



Hubbardston Massachusetts

MASTER PLAN

Open Space and Recreation

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Prepared by Montachusett Regional Planning Commission

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1. Introduction

According to the Massachusetts's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, open space is "conservation land, recreation land, agricultural land, corridor parks and amenities such as small parks, green buffers along roadways or any open area that is owned by an agency or organization dedicated to conservation." The primary purposes for protecting open space are to retain both the town's rural character and the land's intrinsic ecosystem services. Ecosystem services include protection of water quality, groundwater recharge, habitat for wildlife from pollinators to apex predators, attenuation of heat, dust and noise, replenishing the oxygen in the air we breathe, and, perhaps most importantly, the removal of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Sustainably managed, open space also serves as a resource for mitigating the impacts of climate change, offering locally-grown food, fiber, and energy. Another purpose is to keep some land available for future, unanticipated, uses.

Recreation opportunities are also of interest to residents and visitors to the area. This plan serves the purpose of helping the town to identify critical resources in need of protection and direct growth to areas that are most appropriate for it. Therefore, the Open Space and Recreation element must examine a community's desire to ensure a balance between the conservation of open space areas and the future and current development trends of the community. As communities seek to improve public health, the provision of recreational programs for people of all ages should be accommodated.

Much of this chapter was obtained from the 2019 Updated Open Space Recreation Plan (OSRP). Some sections were summarized. Hubbardston received input from the residents of the Town through a survey that asked questions regarding the importance of the preservation of open space and other community priorities. The results obtained from these questions have been incorporated and included in both the Goals and Actions. Utilizing information from the Updated OSRP, this chapter includes a description of the community's needs for recreational opportunities, suggestions for conserving land for open space and recreation, and an outline of community goals and actions for conserving open space and preserving the Town's rural landscape character. The source of much of the narrative of this chapter, the Open Space and Recreation Plan, includes an inventory of conservation and recreation lands, description of the community's environmental resources, and a vision of the future with goals, objectives, and a seven-year action plan. Open Space and Recreation Plans are required to be updated every seven years in order to qualify for grant programs for land acquisition or park improvements offered through the Division of Conservation Services.

2. Importance of Open Space Protection

The protection of open land is important for many reasons. Uncontrolled growth or taking of land for things like pipelines can result in degradation of public drinking water sources as well as other very important environmental and aesthetic features. Hubbardston helps provide drinking water for millions of people in metropolitan Boston, Fitchburg and Gardner. Loss of open space results in the destruction of wildlife habitat, destruction of unique scenic and historic resources and the destruction of recreational resources.

There are also economic costs associated with growth. Numerous cost-of-community-service studies prepared by the American Farmland Trust have proven that residential development requires more in service costs than it pays in taxes. Hubbardston is a destination for recreational pursuits such as camping, hunting, skiing, hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding. Loss of recreational areas could help contribute to loss of potential associated income revenue for local campsites, stores, and restaurants.

Hubbardston's desire is to protect, maintain, and diversify the open space available to its citizenry. Hubbardston acknowledges the value of existing open spaces—in terms of aesthetics, health, welfare, the economy, and recreation. At the same time, Hubbardston recognizes the need to maintain lands in active use, and to balance local fiscal needs and tax-base concerns with conservation efforts. To balance these desires, Hubbardston also seeks to make better use of existing conservation and open space land for limited recreational means, to expand the opportunities available to residents and increase the number of avenues for economic growth.

Ultimately, the quality of life for all of Hubbardston's residents is enriched by the quality of the open space in the Town and region, whether the space is enjoyed for recreational activity or green tranquility. Hubbardston enjoys a vast array of open space resources, in part a result of large state land conservation.

Preservation of open space has natural, social, and psychological benefits. Open land provides visual relief from the developed landscape. Vegetation helps filter out pollutants from air, rainwater, and runoff. Vegetation also mitigates temperature extremes through the process of transpiration. In short, protection of open land is important for both human physical and mental well-being, and the health of wildlife.

