Parks: more money or more nature?

Among the components of a 12 percent real estate tax hike Pottstown Council will likely pass this month is a 16 percent millage increase to support the Pottstown Parks and Recreation Department.

Pottstown has 15 parks and tot lots maintained by the borough, in addition to play areas at its four elementary schools and its high school-middle school complex, maintained by the school district.

Parks are wonderful. But with a declining tax base, we can’t afford them all. Some of them should become low-maintenance natural areas.

The borough is spending $900,000 this year to operate its parks, going up to $1 million in 2019.

In 2017, the borough decided to upgrade Pollock Park, a 2-acre park on a former scrap yard between South and Cross streets. In the process, consultants discovered contaminated soil. A grassy area that had been enjoyed since the 1970s has now been closed off with orange netting for more than a year — until the borough can find the money to replace the tainted soil. It was a nice passive park that didn’t really need to be improved. Now it’s an eyesore.

Meanwhile, a sign greeting people coming into downtown Pottstown from the Schuylkill River Greenway has been peeling for more than a year. Instead of enticing visitors, it reflects negatively on our town.

When it comes to parks, we can’t maintain what we have. We need to set priorities — like making sure a prominent sign is fixed — and downsize our park infrastructure by returning more of our parkland to nature — allowing more woods and meadows to grow that soothe our spirits, absorb and cleanse stormwater, and mitigate flooding.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton

NEGATIVE IMAGE — The trailhead at Riverfront Park is the downtown entryway for people using the Schuylkill River Greenway. An outdated and peeling sign reflects poorly on Pottstown's image. It hasn't been touched for more than a year.

ASSET OR LIABILITY? Pollock Park, above and below, was created as a park in the 1970s from an abandoned scrap yard. It was closed a year ago because soil contamination was discovered. Now it’s an eyesore — cordoned off with orange netting.