

SECTION 7 ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

A. CONSERVATION AND RESOURCE PROTECTION NEEDS

Over the past several years, the Conservation Commission, aside from meeting its responsibilities under the Wetlands Protection Act, has also been working with other municipal boards, commissions, departments, and committees, to protect and increase the conservation and open space assets of the Town. These efforts include partnerships with non-profit organizations and include pursuing: long-range greenway/trail/preservation projects; improved public access to conservation areas; water supply and watershed protection, and; habitat and ecological preservation and restoration plans (such as those efforts underway on the Three Mile River and the Canoe River). The Commission is also working with the Department of Public Works (DPW) and SRPEDD to address chronic flood and water quality management issues on the Wading River (Walker Street) and the Three Mile River (Crane Street). These projects also relate directly to nutrient management issues in the Taunton River and its tributaries.

In a now thirty-year effort to protect the quality and quantity of Norton's water resources, the Town, in conjunction with its partners on the Canoe River Aquifer Advisory Committee (Norton, Mansfield, Easton, Sharon, and Foxborough) has mapped, monitored, and assessed the water resources of the Canoe River Aquifer. The Norton Conservation Commission has also assessed the wildlife and habitat resources of the Canoe River Watershed. These assessments can be used to prioritize the acquisition and permanent protection of open space important to retaining the ecological integrity of the Canoe River Aquifer. These assessments can also be used for land that meets conservation and recreation needs, provides river and stream buffers, preserves critical habitat linkages and functions, and protects recharge areas near existing and future potential water supply sites. Healthy environmental systems require a network of vital connections that help to preserve the services that these systems provide to our cities and towns (water quality, air quality, fish and wildlife habitat, etc.). By protecting and restoring naturally functioning ecosystems, we help to preserve the "green infrastructure" that is critical to the overall health and resiliency of our cities and towns. This approach can complement regulatory measures currently being employed by the Planning Board and the Water Department, and should be employed as part of a comprehensive municipal natural resources protection strategy.

Areas that are critical for their conservation, recreation, and cultural values, and are heavily used and favored by the public, should also undergo regular need assessments and upgrades. In the Open Space and Recreation Plan Survey and at the Committee's working meetings, the following items were specifically mentioned as conservation priorities:

- The acquisition of Camp Edith Read as part of a larger conservation/recreation block strategy to include a landscape connection between the Middle School and the YMCA
- The acquisition of the Houghton Farm for its conservation and cultural value to Norton
- The conservation of the Balfour land
- The importance of Seekonk/Hemlock Swamp for its connection to the Attleboro Land Trust and the Land Preservation Society of Norton Lands
- The conservation of the Daggatt-Crandall-Newcomb Home Land
- The collaboration with conservation partners in order to help meet Norton's conservation goals/needs
- Improve wayfinding signs for conservation properties

B. PARKS & RECREATION AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), Massachusetts Outdoor 2012, is a five-year plan developed by the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. The plan is required for state participation in the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grants programs. The SCORP also provides an overview of the recreational preferences of the citizens of each geographic region of the Commonwealth as determined through a public participation and outreach process. The profile of recreational use afforded by the SCORP also provides municipalities with a planning tool for addressing the future needs and uses of our outdoor recreational resources.

The SCORP summary of the Commonwealth's Eastern and Southern Regions, which includes Taunton, indicates that water based activities and playgrounds provide the most popular recreational outlets for families in the regions. The SCORP also revealed that the most popular facilities for adults and seniors are hiking and walking trails; adolescents find athletic fields and skate parks most popular; for children, playgrounds and athletic fields, and; for preschoolers are playgrounds and water facilities. The SCORP also indicated that trails are the type of facility that has increased the most in popularity over the past five years, as well as the activity that people believe will increase the most in popularity over the next five years.

Finally, it should also be noted that the SCORP indicated that citizens in this region favored restoring/reinvesting in and maintaining existing recreational facilities. This is something that the Town's residents would very much like to see become a standard in policy and practice.

The SCORP summary also largely reflects the Town's recreation preferences and goals. Based upon both the Open Space and Recreation survey and discussions at the Open Space Plan Committee's working meetings, the top five choices for the types of recreation facilities that are needed or should be expanded in Norton were: hiking and walking trails; bike paths (the rail trail); water and boating access; conservation areas/nature observation areas, and; improved signage and parking at conservation and recreation areas.

