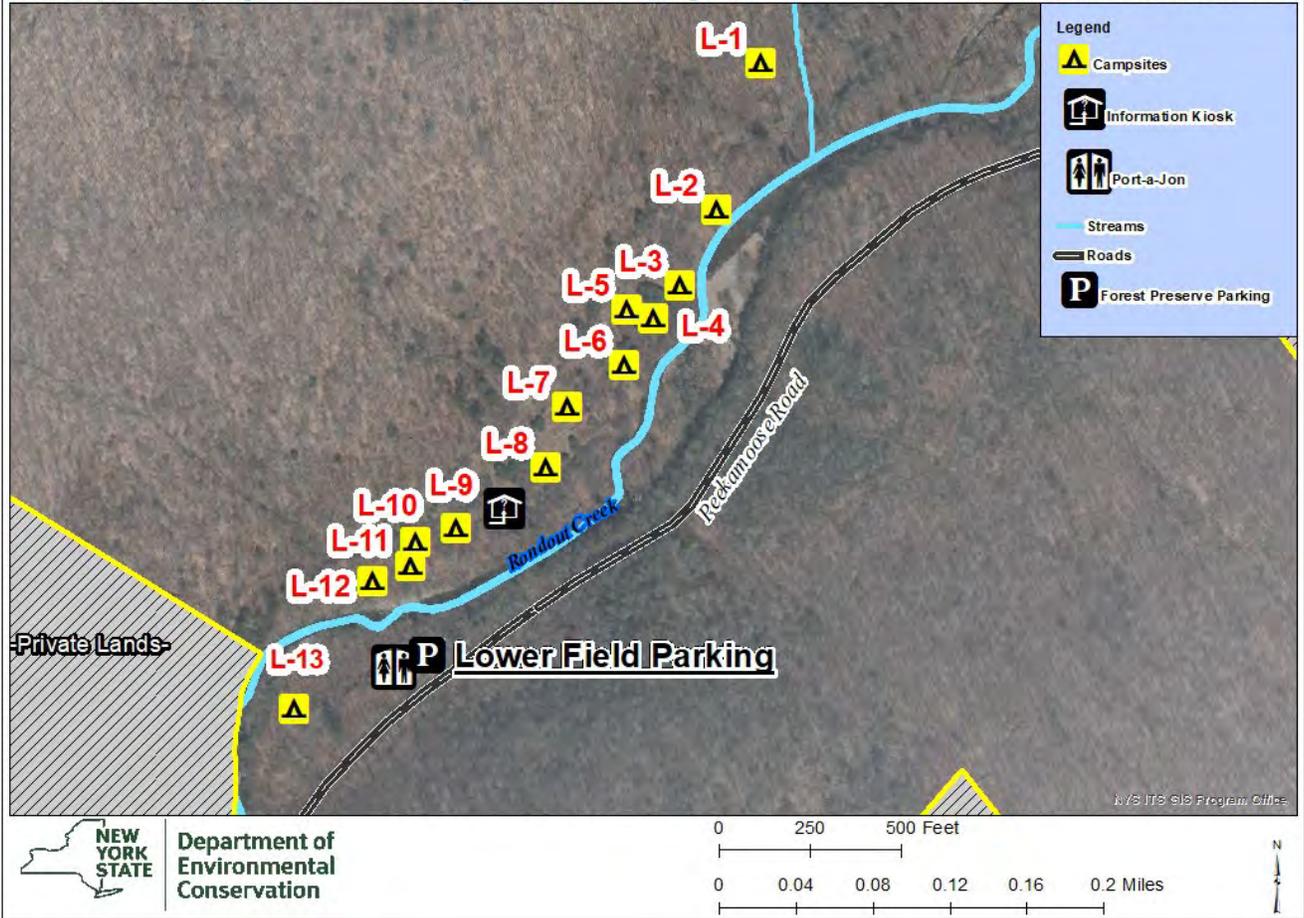
Management Actions:

- Close camping at the upper and middle camping fields. Restore all closed campsites to a natural condition. Remove fire rings and other evidence of past use. Sign closed sites with Department “No Camping” disks.
- Eliminate RV camping at the trailer field.
- Reduce campsites from 13 to 10 at the Lower Field.
- Provide camping opportunities for people with disabilities by offering accessible primitive camping within the Corridor.
- All camping in the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor will be at designated campsites only.
- Open and Close Campsites as necessary.

