

CHAPTER 8 OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

From the Town of Reading's Open Space and Recreation Plan (2001):

Sculpted by glacial activity, the town is a series of gentle hills split by ravines with a few steep slopes: Bear Hill, Dobbins Hill (town's highest point, 232 feet above sea level), Prospect Hill and Auburn Street Hill. Surfaces of Reading's woods and meadows are broken by numerous outcroppings of bedrock. Drumlins, kames and eskers dot the landscape and can be seen in the Town Forest and North Cedar Swamp. Swamps, wetlands and floodplains make up more than 30% of Reading's land area.

The Town Forest and well fields encompass 310 acres along the northern perimeter of town abutting the Ipswich River. The Town Forest also serves as a buffer from development for most of the town's well fields. This area lies within the floodplain of the Ipswich River. Reforested areas were planted in the 1930s and now form a dense pine forest. There are several wide paths for hiking, cross-country skiing, birding, nature study, scout projects, camping and environmental education. Recent subdivision on its east end has brought a new access point to the Town Forest and a new neighborhood to its doorstep. The School Department controls 11 undeveloped acres to the east of the Town Forest, which is being developed for the construction of a new elementary school.

A private golf club is located to the southwest of the Town Forest and comprises 139 acres. It is within the Interim Zone II of the well fields and abuts wetland resource areas. The club has a Chapter 61 B restriction.

North Cedar Swamp (429.10 acres) and South Cedar Swamp (119 acres) stretch the length of the town's eastern boundary. The Reading Rifle & Revolver Club owns 51.89 acres between these areas and its passive recreational activities are in harmony with the conservation goals of the area. North Cedar Swamp, which continues to the town's northern border, was acquired to protect the wetlands. The area provides flood control, groundwater supply, wildlife habitat and protects several vernal pools. The Symonds Way full-size baseball field with an overlay soccer field has recently been constructed on the remaining piece of upland at the former Nike site. South Cedar Swamp is a

relatively inaccessible wooded wetland, except in winter when frozen. An interesting aspect is that water from the area sometimes flows north toward the Ipswich River and sometimes south toward the Saugus River, depending on ground water levels.

Camp Curtis Guild National Guard Base is located to the south and east of South Cedar Swamp, straddling the boundary line of three communities and containing 275 acres within Reading. A portion of this land is upland (195 acres) and could be developed if the base were to close. Timberneck Swamp (101 acres) is a wooded swamp at the headwaters to the Saugus River. It prevents flooding downstream and provides pollution control and wildlife habitat. Bare Meadow (84.51 acres) is protected by Conservation Commission jurisdiction and abuts Fairbanks Marsh (32 acres) owned by the Reading Open Land Trust, Inc. The area includes marsh, wet meadows, wooded wetlands with vernal pools, forested upland and open upland and allows residents to escape from daily pressures without having to drive out of town.

Kurchian Woods (32.7 acres), an upland open space encroached upon by residential development, includes stands of mature trees, rocky outcrops, vernal pools, a bog and a relatively uneven terrain. The area is crossed by a Tennessee Gas Pipeline easement. Several subdivisions abut it and it acts as a natural buffer between them while providing passive recreational options.

Marion Woods (8.6 acres) completes the publicly-owned greenway corridor along the Town's northern border abutting the Ipswich River. The 1999 purchase of Marion Woods provides a connection to Lobs Pond and its canoe access area.

The Reading Open Land Trust, Inc. preserves land in its natural state: wetlands, open lands and lands of historical significance. Since its founding in 1979, the Trust has acquired over 68 acres of open land. In 1998, the Trust received an 8.68-acre parcel of land known as Swamp Island on the Reading-Wakefield line, part of an area identified in the 1995 Open Space & Recreation Plan as needing to be protected.

FINDING

Reading's open spaces and recreational resources contribute to the Town's quality of life for residents, businesses, visitors, and neighboring communities.

The Town has attempted to pass the Community Preservation Act (CPA), which would have made matching State funds available for the preservation of open space, but it narrowly failed a referendum. Any future effort to attempt passage of the CPA needs to account for accountability and objectives, and public outreach and education.

The Town's land use regulations contain many provisions that protect of open space and recreation but budgetary constraints have not allowed additional municipal purchase of land for either. Therefore, the Town has continued to negotiate for private developer contributions to open space and recreational facilities. As the supply of buildable land diminishes and its cost increases, this strategy will become more difficult to implement.

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As evidence of the appreciation for this the Town maintains an up-to-date Open Space and Recreation Plan (2001), which among many goals identified two priority action items: to explore the enactment of the Community Preservation Act (CPA) and to acquire additional open space for playing fields and passive open space.

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Figure 1.

