Planning for the Future:

Reuse Assessment for the BoRit Asbestos Site
Ambler, Pennsylvania
FINAL

April 2009

prepared for the
BoRit Future Plans Group by E^2 Inc.

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Technical Assistance to Communities (TASC)

Forward

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Technical Assistance for Communities (TASC) program provides communities near potentially hazardous waste sites with independent technical assistance to help them understand the technical issues related to hazardous substance contamination and cleanup so that they can substantively participate in the decision-making process. Understanding the reasonably anticipated future land use of a site is an important consideration in the remedy selection and design process. A community-based reuse assessment identifies reasonable anticipated future land use options that can inform local planning efforts and the remedy process.

Acknowledgements

This report was developed for the BoRit Future Plans Group. E^2 Inc. would like to thank the following participants for their valuable contributions to this assessment.

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View of the former Wissahickon Park

I. INTRODUCTION

The BoRit Asbestos Tailing Pile Site (BoRit Site) is located in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, about thirty miles northwest of Philadelphia. During the 1930s to the 1970s, asbestos waste and asbestos contaminated material was disposed at the BoRit Site. The BoRit Site is currently undergoing a removal action by EPA Region 3 which primarily includes bank stabilization along the Wissahickon Creek and its tributaries, the Rose Valley Creek and Tannery Run. The removal action is expected to be completed in 2010. The BoRit Site has also just been approved for the National Priorities List. EPA will soon begin a Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study to select a clean up remedy for the site.

The BoRit Future Plans Group requested TASC assistance to develop a reuse assessment for the BoRit Site. The purpose of the reuse assessment is to clarify reuse goals, understand the site's constraints and opportunities, and identify reuse considerations to inform clean up activities and local planning efforts. This report summarizes the findings of the reuse assessment including the future use goals, the local planning goals, the site context and potential future use scenarios.

II. SITE OWNERSHIP AND JURISDICTION

The site contains three properties totalling approximately 43 acres, each under separate ownership and municipal jurisdiction as shown in Figure 1. The parcel characteristics are summarized in the adjacent table.

Property	Acres	Character	Owner	Jurisdiction
Wissahickon Park	19 acres	Vacant, flat, site mostly un-vegetated with steep side slopes	Whitpain Township	Whitpain Township
Ambler Reservoir	18 acres	Primarily reservoir with surrounding vegetated berm	Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve	Primarily Upper Dublin Township
Kane Core Pile	6 acres	Extremely steep, elevated topography with trees and other vegetation	Kane Core, Inc.	Ambler Borough

The 19-acre Wissahickon Park property owned by Whitpain Township was once a community park serving Whitpain's West Ambler and Mercer neighborhoods. In the mid-1980s the park was closed due to potential risks and liability from the asbestos materials on the property. Whitpain Township is interested in reopening the park to serve the adjacent neighborhoods once the contamination is addressed.

The 18-acre Ambler Reservoir, located primarily in Upper Dublin, is owned by the Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve (WWP) and managed as a waterfowl preserve. Recently the National Audubon Society designated the preserve an Important Bird Area (IBA) due to the waterfowl that use the site for breeding and resting during migration.

The WWP would like to continue the site's use as a habitat preserve and plans to install a pedestrian viewing platform along Maple Avenue in the near future. However, the WWP would like to limit pedestrian access on the property to protect the habitat functions of the reservoir.

The 6-acre Kane Core property, located in Ambler Borough, is defined by steep topography, vegetation and the surface water surrounding three sides of the site – the Ambler Reservoir to the North, Tannery Run to the South and the Wissahickon Creek to the West. In 2005, Kane Core's proposal to cap the property and build a 17-story condominium raised community concerns and prompted EPA involvement. Despite recent attempts to contact Kane Core, Inc., there has been no response. Therefore, the site owner's future use goals for the site are unknown at this time.

