



Lancaster's Trails Vision, 2016

Prepared by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes how Lancaster can use and enhance its infrastructure of trails to significantly increase the quality of life for its citizens and visitors. It describes how the infrastructure we have today came to be and also highlights the limitations of the current infrastructure that prevent us from using it for much greater recreational, business-related, and social benefit.

Section VI of this Lancaster's Trails Vision provides summaries of the 10 most important sites that contribute people's enjoyment of the many kinds of trails that Lancaster has. Each site location is shown with a map and other relevant pictures, as well as the basic design features of the location. The 10 locations must be seen as parts of a whole, thus building the vision for a future expansion in the network. Such an expansion involves connecting existing pathways with places where people want to go. This can be achieved by: i) extending a path a short distance, or making a short connection between two paths, so that more people could get to more places of interest; ii) enhancing access over existing pathways so that people with young children in strollers, senior citizens, or people with mobility impairments can get to points of interest; iii) creating new recreational opportunities (e.g., fitness trails, blue trails); or increase educational opportunities along the pathways; and iv) projects that involve developing new long pathways that would increase the number of major "arteries" both within Lancaster as well as between Lancaster and its neighboring towns, aiming to interconnect the different sites into a walkable network.

In Section VII, an overview of the participatory consultations conducted with the public that constitute the core of users from Lancaster's trails, as well as local stakeholders and regional players in an attempt to come up with an unified and comprehensive vision of the future network of Lancaster's Trail Vision that is as inclusive as possible. In the appendix it is possible to see a complete and literary transcription of the public forum that was made in order to collect the public input. Such a literary reproduction is important to assert that the voices were heard and taken into consideration during this document's preparation.

Finally, in section VIII a rough road map for the construction of the network, with some time tables that can serve as parameters, as well as potential sources of funding from grants that can address the costs of building new pathways and revamping the existing ones.

It is important to stress the fact that this document was prepared using the Groton's Trails Vision as a source of inspiration.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout this report, we will use the terms “trail,” “path,” “pathway,” “sidewalk,” “dirt road,” “rail trail,” and even “river trail” somewhat interchangeably. They are all considered part of the pathway infrastructure that this Trails Vision for Lancaster seeks to expand and enhance to improve the quality of life for all of Lancaster’s residents and visitors.

The core of this report is with Sections VI, VI and VIII, with the first describing the existing sites that are significant to Lancaster’s trail infrastructure and the second explaining how the public participation occurred. In Section VIII, the next steps addressing the integration of the sites is discussed by this Trails Vision report in order to come up with a ‘Road Map’ for the network building. To lay the foundation for these projects, this report begins by describing the following:

- How the Lancaster Trails Vision Committee believes this report can be used by the state, the region, and the Town of Lancaster;
- Who uses the trails in Lancaster;
- What the benefits are to the Town of Lancaster and the region by enhancing our trails infrastructure;
- Who is on the Lancaster Trails Vision Committee and what the current committee’s purpose, vision, and values are; and
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- The limitations in the current trails infrastructure.

It is the Lancaster’s Trails Vision Committee’s hope that this initial Trails Vision report will serve to stimulate discussion and actions that will lead to the implementation of many of the projects described herein. Our Lancaster’s Trails Vision is a long-range view of what is possible and the benefits that could be achieved, but it will need to be updated every five years or so to incorporate lessons learned along the way and to reassess priorities. As we move forward, membership on the Lancaster’s Trails Vision Committee is expected to be dynamic as advocates for the different projects come forward to take them from concept to completed infrastructural enhancement. The Lancaster’s Trails Vision Committee believes this could be a sustainable approach to enhancing the trails infrastructure for the benefit of all the residents, and visitors to the Town of Lancaster.

