



Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area

Photo by MRPC

Section 7. Analysis of Needs

7.A. Summary of Resource Protection Needs

Lancaster has a rich abundance of natural resources and open space that our residents value and want to maintain. The challenge for town planners is to balance the fear of losing these resources to developers, while meeting the need for increasing our tax base. Our residents do not want to lose the Town's historic and cultural heritage. The residents of Lancaster have identified the protection of our water supply and the natural resources of the town as very important to them, with the following providing public input:

- The 2007 Master Plan called out the protection of open space and natural resources as a high priority.
- The 2009 Open Space & Recreation Plan called out the same.
- The OSRP Survey conducted in 2017 identified the protection of our water supply, agricultural land, and the protection and preservation of forest lands as being the highest priorities.
- Attendees at the 2017 Public Forum on the proposed Open Space and Recreation Plan also confirmed these choices.

Our community recognizes several natural resources protection needs and issues:

- Quality of our surface waters.
- Protection of our aquifers and their zones of contribution.
- Eradication of invasive species.
- Fragmentation of our remaining open space and large blocks of forest land.
- Conversion of agricultural land to development.
- Loss of historic character and small town New England feel.
- Storm water runoff and erosion.
- Loss of soil biodiversity and original topography, especially at our hills and ridges.
- Accessibility of trails, walkways and connection of trails.
- Vulnerability of much of our open space for lack of permanent protection.
- Separation of our wetlands from adjoining upland habitat.
- Flooding, especially in the Nashua River Floodplain.
- Loss of unique habitats in our community that host rare, uncommon or threatened species.
- Lack of trail and walkway connections between North and South Lancaster.

However, in the seven years since the last update of the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town has seen major improvements with:

- Moderation of large-scale development.
- Improvement of water quality in most of its ponds.
- Moderation of Chapter 61A agricultural land to development.
- More forest land acreage to conservation and into permanent protection.
- An active parcel protection list with regular annual transfers of parcels into permanent protection.
- Improved river protection with increased public awareness.

- Less non-point source pollution and flooding with new stormwater management measures.
- Major improvements in the Town's recreation facilities and resources.
- Better access in our municipal facilities.
- Major improvements in trails and trail programs.
- Opening of the Community and Senior Centers.
- Kick-off of the Nathaniel Thayer Memorial Park project.
- Re-instatement of the Lancaster Farmers Market.
- Increased public education about the Town's recreational and open space opportunities.

7.B. Summary of Community's Needs

The 2012 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) looks at the recreation needs of the state. The SCORP breaks down areas by planning region, and Lancaster is in the Central Region.

The 2012 SCORP identified major problems in resource protection, education and information about recreational resources, partnerships, funding, access and maintenance. The 2017 Lancaster Open Space and Recreation Survey and 2017 Public Forum identified the same issues for the Lancaster community.

According to the SCORP, the Central Region ranks 5th out of 7 for open space and recreation acreage with .26 acres per capita. Lancaster is fortunate to have plenty of open space, however the majority of this acreage is vulnerable to change as it is not all permanently protected.

Walking and hiking were ranked first, with swimming and access to playgrounds and neighborhood parks ranking very high as well. According to the SCORP, the attraction of lakes and ponds is highest in the Berkshires and the Central Region. The ponds of Lancaster are extremely popular and residents care deeply their long-term health and stewardship.

The SCORP identifies the Central Region as first in the Commonwealth for the protection of drinking water supplies. The Quabbin and Wachusett reservoirs are within our region, and receive the highest levels of protection within the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation.

The SCORP also ranks the Central Region first in appreciation of and use of forests. Lancaster's Open Space and Recreation survey ranked "the protection and preservation of our forest lands" second, with a tie to "the protection of agricultural lands and viability of farming". Several of the action items of the Lancaster Open Space and Recreation Plan relate to the sustainable use of town-owned forest land, linkage of contiguous forest blocks, and wise stewardship of forest resources.

The SCORP survey results indicated that non-motorized boating ranks high in our Central Region. The Town of Lancaster has been collaborating with its neighbors to increase access to and use of car-top boat launches on the Nashua River. The City of Leominster and MassDOT recently built a boat launch

near the Lancaster town line. Further south on the Nashua River in Lancaster, the Pellechia Conservation Area has opened that offers a canoe and kayak launch point with associated parking.

Accessibility for person with disabilities was ranked low in the Central Region with water-based resources and trails scoring the lowest. The accessibility report done by Lancaster's Commission on Disability confirmed these findings in Lancaster. There is also a direct match in this area between the SCORP demand survey results and those of Lancaster's 2017 Open Space and Recreation Survey.