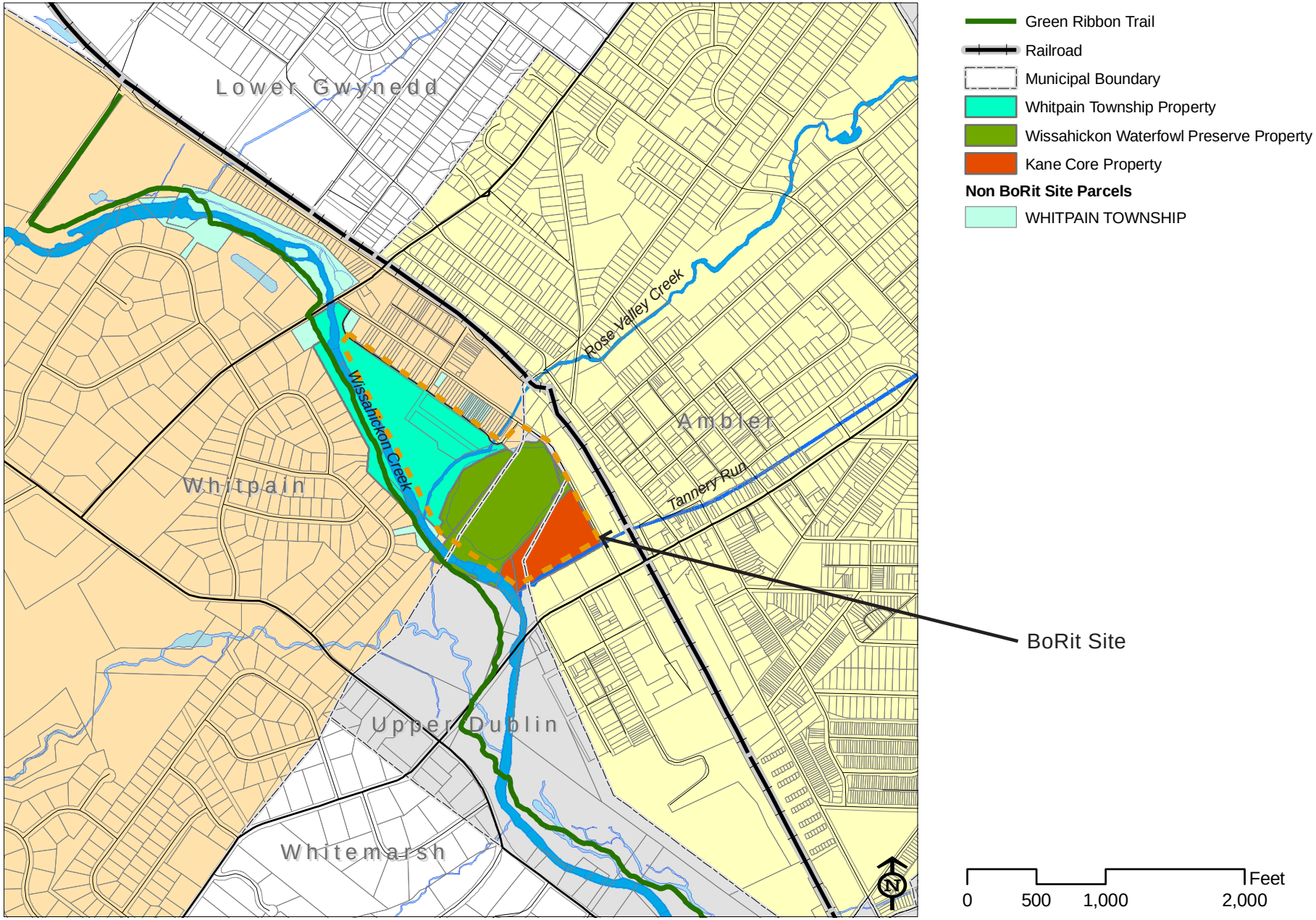

Figure 1: Ownership and Jurisdiction

III. REUSE GOALS

E² Inc. met with the Future Plans Group on December 3rd to identify the committee's future use goals for the site, as well as future use options and considerations. The participants identified and agreed upon the following future use goals:

Future Use Goals

- Develop unified plan for the parcels as one unit
- Support a mix of uses
- Support regional greenway network
- Support recreational reuse such as youth activities/facilities and performance space
- Support compatibility with habitat preserve and riparian buffers
- Support economic development and compatibility with adjacent TRID[1] zone
- Support compatibility with adjacent neighborhoods

Site Owner Goals

- Whitpain Township expressed an interest to preserve the former Wissahickon Park property as recreational open space and, once the contamination is addressed, would like to re-open the Wissahickon Park to serve the West Ambler neighborhood and surrounding community.
- The Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve (WWP) representative confirmed that they plan to retain the property as a habitat preserve. The WWP intends to build a pedestrian overlook from Maple Street to view the preserve, but does not plan to allow regular public access to the site due to potential conflicts with the habitat preservation goals.
- Despite attempts to contact Kane Core Inc., the owner of the Southern property, there has been no response. The site owner goals for this property are not known at this time.

Community Planning Goals

E² Inc. reviewed the Open Space plans for the three jurisdictions to identify community planning goals relevant to the BoRit Site's future use. The Whitpain Open Space Plan (2005 Update) outlines goals to reopen Wissahickon Park, preserve large interconnected open space along Wissahickon Creek, and designate Wissahickon Creek as a High Value Conservation Area.

The Upper Dublin Open Space Plan (2005) outlines similar goals including: create loop trails within and between the parks and open spaces and establish additional pedestrian links from the Wissahickon Watershed Green Ribbon Trail to Ambler Borough.

The Ambler Borough Open Space Plan (2006) identifies the site as both a natural resource and a potential asset to the adjacent growth area. General goals include: preserve selected remaining open space and sensitive natural features including land along Rose Valley Creek and Tannery Run, and establish trails or greenways to link existing borough parks and open space. The site is also specifically identified as a vulnerable natural resource (p. 49), sensitive to flooding (p.31) and a potential acquisition target as a conservation focus area (p. 67).

Given the uncertain site owner goals for the Kane Core property, E² Inc. reviewed the Ambler Borough Zoning Map (October 2008), which identifies the Kane Core property as zoned "Retail and Service Commercial" within a Redevelopment Overlay District. In addition, Ambler Borough is currently conducting a Transportation Revitalization Investment District (TRID) Study for the areas along Butler and the SEPTA rail line. The TRID study boundary does not include the Kane Core property, but does run adjacent to the property along Maple and Butler as shown in Figure 3. The purpose of the TRID Study is to evaluate opportunities to increase mixed-use, pedestrian friendly and transit-oriented development around the new SEPTA train station at Butler.

[1]Transit Revitalization Investment District

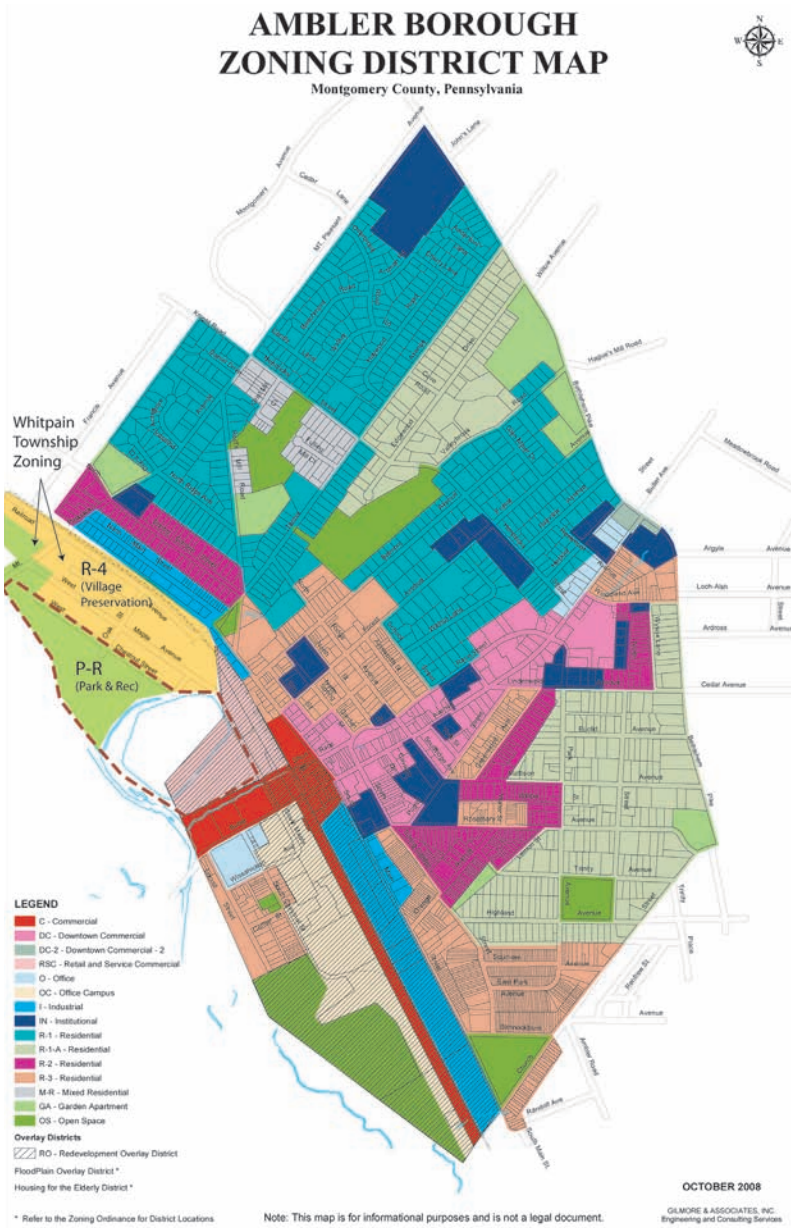

Figure 2: Ambler Zoning Map

Figure 3: Ambler Transportation Revitalization Investment District

IV. SITE CONTEXT

The BoRit Site context is defined by two corridors as shown in Figure 4. The Green Ribbon Trail to the west is characterized by riparian habitat and open space. The SEPTA commuter rail to the east is bordered by the Ambler Central Business District, the industrial spine and the Redevelopment Overlay District. The BoRit Site's context within these two corridors is explored further in the following sections.