II. HOW THIS TRAILS VISION WILL BE USED

A. By the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

The initiative for developing a Trails Vision for Lancaster was a request from the Montachusett Regional Trails Coalition¹ (MRTC) to each of its participating towns² to develop their Trails Visions. The MRTC will integrate the Trails Visions from its participating towns into a regional vision and implementation plan. The Trails Visions of all the active regional trail coalitions will be integrated to provide an update to the current state-wide recreational trails vision, “Commonwealth Connections”³. The goals of “Commonwealth Connections” have been used to prioritize Recreational Trail Program grants that are administered by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and funded from the state’s alternative transportation funds. The updated Commonwealth trails vision will seek increased state funding for trail projects at all levels to help achieve the vision.

B. By Other Nearby Towns

Lancaster’s Trails Vision may help other nearby communities in developing their own Trails Vision. Our Trails Vision may also stimulate greater interest in developing long-distance town-to-town pathways with our neighboring towns. To the extent that parts of our Trails Vision are in common with those of nearby communities, they are more likely to become part of the future state-wide Trails Vision and thus give the projects a higher probability of being at least partially funded with state resources. This document follows Groton’s Trail Vision goal of serving adjacent communities into developing their visions.

C. By the Town of Lancaster

The development of this Lancaster’s Trails Vision uses ideas put forth for trail improvements in the Lancaster Master Plan⁴, Lancaster’s Open Space and Recreation Plan⁵, Lancaster Green Belt

¹ The Montachusett Regional Trails Coalition (MRTC) began meeting in March 2012 through the cooperative efforts of the Nashua River Watershed Association, the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, and the Leominster Trail Stewards. Mr. Dick O’Brien is the current Chairman of the MRTC. Al Futterman of the Nashua River Watershed Association is the Co-Chairman. It is the first regional trail coalition to form in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts but two others have very recently been formed (viz., North Quabbin and Pioneer Valley) and another is in the formative stage (Westborough-Southborough-Northborough area). The MRTC’s Mission is to “...enrich the lives and communities within its boundaries by advancing the development of diverse, high quality trails and greenways.” The MRTC’s Core Values are to provide “...trails and greenways that promote accessibility, healthy lifestyles, economic vitality, sustainable development, best practices, experiences in the outdoors, appreciation for the outdoors, learning in the outdoors, and connectivity.”

² The towns encompassed by the MRTC are Ashburnham, Ashby, Athol, Devens, Fitchburg, Gardner, Groton, Harvard, Hubbardston, Lancaster, Leominster, Lunenburg, Petersham, Phillipston, Princeton, Royalston, Shirley, Sterling, Templeton, Townsend, Westminster and Winchendon. Not all of these towns currently have representation on the MRTC.

³ Department of Environmental Management, “Commonwealth Connections – A greenway vision for Massachusetts,” 2001.

⁴ The Master Plan is prepared by the Planning Board.
http://www.ci.lancaster.ma.us/Pages/LancasterMA_CommDev/master

⁵ The Open Space and Recreation Plan is spearheaded by the Conservation Commission and its Open Space and Recreation Commission. http://www.ci.lancaster.ma.us/Pages/LancasterMA_WebDocs/osrp

Vision Plan⁶ and the Groton Trail Vision Plan⁷ [n1] as its baseline. Committee members added many other ideas for projects that serve parts of the town and/or groups of users that have not been specifically addressed before. Unlike either Plan, this Trails Vision also provides an initial design and implementation plan for each project and provides an initial attempt at prioritizing the projects. In addition to the aforementioned projects, this vision also relied on the conclusions drafted from Lancaster's Green Belt Plan, Connecting Communities - Along Our Trails from MRTC, and Groton's Trail Vision. Several of these projects have been dreamed about for many years but they have not been previously assembled in one place and prioritized. By bringing all the ideas together in one document, we believe it will be easier to take a comprehensive and balanced approach toward growing and enhancing our trail network.

