

## Section 6: Community Vision

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### A. The Planning Process:

The Master Plan Public Forum held on November 21, 2009 had approximately 80 attendees. The attendees participated in a variety of activities including a presentation covering Sturbridge land use statistics and demographic data. A Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities and Threats (SCOT) Analysis was conducted at the Forum as well. As part of this exercise, participants were asked to describe aspects of living, working, shopping and playing in Sturbridge; both positive and negative aspects were encouraged to be listed and discussed. Once the lists were compiled, participants were given four “voting dots” that allowed each person to vote for what they believed were the most important issues to be addressed during the Master Plan process. Another activity involved the use of handheld electronic voting devices which allowed each participant to vote on a short survey that was conducted. Finally, to conclude the day, participants were randomly assigned to participate in two “breakout sessions” for each plan element area including Land Use; Housing; Economic Development; Transportation; Natural, Cultural and Historic Resources; Public Facilities; Energy and Sustainability and Open Space.

All of the sessions that day reinforced the ideas that the open space and recreational resources within the town are an important part of the community that greatly enhances the quality of life for residents and the experience of visitors to the community. The SCOT Analysis revealed that participants considered strengths to include the following:

- o The amount of open space and common areas within the town including park land;
- o The natural resources including lakes, ponds, and the Quinebaug River;
- o The natural beauty of the landscape;
- o Opportunities for passive recreation, including but not limited to trails;
- o Being a part of the “Last Green Valley”; and
- o The Town’s ability to balance preservation with economic growth.

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Challenges identified in the SCOT Analysis included:

- o An insufficient number of recreational fields;
- o Lack of awareness related to water supply protection and sustainability;
- o Lack of access to the Quinebaug River and other water bodies; and
- o The need to preserve open space with a strategic goal in mind (i.e. wildlife corridors, watershed protection).

Some opportunities identified during this exercise included:

- o The opportunity to use open space as a link with tourism by the provision of trails and natural areas and the promotion of activities such as hiking, cross country skiing, biking, equestrian activities, nature walks and photography, etc.; and
- o Finding ways to encourage more collaboration and partnerships with others in the acquisition, stewardship, and management of land and resources.

Threats identified included:

- o Negative impacts of growth in surrounding communities; and
- o The town's rural identity being threatened by large retail expansion.

As noted earlier, the Forum covered other plan element areas that are not relevant to this planning process and are not discussed here. The summaries from the entire SCOT analysis can be found in the Appendix.

The electronic voting segment of the forum posed several questions to the audience. Two of the questions were directly related to open space and recreation. The questions and responses are noted below:

1.) Do you favor or oppose purchasing farmlands, forests, and open space for conservation?

- |                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| a.) Favor, even with higher taxes    | 52% |
| b.) Favor, but not with higher taxes | 34% |
| c.) Oppose, not needed               | 15% |

2.) Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of recreational facilities such as parks, playgrounds, and ballfields?

- |                        |     |
|------------------------|-----|
| a.) Very dissatisfied  | 41% |
| b.) Not very satisfied | 31% |

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c.) Somewhat satisfied	23%
d.) Very satisfied	5%

The last session of the day was the random assignment of participants into breakout groups that were asked to answer a series of questions about a specific topic area. The topic areas included Land Use; Housing; Economic Development; Transportation; Natural, Cultural and Historic Resources; Public Facilities; Energy and Sustainability and Open Space. While the entire summary can be viewed in the Appendix, only the items relevant to this plan will be discussed here.

## Open Space and Recreation:

1. Identify Sturbridge's most significant open space assets? How has the Town performed in preserving/developing/utilizing them?

The most significant open space assets identified by the breakout group included Wells State Park, the Old Sturbridge Village Lands (OSV) and the River Lands. The Town has worked well to preserve land and continues to develop lands through the addition of trails and signage and the printing of brochures describing and promoting appropriate use of the lands. However, the group did believe that not enough was done to promote awareness and use of the land by non-residents.

2. What are the most significant recreational needs? If new facilities are needed, identify potential locations.

A variety of recreational needs were identified by the Breakout Group. The group believed that additional facilities for active recreation including adult activities were warranted. Facilities desired included adult ball fields sufficient to host regional tournaments. A running track was also identified as a need as was appropriate infrastructure for bicycling and walking. Better access to the river and dog parks were both noted as lacking within the community. The group believed that the town should purchase the Holland Road Mill (corner of Route 20 and Holland Road) for open space and housing; however, the group did not identify potential locations for the other facilities as noted.