Regional Context

The site is characterized by significant regional habitat, water, and open space resources. The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission identifies Wissahickon Creek as a key connection within Pennsylvania's open space network, as well as a conservation focus area within the regional green infrastructure priorities. Montgomery County has identified the Wissahickon Green Ribbon trail as a key connection in the County's Primary Trail Network. The Appendix includes several maps illustrating the BoRit Site's regional importance as an open space corridor.

Ambler Central Business District

Green Ribbon Trail

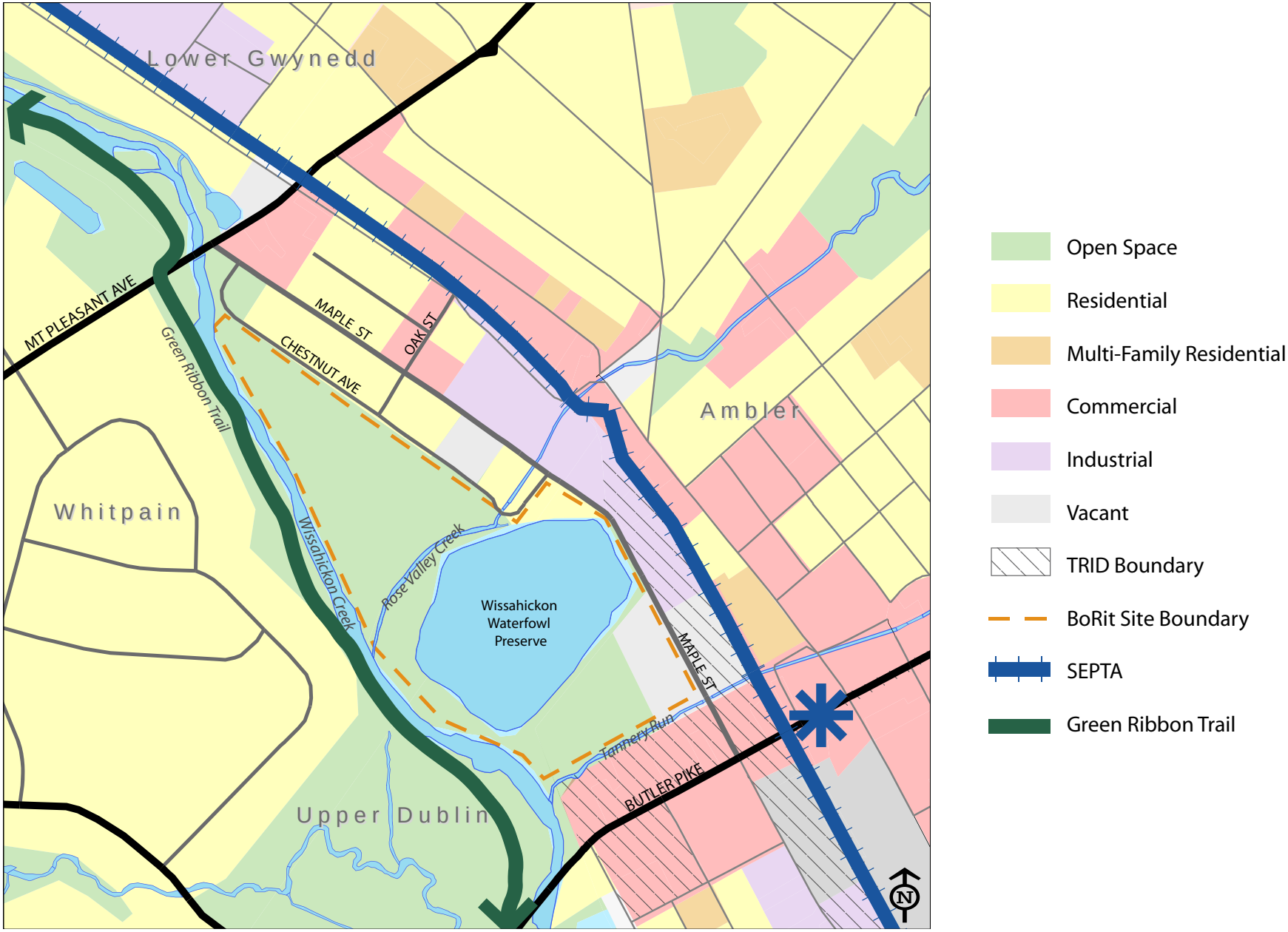

Figure 4: Site Context Diagram

Watershed Context

Located adjacent to the Wissahickon Creek, the BoRit Site also includes the Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve and the confluences of Rose Valley Creek and Tannery Run as they enter Wissahickon Creek. As shown in Figure 5, the site is centrally located within the Wissahickon watershed offering opportunities to connect the surrounding communities with a riparian open space network. Due to this watershed context, much of the site is characterized by riparian corridors, steep slopes and floodplains that may pose constraints for development.