Lancaster agrees with the findings of the SCORP that the growth explosion of the Central Region, without the corresponding set-aside of recreation and conservation resources, exacerbates both the fiscal effects of the Town and our inability to meet recreational needs. The proportion of funds going to the maintenance, improvement and addition of recreational resources in Lancaster had steadily declined for many years. However, in recent years as new staff has been added and ranks of volunteers have come forward, we are seeing steady progress and great improvements in the availability of recreational resources, programming and maintenance.

Today's resources are protected in Lancaster by active boards of governance, such as the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Zoning Board of Appeals, Board of Health, Historical Commission and the Agricultural Commission. The Town also gets benefit from the good work done by the Recreation Committee, Open Space and Recreation Committee, Town Forest Committee, Lancaster Land Trust, Lancaster Trail & Bikeway Coalition, Lancaster Friends of the Nashua River, Friends of the Oxbow, MA Fish & Wildlife, Trustees of Reservations and the New England Forestry Foundation who contribute to the acquisition, maintenance, protection and overall well-being of our natural resources. Additionally, several large landowners protect and conserve their working landscapes for the benefit of agriculture, wildlife and the scenic beauty of our town.

There are still many improvements and enhancements that can be made to the existing resources. These break into several major categories.

Open Space and Natural Resource Needs

The Town Master Plan calls for finding "the appropriate balance between safeguarding important natural areas, wildlife habitat and providing opportunities for human recreation and enjoyment of Lancaster's rich natural resources". To do this, we must do several things:

- Continue to work with the Planning Board to revise our zoning bylaws and site plan review criteria to include recreation or open space requirements in new development projects.
- Continue to develop and enhance the Town Forest by either purchasing abutting land or by placing conservation restrictions on abutting land. Continue to implement the certified Forest Management Plan.
- Continue to support the several Spectacle Pond and Fort Pond Associations in town in their efforts to preserve the quality of these important natural resources.
- Continue to carry out the recommendations for improved water quality, quantity and open space and resource protection as outlined in the *Nashua River Watershed Association (NRWA) Five-Year Action Plan 2003-2007*, the *1995-2020 Vision for the NRWA* document, and additional MassWildlife guidance documents.

- Participate in the Agriculture Preservation Restriction (APR) Program and work with landowners to explore ways to keep agriculture viable in Lancaster. Partner with the schools to grow crops on their campuses.
- Continue to promote the donation of conservation restrictions or easements by private landowners.
- Actively remove and manage invasive species, perhaps selecting an area that is at risk before it is overrun and difficult to treat. Research and apply for State grants to prepare an organized plan. Also educate landowners about the dangers of Oriental Bittersweet and on mechanisms for control.
- Continue to protect Riparian areas and connect them to upland habitat and wildlife corridors and to other protected areas.
- Become more diligent about implementing the Town and State's stormwater management regulations and Low Impact Development tools.
- Continue to survey and document vernal pools on Town-owned land and of other privately-owned land where permission is granted.
- Continue to create trail connections across Town, including the Green Belt, Nashua River Greenway and the Thoreau Trail.
- Educate and encourage stewardship at all levels of education, including Atlantic Union College, Nashoba Regional High School, Dr. Franklin Perkins School, South Lancaster Academy and Trivium School. Consider churches, Thayer Memorial Library and other civic groups.
- Continue to protect the top areas in Lancaster:
 - Lancaster's ponds and rivers and lands around them.
 - Existing open fields and farmlands.
 - Nashua River Greenway and Nashua River floodplain.
 - Land around the Town Forest, including Ballard Hill.
 - Bolton Flats and Pine Hill.
 - Land around the Bolton Fairgrounds and Bolton Flats.
 - Fields along Main Street between the Town Green and Atlantic Union College.
 - George Hill.

- Dexter Drumlin (under protection by the Trustees of Reservations).

Recreation Needs

Simply put, there is a need for more and better space for the town's recreational needs. The resources such as funding, labor and oversight have drifted away over numerous years which has caused the issues that we now see in 2017.

Most of Lancaster's recreation fields have suffered from lack of support and repair. For more than ten years, basic field maintenance has heavily relied on volunteers to complete basic maintenance such as mowing and weed-wacking. Preventative field/turf maintenance plans have been non-existent to help maintain the existing softball and Little League fields.

Another example is on-going maintenance of the Town's recreational trails, most of which need to be cleared and groomed. Some recent improvements to the trails are new trail maps for each trail system and improved signage in most locations. There are also new "friends" groups and an Adopt-A-Trail program that pairs volunteers with specific trail systems for on-going maintenance.