This Trails Vision describes a variety of projects that use and enhance Lancaster's trails network to improve the quality of life for all Lancaster residents. To this end, this Trails Vision provides examples of short-term, mid-term, and long-term projects that serve the following needs:

- Outdoor recreational opportunities of all types for all ages
- Healthy and safe activities for residents of all levels of ability
- Increase in connectedness between neighborhoods and points of interest (library, religious facilities, cultural/historic sites, schools, post office, ball fields, parks, offices, restaurants, town facilities, mass transportation nodes, etc.) via woods trails, field trails, roadside paths, abandoned roads, and sidewalks.
- Business growth via easier access and increased tourism, and

The projects in this Trails Vision have very different levels of feasibility. Some could be relatively easy to do and some could be very difficult. A few might better be considered conceptual since they are not specific as to what should be done but rather they illustrate an idea with the aim of encouraging public discussion of exactly what could be implemented. The projects in this report are intended to stimulate excitement about what the future of recreational opportunities and transportation alternatives could look like in Lancaster and to provide an initial set of priorities for the detailed studies and discussions that they will require to become more than just ideas.

By developing Lancaster's Trails Vision, we have started to lay out some directions our town can take to enhance the great potential of our network of trails, waterways, pathways, and sidewalks. As each project described in this Trails Vision is implemented, we believe the quality of life will be significantly improved for a large number of Lancaster's citizens. Some projects focus on particular types of trail users and some projects support multiple trail users. We believe that as each project is completed, we will all be very pleased with the new opportunities that will be

⁶The Lancaster Green Belt Vision Plan is prepared by the Planning Board.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7ryAPZTjAOkeEMzVEFtbEN6RVU/edit?usp=sharing>

⁷ The Groton Trail Vision Plan is prepared by the Trails Vision Committee.
<http://www.townofgroton.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?PortalId=0&EntryId=17861>

provided.

Some of the projects to enhance the trails network may require considerable resources and so will involve hard decisions. Other significant projects can be accomplished with minimal cost if accompanied by a spirit of cooperation and a collective willingness to do them. The Trails Vision identifies numerous projects having varying degrees of difficulty and benefits so that we can begin a more systematic approach to tapping into the potential our exceptional trails infrastructure holds. We will know that our Trails Vision is successful if we enjoy the benefits of each successful project enough so that we want to continue to work and plan additional ones.

III. TRAIL USERS CONSIDERED IN THIS REPORT

The trails in Lancaster have many uses and people with many different interests use them. The following list of potential users is certainly not complete, but it gives an idea of the many uses for our trails have:

- Bicyclists
- Boaters (e.g., canoers, kayakers)
- Commuters
- Cross-country skiers
- Equestrians
- Exercisers (e.g., laps around tracks, calisthenics; physical fitness)
- Geocaching
- Fishermen
- Hikers
- Hunters
- Mobility-impaired individuals (e.g., wheelchairs, walkers, canes, crutches)
- Motorized wheelchair users
- Mountain bikers
- Nature observers (e.g., birdwatchers, educational groups; scenic views; geologic features)
- People going to and from churches, historical sites, recreational facilities, retail stores, schools, town and private offices
- People walking their pets
- People with children in strollers
- Runners
- Senior citizens
- Skaters (e.g., roller skates, in-line skates, ice skates)
- Snowmobiles
- Snowshoers
- Swimmers (e.g., in pools, ponds, lakes, and rivers)
- Trailrunners
- Walkers

IV. BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR PATHWAYS

The benefits of outdoor pathways are as varied as the interests of the people that use them. In addition to the specific personal benefits that each user wishes to derive from the pathways, there are community-wide benefits as well that include the following:

Health – The more that people can safely use non-motorized pathways, the more they will benefit from increased exercise they will get and the reduced stress they will enjoy due to driving less on our town’s busy and narrow roadways.

Cleaner air – The less that people use motorized vehicles, the cleaner the air will be for all.

Community connections – The more that people go from place to place using the non-motorized pathways, the more likely they are to meet people they know and to make new acquaintances. Over time, this can provide an increased sense of community and with it a sense of safety, support and pride.

Educational opportunities – The Town of Lancaster is rich in history and natural diversity. Improved signage or other means (e.g., pamphlets) to identify places of archaeological and historic interest, flora, fauna, geologic points of interest (e.g., drumlins, eskers, kettle holes) and agricultural areas and activities can educate citizens and visitors alike about the things that make Lancaster unique and thus worth living or visiting.