Confluence with Rose Valley Creek

Confluence with Tannery Run

Rose Creek looking East from Maple

Tannery Run flowing West from Maple

Former dam on Wissahickon Creek West of the site

Riparian borders on Kane Core property
Photo Credit: Sal Boccuti

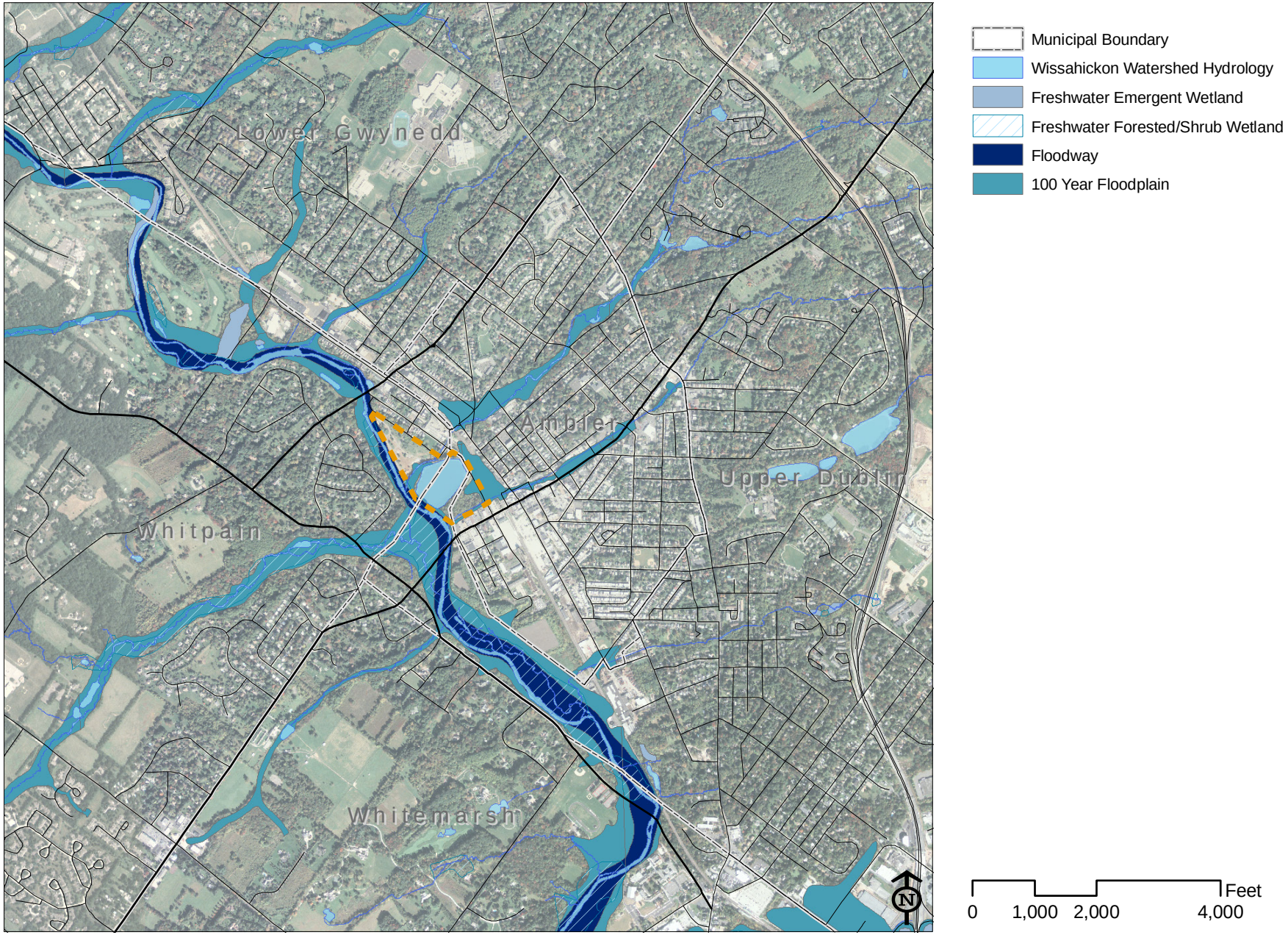

Figure 5: Local Watershed Context

Open Space Network

The BoRit Site is located along the Green Ribbon Trail within a growing regional open space network. The site is adjacent to several large conservation areas including properties owned by the Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association, PennDOT and Montgomery County. As shown in Figure 6, this growing conservation area represents an opportunity to create a regional greenway network connecting the communities in Montgomery County. Once the contamination is addressed, this regional open space network could provide a valuable recreational amenity for the adjacent Redevelopment Overlay District as it transforms to a vital mixed-use transit-hub.