OPEN SPACE INVENTORY

<i>Type of Open Space</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Ownership</i>	<i>Degree of Protection</i>	<i>Area (acres)</i>	<u>Total area</u>
Woods & wetlands	Town Forest	TOR	Perm.	303.00	1529.18 (64%)
	Cedar swamp	CC	Perm.	602.50	
	Timberneck swamp	CC	Perm.	101.00	
	Bare Meadow	CC	Perm.	84.51	
	Kurchian woods	CC	Perm.	38.50	
	Pinevale	CC	Perm.	16.22	
	Higgins	CC	Perm.	10.15	
	Fairbanks marsh	ROLT	Perm.	32.10	
	Other CC owned	CC	Perm.	243.00	
	Other ROLT owned	ROLT	Perm.	38.20	
	Other Water owned	WAT	Perm.	60.00	
	Streets & Roads	Several streets	CC	Perm.	
Cemetaries	Laurel Hill	Cem	None	19.65	59.21 (2%)
	Forest Glen	Cem	Perm.	10.40	
	Wood End	Cem	None	11.14	
	Charles Lawn	Cem	None	18.02	
Parks/playgrounds	Sturges Park	TOR	Perm.	7.38	83.25 (3%)
	Memorial Park	TOR	Perm.	12.28	
	Hunt Park	TOR	Perm.	2.93	
	Commons	TOR	Perm.	2.61	
	Washington St. Park	TOR	Perm.	5.40	
	Symonds Way fields	TOR	Perm.	4.50	
	Pearl St. Park	TOR	Perm.	4.84	
	Leach Park	TOR	Perm.	0.25	
	Birch Meadow	TOR	Perm.	43.06	
Schools	High School	TOR	None	10.50	123.39 (5%)
	Barrows School	TOR	None	7.66	
	Killam School	TOR	None	7.28	
	Eaton School	TOR	None	7.48	
	Coolidge School	TOR	None	10.89	
	Wood End School	TOR	None	11.60	
	Birch Meadow School	TOR	None	8.57	
	Parker School	TOR	None	15.63	
	Austin Prep School	Private	None	43.78	
Other	Library	Library	None	1.87	570.42 (24%)
	RMLD owned	RMLD	None	18.48	
	Camp Curtis Guild	State	None	282.00	
	Lester	Private	C61	11.36	
	Golf Club	Private	C61	138.90	
	Shooting Club	Private	None	51.89	
	Camp Rice Moody	Private	None	8.02	
	Nietche Prop	Private	None	14.90	
	Other CC lands	Private	PCR	43.00	

8.2 ANALYSIS

Note: In review of the Open Space and Recreation component, the MPAC realized that the Open Space and Recreation Plan from 2001 provided a fairly current resource for the analysis, goals and objectives section of this chapter. In an effort to avoid duplication and capitalize on previous efforts the following objectives from the Open Space and Recreation Plan are incorporated where they have not been identified in the previous master plan updating process or have not already been substantially implemented. Detailed analysis of Reading's open space and recreation inventory and needs assessment can be found in the Open Space and Recreation Plan.

Strengthening and Expanding the Network

The Town's primary priority should be to build upon the existing green infrastructure, path system, Town Common, and parks. The Town shares resources with neighboring towns and Reading alone can not ensure protection of these assets; it needs to work proactively and collaboratively with private, local and state entities where inter-municipal resources are concerned.

Recent development may have dwindled opportunities to provide open space connections but tax title and undevelopable land continues to be conveyed to Conservation Commission jurisdiction.. The Town will need to be diligent and creative in capitalizing on further chances to expand connectivity to existing open space and recreation resources, as it was on the residential developments such as Johnson Woods at the Longwood Farm, the Archstone development at Spence Farm, and the Maplewood Village on Salem St.

Land Use Policy

The Town needs to insure the highest level of protection of existing open space and explore every opportunity to increase its inventory in perpetuity. Although Reading is largely built-out, redevelopment continues to be a threat to maintaining the current level of 22.3%¹ open space in the community. However, recently adopted zoning regulations that require open space components enhance existing and future opportunities to protect open space and provide more recreation options.

Accessibility

Accessibility is largely related to ongoing management of open space and recreation facilities, but is also obviously inter-related with other open space and recreation goals. While implementation of objectives in other areas may achieve greater accessibility, the demand for recreational space in particular continues to increase as residential development has amplified and Reading's demographic continues to shift to younger families who expect a variety of active recreation services. Budgetary constraints have also impeded the ability of the Town to maintain accessibility without sacrificing quality or public safety.

Increasingly the Town will have to look to private development and redevelopment to compensate for reduced access to recreational resources. With the emphasis on more intensive uses with redevelopment the Town has sought to negotiate public access to recreation and open space areas on private developments. Balancing the need to preserve wildlife habitats while

¹ MA EOE, 2004

maintaining or expanding accessibility for a variety of use groups will require trade-offs and outreach to private development to achieve continued accessibility to open space and recreational resources.

Financial

Although property tax revenue has increased and municipal expenditures have been contained Reading has experienced reductions in State funding during a period of significant residential development. In addition, real estate prices have increased as Reading has attracted increased residential demand and supply has dwindled. This has made it more difficult to commit resources toward acquiring additional open space and much needed recreational fields.

The adoption of the Community Preservation Act still remains a viable and even more lucrative option and State initiatives emphasizing smart growth principles are increasingly providing incentives that may allow for more financial resources for open space acquisition.