Business opportunities – An improved non-motorized infrastructure will attract people to live in Lancaster and to come to Lancaster for leisure activities. There will be opportunities for increased business in general due to more “eco-tourism” as well as for new businesses that support the recreational interests of the trail users (e.g., hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, runners, and boaters).

These benefits and more are discussed in the following initiatives that have emerged in the past decade:

- The Massachusetts “Safe Routes to Schools” (SRTS) program⁸. In 1969, roughly 48% of students bicycled or walked to school. Today only 13% of children do so. And travel to school can account for up to 25% of all morning traffic. That’s why we work...to teach and inspire children to start walking and bicycling more often to and from school, improving their physical health, safety and community. The Massachusetts SRTS program promotes healthy alternatives for children and parents in their travel to and from school. It educates students, parents and community members on the value of walking and bicycling for travel to and from school.
- “Walkable Communities”⁹ – These are described as thriving, livable, sustainable places that give their residents safe transportation choices and improved quality of life. They are designed around the human foot, truly the only template that can lead to sustainability

⁸ <http://www.commute.com/schools>

⁹ <http://www.walkable.org>

and future community prosperity. Increased walkability also helps improve resource responsibility, safety, physical fitness and social interaction.

- The Massachusetts Department of Transportation's (MassDOT's) GreenDOT¹⁰ Policy – One of the three primary objectives of the “GreenDOT Implementation Plan”¹¹ is to “Promote healthy transportation options of walking, bicycling, and public transit.”
- Other important aspects of the Policy, Planning, and Design component of the GreenDOT Implementation Plan are the guidelines offered by the “Complete Streets”¹² concept. In 2009, MassDOT became the second New England state to adopt a Complete Streets design policy. Complete Streets “...are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. People of all ages and abilities are able to safely move along and across streets in a community, regardless of how they are traveling. Complete Streets make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work.
- The soon to be published Complete Streets study from MRPC and Lancaster, which incorporates points of interest locations provided by the Lancaster Planning Department, within the downtown area and a 1000 foot buffer was placed around those locations. Data that was collected within the study area included traffic volume, speed and classification counts, turning movement counts, sidewalks and related sign inventory as well as public input. This study area mainly focuses on the walkability aspect of Complete Streets, where residents and visitors might be the most likely to explore the community on foot, bicycle, or wheelchair/walker. Based on the data collected, a recommendations section was included. These recommendations are comprised of sidewalk maintenance and connections, the materials used for the sidewalks, traffic calming measures to address speed issues, lighting along Main Street, additional and improved parking areas, connections to neighborhoods, and other options to complement a Complete Streets municipality.

None of these initiatives can prescribe what Lancaster needs to improve its trail infrastructure for the benefit of the quality of life for its citizens and visitors, and none of them tries to do so. They simply offer a variety of approaches and guidelines that can be adopted by Lancaster as appropriate. The broad acceptance of these initiatives throughout the country speaks to the need and desire of communities to purposely build and sustain a greater number of healthy, safe, and convenient non-vehicular transportation pathways to counter the emphasis we have all put on motor vehicles to get us where we want to go. Lancaster will make its own decisions about how it views the benefits of improved public pathways relative to their costs and to other important quality of life issues. The Trails Vision Committee hopes that this report will help the citizens of Lancaster make those decisions with a better vision of what is possible.

¹⁰ <http://www.massdot.state.ma.us/GreenDOT.aspx>

¹¹

<http://www.massdot.state.ma.us/Portals/0/docs/GreenDOT/finalImplementation/FinalGreenDOTImplementationPlan12.12.12.pdf>

¹² <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets>

V. TRAILS VISION COMMITTEE

A. Organizations Represented on the Committee

The MRPC solicited input from what we called the town “Stakeholders”. These individuals represented various town boards and committees throughout town, including the Planning Board, Trail and Bikeway Coalition, Conservation Commission, Council on Aging, Commission on Disability, Historical Commission, Open Space and Recreation Committees, Town Forest Committee, Thayer Field Campus Committee, Lancaster Land Trust, New England Forestry Foundation, Mass Fish and Game, Nashua River Watershed Association, Friends of the Nashua River and Public Works. These entities that comprise the Trails Vision Committee were vital in the data gathering process.