Sundown Wild Forest

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor Map - Lower Field Campsites

Catskill Forest Preserve



Camping will be allowed at the lower field at designated sites only and will require a camping permit from May 15th – September 15th. Campsites will be reduced from 13 to 10 campsites. Outside of the permit regulated timeframe, campsites will be available on a first come first served basis with no reservations.

Sundown Wild Forest

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor Map - Upper Field Campsites

Catskill Forest Preserve

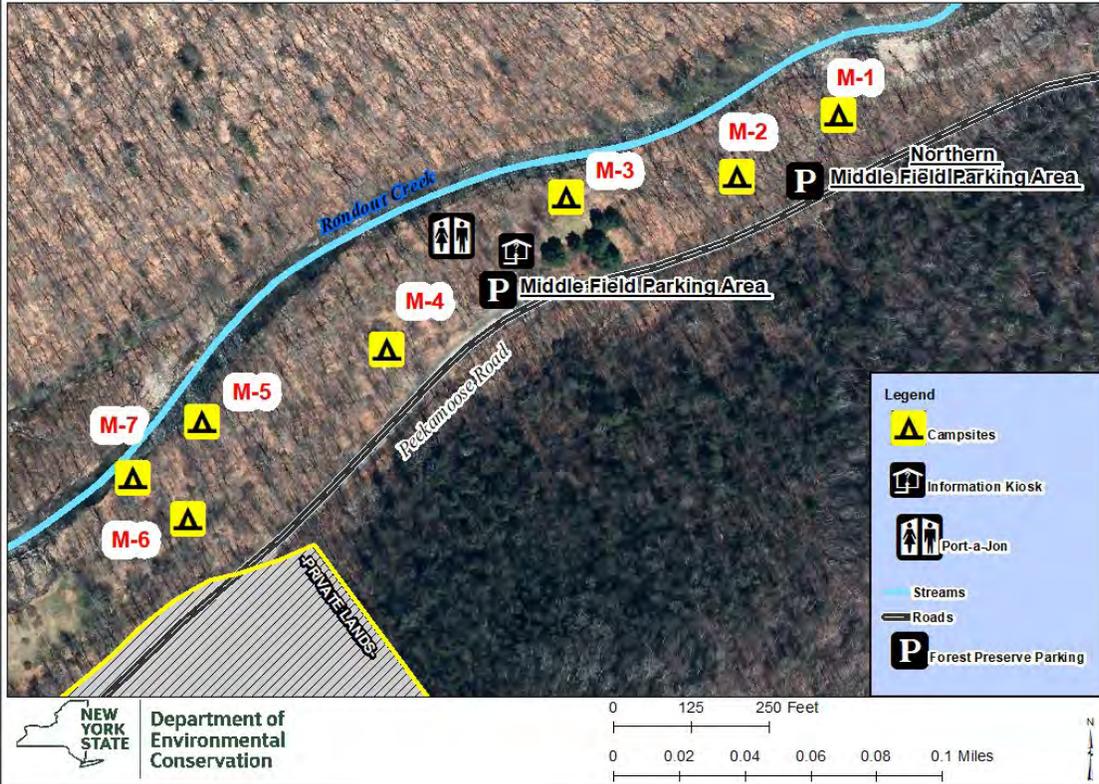


Due to natural resource and enforcement concerns, camping will be prohibited in the upper and middle fields.

Sundown Wild Forest

Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor Map - Middle Field Campsites

Catskill Forest Preserve



D. Access for People with Disabilities

Existing Conditions *(Access for People with Disabilities)*

Universal Trail Assessment Process

The Universal Trail Assessment Process (UTAP) is an objective method of measuring such site conditions as average and maximum grade, minimum trail width, cross slope, trail length, and surface type. These variables can then be presented at the trailhead to allow users to make an informed decision about whether they would like to use the facility or not. Additional information is available at: (include hyperlink to DEC webpage)

Proposed Management *(Access for People with Disabilities)*

Objectives:

- To provide outdoor recreational opportunities to people of all abilities.
- Increase access opportunities for people with disabilities and comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (accessible) of 1990 by improving access and creating recreational opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Inform users of the location and condition of facilities in the unit, focusing on such variables as length of trails, average grade, steepest grade, minimum width, etc., to allow them to make informed decisions regarding whether they choose to use a facility or not.