Photo courtesy of Wissahickon Valley Watershed Association

Green Ribbon Trail sign

Green Ribbon Trail near Butler Pike access

Green Ribbon Trail with residences in the background

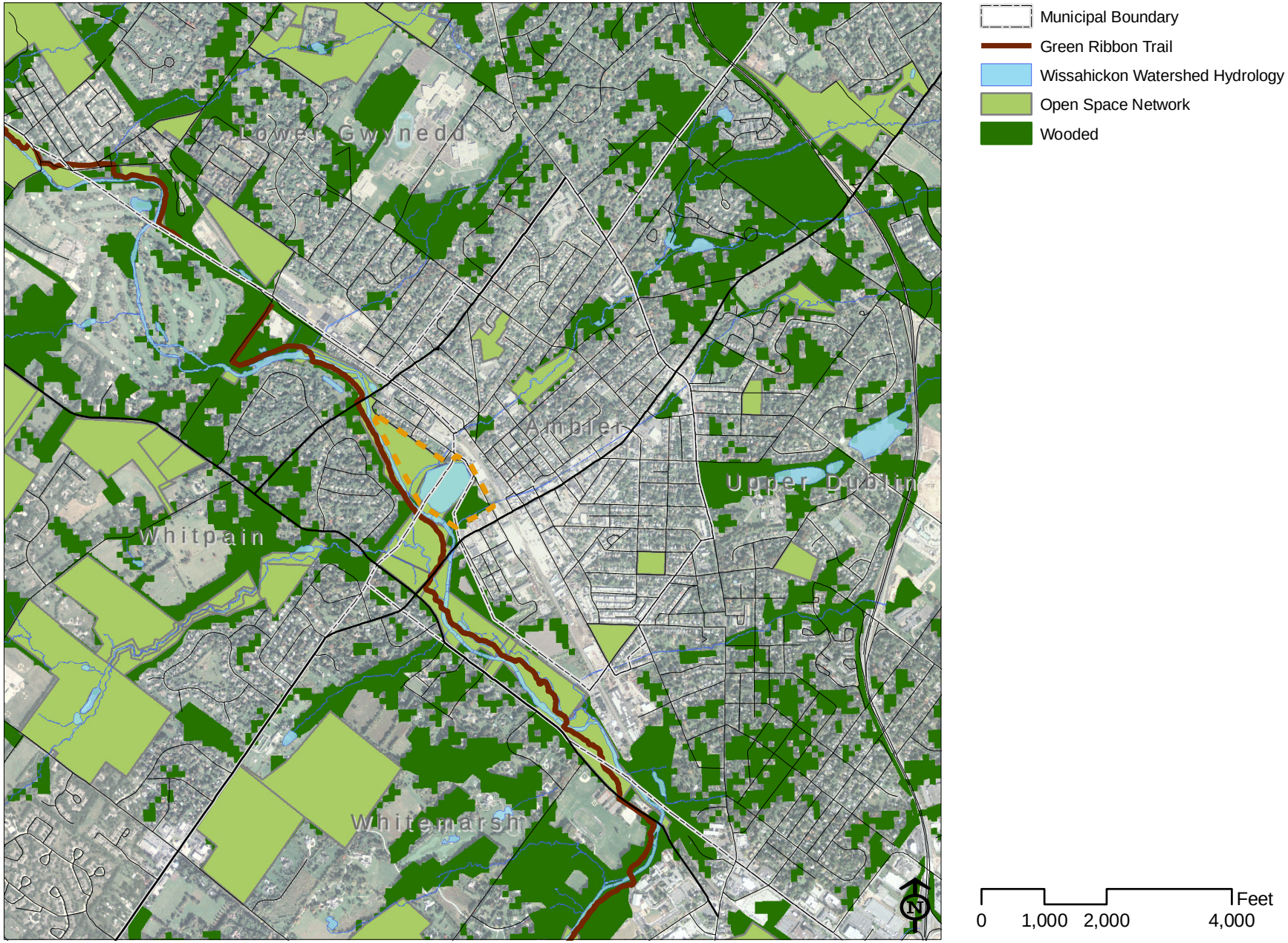

Figure 6: Open Space Context

Surrounding Land Use

The BoRit Site is located at the transition between high and low intensity land use. As shown in Figure 10, much of the BoRit Site is surrounded on the East, North and West by residential land use and open space. The Future Plans Group has expressed a desire for the future use of the BoRit Site to maintain compatibility with the adjacent open space and residential neighborhoods.

The BoRit Site is also adjacent to the Ambler Central Business District, the SEPTA commuter line and the industrial spine running along the rail. As highlighted in Figures 2 and 3, this area has been identified as a Redevelopment Overlay District, as well as a TRID study area for potential mixed-use transit-oriented development. Photos of the Redevelopment Overlay District are shown on page 14. The Future Plans Group has expressed a goal of supporting this adjacent revitalization zone.

Photo Credit: Sal Boccuti

Adjacent Residential Neighborhoods

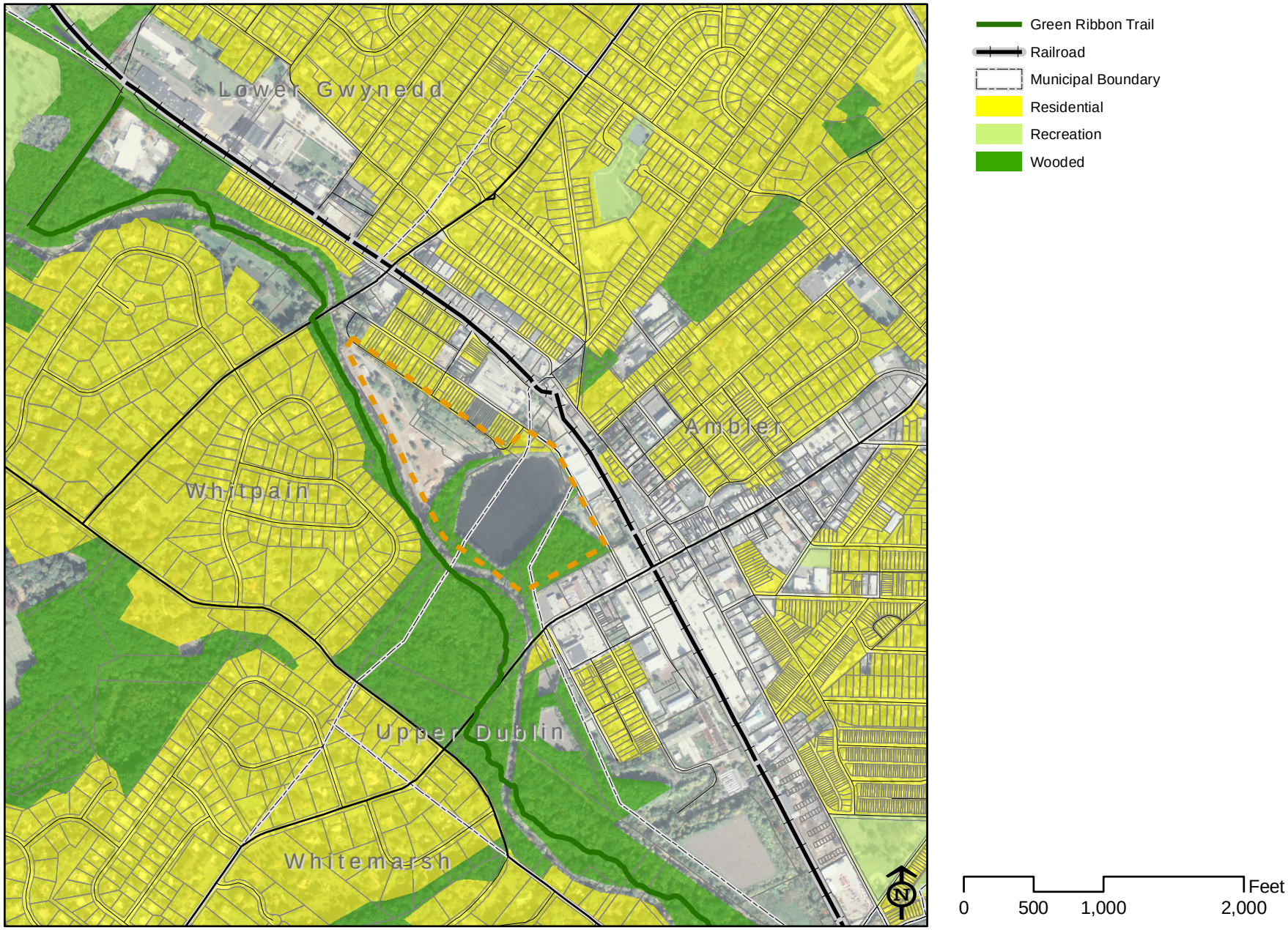

Figure 10: Land Use Context: Residential

Access Considerations

Despite the BoRit Site's proximity to the SEPTA station and the Ambler Central Business District, the creek and rail corridors isolate the BoRit Site from the major circulation routes. The BoRit Site is only accessible from Maple, a single local access street, via Butler Pike or Mount Pleasant. This limited access and visibility could be a constraint for potential commercial and industrial uses.

Summary of Site Context

The future use of the BoRit Site is challenged by a number of factors: multiple owners, multiple jurisdictions, limited access, steep slopes, riparian borders and a mix of surrounding land use. However, the BoRit Site also offers significant opportunities provide a recreational greenway that links the surrounding communities and supports the future transit hub with high quality open space.