B. Purpose, Vision, and Values

At its first meetings, the Trails Vision stakeholders discussed its purpose, vision and values. Such guidelines coincide with the vision from the Lancaster Trail & Bike Way Coalition regarding the promotion of walkability and bike riding within Lancaster open areas through new trails and trail connection routes; while keeping up with the conservation of natural and cultural assets. The Committee developed the following consensus statements:

Purpose

- Help the Town of Lancaster – preserve and improve our quality of life by identifying what we want and need for getting around town without motorized vehicles.
- Support the regional trail plan – take advantage of Commonwealth funds, to the extent available, by contributing to the region’s input to the state’s Trails Vision.
- Create an initial implementation plan for our Trails Vision – identify basic resource needs, set priorities (short, medium and long term), and suggest a timeline for possible implementation.

Vision

Our vision for Lancaster’s trails is a safe and easy-to-use network of ways that will connect people to each other, to places they want to go in town and in surrounding towns, and to the unique natural, geological, and historical points of interest throughout our town.

Values

- We believe that sustainable community support for improving the quality of paths in Lancaster will develop through more complete understanding by the community of its

unique and substantial natural, historical, and geological features.

- We believe increased and improved connectedness of our network of paths will provide significantly improved health, recreational, business, and educational opportunities for people of all ages and abilities.
- We believe that Lancaster's paths should promote accessibility, healthy lifestyles, economic vitality, appreciation of our diverse biohabitat and history, education, and connectivity with each other and the places we want to go.

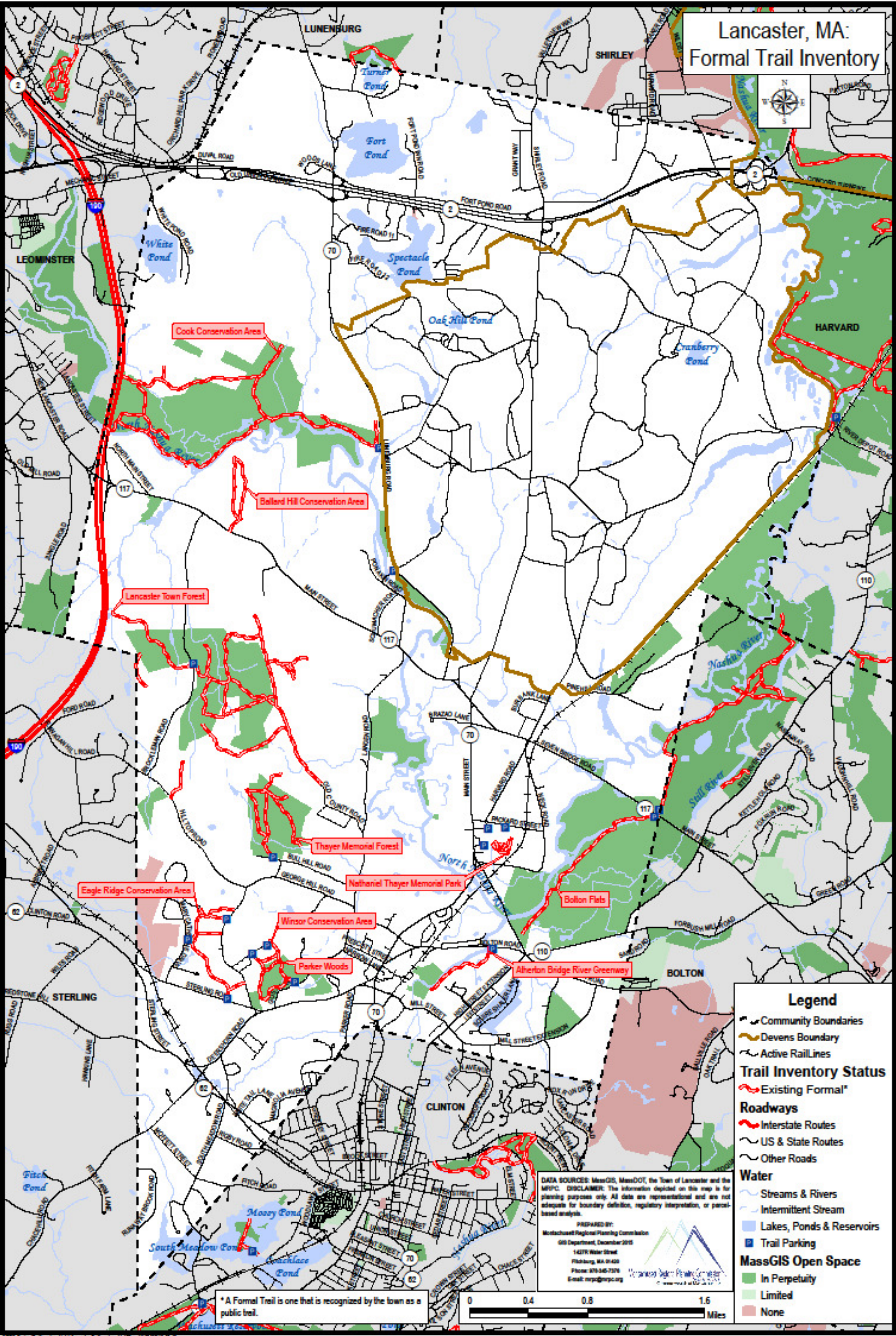
VI. EXISTING CONDITIONS IN LANCASTER'S TRAILS NETWORK