FINDING

Recent development may have dwindled options for open space connections, but undevelopable land continues to be conveyed to Conservation Commission jurisdiction and recently adopted zoning regulations requiring open space enhance opportunities to provide and protect open space and recreation options. Balancing the need to preserve wildlife habitats while maintaining or expanding accessibility for a variety of use groups will require trade-offs and outreach to private development to achieve continued accessibility. The Community Preservation Act still remains a viable and even more lucrative option, along with State initiatives emphasizing smart growth principles.

8.3 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Community Network

A creative, community-wide system of pedestrian network can provide for non-vehicular routes for residents, workers and visitors to follow. In their design, these routes can be part of memorable place-making when taking best advantage of neighborhood features. Within the residential neighborhoods, open space networks can add to the variety, richness and (to some extent) the unique neighborhood identity. Within Downtown, the qualities of designed open space can enhance the civic experience of retail stores, offices, institutions and parking.

Goal 1 Provide a Community and Regional Network to Open Spaces, Recreation and Public Facilities

Objective:

- A. Work with adjacent communities to connect public spaces and protect shared resources
- B. Look for opportunities to connect open spaces within Reading
- C. Create path systems connecting schools, open space, and neighborhoods, e.g. develop walking/biking trails between open spaces
- D. Enhance public open spaces as part of downtown revitalization
- E. Build river/watershed greenway
- F. Provide legal rights of way between neighborhoods and from new subdivisions to adjacent public land
- G. Promote and Support Regional cooperation

Open Space and Recreation

Open spaces have been a functional and aesthetic component of the New England Village providing the grounds for collective activities, recreation and a collective experience. For a community like Reading, without any undeveloped lands, the Town's priorities for the preservation and enhancement of open (and natural) space are, essentially, the means to control growth and define areas preferred to receive future developments.

Goal 2 Provide ample open space and recreation space

Objectives:

- A. Review and amend ways to enhance zoning protections for open space
- B. Provide active management and maintenance of conservation areas.
- C. Acquire additional open space for passive use
- D. Acquire more land for playing fields, a family picnic area and pocket parks
- E. Continue programs for refurbishing the Town's playgrounds and maintain the turf on the playing fields
- F. Establish a policy of no net loss of sledding hills, skating rinks, basketball and tennis courts, etc. when school properties and recreation areas are redeveloped

Accessibility

Providing adequate access to open spaces and natural resources for all ages and all mobility levels not only adds to their passive protection but also develops a public awareness of their contribution to the Town's character. In times of thin state aid, the funding for open space and recreation programs is determined by the creativity of the Town and its non-profits to look into alternative sources and types of funding. Given the option, communities will decide in favor of the park and revitalization as long as all interested parties are involved in the decision making process.

Goal 3 Make recreation and open space accessible to all

Objectives:

- A. Build more quality trails at existing open space areas specifically for:
 - seniors
 - baby strollers
 - wheelchairs
- B. Provide more handicapped parking and regular parking at well-used conservation areas and or the Town Forest.
- C. Make public aware of the importance public and private conservation land and open space
- D. Improve signage at conservation areas and Town Forest
- E. Lead walks for the public at different conservation areas
- F. Build a handicapped-accessible nature trail on existing open space
- G. Address safety issues along new and existing trails

Resources

The Town has very limited resources to purchase land for open space and recreation. The Community Preservation Act, which would have provided State-matching funds for this purpose, failed at Town-wide referendum. The Town has sought developer contributions both through regulations and negotiations but recently land has become more scarce and valuable.

Goal 4 Identify new funding and acquisition sources for recreation and open space

Objectives:

- A. Re-consider the Community Preservation Act

- B. Develop new sources of recreation funding, apply for grants and self-help funds and create a Friends or Stewardship program to help maintain open spaces
- C. Build partnerships with developers of large tracts of land for conservation restrictions, for land donations, and for “bargain” and sales to realize income tax relief and develop links with local businesses and civic groups and interact with owners of large tracts
- D. Increase Dept. of Public Works funding for maintenance of open space

APPENDIX

Suggested Locations for Open Space or Recreation Protection (Refer to Map 13 for locations)

- Between Fairbanks and Bare Meadow – wetlands, possible vernal pool, core habitat, near Ipswich River floodplain (#10 on map) – 9 votes
- Central Path – connection, hub at Birch Meadow (#9 on map) – 8 votes
- Area east of Lindsay Lane – open space connection, wetlands, vernal pools, rare habitat (#5 on map) – 7 votes
- East of Haverhill Street – uplands, playing fields, wetlands, core habitat, natural landscape (#7 on map) – 7 votes
- Camp Curtis Guild – wetlands, habitat, vernal pools (#1 on map) – 5 votes
- Meadow Brook Golf Course – aquifer, zone II, wetlands, habitat (# 3 on map) – 5 votes
- West of Dividence School – wetlands, zone II, habitat (#4 on map) – 4 votes
- Between Van Norden and Forest – wetlands, vernal pools, rare habitat (#6 on map) – 2 votes
- Birch Meadow – expand, improve habitat (# 2 on map) – 0 votes
- Cross / Ash Street – wetlands, vernal pools, habitat, rare wildlife (#8 on map) – 0 votes

Map 12 Open Space and Recreation Plan (2001) Map

