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Open Space and Recreation

Introduction

Open space and recreational resources are an important part of any community as they add to residents' quality of life and contribute to a community's appeal. Open spaces also play a crucial role in the protection water, wildlife and other natural resources. Recognizing their importance, the state of Massachusetts encourages communities to create and update an Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP). Communities with state-approved OSRPs are eligible for grant programs to fund the acquisition of open space and development of recreational facilities.

Sturbridge is in the final stages of updating its OSRP, which was written in 1999 and updated in October 2005. The Town's Open Space Committee expects to complete the latest plan in 2011.

This chapter incorporates information from the 2005 OSRP, updating information when possible. It will provide an overview of existing open space and recreational resources, examine current and future needs, and make recommendations to meet those needs. Additional information regarding parks and recreational facilities is provided in the Public Services and Facilities chapter, and natural resources including water and wildlife are discussed in the Natural, Historic and Cultural Resources chapter.

Open Space and Recreation Goals

These goals are based upon those found in the 2005 Open Space and Recreation Plan and the Issues Paper prepared by the Open Space Focus Group.

- Continue to preserve significant parcels of presently undeveloped land, implement completion of town's trail system, and strengthen proactive

regulation protecting street trees to maintain the natural and historical heritage of Sturbridge.

- Protect existing open land and expand both passive and active recreation facilities.
- Provide adequate resources for the management, maintenance and development of existing and planned open spaces and recreational facilities.
- Maintain town character, for example, by conservation of watershed and riverfront parcels along the Quinebaug River; and preservation of historic assets of the town including the Town Common.

Community Setting

As discussed in the Housing chapter, Sturbridge's population has rapidly grown since 2000, outpacing its neighboring communities as well as the state. Projections also show this trend continuing through 2030. At the same time, the amount of agricultural and open undeveloped land continues to shrink.

This combination of factors has raised awareness and concern among Sturbridge residents, who want to preserve remaining open spaces in town, protect natural resources, and meet the recreational needs of the growing population. According to the Open Space and Recreation issue papers, the Town's basic open space goals are to protect watersheds, protect wildlife corridors and investigate the potential to acquire properties that meet these goals.¹

In recent years, the Town has made a concerted effort to purchase and conserve undeveloped land. In 2001, voters passed the Community Preservation Act (CPA), which has provided the Town with revenue to acquire open space. As mentioned in the Natural, Historic and Cultural Resources chapter, the Town, in partnership with the state Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, bought 826 acres of land from Old Sturbridge Village in 2006 and now uses it for passive recreation.

Beyond preservation efforts, the community has recognized the need to properly manage and maintain the land the Town has acquired as well as any new recreational facilities the Town develops. There has also been a desire for more resources to fund both development and maintenance activities.



1 Open Space issues paper, October 20, 2010

Open Space and Recreational Resources

More than a quarter of the land in Sturbridge – nearly 6,500 acres – is protected or recreational open space.² This includes everything from permanently-restricted conservation land to recreational properties owned by the Town or private parties. Figure 6.1 shows the open space resources and ownership in Sturbridge. Some but not all privately-owned land that falls under the state's special taxation program Chapter 61 is included in Figure 6.2.

The state owns approximately 44 percent of the protected open space in Sturbridge (See Table 6.1). For example, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation owns Wells State Park. The Town is also a major owner of open space in Sturbridge. Town-owned properties include Shumway Farm, an 826-acre property purchased from Old Sturbridge Village, the Town Common and numerous recreational open spaces. A complete inventory of open space in Sturbridge is expected to be included in the Town's updated OSRP.

The degree to which open space and recreational land is protected is important, particularly as communities grow and face increasing development pressures. Open space that is protected in perpetuity, for example, means natural areas will continue to be available for residents and visitors to enjoy. Such open space will also protect wildlife habitat, wetlands, forested areas, and natural resources.

Table 6.1 Protected and Recreational Open Space

Owner		Acres	% of Total
Federal	Hobbs Brook Conservation Area, Westville Dam, East Brimfield Lake, and Streeter Point Recreation Area	840.24	12%
State	Wells State Park, and Leadmine, McKinstry Brook, Wolf Swamp, and Breakneck Brook Watershed Management Areas	3,092.2	44%
Municipal	Conservation Commission	1,147.66	16%
Land Trust	Opacum Land Trust and Trustees for Reservations	319.25	5%
Private For Profit		1,651.00	23%
Total		7,050.35	100%

Source: MassGIS 2010, Tighe and Bond, Town Planning Department

* These are GIS-calculated areas.