Hubbardston faces some major decisions such as determining which land parcels, if any, are important to acquire, identifying and then addressing any unmet open space and recreation needs, and how to keep the preservation of town character at the forefront of any development discussions without greatly stifling opportunities for growth. Having a solid inventory of open space and recreational facilities and a plan as to how they will

be taken care of will be a critical stepping-stone as the town moves towards achieving its goals.

Recent History of Community Accomplishments

Progress in Hubbardston

In 2018, the Department of Conservation Services approved the Updated 2018 Open Space and Recreation Plan. This finalized plan is based on the original Open Space and Recreation Plan from 2012 but has been updated to reflect the accomplishments achieved by Hubbardston since that date. The Town of Hubbardston is active in and has made great strides towards accomplishing the community's goals and objectives related to its open space and recreational resources.

3. Community Setting

Surroundings of Hubbardston

Located in central Massachusetts, just seven miles from Route 2 and within an hour's commute of several important urban areas, Hubbardston is one of a growing list of towns that is struggling to maintain the rural character cherished by residents while accommodating the growth demand which is spreading steadily westward from the Route 495 corridor. While this growth has slowed dramatically since the housing crisis that began in 2007, an improving economy will undoubtedly renew the development pressure in the town. Hubbardston is on the very edge of the Boston metropolitan area, and it must be ready to face the next phase of development.

Landscape Character

Like most towns in rural Massachusetts, Hubbardston is primarily forested with numerous wetlands and fields. Because of its location within the Ware River Watershed there are large tracts of contiguous forests that are permanently protected to preserve the quality of the water flowing into the Quabbin Reservoir. Large tracts of land in the eastern section of town are also conserved to protect the Fitchburg water supply.

Water Resources

Hubbardston's surface drainage network of streams, ponds, and wetlands is the direct result of the topography. The drainage network is perhaps the most important environmental feature that should be considered in open space planning. Phil Lewis, a Wisconsin land-use design expert who based his state's open space protection plan on drainage networks, refers to them as a "string of pearls" where rivers and streams are the "string" and ponds, wetlands, endangered species habitats, rich floodplains, historic sites, etc. are the "pearls". Protection of these networks thus provides prime wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, water supply protection, historic preservation, and other important aspects.

Watershed

One of the reasons that Hubbardston is predominantly undeveloped is because of its placement in the state's watershed system. The DCR Division of Water Supply Protection is responsible for the stewardship of over 92,000 acres of critical lands and 45.6 square miles of reservoir surface water within the watersheds of the Quabbin, Wachusett, and Sudbury Reservoirs, and the Ware River in order to protect the municipal drinking water supply for current and future generations.

Most of Hubbardston is within the approximately 60,000-acre Ware River watershed (also spanning parts of Rutland, Phillipston, Oakham, Barre, Templeton, Princeton, and

Westminster), and DCR-DWSP owns approximately 23,000 acres of that total acreage. DCR land acquisition and water supply efforts have created some large, un-fragmented and undeveloped tracts of land in Hubbardston. A large acreage is also owned by the City of Fitchburg for water protection.

The Burnshirt River enters Hubbardston from Templeton, to the northwest, and then travels for almost six miles through Hubbardston, combining with Canesto and Natty Pond Brooks and entering the Ware River before flowing into Barre. The East and West Branches of the Ware River are also significant watercourses within Hubbardston. The West Branch originates in Hubbardston and flows for five miles south before entering Rutland. The East Branch begins in Westminster, flows for almost three miles in Hubbardston and continues southward to Princeton. The Ware River supplies drinking water to Quabbin Reservoir and to the Wachusett reservoir through the Quabbin Aqueduct. Diversions of water from the river are conveyed into the Quabbin Reservoir through the two-way Quabbin Tunnel. Water flows west from the Ware River to the Quabbin during the high-water months (October through May or June) and east to Wachusett the rest of the year.

Wetlands

Wetlands are a very important resource for wildlife habitat, water purification, groundwater recharge, and flood control. Many species of flora and fauna only occur in wetlands. Numerous types of wetlands exist in Hubbardston, comprising approximately 1,200 acres.

