

Bethlehem Discovery Park: Summary

Stage: Planning phase · Version 1.3 · October 19, 2026 · Independent community project

Planning phase. An independent plan; nothing is funded or built yet. Not an official project of, or endorsed by, any agency, landowner or institution named. Every fact here comes from the feasibility brief (v1.3), with its source and label.

The idea

A welcoming park in the greater Bethlehem and Lehigh Valley area, Pennsylvania, where children, teens, adults, families and seniors can play, learn, enjoy nature and spend time together without everything being expensive. It should feel like a shared community park first and a small attraction second. Entry to the grounds would be free every day, with no income tests. Rides would be free whenever someone reliably gives or pays for them, and otherwise kept as low as possible (about \$2-\$4 a ride), with free-ride days protected.

What it would include

Start small: a pilot of about 5–15 acres. No rides at this stage.

- Inclusive playgrounds for ages 0–2, 2–5 and 5–12, with a discovery and nature theme and a calm sensory nook.
- A native meadow, pollinator and learning gardens, and a walking loop with outdoor fitness stations.
- An event lawn for festivals and free carnival-style games of skill on event days.
- A Welcome Hub with modern, accessible restrooms (all-gender and family rooms), adult changing rooms, first aid, free drinking water and bottle refill.
- A food and water hub: shared fridges and freezers so food left over from events is saved, not wasted, run by a named food-safety lead.

Grow only if the pilot meets its targets: a family park of about 20–35 acres.

- A carousel and a few gentle family rides, run by paid, trained operators aged 16 or older.
- The Discovery Barn, for hands-on science and local history (the Lehigh River, Moravian heritage, steel and industry). Farm-animal visits there are optional.
- A food pavilion with clear ingredient and allergen information.

Why here, and why now

- **The gap is real but modest.** Nothing within about 15 minutes of Bethlehem combines free entry, low-cost rides, a carousel and destination-scale inclusive nature play. Dorney Park costs about \$60 or more a day. Knoebels shows that a free-gate, pay-per-ride park works, but it is about 1 hour 40 minutes away.
- **People are asking for it.** The City of Bethlehem's 2026 "40 in 10" parks plan heard demand for inclusive play, natural play and splash pads.

Where

The main location is being finalized. Desk research screened twelve candidate areas and set aside six more. Several places that look vacant are already committed to other uses: warehouses, apartments, or former steel land under cleanup covenants that rule out children's play. Any site needs safe walking, bus and trail access, and must stay out of the floodway and away from industrial uses.

Safety and rules

- **Rides are tightly regulated in Pennsylvania.** The state requires yearly registration, Qualified Inspector affidavits before opening and every 30 days, and operators aged 16 or older. Rides are never a volunteer job.
- **Playgrounds** follow the CPSC Public Playground Safety Handbook and ASTM F1487. They also need accessible play under the 2010 ADA Standards and inspection by a certified playground inspector.
- **Every path** is an accessible route. There is shade and seating along the way, and sensory-friendly hours.

Natural first

- Native, drought-tolerant planting instead of irrigated lawns, plus rain gardens.
- Refill stations instead of bottled water, and reusable dishware.
- Sorting points for recycling, compost and trash at every entrance, the Welcome Hub and every event; food and garden waste composted for the gardens; materials salvaged and reused when building.
- It protects native plants and pollinators, mature trees, the creek and its banks, and clean water.
- The aim is only natural energy: solar under 1 MW, batteries, ground-source heat and heat recovery where they fit; wind, hydro (only where permitted) and pumped storage through the separate Energy & Logistics Hubs, under utility and state rules.

People and roles

- **Building it** needs many temporary roles, each with an end point: design and engineering, construction support, community build days, setup, training and launch.
- **Running it** keeps only a few long-term positions. There are never fewer than safety and the law require: first aid at every opening, grounds and maintenance, supervisors for youth helpers and, at the family-park stage, ride operators.
- **Software does the paperwork** (scheduling, records, reports), never the work safety requires.
- **Volunteers** choose roles they like and switch anytime. Hours are never ranked; all are credited by name and role.

Paying for it honestly

- **Free is the goal.** It is only free when someone reliably gives or pays, so each gift has a named giver and a backup.
- **Capital money** for building would need a public partner. The biggest state programs require a public applicant: RACP, and the gaming Local Share Account. A nonprofit can apply directly to DCNR's Community Conservation Partnerships Program and the state Greenways, Trails and Recreation Program.
- **Running costs** need earned income and steady public support, not donations. Costs that remain include ride insurance, inspections, parts, utilities and trained staff.

How it moves forward: earn each step

- **Before a pilot (Gate 1):** a willing landowner, community support, a market study, a credible operating budget, a check that no existing park or facility already meets the need, and a written cleanup and restoration plan for the site.
- **Before the family park (Gate 2):** visits and costs on target, a ride operations plan, insurance quotes and secured funding.
- **Before anything larger (Gate 3):** proven demand, enough land, an operating surplus and an environmental review.

Every physical step needs local engineering, environmental review, community participation, written land permission and every required permit, all "Not requested" today. **Reuse it anywhere:** Others can copy the method and checklists; land, permits, laws, climate, language, currency and units stay local. The aim, not a plan or a promise: other Pennsylvania towns, the US (for example the Midwest), the world.

Contact: no public contact address yet. Full plan, brief and sources: <https://bethlehem-discovery-park.vercel.app>