** This includes land (water supply) owned by the City of Southbridge.

Over 5,300 acres of open space and recreational land is permanently protected, as shown in Table 6.2. This high level of protection has been achieved through several means, including conservation restrictions. There is a conservation restriction, for example, on Opacum Woods, which is owned by the Opacum Land Trust.



2 MassGIS 2010 Protected and Recreational Open Space

Table 6.2 Protected and Recreational Open Space

Level of Protection	Acres	% of Total
Perpetuity and Article 97	5,315	58%
Short term	3,149	34%
None or protection level unknown	695	8%

Source: MassGIS 2010, Tighe and Bond, Sturbridge Planning Department

Table 6.3 shows the amount of land in Sturbridge held under Chapter 61, 61A or 61B, which are managed for forestry, agricultural or recreational purposes. Chapter 61 is a legislative act offers property owners tax benefits in exchange for maintaining their properties for those uses. These lands are considered to only be temporarily protected, however, as they can be developed and converted into other uses. If an owner decides to sell or use the land for another purpose, the Town can recover some of the tax benefits – through back taxes – and has an option to buy the land. In Sturbridge, more than half of the Chapter 61 land is protected for recreational purposes.

Table 6.3 Temporarily Protected Open Space in Sturbridge

Type of Ownership	Acres	% of Subtotal	% of Total
Chapter 61 Forestry	1,492	25%	6%
Chapter 61A Agriculture	1,325	22%	5%
Chapter 61B Recreational	3,173	53%	13%
Subtotal	5,990	100%	24%
Town Total Acreage	24,923		100%