The Town's Recreation Commission is committed to providing quality year-round recreational programs for all residents of the town as well as facility maintenance of all parks, recreation. However, an efficient, effective, and sustainable recreation program requires a full-time Administrator/Director. Norton currently does not have a Recreation Administrator/Director.

Based upon the amount of public use of its existing recreational facilities, and use limitations related to accessibility issues at some of these facilities, the Town should continue to upgrade and address compliance issues at these facilities (as assessed in the current ADA Transition Plans, found in Section 11 of this plan). Addressing upgrade and compliance issues will allow for maximum and efficient use of several of the more popular and developed municipal parks and recreation holdings. This will also allow for greater levels of participation in the parks and recreation system by people of all ages and abilities.

Some of the facilities/opportunities specifically mentioned as "recreational and community needs" (in terms of upgrades, repurposing, or new development) at public meetings and in Open Space and Recreation Survey comments, included:

- Improve public boating access
- Improve wayfinding signage for public
- Create recreation and trails facilities maps with mileage noted
- Complete ADA upgrades to facilities as needed
- Construct Splash pad facility as part of improved youth recreation facilities upgrades
- Construct an outdoor education center/fitness trail
- Improve fishing opportunities with dedicated, safe facilities and spaces

Community planners have traditionally looked to the National Park and Recreation Association Standards (NPRA) as a benchmark for the number of facilities/opportunities/acres a community should have per units of population. These standards are still very useful as guides, but have become more difficult to achieve in leaner economic times as communities struggle to maintain their current recreational assets and stock. Partnerships (local and regional), reinvestment, and repurposing may hold the keys to the maximum and efficient use of current recreational stock as well as the ability to expand and offer more (and more diverse) quality, life-long experiences to citizens of all ages and abilities.

Special User Group Needs

Seniors

Norton is similar to state and national trends in that its population is aging and remaining more active than in years past. Norton's population aged 55 and over showed a significant increase between 1990 and 2010, and currently makes up 30% of Norton's population compared to 14% in 1990. Furthermore, Norton's Median Age increased by over seven (7) years during this same period (38.2 years), and is only slightly less than the state Median Age figure (39.1 years) for the first time.

Many people in this age group, particularly in survey responses, were looking for the Town to provide increased outdoor activities for seniors (paved and accessible walking, hiking, etc., with comfort/bathroom facilities).

Citizens with Disabilities

The Town has prepared a self –evaluation and transition plan for its recreational facilities as required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These plans are carried out through a municipally appointed ADA Coordinator. The Coordinator is responsible for working to bring all municipal services, infrastructure, and buildings into compliance with the Act. The ADA Coordinator is not responsible for privately owned facilities.

The ADA Transition Plan, found in Section 11 of this plan, contains an inventory of the public conservation and recreation facilities of the Town of Norton (exclusive of the School Department facilities; the School Department must conduct their own assessment and prepare a Transition Plan for their facilities). The Transition Plan takes inventory of the improvements needed to bring a facility into ADA compliance. The Town has been attempting to address these needs as funding allows, and has accomplished some of the necessary tasks.

All future recreation facilities should be designed with the needs of citizens with disabilities in mind, in terms of site access, physical use, and ability to view events and cultural/scenic landscapes.

C. MANAGEMENT NEEDS, POTENTIAL CHANGE OF USE

Beyond the management needs of the physical conservation and recreation assets of the town, the Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee saw the need to manage the flow of information/education regarding the Open Space and Recreation Plan. The following ideas are a synthesis of those offered at Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee and community meetings:

Management

In general, the public defined the major management issue associated with all parks, recreation, historical, and conservation holdings in town was the need for improved maintenance on all town-owned facilities. A number of suggestions came out of the working meetings, including: neighborhood pride days (clean-up/fix-up events); corporate sponsorship of parks and recreation facilities; increased budget allocations where necessary, and; engaging in more and more diverse partnership activities to help meet needs.

Trash was identified as a major problem throughout town, both in terms of trash recycling/collection, and littering/dumping. There is a need for a single company to handle the collection of trash and recyclables, and to provide receptacles, at all town properties.