Aquifers and Recharge Areas

Templeton and Hubbardston Brooks flow through a landscape characterized by rich sand and gravel deposits that are extensively mined. The drainage basin for Hubbardston Brook contains a medium-yield aquifer, and, according to Hubbardston's Executive Order 418 Community Development Plan, the Department of Environmental Protection has delineated this as a Zone II Aquifer Recharge Protection Area.

Vegetation

Hubbardston's landscape is dominated by secondary growth forests that have grown back since the time more than 100 years ago when there was substantial clearing of land for timber and agriculture. Many of these forests are considered "upland," or sites that are dry and well-drained. Oak, red maple, hickory, and ash trees dominate the uplands, interspersed with black cherry, basswood, yellow and black birches, and sugar maple. Large stands of hemlock and white pine are also common in Hubbardston's upland forests. Understory shrubs include witch-hazel, striped maple, hazelnut, blueberries, and a variety of ferns and other herbaceous plants.

Wildlife

Hubbardston, due to a combination of large expanses of protected and undisturbed land and the diversity of habitats, is home to many common species of wildlife. State biologists recognize this area for its impressive biodiversity.

Public Shade Trees

Shade trees exist on all Hubbardston's roadways due in large part to the Scenic Roads Act of 1973. On many of the small back roads, branches of large trees that span the road. All cemeteries in town are bordered by shade trees. In addition, there are 2 other main sites with public shade trees in Hubbardston, Curtis Recreation Field and Millenium Park. Shade trees play an important role in beautifying the recreation field and providing much needed shade for spectators. Lilac bushes were planted in the very early years of the field along a boundary line and three maple trees were planted around 2005 using funds from a state grant. Similar funds were used to plant trees at Millenium Park. It is likely that more trees will be deemed beneficial for both locations in future years should funding permit. Efforts are currently underway to beautify the town center and a Town Center Committee has been formed. Some years ago, crab apple trees were planted in locations along Main St. by the town.

Scenic Landscapes

Protecting Massachusetts' scenic beauty plays an important role in the future desirability of the Commonwealth as a place to locate. "The Massachusetts Landscape Inventory" published in 1981 by the Department of Environmental Management (now Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)) remarks that extensive areas of pastoral scenery are becoming rare due to development. These areas are valuable not only for scenic beauty, but for agricultural, economic, environmental, and historic qualities. Several trails in Hubbardston provide access to the scenic landscapes in the hills and river valleys and are an attraction that draws people to the community. These trails are located on state, town and local land trust properties offering a variety of experiences in the fields, forests, wetlands, and waterways that dominate much of Hubbardston's landscape. Scenic landscapes play a significant role in the way residents characterize the town. Unfortunately, the loss of agricultural lands to development in the past few decades has adversely impacted Hubbardston's many scenic vistas.

Working to mitigate the adverse impact on the open spaces and landscape of Hubbardston is a popular point of view in Hubbardston. Surveys collected from previous OSRP Updates and most recently in June of 2021, have expressed a common theme focusing on the preservation and positive aspects on the quality of life of Hubbardston's "rural character".

Hubbardston contains within its borders several natural and managed features which are valuable from a scenic and economic standpoint. The southernmost section of Mare Meadow Reservoir, Barre Falls Dam Reservation, and many of the town's ponds provide attractive waterfront views. There are several points of high elevation that offer outstanding looks toward Mt. Wachusett, the region's most prominent landscape feature. The Mt. Jefferson Conservation Area, which maintains open fields and offers dramatic views of Mt. Wachusett, as well as attractive vistas of church steeples amongst the rolling hills, is a valuable scenic asset to the town. Not as well known, because of its seclusion on the Malone Road Conservation Area, is the view of Mt. Wachusett from the cliffs above Natty Pond. Many of the open vistas in town remain that way because of periodic grazing, mowing, clearing, and stewardship. While several Hubbardston's most treasured scenic aspects are available on public property, many of the most aesthetically pleasing viewing points and scenic locations in town are in private ownership.

