

7. Open Space and Recreation



Master Plan

A. Goal

Protect and enhance our rural character and agricultural viability, and provide and develop multi-use and multi-generational recreational opportunities that bring townspeople together.

B. Overview

Amherst has for many years acted on its commitment to preserve the community's unique landscape and character. The Town has been steadily acquiring critical lands for conservation since 1963. Today, a total of 4,849.5 acres, or 27.3 percent of Amherst's land area, is permanently protected land. The Town is committed to protecting more land, to preserve the community's open space and provide adequate recreational opportunities as new growth occurs.

Several recurring themes appear throughout this chapter, including: the desire to support local farming; the need to increase the amount of existing open spaces and expand the trail system through innovative land use policies and zoning; and the desire to create new and successful recreational facilities to improve the quality of life in the community. Fulfilling many of this Plan's recreation objectives will require a shift in priorities in the Town's budget.

C. Existing Conditions

This assessment of the Town's existing open space and recreation conditions was developed by the consulting team based on technical research, as well as discussions with the CPC and Town staff. The Town's own plans and studies, including but not limited to the draft 2007 "Open Space & Recreation Plan," "Amherst Comprehensive Planning Study: Defining Village Boundaries and Open Space Preservation Strategies," and the "Town of Amherst Community Development Plan" were closely consulted. This section summarizes the current open space and recreation conditions:

- **An extensive network of parks, open space, and recreation resources:** The amount of open space and recreational resources within Amherst is already extensive. Highlights include the Mount Holyoke Range State Park and an 80+ mile network of hiking trails that traverses the Town.
- **A variety of land protection approaches:** For 40 years, Amherst has used outright purchase, acquisition of easements and deed restrictions, and development regulations to protect many kinds of land—including parks, open space and recreational facilities—and to preserve critical conservation lands, wildlife habitat, water

supplies, scenic views, agricultural lands, and the community's historic landscapes. Permanently protected lands include Town conservation areas, Agricultural Preservation Restriction farmland, recreation areas and schools, private land trusts, conservation restrictions, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation land, and open land required to be provided by private developers during the permitting process. Currently, the Town's regulations encourage development in existing developed areas, while preserving farmland and conservation lands in the outlying areas.

- **Land preservation priorities:** Several areas of Amherst have been identified as priorities for continued conservation efforts. Those areas are Pulpit Hill, the Cushman Brook green belt corridor, the Plum Brook green belt corridor, the block of farmland in the northwest corner of Amherst, consolidation of existing blocks of partially-protected farm and conservation lands, and the Holyoke Range.
- **A trail system:** Currently, Amherst has more than eighty miles of maintained trails. The trail system includes approximately fifty different trails designed to accommodate diverse users.
- **A need to protect the region's natural attractions:** Amherst is located within the Pioneer Valley—the middle stretch of the Connecticut River valley in western Massachusetts. Amherst's landscapes offer a great variety of natural recreational activities including fishing, hunting, hiking, skiing, boating, and cycling. This wealth of natural habitat should be preserved, managed, and promoted as a natural and economic asset that serves as a sustainable resource for the community, tourists, and visitors.
- **Recreational leadership:** A variety of organizations contribute to the recreational activities in Amherst, including the Leisure Services and Supplemental Education Department, a wide range of private groups, public schools, colleges, and the university.

The Objectives and Strategies discussed in the remainder of this chapter provide a coherent framework for approaching Amherst's future of open spaces and recreation. They reconcile the need to preserve land to support local farms and natural habitats while also providing a variety of recreational areas for the enjoyment of the community at large.

D. Objectives and Strategies

This section describes the objectives and strategies that will support the Open Space and Recreation goal for the Town of Amherst.

OBJECTIVE O.1 - Protect land that provides significant value for agriculture, watershed protection, trail systems, habitat, and biodiversity.

Amherst has a highly valued rural landscape and a commitment to preserving open spaces. Continued efforts should be made to conserve and expand habitats, watersheds, trail systems, and agricultural lands in order to protect native plant and animal species and maintain the area's unique character. The following strategies recommend how this can be achieved.

STRATEGIES

O.1.A Continue to identify key conservation, recreation, and agricultural land parcels for future acquisition or protection.