The 2017 Lancaster Open Space and Recreation Survey provided the following recommendations:

- Expand recreational opportunities *for all ages*. Status: Hiring of a Recreation Director has greatly improved the recreational programming for all of our residents.
- Renovate the Nathaniel Thayer Memorial Park, located behind the Lancaster Community Center. Status: Phase 1 for the playground is in progress.
- Improve and construct more bike paths, trails and sidewalks. Status: On-going.
- Improve access and signage to existing paths and trails and indicate difficulty level to be more user friendly. Status: On-going.
- Renovate the tennis courts. Status: Part of the NTMP renovation.
- Create a dog park. Status: Part of the NTMP renovation.
- Provide recreation opportunities, including a place to go and programming for seniors. Status: The Lancaster Community and Senior Center opened in 2011.
- Create playgrounds and picnic areas accessible at the neighborhood level. Status: Mainly on Main Street. Need to address in North Lancaster.
- Consider transportation to recreation events and the Town Beach. Status: Created via summer camp program.
- Designate locations for off-road vehicles and snowmobiling. Status: Town Forest has snowmobile trails. Other trail areas being considered.

- Create clubs to help maintain and foster environmental stewardship. Status: Created the Lancaster Friends of the Nashua River and the Adopt-A-Trail program for river and trail stewardship.

Additional recommendations from other planning venues include:

- Improve accessibility and ease of use of Lancaster's open space and recreational opportunities for the benefit of persons with disabilities. Status: On-going.
- Continue to improve and publicize Lancaster's trail systems, and develop new trails to connect the Town Forest, the State Forest, and other conservation lands in Lancaster. Create new trails to connect North and South Lancaster and foster a greater sense of community. Status: On-going.
- Develop a brochure that showcases and explains Lancaster's trails, natural history, historical treasures, and paddling waterways for newcomers and for town residents. Status: Created a Lancaster Trail Guide.
- Work with non-profit landowners in Town to explore ways that their facilities can be extended to residents for recreational use. Status: On-going.
- Work with surrounding towns in efforts to preserve water quality, habitats, connection of regional and cross-town trails, and expansion and collaboration in senior recreational programming events and recreation opportunities for all residents. Status: Lancaster is a member of the Montachusett Regional Trail Coalition, whose mission is to connect the towns in our region by way of walking trails, bikeways and blue trails.
- Educate the public via the Town's web site with information on the Town's conservation areas, recreational areas and associated programming. Status: The Town electronic newsletter serves as a centralized medium for disseminating information on all modes of recreation and conservation programming.

American with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance

In 2009, the Lancaster Commission on Disability issued an ADA accessibility report specifically evaluating the Town's conservation and recreation sites, which have remained a challenge for the Town to address. A goal of this Open Space and Recreation Plan update will be to improve accessibility and signage for all, which includes ADA compliance for a reasonable number of conservation and recreation properties in the Town.

A goal of past Open Space and Recreation Plans (as early as 1980) is the creation of a handicapped trail, which has never been done. Perhaps an action item for this current plan update will finally make this goal a reality.

Management Needs

The need for enhanced communication across the Town's many boards and committees that address open space and recreation needs was recognized in the planning process for the 2007 Master Plan and the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Plan. These plans directed that a coordinating committee be

formed, with representatives from the various boards, with the mission to “advance the goals, objectives, and actions of the Town’s Open Space and Recreation Plan and to serve as a centralizing forum of this effort”. In 2008, the Open Space and Recreation Committee were resurrected to become this centralizing body.

Since that time, there have been several initiatives started to address the Town’s management needs:

- A part-time Recreation Director has been hired to coordinate programming for all ages (seniors, children, adults and adolescents) and assist with operations planning and maintenance, as well as grant writing and general fundraising.
- Active recruitment of volunteers and volunteer coordination was completed through creation of “Friends” groups to foster and coordinate fundraising, public participation and caretaking. Some of the Friends groups include the Lancaster Friends of the Nashua River (see Section 4.F under Area of Critical Environmental Concern), the Town Forest Committee, and the Lancaster Trail and Bikeway Coalition (LTBC), and the Adopt-A-Trail program.
- A partnership has been established with the Thayer Memorial Library, Lancaster’s cultural and intellectual media center, to centralize and distribute information, as well as the Lancaster Community and Senior Centers and Recreation Department for inter-generational programming and activities.
- A partnership with the Commission on Disability to coordinate efforts on compliance with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). This alliance has produced new initiatives on bringing accessibility features to the Town Beach, as well as participation in the MassDOT Complete Streets program to improve sidewalks and public facility access.
- A club for snowmobilers (Snow Riders of the Nashaway) was created to plan and maintain trails for the enjoyment and safety of the snowmobile community.
- Regular attendance at meetings with the various town boards and committees to discuss and study issues of mutual interest and overlap. New ad-hoc committees have been formed to focus on specific topics, which include the Economic Development Team, the Tech Team, the Nathaniel Thayer Memorial Park Committee, and the Trail and Bikeway Coalition.
- Continued work with the Lancaster Agricultural Commission to foster and advance mutual goals and work plans. Recent efforts include creation of an Agricultural Parcel Protection List that identifies agriculturally important farm land and lists prioritization of land protection measures for the future. The Lancaster Farmers Market was also resurrected in 2013 after having been dormant for three years.
- Continued work with the Lancaster Historical Commission and Historical Society to foster and advance mutual goals and work plans. Recent efforts include acquisition of the historical Rowlandson Rock parcel from private ownership to the Conservation Commission, and joint work on historical bridge restoration for the Atherton and Ponakin bridges.

- Partnerships with our area non-profits (educational, recreation and conservation organizations) to discuss good community partnership, issues of mutual concern, and joint conservation and recreation initiatives. These coalitions include the Freedom's Way National Heritage Area and the Montachusett Regional Trail Coalition.
- Establishment of active relationship and communication with the Department of Public Works, Fire Chief and Police Chief through regular meetings of the Tech Team.
- Improvement of information exchange and public involvement when Chapter 61 land becomes available. Regular distribution of Chapter 61 land sales are sent to the Open Space and Recreation Committee as part of an inter-departmental circulation and comment.
- Growing stewardship programs and management plans for all Conservation Commission and other Town-owned open space. Recent programs include:
 - A Forest Management Plan for the Town Forest.
 - Establishment of the Lancaster Friends of the Nashua River for the Cook Conservation Area, the Pellechia Conservation Area, and the North Nashua River Blue Trail.
 - The Cub Scouts for maintenance of the Eagle Ridge Conservation Area.
 - The Lancaster Trail and Bikeway Coalition and the Adopt-A-Trail program for care of the Town's trail areas.
- Town-wide education on the Town Forest Management Plan development and implementation. A timber harvest was recently completed and trail walks held to educate the public on the purpose of the harvest and to show the resulting forest health and wildlife habitat improvements.

Potential Change of Use

The special opportunities for potential change of land use include:

Economic Development

- Development in North Lancaster – the creation of zoning in North Lancaster for the Enterprise Zoning District and the Integrated Planning Overlay Districts.
- Sewer and public water supply infrastructure and capacity, particularly in North Lancaster for economic development.
- Two undeveloped sites – two mixed-use developments in North Lancaster, known as Lancaster Tech Park and Lancaster Crossing.
- Conversion of earth products removal sites for economic development, agriculture, open space or recreation.

Community Facilities

- Town Green Building Complex – conversion of two former school buildings into a Community and Senior Center and for new Town offices.
- Nathaniel Thayer Memorial Park – renovation of Thayer Field into a multi-generational recreation campus.

Recreation

- Complete Streets program to improve sidewalks and create bike lanes for better pedestrian and bicycle movement to points of interest within the community.
- Lunenburg Road (Rt. 70) – area along this road for a bike trail to connect North and South Lancaster.
- Solar Field site – add area along the Nashua River for passive recreation (walking trail, canoe launch, picnic areas).

Conservation and Open Space

- Conversion of Chapter 61 land.
- Mandate of open space – through the Flexible Development zoning and the Integrated Planning Overlay District zoning.
- Parcel Protection List – to designate areas of future acquisition for land earmarked for conservation, open space, natural resource protection or recreation.

Natural Resources

- Selective harvesting of the Town Forest and other Town-owned forested areas for forest management and potential revenue generation.

Housing

- Identify areas where more compact housing can be implemented, and change zoning laws accordingly to allow for mixed types of residential housing (townhouses, apartments, duplexes), thus reducing footprint and creating better walk-ability (and reducing carbon emissions) and more open space.

Transportation

- Intersection improvements – major re-modeling of two major intersections (Rt. 117/70) to improve public safety and to reduce congestion.

Other

- Re-development of the Fort Devens South Post (in the future).
- Demolition of the MA Department of Capital Asset Management (DCAM) complex near the old Industrial School for Girls on Old Common Road.
- Re-development of the Atlantic Union College campus.