Source: Sturbridge Assessor

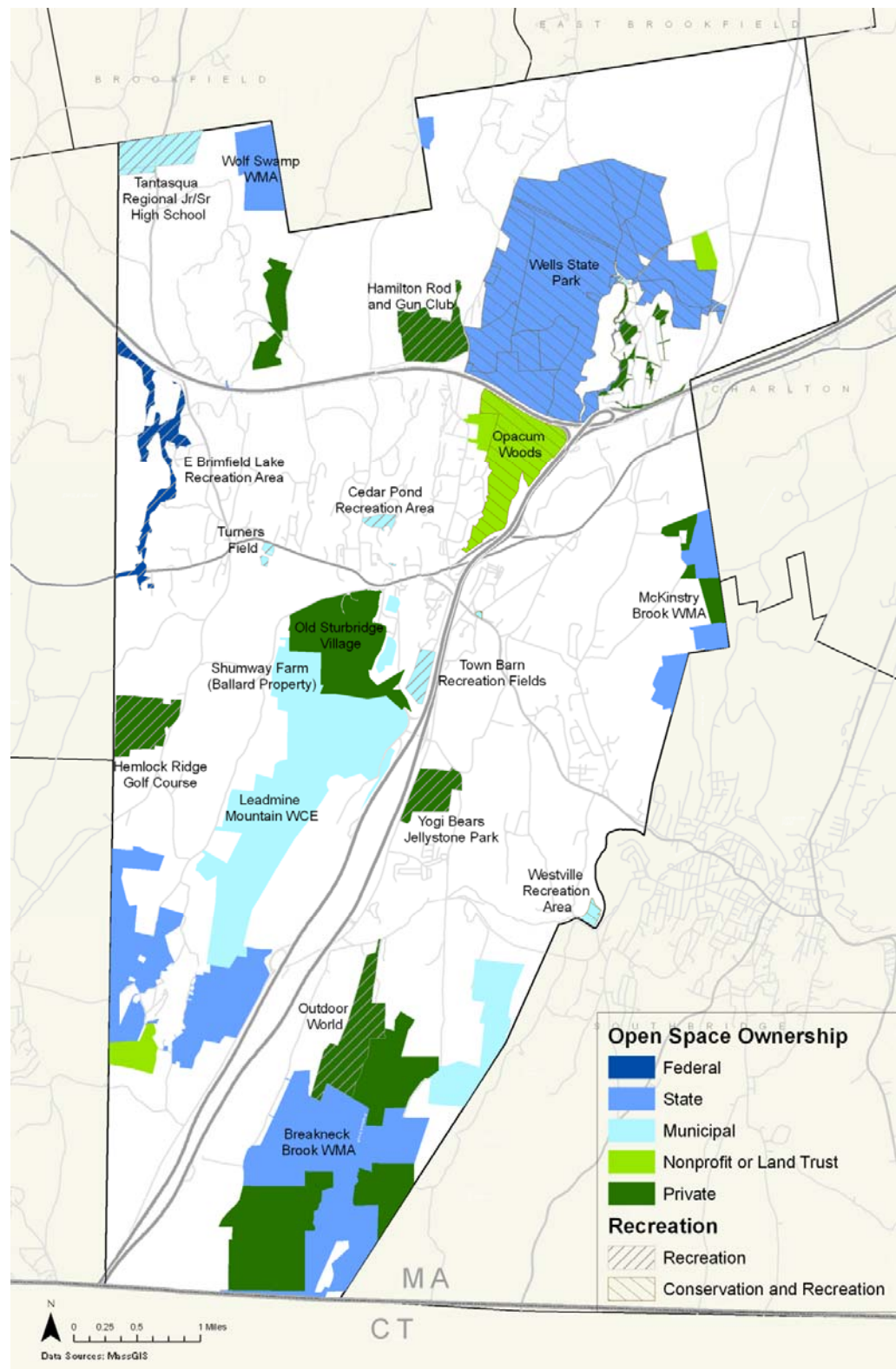
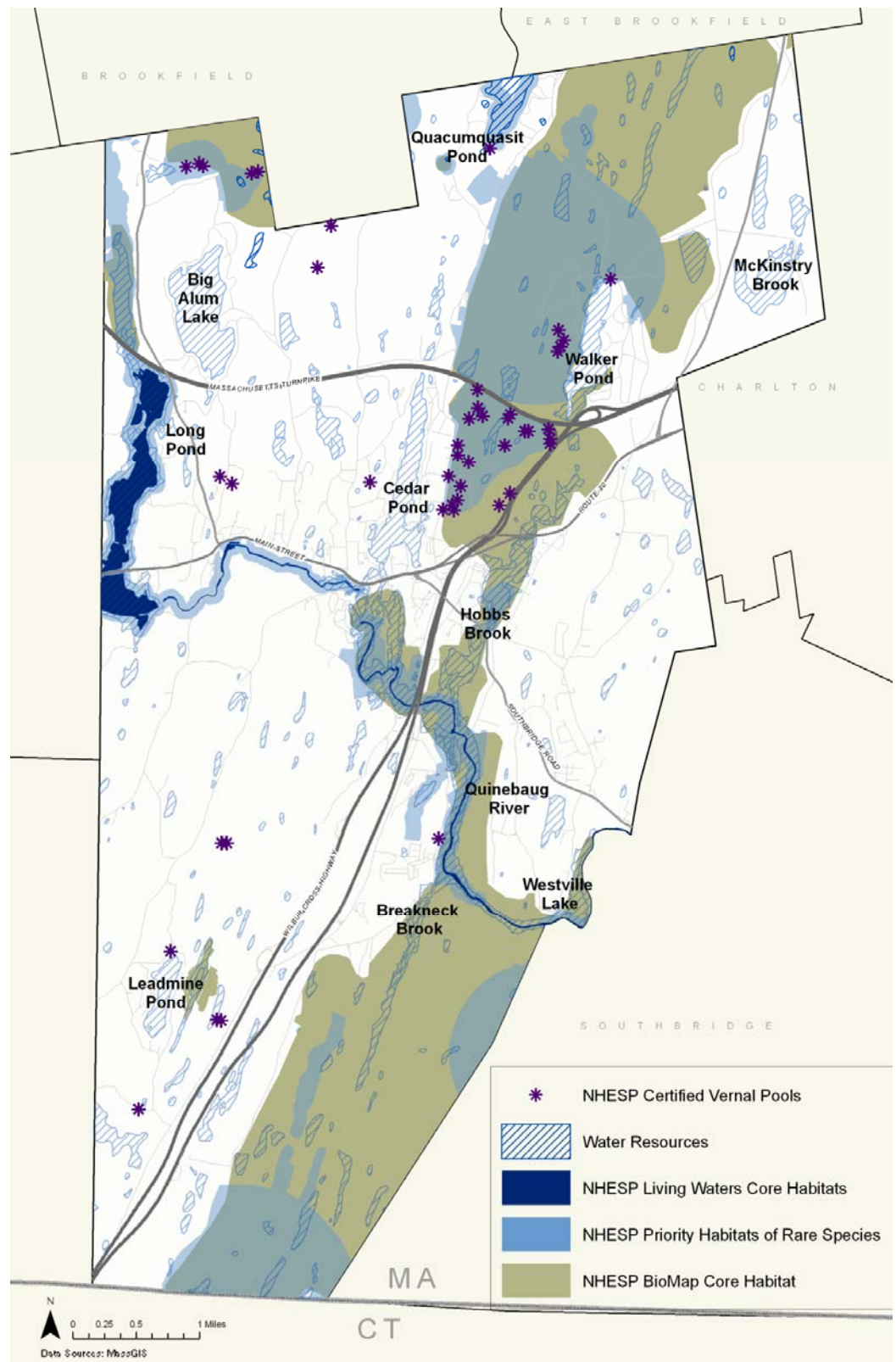
Figure 6.1 Open Space Ownership