The community should continue to work to identify and prioritize significant land parcels that should be acquired by the Town or otherwise protected. Potential acquisition targets need to be inventoried and assessed for their environmental, recreational, and scenic value, as well as their potential vulnerability to development pressures and connection to existing protected parcels and greenways.

O.1.B Match these parcels with public and private programs that will support acquisition and/or protection.

The Town of Amherst has played a very active role in acquiring conservation lands. In addition to public acquisition of lands, the Town should continue to work with private conservation organizations such as land trusts to further open space protection efforts.

O.1.C Augment the public trail and transportation system with permission from private landowners.

The Town should continue to maintain close contact with residents, businesses, and those that own parcels of land that have been targeted for future greenway or trail expansion. In addition to better connections between conservation and recreation areas, private trail connections can provide access for pedestrians and bicyclists between residential, commercial, and institutional destinations and public rights-of-way and public transit stops, as a means of encouraging sustainable transportation. Regular communications should be used to educate landowners about the importance of greenways and trails, and offer incentives for the granting of easements.

O.1.D Use zoning bylaws to encourage design that protects and enhances the landscape.

Zoning regulations can be used as an important tool to reduce human impact on natural areas. Types of creative zoning include open space offsets, transfers of development rights, and preservation banks, among others. These approaches retain a large percentage (or all) of a development site as

natural or open space in exchange for allowing higher density development in a more appropriate area. Regulations should also be established to ensure that when development is proposed adjacent to ecologically significant areas, it adheres to dimensional and design standards that minimize impact on the natural environment.

OBJECTIVE O.2 - Improve the economic viability of the farm community within Amherst.

The Town should support the economic viability of the local farm community by continuing to develop and pursue policies that sustain and support the agricultural economy.

STRATEGIES

O.2.A Define priority agricultural districts and continue to acquire and otherwise preserve land within these districts.

Farmers today are facing a variety of new challenges. As their profits decrease and speculative land values increase, they face more pressure to sell off all or part of their farmland. The Town should continue to identify, prioritize, and protect its most significant agricultural lands in order to sustain the local farming community, preserve open space, and retain its unique rural character.

O.2.B Employ Town policies to improve the economic viability of the farm community.

A variety of policies can be adopted to improve the economic viability of the farm community, including: preferential tax treatment and streamlining the permit requirements for accessory farm businesses or small scale farm-related commercial uses on agricultural lands which will enhance farmers' profits and preserve the land for future agricultural activity.

OBJECTIVE O.3 - Provide a supply of accessible, well-maintained recreational facilities that meet the changing needs of our community.

All residents of Amherst should have access to parks, greenways, and other outdoor recreation facilities, within walking distance of their homes. Parks and recreational facilities should be designed to accommodate a variety of users and activities.

STRATEGIES

O.3.A Develop shared-use agreements between the regional school department and the Town that clearly define access to and maintenance responsibilities for recreational facilities.

In order to more effectively meet the recreational needs of school children and community members alike, the Town and the regional school district should consider developing joint agreements in order to take advantage of shared recreational facilities, and split the responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of these facilities.

O.3.B Improve handicapped access to existing recreational facilities and conservation trails.

There is great diversity among the users of Amherst's recreational facilities, and accessibility must be considered when developing or renovating such facilities. The Town should ensure that all of its parks and recreation facilities are in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility requirements. American Trails (a national non-profit) provides suggested design standards that can make conservation trail facilities more accessible to all users. (For details, see <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/accessible/index.html>.)

O.3.C Develop new, well-designed recreational facilities.

The Town needs to identify changing recreation needs so it can develop attractive new facilities to meet them. By seeking public input, unmet recreational needs can be identified, unnecessary overlaps eliminated, and collaboration among private and public providers of recreation can be coordinated. Following this analysis of needs, new recreational facilities should be planned, funded and constructed to meet the community's growing needs. These facilities will need to meet strict design, development, and maintenance standards to ensure that they are safe, attractive, and compatible with surrounding neighborhoods.

O.3.D Acknowledge and support the original plan to use the old landfill for recreational purposes.

The original capping/closing documents for the old Town dump included significant language committing Amherst to reusing the landfill site for recreation purposes. Creative reuse of the site should be explored, including an opportunity for some multi-purpose development (transfer station, DPW headquarters, etc.) along with ball fields, trails and picnic sites.