Management Actions:

- Maintain existing recreational access opportunities for people with disabilities, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (accessible) of 1990.
- Publicize the locations and details of existing accessible facilities on DEC's public website and through other appropriate informational pathways.
- Incorporate accessible signage at trailhead access points.
- Construct new facilities to the most accessible degree possible given site constraints, with the understanding that while many may not fully meet Americans with Disabilities Act (accessible) standards, the intent is to maximize the degree of accessibility for the widest range of abilities. These sites would provide opportunities for those seeking more primitive outdoor experiences than those found in traditional intensive use campground areas.
- Accessible parking spots and unloading zones will be designated at all significant parking areas.

E. Evolution of Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor Management Actions

2015

- Resurfaced/defined 4 closest parking areas ~ 33 spaces
- 2 electronic highway billboards installed
- 20 barrel barricades placed in illegal parking areas
- Assigned back country stewards to work weekends at Blue Hole
- Weekly garbage sweeps by Department staff and volunteers
- Installed port-a-john and refuse container
- Law enforcement assigned to area

2016

- Installed kiosks at Peekamoose/Table trailhead and Blue Hole access trail
- Installed 2 port-a-johns and bear proof refuse container
- Installed additional “No Parking” signs at areas commonly used for illegal parking
- Created/defined Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor
- Enacted Emergency Special Regulations for the Corridor

Emergency Special Regulations:

Public use of the corridor prohibited from ½ hour after sunset to ½ hour before sunrise

- The use of any type of fire prohibited including the use of charcoal, wood, gas/propane stoves or other portable stoves
- Glass containers prohibited
- Portable generators prohibited
- No person shall play a musical instrument or audio device unless the noise is rendered inaudible to the public by personal noisedampening devices such as headphones or ear buds
- No person shall deposit any type of waste (human/garbage) within the corridor except at receptacles provided by the Department
- No parking within the corridor except at designated areas

2017

Peekamoose Blue Hole was recognized as a Leave No Trace Hotspot.

Recommendations from the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics and commitment from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) and the Catskill Center led to the implementation of new resource management strategies, such as the implementation of the Peekamoose Blue Hole Stewardship Program, along with special regulations within the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor, including a free permit on weekends and holidays during the summer season.

2018

Permit requirement established. From May 15th thru October 15th of each year on Saturdays, Sundays and state and federal holidays no person shall enter the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor east of the County Route 42 bridge crossing the Rondout Creek, an area that includes that portion of the Rondout Creek known as the Blue Hole, except under permit from the Department

Peekamoose Blue Hole Stewards - Two stewards working full time through weekends and holidays during the months of May – October with the goal of educating visitors about Leave No Trace, primary impacts, special regulations, and alternative areas to recreate.

2019 – Peekamoose Blue Hole Hot Spot Revisit. Recommendations from the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics were received leading to the implementation of new management plan strategies such as adjusting the number of permits issued per day and implementing a new permit system for reservation of campsites.

2020- Campsites temporarily closed and number of permits issued for Blue Hole Day-Use were reduced due to Covid 19.

2021 – Campsites reopened. Permit requirements were adjusted and expanded from weekends and holidays to 7 days per week from May 15th – September 15th. Visitors now required to pay \$10 fee for day use or camping. Double sided entrance/ exit signs placed on east and west ends of the corridor. Signs are designed to let visitors know when they have entered and exited the corridor where special regulations are in place.

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Appendix A –Implementation Schedule

Implementation Schedule

Year	Project	
2023	Construct a new 80 car parking area within the footprint of the Peekamoose Trailer Field.	Phase 1
2023	Construct all portions of 5 ft (60 inch) wide, 0.6-mile trail except for the portion involving a 300-foot retaining wall.	Phase 1
2023	Construct 60-foot pedestrian bridge over bear Hole Brook	Phase 1
2023	Close eight parking areas within the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor.	Phase 1
2023	Close 23 campsites throughout the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor.	Phase 1
2023	Build “Restricted Access Parking Area” and provide 4 parking spaces for administrative use and parking for people with mobility impairments.	Phase 1
2023	Construct a minor re-route along a short segment of the Peekamoose-Table Trail to provide better access for hikers seeking to use that trail.	Phase 1
2024	Construct 2 new accessible campsites in a suitable location.	Phase 2
2024	Construct a 300-foot retaining wall between the banks of the Rondout Creek and Peekamoose Road at designated location near Blue Hole.	Phase 2