Some of the more popular scenic vistas are:

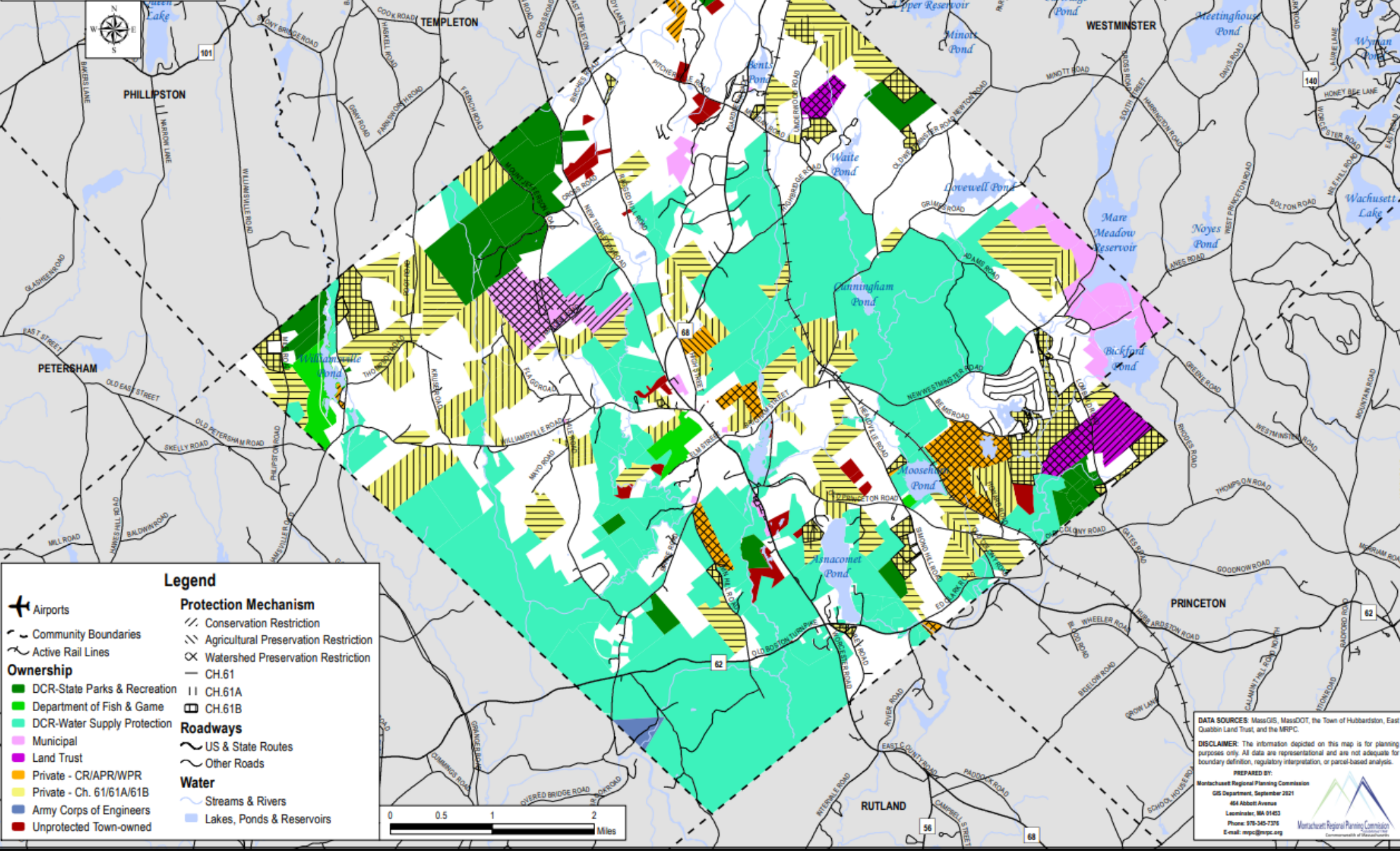
- Mt. Wachusett from upper Mt. Jefferson Road;
- Mt. Wachusett and open meadow from Curtsey Farm on Hale Road;
- Brigham Pond from upper Brigham Road to Evergreen Road;
- Mare Meadow Reservoir from New Westminster Road near Westminster line;
- Mt. Wachusett from George Howard Road;
- Comet Pond from Old Princeton Road.