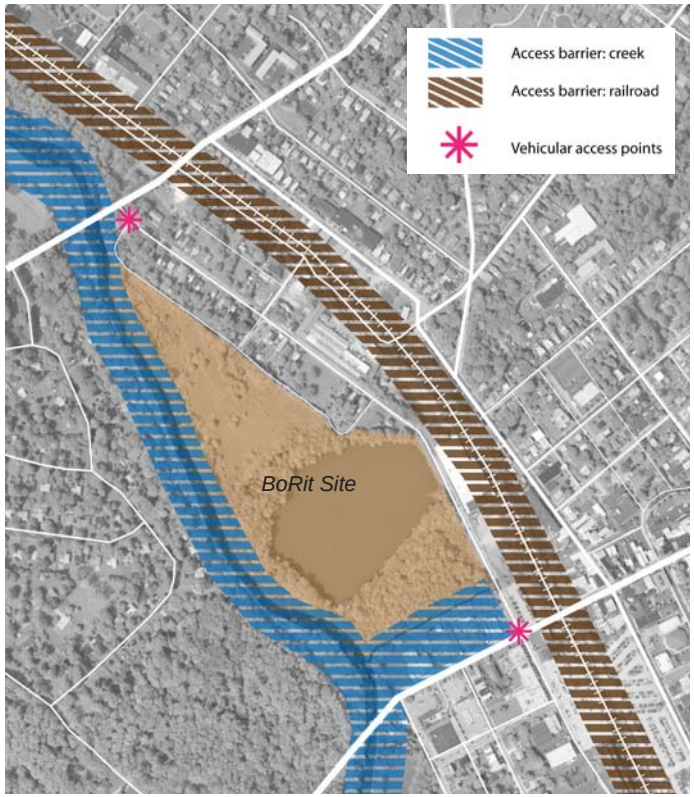

Figure 8: Access Diagram

Photos of the Redevelopment Overlay District to the south and east of the site.

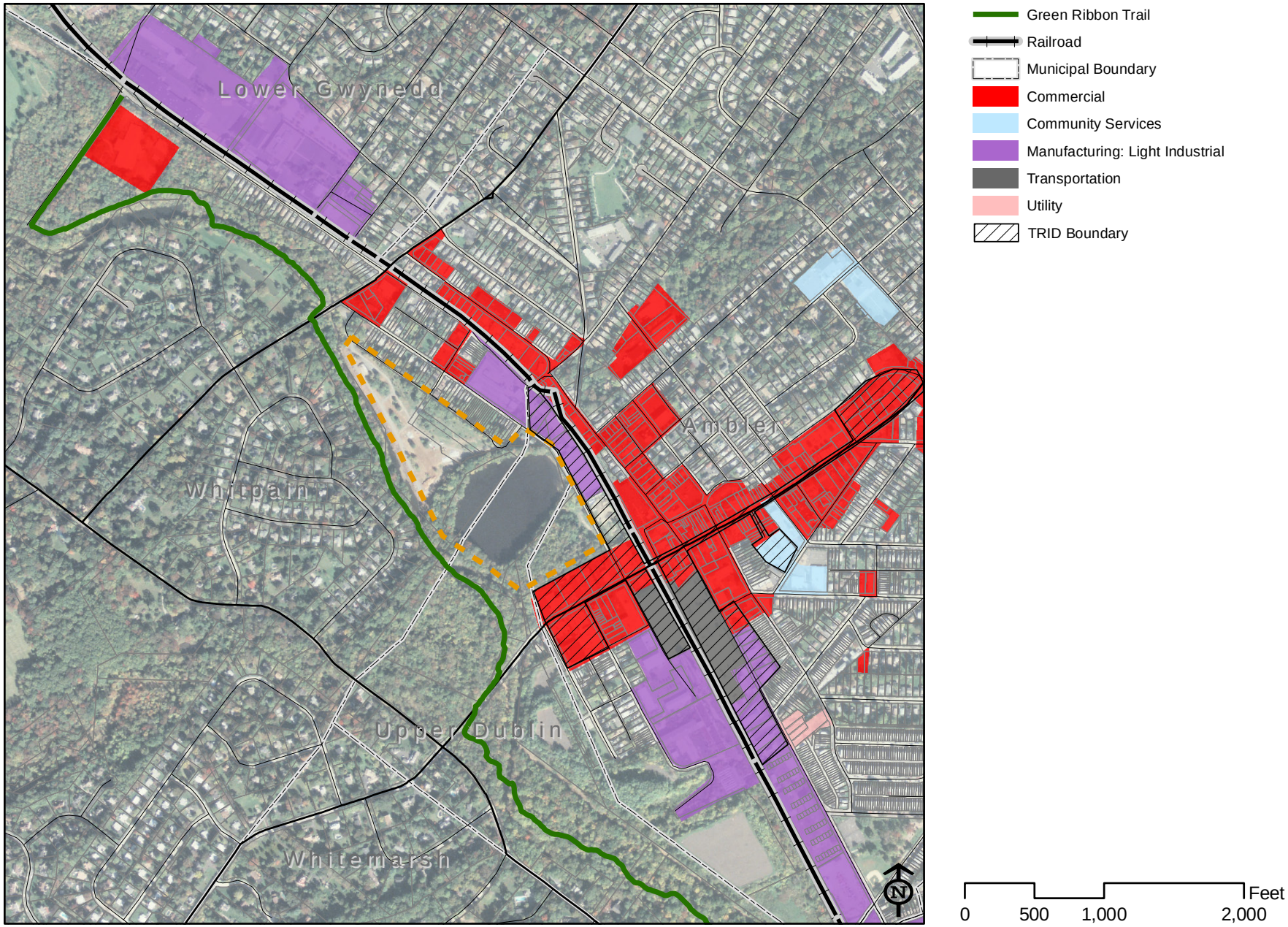

Figure 9: Land Use Context: Commercial and Industrial

V. FUTURE USE SCENARIOS

As presented in the previous section, the BoRit Site is defined by two corridors – the Green Ribbon Trail to the West and the SEPTA commuter rail, Central Business District and potential transit oriented development to the East. Located between these two corridors, the future use of the BoRit Site could support the regional greenway, the growing revitalization district, or a combination of uses. Based on this context, the Future Plans Group evaluated the following potential future use scenarios as illustrated in Figure 10:

- Regional Greenway – including habitat, recreation and open space
- Mixed Use Greenway – including a greenway with mixed-use
- Transit Hub – including commercial and higher density residential

VI. FUTURE USE RECOMMENDATIONS

During the reuse assessment discussion on March 4th, the BoRit Future Plans Group noted the following important reuse considerations regarding the BoRit Site and surrounding context:

- The Whitpain property should be preserved as recreational open space and re-opened as Wissahickon Park to serve the West Ambler neighborhood and surrounding community.
- A buffer should be included around the Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve to protect the wildlife habitat from noise, building height and other disturbances related to human activity. Pedestrian access to the Green Ribbon Trail should be directed outside this buffer zone.
- Pedestrian access to the Green Ribbon Trail could use the existing vehicular bridges on Butler Pike and Mount Pleasant; a pedestrian bridge across Wissahickon Creek was considered unnecessary and unsuitable at this location.
- Future land uses for the BoRit Site and surrounding properties should consider minimizing vehicular traffic and enhancing pedestrian amenities on Maple and Chestnut Streets.
- More intensive land uses should be concentrated within the TRID district. With proper guidance, future uses in this revitalization district could enhance the gateway to Ambler Borough.
- The BoRit Site properties could best contribute to the revitalization goals by providing nearby high-quality open space that could enhance quality of life and property values.