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Appendix B – Response to Public Comments

The Department provided a 30-day public comment period from March 22, 2023, thru April 21, 2023, and received 18 written comments in response to the proposed Blue Hole parking area and connector trail. Some comments voiced support for a parking area or connector trail, some were opposed to a parking area or trail, and some were ambiguous in terms of support or opposition towards the proposals. Comments were reviewed, categorized, and summarized. A responsiveness summary was then prepared.

1) In favor of the parking area.

Comment: The removal of parking areas along Peekamoose Rd. and consolidation into one large lot is a beneficial move that will improve the safety of visitors and motorists during warm weather seasons. This consolidation should also improve the experience of visiting this popular location, while potentially reducing tensions with local residents through the creation of an 80-car parking area and trail by the Rondout Creek.

Response: *We appreciate your comment. Consolidating parking areas will help reduce congestion on local roads, improve visitor safety, and provide a better experience for visitors to the area. Concentrating travel on trails reduces the likelihood that multiple routes will develop and scar the landscape.*

2) Not in favor of the parking area.

Comment: I have concerns about the proposed construction of an 80-car parking lot and any expansion of parking facilities at the Blue Hole. I personally suggest the idea of temporarily shutting down the area to allow nature to restore itself. The creation of more parking spaces and impervious surfaces worries me, and I am against accommodating 80 vehicles with fewer camping opportunities, as it may lead to overcrowding on the trails and along the stream.

Response: *The proposed parking area will not significantly increase the overall parking capacity that currently exists within the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor. Most of the existing parking areas will be closed, with parking consolidated at the proposed parking area to be located in the former Trailer Field. This new parking area will not be a paved and will consist of a gravel surface. The design of the parking area calls for the installation of a rain garden to capture stormwater runoff. The creation of a centralized parking area reduces parking congestion along the public highway and provides an opportunity to direct concentrated foot traffic to the Peekamoose Blue Hole via a*

connector trail designed to keep pedestrian traffic off of the public highway and out of sensitive areas which will increase public safety, allow for a smoother flow of traffic and protect sensitive environmental currently receiving impacts from foot traffic.

We share your concerns regarding the importance of managing visitor use and mitigating impacts to the natural resources and are committed to doing so through careful planning and management.

Closing of the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor would prove to be challenging, given the area contains public foot trails, including the Long Path, a well-known long distance foot trail, is open to hunting and fishing opportunities for members of the public who hold hunting and fishing license privileges and contains a public highway traversing the corridor.

3) Proposal to reduce the amount of parking spaces at the closer, administrative / accessible parking area.

Comment: The proposed "Restricted Access Parking Area" is too large and will create confusion and conflicts with users on the new "connector trail". I suggest reducing the size of the "Restricted Access Parking Area" to only two parking spaces for people with mobility impairments.

Response: *We have reduced the size of the proposed "Restricted Use Parking Area" from five to a maximum of four vehicles, with the final size to be determined by existing site conditions. This parking area is designed for those holding a valid accessibility permit and for parking of Law Enforcement vehicles. Further reduction of this parking area would not adequately serve the intended purposes. This parking area will be clearly marked to reduce the potential for confusion for visitors to the area.*

4) Proposal to reduce the width of the trail.

Comment: I support the new trail between the proposed parking lot and Bear Hole Brook, but I suggest reducing the trail width to three feet to lessen its impact on the environment.

Response: *We appreciate your concern for the environment and desire to reduce the impact of this trail. After careful consideration, we have reduced the proposed finished trail width from six feet to five feet for the entire length of the trail. A five-foot-wide trail tread conforms to existing accessibility standards and will likely accommodate the expected public use on this trail. Given existing public use, a trail narrower than five feet will likely lead to pedestrian congestion and increase the likelihood of trail side erosion and/or cause the public to continue to utilize the public highway as a pedestrian foot trail to the Blue Hole. Establishment of this proposed connector trail will reduce impacts to the environment by creating a single path that keeps public use concentrated*

to one trail, rather than multiple user-created informal trails, and will improve public safety by providing a safe alternative for pedestrian traffic currently utilizing the public highway. We believe that a five-foot-wide trail tread will likely meet these objectives.