Unique Environments

The town has several unique features. The northwest section of town is an area of vast gravel reserves which have been heavily mined over the years. Within the same area as these former gravel pits, is one of the town's most important aquifers which is within the Zone 11 protection area for the City of Gardner's Snake Pond Well. There is also a large area of NHESP priority and core habitat located within the gravel reserves.

New Templeton Road is the site of two notable geologic features that many residents are not aware of. The cliffs that rise above the swamps in New Templeton Road provide a wonderful overlook in the Malone Road Conservation Area, and just a short while further north they are the site of the Indian Caves. There are several caves, and one has a large chamber big enough for two people. A hole at the bottom of the cave is the site of a fire pit and three windows above it allows the smoke to escape

Hubbardston, MA: Master Plan Open Space by Owner



4. Open Space and Recreation Assets

The Town of Hubbardston has diverse open space and recreational assets, distinguished by the form of land ownership and by the primary use of each parcel. There are six major categories of land ownership.

Privately-Held Parcels With Only Wetlands and Zoning Protection

Approximately 1,200 acres of forests, fields, and wetlands in Hubbardston are owned by individuals, trusts, and corporations without any restrictions on the use of the land except as provided by wetlands and zoning regulations. Much of this land could be converted to residential or other developed use at the discretion of the owner. Thus, this land is often considered non-protected open space.

Privately-Held Parcels With Chapter 61 or Easement Protection

Chapter 61 provides an incentive in the form of reduced property tax for private owners of forest and farm land to voluntarily maintain their land in some form of open space. Chapter 61 also provides the Town with the option to purchase the land, if the owner elects to withdraw from Chapter 61. If the Town declines to exercise that option, the land reverts to the category of privately-held parcels with only wetlands and zoning protection. A private owner may grant a conservation easement to the state or a conservation organization. This is a more durable protection than Chapter 61.

Nongovernmental Conservation Organization Owned Parcels

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to protecting open space own and manage several parcels in Hubbardston. Conservation NGOs are non-profit and typically funded by private donations. When acquiring land, an NGO may grant a conservation easement to the state in exchange for funds to help pay for the acquisition. The East Quabbin Land Trust, North County Land Trust, Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, and North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership each own protected land or have assisted other entities in protecting open space in Hubbardston. Two such areas within Hubbardston that are owned by conservation NGOs are as follows:

- Henry's Grove, East Quabbin Land Trust (94 acres)
- Underwood Road Conservation Area, North County Land Trust (65 acres)

Other large conservation NGOs in the region include Mass Audubon and New England Forestry Foundation.

Privately Owned Parcels

Private Parcels constitute private land that is considered protected, which happens if it has a deed restriction in perpetuity, if an Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) has been placed on the property, or if DEP has placed a conservation restriction on it as part of the Wetlands Conservancy Program. Removing land from permanent open space protection status so that it may be developed requires an affirmative vote by two thirds of the State Legislature. In most cases, the watershed district would be required to show the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection just cause for converting the use of the land. Much of Open Space land held as private parcels in Hubbardston are classified as Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B land¹.

Municipally-Owned Parcels

The Town of Hubbardston currently owns four permanently protected recreation and conservation areas totaling nearly 380 acres:

- Mt. Jefferson Conservation Area (250 acres)
- Malone Road Conservation Area (67 acres)
- Curtis Recreation Field (11.5 acres)
- Sharron Conservation Area (50 acres)

A conservation easement was granted to the state in order to help with the cost of acquisition of some of these lands. The conservation easement describes the specific limitations on changes in the use of the land.

The City of Fitchburg owns land near Mare Meadow Reservoir and Bickford Pond for the protection of their public water supply.