## One question posed to the Economic Development Breakout Group was:

1. In terms of economic development (jobs, retail, office, industry), what do we want/need in Sturbridge.

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Amongst a variety of responses was the need to encourage a diverse economic base that would include the promotion of ballfields for tournaments and recreation; publicizing the trail system; promoting indoor winter recreation, eco-tourism, and family recreation and entertainment.

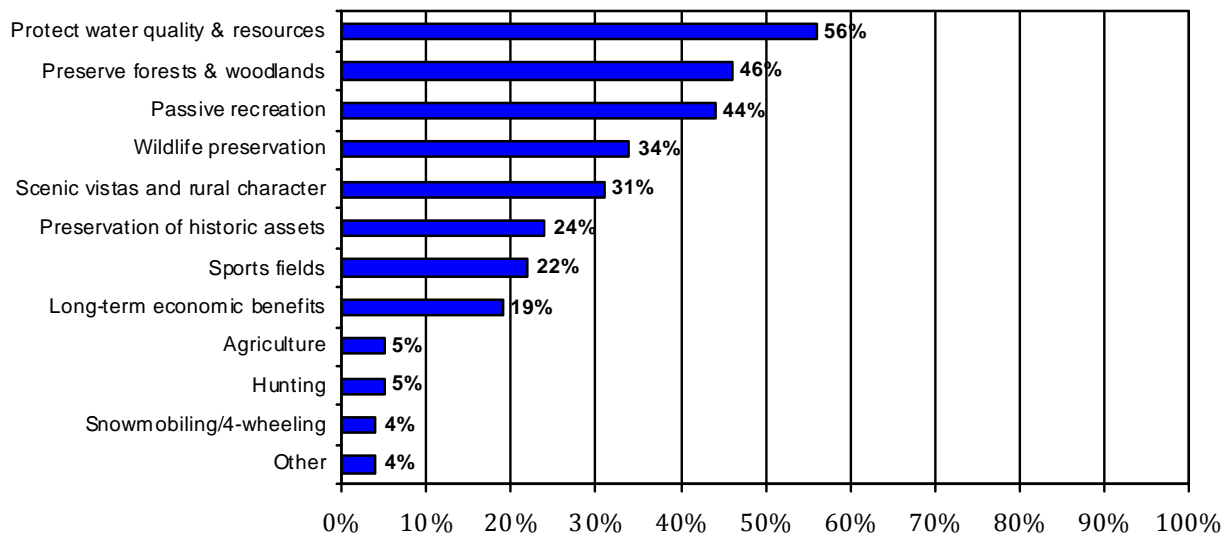
The Public Forum was just one re-affirmation of the Town's desire to preserve open space and promote recreation within the town for its residents. There was also support by participants to use our open space and recreational resources as a way to promote tourism within the town. The participants realize the need to balance population growth with the protection of open space to ensure water quality, air quality, wildlife corridors, scenic landscapes and recreational opportunities. It further reminded those present and this Committee of the need to ensure the residents of Sturbridge and others access to enjoy the beautiful wooded hills, pristine lakes and rivers and fine trails found within the Town of Sturbridge.

The Master Plan Survey was mailed on April 12, 2010 to 3,149 randomly selected household members. Nine hundred and thirty (930) Sturbridge residents responded to the survey for a response rate of 30%. The survey results reinforced residents desire to preserve open space, community character and quality of live while promoting passive and active recreational activities while allowing for balanced growth. The entire survey can be viewed in the Appendix; highlights relevant to this planning process are discussed in this section. Quality of life (51%) and rural town character (45%) were the two top reasons respondents moved to Sturbridge. Nearly three-quarters of Sturbridge residents would like to see more open space and recreation areas in their neighborhood or area of town. A variety of reasons for the town managing, acquiring or preserving open space ranked high with protecting water quality and resources ranking as the top reason at 56%, followed by preserving forests and woodlands (46%) and passive recreation third at 44%. The figure below shows all the responses:

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**FIGURE 1: CHECK OFF YOUR TOP 3 MOST IMPORTANT REASONS FOR THE TOWN TO MANAGE, ACQUIRE AND/OR PRESERVE OPEN SPACE**