5) We do not want to see campsites closed.

Comment: We are deeply disappointed that the proposed plan to accommodate visitors to the Blue Hole swimming hole involves sacrificing camping, which is a traditional and beloved use of this local area. It seems like the needs of out-of-town visitors are being prioritized over the needs and desires of the local community, who have been camping here for years.

Response: We recognize the importance of camping as a traditional use of the local area. However, the campsites proposed to be eliminated are located in a sensitive riparian area and are subject to ongoing natural resource degradation caused by significant use by the public. There were also numerous negative encounters with bears due to ongoing sanitation issues with the storage and disposal of food and refuse as well as the purposeful feeding of local wildlife, causing inappropriate behaviors by both the wildlife and visitors. Camping will continue as an allowable use at the Lower Field camping area which will remain open for public use. In addition, camping is available at nearby state campgrounds, including Kenneth Wilson and Woodland Valley, which include facilities that can accommodate significant public use. Other opportunities for primitive camping exist throughout the forest preserve, including any visitor chosen site that is at least 150 feet from any road, trail or water source.

6) In favor of closing campsites.

Comment: I support the DEC's proposal to close campsites if it is necessary to protect wildlife and preserve the natural resources of the area. However, I do request that the proposal include vegetation plans for the areas that will be closed. It is important to ensure that the restoration and rehabilitation of the closed areas is done in an environmentally responsible way.

Response: We will seek to ensure that all sites will be restored to blend in with the surrounding environment and resist erosion.

7) Reduce damage to trees.

Comment: Please be mindful of preserving trees and root systems during construction.

Response: We understand the importance of preserving trees and their root systems during construction and will take this into consideration when constructing the trail, bridge and parking areas. We will seek to minimize tree cutting and major disturbance of root systems during the construction process.

8) Install facilities similar to those at an Intensive Use Area.

Comment: Consider installing manned booths, barriers, and turnarounds at both ends of the Peekamoose Riparian Corridor to minimize traffic congestion, illegal parking, and unsafe U-turns. Local residents should receive an annual permit sticker for basic travel, but still need a daily permit for recreation. Other visitors need a daily permit or they will be denied access to the corridor. Controlled access at each end should reduce the need for multiple staffing agencies and provide safer interactions with visitors.

Response: *Installing barriers or booths on a public highway is outside the scope of this plan and the authority of this Department. Establishment of such infrastructure would likely have a significant impact on the traveling public who utilize this highway for daily access to work and amenities found in adjacent areas as well as for recreational access and sightseeing.*

We appreciate your input and will continue to explore ways to manage the use of our public lands while minimizing impacts to the traveling public who utilize this public highway.

9) Local-resident permit requests.

Comment: I would like for there to be a way that the local Denning residents are able to utilize the state lands like we did previously without permits. I was hoping that maybe there is a way to get a resident permit for the year. Just so I could park a couple hours at various locations and just walk my dog and dip toes in the water. We would be happy to pay for a parking pass of some sort. It's too difficult to get a day pass each time, since sometimes we just go on a whim.

Response: *State lands are owned by the "People of the State of New York" and as such, are managed to be open and available to all on an equal opportunity basis. The current permit system was put in place to address overcrowding issues in the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor, with the intent to also address the associated parking and public highway concerns voiced by residents and the traveling public. Permits are required for anyone wishing to recreate within this corridor during the peak use season from May 15th through September 15th. Permits are not required for this area outside of the peak use season, allowing for the free, unfettered use of the area for 8 months of the year. We understand that demand for available permits can be significant during the peak use season, but we must ensure that the permit system is fair, equitable and available to any who want to recreate in this area.*

10) Not in favor of snowmobiles.

Comment: I think that snowmobiling is very disruptive to other outdoor hiking activities during the winter such as snowshoeing and is hard on the trails. I hope you keep this exclusion in the final document.

Response: *Snowmobiling is recognized as an allowable use on State lands in areas where deemed appropriate and when adequate snow or ice cover is present. Under these conditions, a layer of protection exists between the snowmobile and the ground beneath, resulting in minimal impact to the trail. Snowmobiling will continue to be allowed on trails currently marked for such use. However, snowmobiling has been removed as an allowable use on the proposed reroute of the Long Path trail beginning at the Cutler Road parking area to Vernoooy Falls.*

11) In favor of snowmobiles.