Figure 6.2 Sturbridge Chapter 61, 61A and 61B Lands

Open Space Needs and Efforts

As mentioned earlier, the Town has worked to purchase and conserve open space in the community in recent years, particularly since the passage of the CPA in 2001. The Town's Community Preservation Committee (CPC) recognizes the need to continue to preserve open space in the community for both active and passive recreation as well as natural resources protection. Its open space goals include the following:³

- Protect and preserve critical natural resources and wildlife habitat
- Protect surface and groundwater quality and quantity
- Preserve, enhance and connect, where feasible, large parcels currently in agriculture, open space and recreational use, and other undisturbed natural areas
- Develop sustainable land uses on Town-owned properties, such as eco-tourism
- Create trail linkages, including new trails, bike paths, walkways and greenways
- Increase public awareness and support of open space conservation

The Town is actively pursuing several of these goals. For example, trail development has become a focus in the community. Given the Town's natural amenities and geographic location, there are opportunities to not only create trails within Sturbridge but also develop linkages with trails, open spaces and parks in the region. A subcommittee of the Town's Trail Committee – the Recreational Trails Master Plan Steering Committee – has funds to hire a consultant to create a Trails Master Plan.



Trailhead

The Trails Committee is also working to develop trails on open space properties in Sturbridge. Largely through volunteer efforts, the committee has spearheaded the development of many trails in town. Trails that have been completed, improved or are under construction include Heins Farm trails, Pond Loop Trail, Stafford Turnpike Trail, Arbutus Park Trail, Old Growth Trail and others.⁴



3 Town website, Community Preservation Committee,
http://www.town.sturbridge.ma.us/Public_Documents/SturbridgeMA_BoardCmt/preservation

4 Town Website, Trails Committee,
http://www.town.sturbridge.ma.us/Public_Documents/SturbridgeMA_RegionalTrails/index

Meanwhile, the Town's Open Space Committee is working to update its OSRP, which will outline specific goals and objectives for open space acquisition, preservation and management. Priorities for acquiring open space will likely be included. The 2005 OSRP recommended that land the Town purchase should either "protect present or future water supplies, sensitive natural resource areas, provide public access to natural resources, connect existing open space land, or provide recreational facilities or amenities, particularly in settled areas."⁵

In addition to the preservation of open space, the 2005 OSRP identified several other community goals. They included the provision of recreation facilities, strengthening of regulations to protect street trees, maintaining of the Town's character, and limiting of detrimental effects to the natural environment as a result of too much development.⁶ The community has also recognized the need to create or improve public access to open space areas in Sturbridge, particularly around the lakes and to the Quinebaug River.

