

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING FOR OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION¹

What is “Open Space”?

The term "open space" refers to conservation land, recreation and agricultural land, forest land, corridor parks and amenities such as small parks, green buffers along roadways or any open area that is owned by an agency or organization dedicated to conservation. It also refers to any undeveloped land with particular conservation or recreation interest. Some open space use may be for passive activities such as walking, hiking, and nature study while other more active recreational uses include soccer, tennis, or baseball.

Why Bother?

Valued natural resources will be preserved, maintained, and restored, only through thoughtful planning and active stewardship. Without planning, ill-conceived changes in land use patterns can dramatically alter a community in a short period.

Planning provides the opportunity to assess where you are, where you would like to go and how you might get there. Planning now to protect important open space and recreational facilities can greatly enhance the attractiveness of your community and encourage compatible growth in the future.

Planning allows the City to confront and manage aspects of growth and development in ways that preserve, protect, and enhance the environment. The planning process can expose potential problems while there is still time to prevent them.

Open space plans allow the benefits of open space that make up the character and protects the "green infrastructure" of a community. Planning this "green infrastructure" of water supply, land, working farms and forests, viable wildlife habitats, parks, recreation areas, trails, and greenways is as important to the economic future of a community as planning for schools, roads, water, and wastewater infrastructure.

Cost Effectiveness!

Besides enhancing the quality of life, protecting open space can provide economic benefits. It can help a community avoid the costly mistakes of misusing available resources. Protected open space usually raises the taxable value of adjacent properties and is less costly to maintain than the infrastructure and services required by residential development. Even taking into account the increased tax base that results from development, open space usually proves easier on the municipal budget in the long-run.²

¹ Adapted and modified from Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Division of Conservation Services, Open Space Planner's Workbook

² A publication by the River and Trail Assistance Program of the National Park Service, Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails, and Greenway Corridors, presents many studies on this subject, including

Protecting a community's open space is not necessarily synonymous with costly acquisitions. Many municipalities and private nonprofit organizations hold partial ownership interests in land, such as conservation restrictions or agricultural preservation restrictions.³ These restrictions may be acquired through gift, purchase, or regulation, and are designed to preserve natural resources from adverse future use.

Leveraging

Once completed, an Open Space Plan is a powerful instrument to effect community goals. It establishes the community's aspirations and recommends patterns of development that will support them. Courts recognize the effort and organization behind a plan. Municipalities with plans are more likely to win land use cases and other tests of their municipal statutes.

Finally, a Massachusetts community with an approved Open Space Plan becomes eligible to apply for Self-Help, Urban Self-Help, Land and Water Conservation Funds, and other grant programs administered by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs' Division of Conservation Services. Open space plans also help to coordinate with ongoing acquisition efforts of state environmental agencies, and local and regional land trusts, and can leverage significant resources.

Conclusion

Although open space itself is a simple concept, the factors that affect it, and that it affects, are complex. Through an Open Space Plan, you identify and examine these factors and lay out strategies your community can use to protect and enjoy its character, natural resources and open spaces.

chapters on property values near open space and costs of municipal services for developed land, and is a valuable reference book for use in defending open space protection. Similarly, the Southern New England Forestry Consortium's study, Cost of Community Services in Southern New England, illustrates the net fiscal benefit of open space on local tax bases, when compared to residential development. Additional resources on this issue include the Trust for Public Land study on open space and taxes and the American Farmlands Trust, which developed the methodology used in the Southern New England study.

³ An Executive Office of Environmental Affairs publication entitled The Massachusetts Conservation Restriction Handbook, explains all of the steps involved in drafting a conservation restriction and gaining state approval. In addition, certain zoning techniques, such as conservation subdivision design, can help a community achieve its open space objectives.