Comment: I am against the proposal to remove the use of snowmobiling from the Long Path multi-use trail. Snowmobiling has taken a hit with the holiday hunt and private landowners taking away trails. There is no reason to remove this snowmobile trail. I paid my NYS Snowmobile registration this year and did not once get to snowmobile due to closed trail conditions (snow came during hunting season and holiday hunt.) All New Yorkers should get opportunities on state lands. Some groups should not be excluded.

Response: *Existing environmental conditions limited our options of where the proposed multi-use trail could be built. Unfortunately, steepness of terrain and existence of protected species restricted our ability to locate a trail that would be conducive to snowmobiling, resulting in the removal of snowmobiling as an allowable use on the proposed reroute of the Long Path Trail. However, snowmobiling will continue to be allowed on the existing trail system currently marked for snowmobile use in the Sundown Wild Forest. We will continue to seek opportunities to expand snowmobiling opportunities where deemed appropriate.*

12) In favor of restricting swimming.

Comment: Please reconsider the changes to the area and just close all swimming. It will be troublesome for a few years, then the hype will die down and people will move on to the next exciting place they find on social media. Keeping this area open and to the public, without a severe reduction in numbers, will destroy the ecosystem and nature in the area.

Response: *We will continue to evaluate all options available regarding the management of this area for both protection of natural resources as well as balancing the public's rights to recreate on their lands.*

13) Hikers, hunting, & angler access.

Comment: Please ensure that hiker, hunting, and angler access is maintained to the Peekamoose Mt. trailhead in Denning. It would be unfair to limit access to these trails due to overcrowding caused by visitors to Blue Hole. DEC should promote other areas that are better equipped for swimming, picnicking, and recreation, and make visitors aware of how limited this area truly is. Closing all other parking may also have negative impacts on hikers and anglers. While a central parking area could help keep visitors off the road in the summer, it may not be possible for serious outdoorsmen to park in the valley during hunting season. I suggest reopening the parking areas in the fall to accommodate these individuals.

Response: *We appreciate your concern for hiker, hunting, and angler access in the Peekamoose Mt. trailhead area and agree that information regarding other areas that are available and better equipped to handle additional public use for swimming, picnicking and other forms of recreation should be promoted. We will also take into consideration your suggestion regarding reopening some of the parking areas for other uses outside of the peak visitor use season currently defined as May 15th to September 15th.*

14) How will law enforcement be accomplished and who will do the enforcement?

Comment: It is recommended that rangers and police officers mingle with Blue Hole visitors without their uniforms and issue tickets to those who leave their garbage behind. Those receiving tickets should be fined heavily and made to perform community service, such as cleaning up around Blue Hole. It is important to ensure that the proposed uses are enforced, and that there is sufficient staffing to ensure that visitors use the trail and park correctly. Additionally, it is important to clarify who will be responsible for enforcing the regulations and accessible parking in the area.

Response: *We appreciate your recommendation for improving law enforcement around Blue Hole. We agree that it is important to enforce all applicable Laws, Rules and Regulations to ensure protection of our natural resources as well as the recreating public.*

Forest Rangers and Environmental Conservation Officers are responsible for enforcement on State lands and coordinate with local law enforcement agencies when necessary and appropriate. Tickets issued for infractions are generally handled by the local court system, who are responsible for the levying of penalties.

15) Dumpsters and portable toilets.

Comment: Where will the dumpsters and portable toilets go?

Response: *As part of the Department's commitment to maintaining a clean and sustainable environment in the area, we anticipate installing portable toilets and dumpsters in the proposed centralized parking area as well as near the proposed accessible/law enforcement parking area, located a short distance from the current entrance to the trail to the Blue Hole. The exact location of these facilities will be determined based on a number of factors, including environmental impact, accessibility, and visitor needs.*

16) Site distance

Comment: Is there sufficient site distance at the road crossing?