In summary, the BoRit Future Plans Group has identified the following two potential future use scenarios that favor open space and recreational land uses:

- Regional Greenway Scenario
- Mixed Use Greenway Scenario

The Future Plans Group agreed that the Transit Hub Scenario is not appropriate for the BoRit site. The two recommended scenarios may be used in discussions with EPA to ensure the selected remedy and design will be protective of human health and the environment under these potential future land uses. These scenarios may also be used in local planning discussions to support growing regional greenway and revitalization efforts. Finally, the scenarios may be used to facilitate cooperation among the site property owners to ensure uses are compatible with the future Wissahickon Park and existing Wissahickon Waterfowl Preserve.

Recommended: Regional Greenway *Recommended: Mixed Use Greenway* *Not Recommended: Transit Hub*

Legend

- Existing Open Space
- Potential Recreation / Habitat
- Potential Multi-Family Residential
- Potential Mixed Use / Commercial
- Revitalization District
- TRID Study Area
- Potential Pedestrian Loop
- Potential Enhanced Sidewalks
- Existing Green Ribbon Trail
- Existing Trail Access

Figure 10: Potential Reuse Scenarios

Appendix

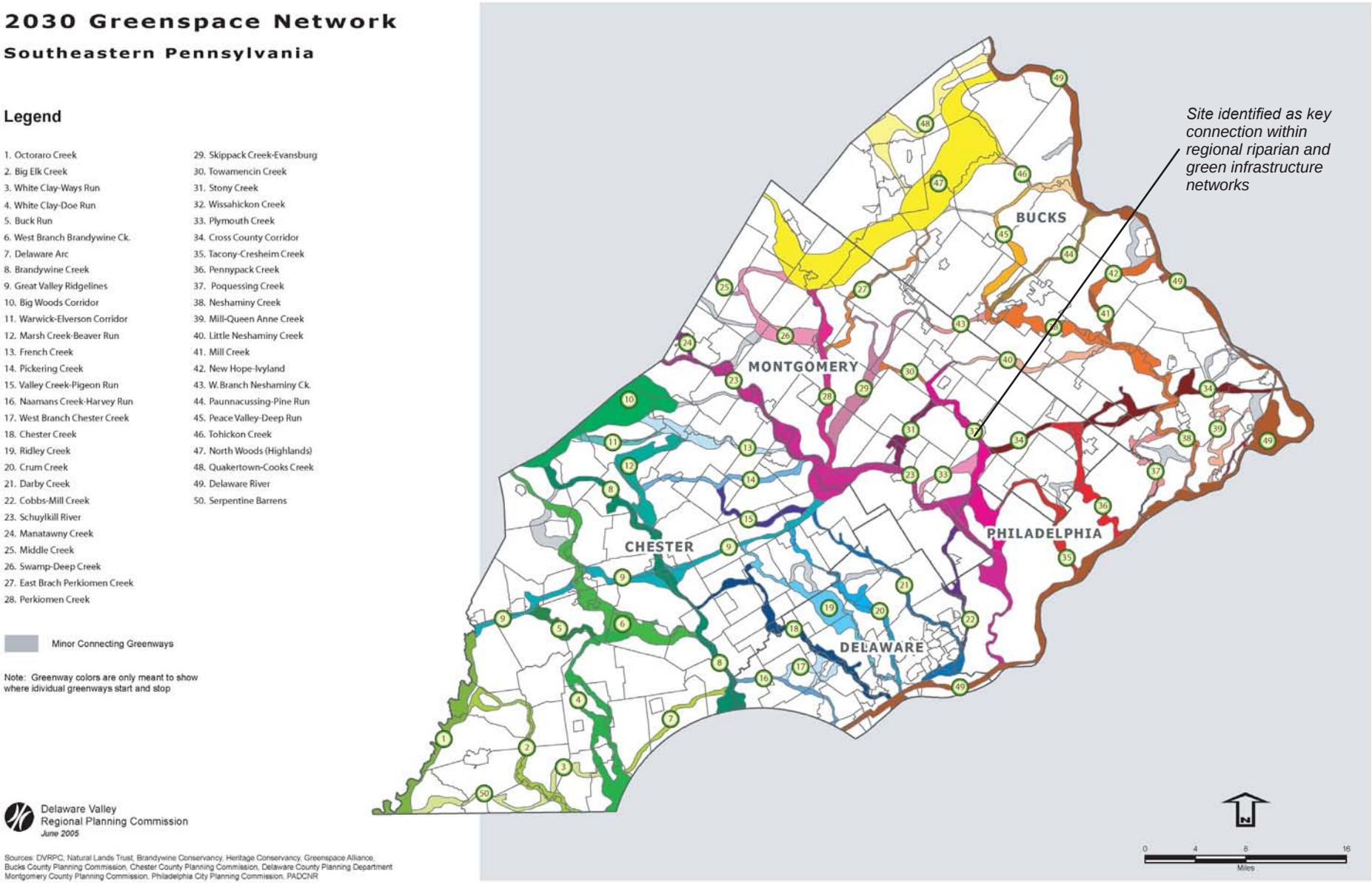

Figure A-1: Regional Greenspace Network

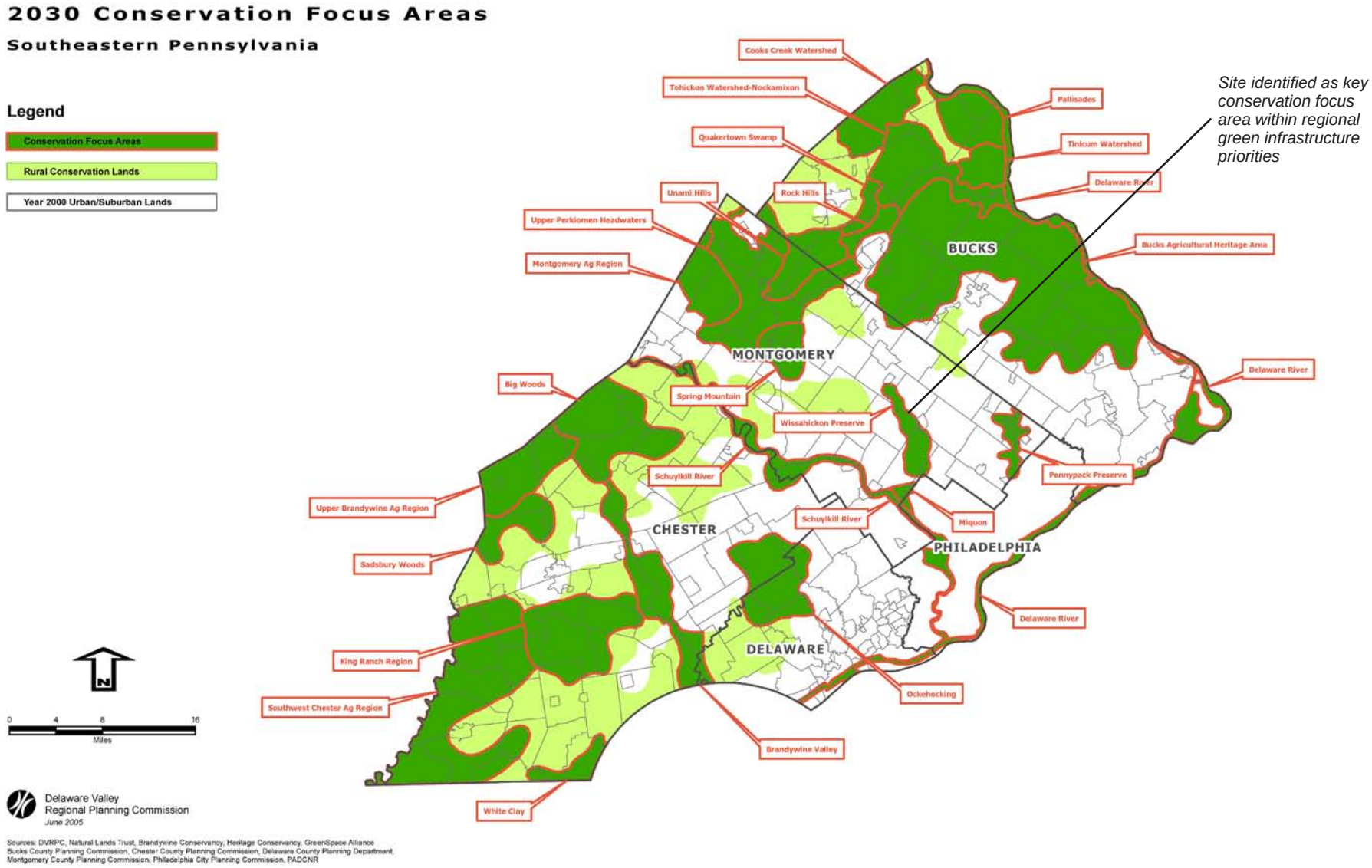

Figure A-2: Regional Conservation Focus Areas

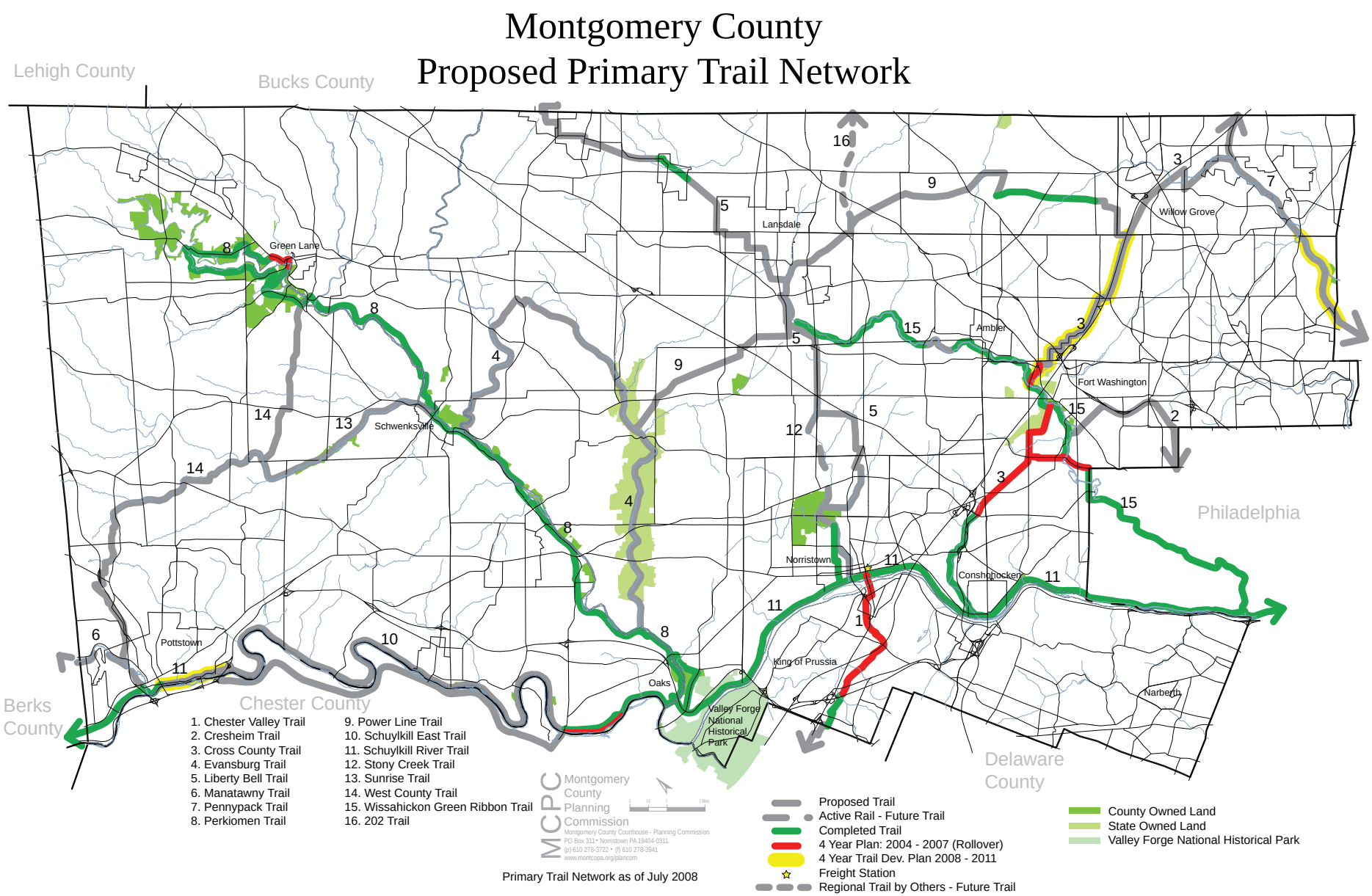

Figure A-3: Montgomery CountyTrail Network

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