State-Owned Parcels

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is the largest landowner in Hubbardston. Much of this land is maintained for protection of the Ware River watershed. The water surface and much of the shorelines and adjacent forest of Asnacomet (127 acres open water) and Brigham (54 acres open water) Ponds, including the swimming area on Asnacomet and the boat launches on each pond are owned by the state. The Ware River watershed land is now managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

¹ Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 61, 61A and 61B is designed to encourage the preservation and enhancement of the Commonwealth's forests, agricultural land and privately-owned recreation parcels by offering tax incentives to property owners for managing these lands for those purposes and allowing the municipality the first option to buy (and protect) the land if landowner decides to sell.

Hubbardston State Forest and Hubbardston Wildlife Management Area are managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Department of Fish and Game, respectively.

5. Analysis of Needs

Open Space

Hubbardston will unavoidably be facing the effects of climate change, which will require a range of measures to improve both resilience and sustainability. One aspect of this will be to improve the economic aspects of local food, fiber, and energy production at Hubbardston farms and forests, while maintaining the landscape's function of removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Another aspect will be the increased importance of both preserving and utilizing open space, and decisions will need to be made from a holistic point of view, such that ecosystem and wildlife corridor conservation, protection of water resources, and development of interconnecting walking and bicycle paths for public use, are all considered in a balanced way. Hubbardston's open space and recreation needs should be considered from this perspective of maintain a strong history of conservation while ensuring responsible use of open space for recreation going forward.

A priority goal should be to establish which existing, if any, unprotected open spaces in Hubbardston need to have priority in terms of preserving ecosystems and wildlife habitat. Such an effort will involve the Town Administrator, the Board of Selectmen and other boards, but the initiative can come from Open Space Committee (OSC).

Another priority goal should be to ensure that Hubbardston's agricultural land, especially that in active use, is not lost to development. This is because average age of active farmers in MA is 60, so large tracts of land will soon be passed on or sold. OSIC needs to work closely with Hubbardston's Agricultural Commission, and together should work to develop a farm transfer program modeled after other programs established elsewhere. As a beginning, OSIC should consider providing links on its website to initiatives, such as the Rural Natural Resource Protection and the American Farmland Trust. Once such land is sold for development, it can be considered lost for good. A specific initiative will be to calculate how much "prime agricultural" land has already been lost to development, and how much is still available, and then formulate a plan to preserve prime agricultural land in a systematic way.

Recreation

Hubbardston residents may take advantage of a wide array of recreational activities, ranging from individual outdoor challenges and pursuits on both public and private

property to team or group sports under the auspices of the Parks Commission. Many residents are fortunate to have undeveloped areas, woodlands, or fields inviting unrestricted foot access “right out their back doors.” Allowed uses, even in the highly regulated Ware River Watershed, are many.

Additional organized recreation opportunities are available to youth sports teams, which make regular use of the playing fields at the Curtis Recreational Field. There is space for soccer and a baseball diamond and batting cage. Private baseball fields are also found at the Rod & Gun Club and on Barre Road. An enclosed skateboard park and children’s play area are also at the recreation area. There is also a small basketball court and playground located at Hubbardston Center School.

6. Goals and Actions

Open Space and Recreation Goals & Actions

The following goals and are not listed in any specific order of importance:

Goal 1: Land Protection, to protect water quality, carbon sequestration, and other ecosystem services, wildlife habitat, agricultural resources, priority parcels, and enhance the quality of life.

Action 1: Develop and maintain a Land Protection Priority map, based upon changes in ownership, use protection status, character, etc.

Action 2: Continue to make connections and build relationships with landowners to encourage protection of priority acreage through: conservation restrictions (CR’s); landscape scale conservation projects such as Forest Legacy; donations of land or CR’s to take advantage of tax benefits or environmentally sensitive development.

Action 3: Continue building connections and relationships with land conservation organizations, land trusts, etc.

Action 4: Encourage town to develop protective protocol for lands being removed from Chapter 61 status.

Action 5: Continue applications for relevant grants and funding as needed.

Action 6: Advocate for adoption of town bylaws that encourage environmentally friendly “green” development.

Action 7: Explore protection of Millers Watershed area in Hubbardston.

Goal 2: Town-Wide Improvements, to increase and improve recreational opportunities, enhance open space protection, protect water quality, and support balanced “green development.”