O.3.E Support the Kendrick Park Committee and a juried design competition to develop a vision for Kendrick Park.

Kendrick Park is a three-acre site located in the north end of downtown Amherst that is intended to become a landscaped park. The Design Review Board, the Planning Department, and a representative Kendrick Park Committee should initiate a process that seeks public input in identifying a

vision for the park, and then undertake a public design process to develop a final park design.

O.3.F Identify land where recreation and conservation uses can exist side by side, providing opportunities for mutually supportive activities, as at the Mill River Recreation Area.

Recreation and conservation are often seen as mutually exclusive activities in Amherst. Since the 1970's (when the Mill River Recreation Area and Greenway were created), Amherst has looked for creative ways to preserve land while expanding opportunities for passive and active recreation. The Mill River Recreation Area and Groff Park are excellent examples of projects that combine the best elements of natural resource protection and recreation (water, picnic areas, trails, ball fields, parking, pavilions, sanitary facilities, etc.). Using this model also gives Amherst the advantage of seeking funding from multiple state and federal agencies. In identifying properties suitable for new outdoor recreation facilities, priority should be given to locations where the new facilities can be directly connected to existing or new conservation areas and trail systems, to maximize opportunities for both active and passive recreation.

O.3.G Inventory old and potential new “pocket parks” and develop a plan for their restoration or development to better serve the public’s use.

Over the decades, a variety of small, informal private and public neighborhood parks have been developed in Amherst. Examples include Kiwanis Park on Stanley Street, Cow Field (the ball field at the former North Amherst School), Markert’s Pond in Orchard Valley, and the greenbelt at Pomeroy Court. The current uses and capacities of these parks should be examined and plans developed for their restoration and improvement. New potential neighborhood or urban parks and path systems should also be identified and plans made for their acquisition and development.

O.3.H Publicize national and state recreation standards to inform Amherst citizens about the relative shortfalls in Town recreational facilities.

The National Recreation and Park Association establishes and publishes standards that indicate how different types of park facilities should meet the needs of varying populations in a given geographic radius. The Town should compare its existing park facilities to these standards and to similar recreation facilities elsewhere in Massachusetts to identify shortfalls, and work with the public to generate support for developing new or improved existing recreation facilities. The Town should work to better inform the public about the importance of greenways, including the benefits they

provide in terms of recreation, alternative transportation, environmental protection, local economic contributions, improved community health, and increased property values.

O.3.I Assign increased budget priority to the management and upkeep of existing conservation and recreation properties.

Planning for future open space and recreation needs will be of little value if Amherst is not willing to adequately fund management and maintenance of the conservation lands and recreation facilities it already has.

O.3.J. Actively manage conservation lands to ensure areas of appropriate size, enhanced wildlife habitat, and assured access supporting a full range of traditional outdoor recreation and activities, including: fishing, hunting, trapping, gathering, etc.

Traditional outdoor recreation offers citizens a deep and lifelong connection to the land, and continues to be an important component of Amherst's landscape, culture, and economy. Town policies regarding the management of conservation lands, habitat, and watershed forests should seek to ensure and enhance these recreation opportunities while carefully managing their impacts.

O.3.K Encourage increased recreational program (LSSE) use of Town conservation trails and areas.

Outdoor recreation is a healthy, low-impact supplement or alternative to organized field sports. LSSE should work to create and expand recreation programs that make increased use of Amherst's extensive conservation areas.

OBJECTIVE O.4 – Institutionalize a process for rationalizing competing public land use interests.

Historically, each Town department has coordinated and overseen identification and coordination for the purchase of land and development of projects under their own separate areas of responsibility, under the direction and guidance of their respective Town boards/committees. The result has been that each area of public interest has operated largely independently of other equally important public interests. The Town is in need of an institutionalized process that can address, coordinate, and resolve competing public interests in any given parcel.

STRATEGIES

O.4.A. Develop an administrative land use review process for all Town projects.

The acquisition and development of properties for open space and recreation purposes should be pursued in coordination with other important public uses. The Town should establish and employ the administrative land use review process proposed under LU.8.A to coordinate open space and recreation land projects with other public interests, including but not limited to: community housing, preservation of historical and cultural resources, transportation, public works, and responsible economic development.