Recreational Facility Needs

As noted in the Public Services and Facilities chapter, there are many recreational programs in Sturbridge but a limited number of facilities for those programs. Recreational facilities include the following.⁷

- Town Barn – two regulation-sized ball fields and one overlay non-regulation-sized soccer field
- Burgess Elementary School – two non-regulation-sized softball fields and two non-regulation-sized baseball fields
- Turners Field – one non-regulation-sized baseball field
- Tantasqua Regional Schools – fields used when schedules allow

Given the lack of facilities in Sturbridge, there has been a push in recent years to examine the field situation in town and pursue the development of new facilities. As mentioned earlier, a 2006 Field Study Subcommittee report made recommendations as to specific field needs. Following that report, the Recreation Committee selected a designer, Waterman Design, to create plans for new fields at two properties. Preliminary proposals call for three softball fields, one multi-purpose



Westville Lake Recreation Area

5 Sturbridge, Massachusetts 2005 Open Space and Recreation Plan

6 Ibid.

7 Open Space issues paper, October 20, 2010

overlay field, a kayak launch ramp, fitness trail, and picnic area at the Shepard property; and two new ball fields (one Major League baseball and one Little League baseball field), one new multi-purpose field, two basketball courts, a playground and a bocce court at the Town Barn behind the DPW garage facility. A concession stand, restrooms, and parking would also be provided. A final proposal is expected to go before Town Meeting in 2011.

In addition to public facilities, there are several privately-owned recreational areas in Sturbridge, including Outdoor World, Yogi Bear Campground, Hamilton Rod and Gun, and Hemlock Golf Course. They offer residents and tourists with a wide range of activities, including camping, fishing, swimming and picnicking. Wells State Park offers all of these activities and more. For example, at the state-owned park, visitors can enjoy cross country skiing, horseback riding, snowmobiling and hunting. The Westville Recreation Area, owned by the US Army Corp of Engineers, offers similar recreational activities in addition to field sports.

Another popular spot in Sturbridge is the Town-owned Cedar Lake Recreation Area, which is home to the Recreation Department's summer program. As noted in the Public Services and Facilities chapter, the Cedar Lake Recreation Area is in need of improvements. Parking should be expanded, the skate park needs new ramps, and the tennis and basketball courts need to be reconstructed.



Cedar Lake Recreation Area

A number of other recommendations for improving and expanding recreation facilities have been made by the Recreation Focus Group. They include the following:

- Develop a football field, community center and multi-use sports field to accommodate residents of all ages and recreational interests
- Develop an all-season facility
- Encourage the construction of pocket parks in new and existing large subdivisions
- Expand parking at existing fields
- Provide handicap-accessible trails for bicycles and wheelchairs
- Investigate the feasibility of developing a picnic pavilion facility on river land

Recreational opportunities could be expanded in Sturbridge if a project called The Sturbridge Arena is developed. The proposed project calls for the construction of an indoor sports arena, outdoor fields, disc golf course and an adjacent building to contain concessions, retail and restrooms near Interstate 84. The project, expected to cost

\$2.1 million, would be built on 28.4 acres of land at 17 Kelly Road and 90 River Road.⁸ According to initial plans, the indoor sports arena would be used for an array of indoor sports, including lacrosse, field hockey, soccer, flag football, baseball and softball. The Sturbridge Zoning Board has approved variances for height, and an application to the Planning Board for Site Plan Approval and Special Permit is expected.

Management Needs

As the Town has acquired acres of open space in recent years and continues to work to develop new recreational fields, management needs are growing. This includes a need to maintain existing parks and fields and to potentially increase staff and resources to perform the work. The Town also does not have a formal maintenance plan for recreational facilities, but could establish a property maintenance program that specifically outlines what generally needs to be accomplished at each facility every month. In addition to mowing and field maintenance, it would include a schedule for trash removal, irrigation of the facilities, and arranging for port-a-john maintenance, for example. This would allow the Town to determine how to allocate its staff over the course of the year, recognizing that park and field demand is greatest during the warmer months. Staffing requirements are then based on the actual time spent on each activity and are assigned accordingly.

Currently, the Town's Recreation Department, staffed by a part-time Recreation Coordinator, is responsible for maintaining parks and recreational facilities in Sturbridge.⁹ The Department of Public Works provides the labor. (As noted in the Public Services and Facilities chapter, fields that are on School Committee property are maintained by the schools.)