Action 1: Work with Parks Commissioner regarding specific developed recreation sites, such as possible ice-skating rink, opportunities for physically challenged and bicycle trails.

Action 2: Develop and map localized trail systems in different areas of the town. This may involve existing trails on state land, new trails on newly acquired land or trail easements to connect existing trails. Improve upon and add to the existing trail systems in the town, especially in the town owned conservation areas, incorporating multiuse capability where possible.

Action 3: Participate in Community Preservation Act fund allocation decisions. Town has approved CPA projects in each category.

Action 4: Consider possible development of a “green cemetery” within town in partnership with the Cemetery Commission. A green cemetery is one that allows for green burials, which minimize environmental impact by forgoing embalming, use biodegradable burial containers, and do not use a vault or cement grave liner.

Action 5: Continue to work with the Planning Board to promote green and low-impact development as needed.

Goal 3: Community Involvement, to increase the general level of education and participation of residents.

Action 1: Sponsor and organize special events and field trips to expose residents to open space and recreational opportunities with particular emphasis given to youth.

Action 2: Consider partnership with the afterschool program to encourage after school activities at the conservation areas.

Action 3: Hold public meetings and hearings regarding major land use goals and decisions on an as needed basis.

Action 4: Post list of volunteer opportunities on website such as trail maintenance, leading educational events, etc.

Action 5: Post on website and publicize Open Space Donation account to encourage donations for general maintenance of open space areas.

Goal 4: Trail and Open Space Land Improvement

Action 1: Continue assessing, GPS and mapping existing and historic cart paths and trails within the town; produce a town-wide trail map.

Action 2: Explore opportunities for new, multiuse trailhead and trail systems around the town to encourage local use.

Action 3: Create individual trail maps for new trailheads, and update maps for older trail systems as needed.

Action 4: Explore opportunities for additional trails within the conservation area/state forest system, potentially with multiuse availability.

Action 5: Continue to repair, enhance, and maintain existing trails through volunteer and cooperative efforts and seek out partnerships with local and regional stakeholders.

Action 6: Explore possibility of including current and/or future trail and recreation maps with the annual town report to increase awareness of existing opportunities.

Action 7: Continue partnership with Montachusett Regional Planning Commission and abutting towns regarding region-wide trail system development.

Action 8: Plan for and facilitate trail connections wherever practically possible. Explore opportunities to connect local trails into DEM Rail Trail and incorporate multiuse as a general principle.

Action 9: Continue to explore appropriate funding opportunities for improvement of existing trails (culverts, bridges, etc.).

Action 10: Encourage and assist Historical Commission efforts to develop a mill pond/mill site interpretive trail within existing trail network; promote trail access to other significant historical sites.

Action 11: Complete Hubbardston's ADA Assessment, develop an initial plan (including funding), and, if funding available, begin an initial ADA trail.

Goal 5: Resource Protection and Enhancement

Action 1: Explore open space land plantings of Nonesuch apple trees and/or other fruit trees and plants beneficial to wildlife.

Action 2: Encourage conservation and reclamation efforts at the Pitcherville gravel pits about aquifer and wildlife habitat protection.

Goal 6: Mt. Jefferson and Malone Road Conservation Areas Stewardship

Action 1: Improve parking area regarding location and drainage.

Action 2: Address illegal ORV/ATV/truck use.

Action 3: Address trash dumping and littering.

Action 4: Develop self-guided nature trail.

Action 5: Involve and engage community in resource management (forests and fields) decisions and land use planning.

Action 6: Maintain and improve existing signs.

Action 7: Develop H/C accessible trails.

Goal 7: Town Communication with State Agencies and Legislators

Action 1: Continue to foster relationship with local state forest administration and advocate for town open space needs relating to state forest funding and protection issues.

Action 2: Urge the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) to support and promote non-motorized recreation and trail access to the Ware River Watershed. Sustainable recreation made possible by public access to trails is important to long-term economic development of Hubbardston.

Action 3: Urge the EOEEA to require the Division of Water Supply Protection to allow non-motorized access to the many miles of singletrack trails that are either currently or could be made sustainable in the watershed.