Education

The Conservation Commission posts the Open Space and Recreation Plan and a Conservation Commission Lands brochure on the Town's website. Many other related documents, or links to important documents, such as the Three Mile River Watershed ACEC Stewardship Plan, The Taunton River Stewardship Plan; the Hockomock ACEC designation, and the Canoe River ACEC designation, should also be put up at the same location.

An improved web page with interactive maps and improved written/outreach materials would help to forge stronger ties between the Town and potential conservation partners, as well as to promote the public ownership and the need for stewardship of these outstanding resources (strategies could include the construction of kiosks to house conservation/parks/recreation literature at appropriate sites).

Land Acquisition and Preservation

The Open Space Plan Committee, the public, and several partnering conservation organizations also identified the need for a formal Land Acquisition/Protection Strategy for conservation and open space parcels. The goal here would be to promote a more unified and purposeful approach to land acquisition by the city that would focus on: keeping significant natural corridors intact; retaining the integrity of significant blocks of watershed and agricultural land; looking at land

function as well as features in a complementary context, and; promoting a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach as to how and why land is preserved or acquired.

This strategy should be used to target susceptible natural resource areas in Norton's three ACECs, along its river corridors, and in areas of agricultural significance (in essence, a way to address issues in identified Core Habitat, high-quality streams, Heritage Landscape Inventory and Critical Natural Landscape areas). This will also serve to enhance the Town's social, economic, and environmental resilience.

Once these lands are acquired, however, proper stewardship is also required, including both physical maintenance (where necessary) and legal protection. Article 97 of the Massachusetts Constitution stipulates a right to a clean environment in order to protect our public and environmental health. Under Article 97, lands acquired for the purposes of Article 97 have protected status and may only be dispensed by a two-thirds vote of the legislature.

In 1998, the (then) Executive Office of Environmental Affairs created a Land Disposition Policy referred to as the no net loss policy. This policy requires the entity requesting a change in use, control, ownership, or disposition of Article 97 land, to show a lack of feasible alternatives to taking such actions. It also requires equitable replacement of land. This is why it is so important for cities and towns to identify these municipal holdings and make sure that the deeds reflect the purpose of the acquisition of those parcels dedicated to conservation or recreation (having affirmative Town Meeting votes). If research reveals that the deed does not reflect the intent of the acquisition, the situation may be remedied by recording a corrective deed (with the authorizing Town Meeting vote recorded as an adjunct to the corrective deed).

In terms of public safety and maintenance of trails, on both public lands and private property, the Town should make the public aware of Chapter 202 of the Acts of 2010, regulating the use of off-highway and recreation vehicles. This legislation amends Chapter 90B of Massachusetts General Law. Chapter 90B, Section 26 was amended to state, in Section 26(e)(iii), and (f), that:

- No person shall operate a snow vehicle or recreation vehicle on publicly-owned property except on trails marked and designated for use by such vehicles, or without the express permission of the owner.
- No person shall operate a snow vehicle in a manner that causes damage to public or private property including, but not limited to, lands owned or managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation or the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, wetlands or other waters of the Commonwealth, priority habitats delineated as such by the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife pursuant to Chapter 131A, lands used for public water supply purposes or historic or archaeological sites.

Finally, the Town should continue to promote agricultural retention, preservation, and assistance programs offered by both MDAR and the USDA. The amount of agricultural land in the Town has diminished greatly over the last sixty years. Much of this land has been converted into commercial land, industrial land, and various residential developments. As recently as 2005, a significant amount of land in the Three Mile River Watershed (including Norton, Easton, Taunton, Dighton, and Berkley) was considered "regionally significant" to farming by both MDAR and USDA, who targeted the area for participation in their programs.

The Town has to plan for/with agriculture, not around it. Poorly planned land use can have negative impacts on viable farm operations. The Town could also consider establishing an Agricultural Commission and develop a Right-To-Farm Bylaw to help increase community awareness of farms and their business needs. This can also help with retention of agricultural lands and soils, promote the practice of agriculture, and encourage new farmers to invest in the community. The Town can also work with organizations like the Wildlands Trust to sponsor workshops on intergenerational transfer of property to help older farm owners and their heirs.