Response: *There are two proposed areas where the connector trail will cross Peekamoose Road (AKA Ulster County 42). The first crossing is proposed near the highway bridge over Bear Hole Brook located just east of the proposed Trailer Field parking area and the second is proposed to cross near the current Peekamoose-Table trailhead parking area to allow for access to the Peekamoose-Table trail. Both locations were chosen as providing the maximum amount of sight distance along this section of highway. We will work with Ulster County to ensure both crossings are adequately marked and are in compliance with appropriate regulations regarding pedestrian crosswalks over public highways. Public safety is paramount. We will continue to work with our partners to ensure that appropriate safety measures are taken.*

17) In support of the Long Path reroute.

Comment: We support the initiative to complete the multi-use trail from the Vernoooy State Forest boundary to Vernoooy Kill Falls. We look forward to eventually co-aligning the Long Path with this route.

Response: *Thank you for your support. Co-aligning the Long Path with this trail would help to enhance the continuity and accessibility of the trail network, making it easier for hikers to explore the area.*

18) Lean-to near Samson Mountain.

Comment: We want the Department to include a provision for a new lean-to on the Long Path around Samson Mountain. The increased demand for the campsites in the Peekamoose Valley and limited alternatives makes it challenging for those hiking the Long Path to find a site. The addition of an overnight facility for thru-hikers on the Long Path would be a great asset. Siting the lean-to on the trail around Samson Mountain would also provide reliable access to water from the creeks in that area.

We also would like the Department to consider an extension of the trail around the south side of Samson Mountain, descending gradually toward the junction where the Long Path leaves Spencer Road to go over Popple Hill. This new section would improve the trail through this area, which is currently relatively undeveloped, and provide an appealing alternative to walking on Spencer Road.

Response: *The addition of facilities such as a lean-to and/or trail relocation is based on an assessment of trail usage to ensure current public use warrants construction and long-term maintenance of such facilities. In the interim, primitive camping is allowed on the surrounding lands adjacent to this trail on any site chosen by the visitor, as long as the site is at least 150 feet from any trail, road or water source.*

While the comment regarding the addition of a new lean-to and extension of the trail around Samson Mountain is outside the scope of the current proposal, these suggestions will be evaluated and taken into consideration as part of future planning efforts regarding the trail system in the area.

19) Trail to Van Wyck.

Comment: Instead of a trail to the Blue Hole, DEC should build a trail that follows nearby old logging roads up the Wilderness Area mountainside to Van Wyck Mountain and other hidden waterfalls. That will help solve the overcrowding problems in this area by spreading out use.

Response: *Features found at the Blue Hole are unique and are relatively rare occurrences on public lands which are found throughout the Catskill region. Such features will continue to be highly attractive to visitors wishing to recreate on public lands. We appreciate your concern for overcrowding at the Blue Hole and will continue to explore ways to manage the area's resources responsibly and to seek additional opportunities to disperse visitors across the landscape.*

20) Best Management Practices

Comment: The proposed project includes a parking lot and a trail connecting it to the Blue Hole, located in an open field off Peekamoose Road. The project site includes the riparian buffers of Rondout Creek and Bear Hollow Brook, with some areas of open meadow and wooded/vegetated land. The majority of the soils in the area are well-drained to very poorly drained areas of unconsolidated alluvium. The impact of these developments on water quality has been evaluated, and suggestions have been made to DEC to avoid or reduce runoff to Rondout Creek. These suggestions include avoiding damage to trees and vegetation and developing erosion and sediment control measures. These suggestions also include best management practices to follow when siting and installing the retaining wall during phase 2 of the proposal.

To ensure the protection of water quality in the Rondout Creek, it is important to use best management practices during the proposed project. In addition to the existing suggestions of avoiding damage to trees and vegetation and developing erosion and sediment control measures, other practices should be considered such as ensuring that the siting of a retaining wall does not unduly encroach on the stream channel cross-sectional area and providing provisions to isolate the work area from flowing water when constructing the retaining wall.

Response: *We agree that the protection of water quality in the Rondout Creek is of utmost importance during the proposed project. It is crucial to use best management practices, particularly during the construction of the retaining wall, to ensure the protection of water quality in Rondout Creek. In addition to the existing suggestions of avoiding damage to trees and vegetation and developing erosion and sediment control measures, other practices will be considered and implemented. By incorporating these best management practices, the project can successfully provide recreational opportunities while minimizing negative impacts on the environment. Thank you for your input regarding protection of water quality of the Rondout Creek.*