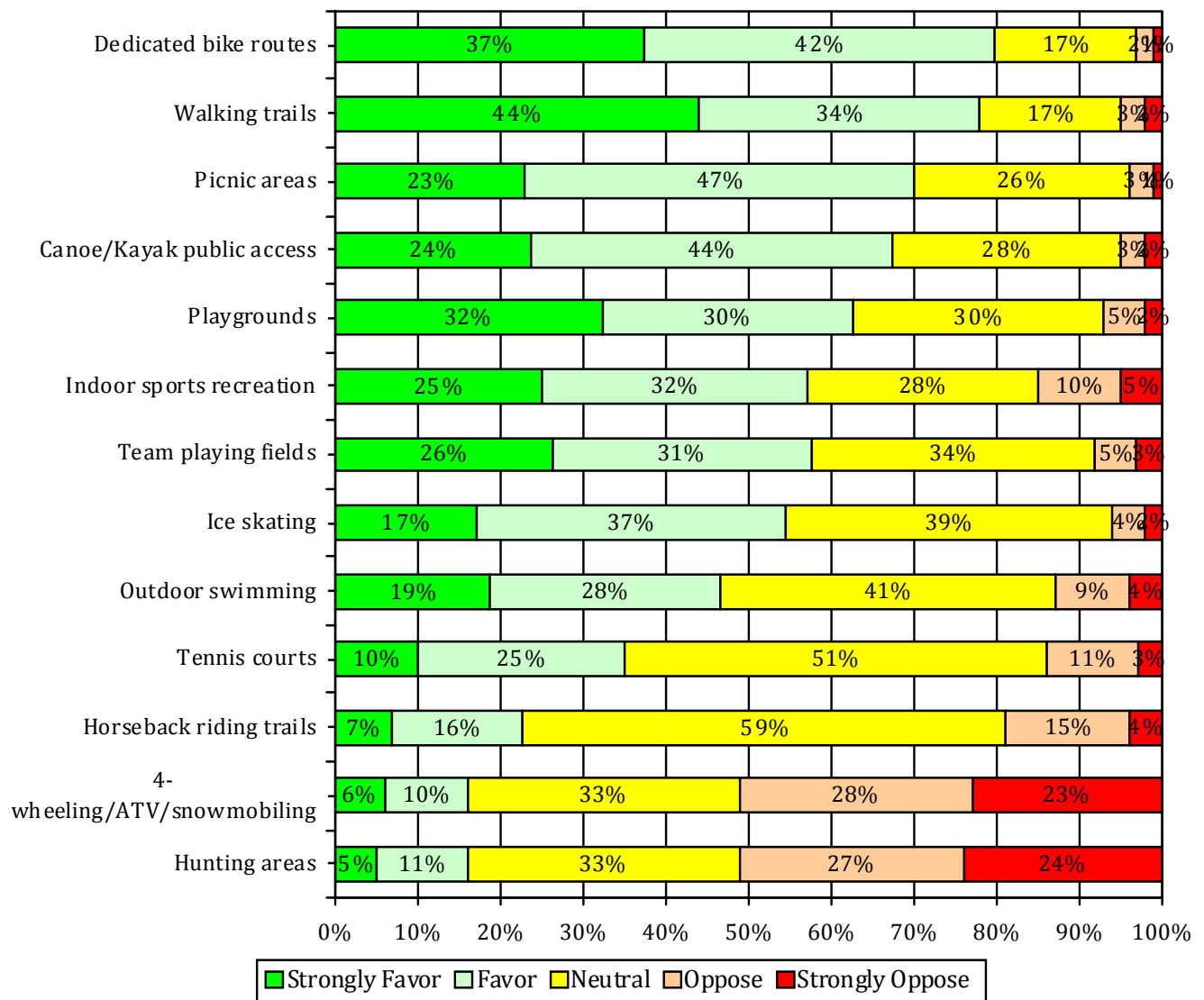


(Source – Town of Sturbridge Planning Survey: prepared by The Survey Center University of New Hampshire, May 2010)

When respondents were asked whether they favored or opposed the town providing more of certain types of facilities/recreational activities, walking trails were the most highly favored (44%) followed by dedicated bike routes (37%). All categories are shown below:

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**Figure 2:** Do you favor or oppose the Town of Sturbridge providing more of the following

