

MIDDLE TOWNSHIP – Imagine a dog park, a walking trail or more athletic fields in Middle Township.

Those are some ideas that could come out of a plan to be put together by Middle Township officials with help from the public, aimed at preserving open space and expanding recreational opportunities. Work is expected to begin this summer and take about a year to complete.

The grant-funded plan will catalogue open space and recreational facilities, include recommendations and give township officials a better chance of securing money for projects.

The focus would not be just on sports, but also on health, said Middle Township Recreation Department director Chuck McDonnell.

“It’s going to be huge,” said Warren Wade, who is the vice president of the township’s recreation advisory committee and has been involved in Middle Township recreation for more than 20 years.

The plan could be the answer for young people wanting to play sports, such as soccer or lacrosse, or ride bicycles and skateboards, Wade said.

In the fall, he said, the Clarence and Georgiana Davies Sports Complex teems with activity, with sports teams playing on the fields.

The Davies Sports Complex is “maxed out,” McDonnell said. That complex includes a skate park and athletic fields.

The department always searches for ways to expand its offerings, like more fields or recreation facilities, McDonnell said.

“Some of Middle Township’s greatest resources are its open space and recreational amenities,” Mayor Dan Lockwood said in a prepared statement. “This initiative will be an opportunity to analyze the best way for us to improve and preserve these areas for our community and our children.”

Of the township’s 82 square miles, nearly 70 percent is unable to be developed based on environmental regulations and 35 percent is preserved open space, according to information from the township.

Meetings and interviews will be part of forming the plan. Surveys on the township’s website would gauge opinions on open space and recreational priorities, such as type, size and location, and help to determine if property should be acquired.

The plan will be directed by the Environmental Commission, recreation advisory committee, and Planning Board, along with township planning consultant Elizabeth Terenik. A kickoff meeting for the plan’s organizers is set for Aug. 15, but Terenik did not know if it would be open to the public.

“The Environmental Commission recognizes that a healthy environment is essential for the well being of the economy, society and each person,” Environmental Commission chairman Steve Atzert said in a prepared statement

The Planning Board is expected to receive in May 2013 a recommendation to add the open space and recreation plan into Middle Township’s master plan, according to a contract between the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions and Middle Township. The master plan was approved in 2010 and charts development in the township.

“It’s always encouraging to see the hard work of our township staff and our professionals bear fruit,” Planning Board chairman Tony Anzelone said. “It’s equally encouraging to see our township remain focused on its goal to preserve open space and expand an already first-class recreation program.”

The open space and recreation plan is supported by an \$8,000 grant from the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions. The money allows the township to bring on a planner, Anzelone indicated.

Contact Alex Davis at alex.davis@catamaranmedia.com or 609-624-8900, ext. 248.