The Town's Open Space Committee is responsible for advocating for open space and coordinating open space issues in Sturbridge. It also oversees implementation of the OSRP and evaluates properties that are being considered for open space acquisition, including Chapter 61 land.

Recommendations

The updated OSRP, when complete, will include goals, objectives and detailed action items related to the Town's open space and recreational needs. In recognition of that, the following recommendations are broader in nature and are meant to serve as longer-range, policy-oriented goals. (See the Natural, Historic and Cultural Resources chapter and Public Services and Facilities chapter for related recommendations.)



⁸ The Sturbridge Arena Priority Project Nomination Form

⁹ Lynne Girouard, Recreation Coordinator

- Continue to identify, prioritize and preserve open space and recreation resources based upon pre-determined criteria for prioritizing acquisitions. The Open Space Committee should be prepared to purchase high priority properties – including Chapter 61 land – when it becomes available. This includes coordinating and communicating with the CPC to help ensure funding is available when needed.
- Research and monitor funding opportunities for the creation or preservation of open spaces. The Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development website provides information about numerous sources of funding.¹⁰ See also the Division of Conservation Services, which administers the Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity (LAND) Grant Program and PARC - Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities program.¹¹
- Expand public access to open spaces, particularly around the lakes and along the Quinebaug River. This entails working with the state as well as property owners.
- Maintain and enhance existing open spaces and recreational facilities. The Town should develop a maintenance plan for Town-owned properties and incorporate any major improvements into the Town's larger Capital Improvement Plan. The Town should also examine whether additional staff should be brought on (or whether the Recreation Coordinator's position should be expanded to full time) to oversee and maintain open spaces, parks and recreational facilities. A volunteer group could also be established to help maintain the properties and augment the Town's capacity.
- Management plans should be developed for each major town-owned facility. In addition to planning for the routine maintenance of the facility and grounds, long-term capital needs and repairs can be identified and scheduled. A cooperative arrangement between the Town and the various leagues and sports associations will enhance this effort. This would create a shared understanding of what it takes to accomplish certain tasks, how to ascertain staffing needs, how to identify specific needs, and how to rectify any deficiencies. It would also be useful to track the costs involved with the various items in the maintenance plan so that long-range projections could be made for allocating staff and fiscal resources.

Similarly, the Town should encourage the creation of "friends of" groups to provide stewardship of other parks. These groups can help to sponsor cleanups and similar activities, as well as flag issues that the Town may need to address but may not be aware of.



10 Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Economic Development website, Open Space Creation/Preservation, http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=eheadterminal&L=4&L0=Home&L1=Community+Development&L2=Community+Planning&L3=A+Guide+to+State+Development+Resources&sid=Ehead&b=terminalcontent&f=dhcd_cd_resourceguide_open_space&csid=Ehead

11 Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services website, [http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=eoeesubtopic&L=5&L0=Home&L1=Grants+%26+Technical+Assistance&L2=Grant+%26+Loan+Programs&L3=Division+of+Conservation+Services+\(DCS\)&L4=Grant+Programs+offered+by+Division+of+Conservation+Services&sid=Eoea](http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=eoeesubtopic&L=5&L0=Home&L1=Grants+%26+Technical+Assistance&L2=Grant+%26+Loan+Programs&L3=Division+of+Conservation+Services+(DCS)&L4=Grant+Programs+offered+by+Division+of+Conservation+Services&sid=Eoea)

- Provide recreational opportunities for all ages. As suggested by the Recreation Focus Group, the Town should consider developing a community center, football field and multi-use sports field to expand the type of recreational activities available in Sturbridge.
- Continue developing trails, particularly those that connect existing open spaces and improve access to lakes, rivers and other natural resources. New trails should be handicap-accessible and multi-use, serving walkers, runners, bicyclists and wheelchairs. Any trail construction should follow recommendations that arise out of the Trails Master Plan, which is under development.
- Capitalize on small vacant properties to create pocket parks and other open spaces. The development of pocket parks should also be encouraged in residential projects, such as those mentioned in the Land Use chapter.
- Increase public awareness of open space and recreational facilities.

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