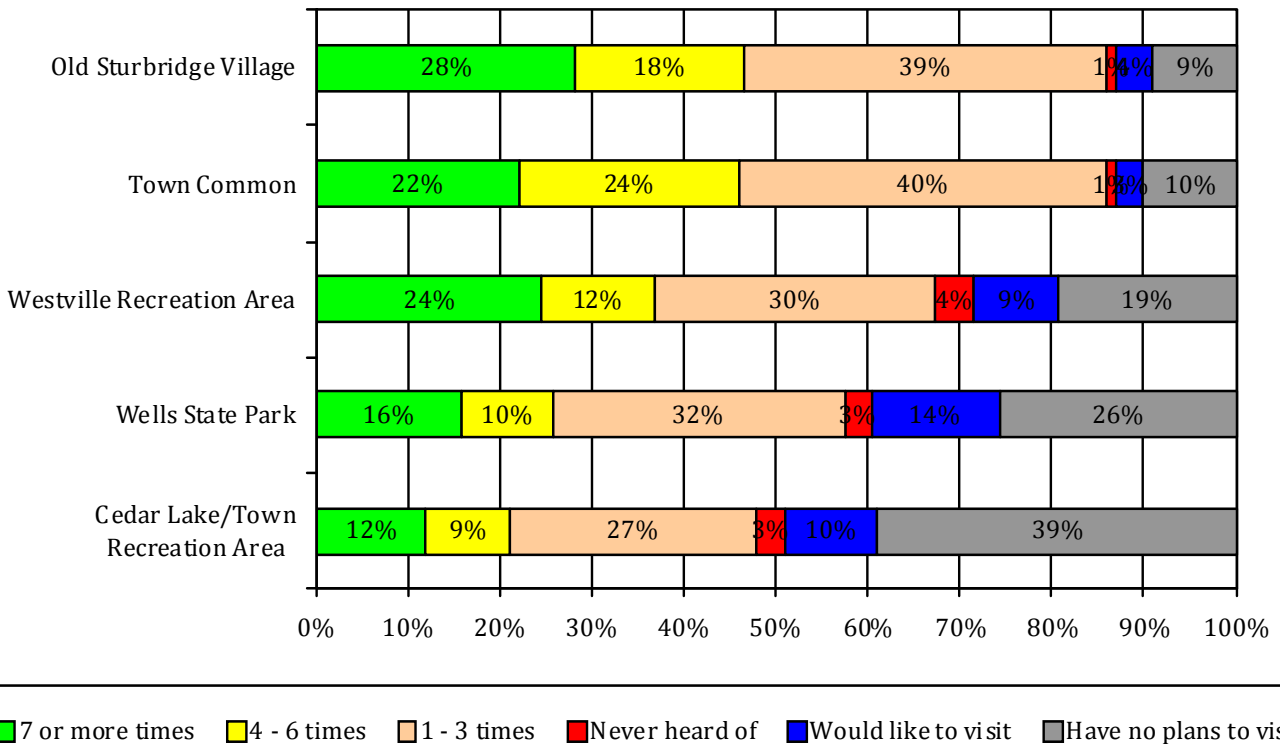


(Source – Town of Sturbridge Planning Survey: prepared by The Survey Center University of New Hampshire, May 2010)

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Residents were also asked how many times per year they use the following publicly accessible properties in Sturbridge.

Figure 3: How many times per year do you typically use the following publicly accessible property in Sturbridge?



(Source – Town of Sturbridge Planning Survey; prepared by The Survey Center University of New Hampshire, May 2010)

In addition to all of the above, the Open Space Committee has met with many Boards, Committees and groups throughout this process. The Conservation Commission, Trails Committee, Public Lands Advisory Committee, Assessors Office, Recreation Committee, Department of Public Works, Planning Board, Historic Commission and Board of Selectmen have all contributed information during this planning process.

The Town's Open Space Committee used the results of the public forum, the survey, and input received from various Boards and Committees in its deliberations for the content of this Plan, particularly for the goals and objectives (see Section 8) and the seven-year action plan. All of the information gathered was instrumental in formulating the policies contained in this document.

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## **B. Statement of Open Space and Recreation Goals and Objectives**

Throughout the planning process it became very evident that town character and quality of life are very important to the residents of Sturbridge. Many commented that they value the small town atmosphere and that it should be maintained by taking a proactive approach to preserving the Town's scenic and historic places including woodlands, agricultural lands and other open spaces areas. With that recurring theme in mind, the Open Space Committee has identified the following broad community goals as a result of the extensive planning process undertaken by the community including public forums and the findings of the survey:

## Open Space and Recreation Plan Goals

- Goal 1      Preserve the small town New England character of Sturbridge.
- Goal 2      Educate residents and others about the importance of open space preservation for passive recreation, habitat protection and water supply protection.
- Goal 3      Increase the inventory of Open Space with by fee, conservation restriction, donation or easement in perpetuity. Give emphasis to these parcels that create green corridors, protect our water supplies and natural, cultural and historic resources, and provide access to our recreational resources.
- Goal 4      Expand outdoor recreational opportunities, both passive and active for all Sturbridge Residents regardless of age or ability.
- Goal 5      Encourage the appropriate use of public lands and recreational resources as a tool to promote sustainable tourism and enhance economic development within the community.
- Goal 6      Protect and Enhance Drinking Water Supplies.
- Goal 7      Promote a cooperative and regional approach to Open Space and Resource Protection.