A. The Lancaster Trail System: A Treasure for Lancaster

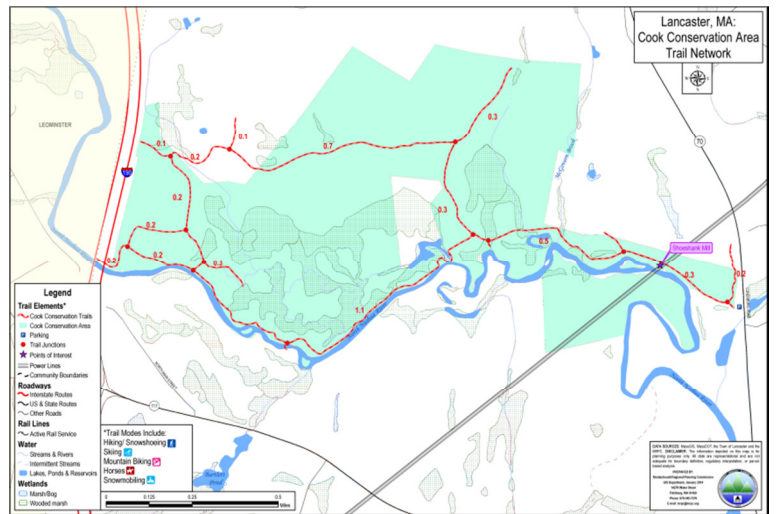
Lancaster has all the elements to become a quintessential rural New England community that allows its population to enjoy all the outdoor features that come with this package, while at the same time exercising and making use of the natural and cultural features that are available.

Throughout the research process for the making of this report, the inventory compiled ten major trail sites for outdoor activities that, when interconnected, will constitute the Lancaster Trail Network. These are the sites shown on the map next page:

1. Cook Conservation Area
2. Lancaster Town Forest
3. Ballard Hill Conservation Area
4. Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area
5. Thayer Memorial Forest
6. Parker Family Forest
7. Turner Pond Conservation Area
8. Eagle Ridge Conservation Area
9. Nathaniel Thayer Memorial Park
10. Atherton Bridge River Greenway.



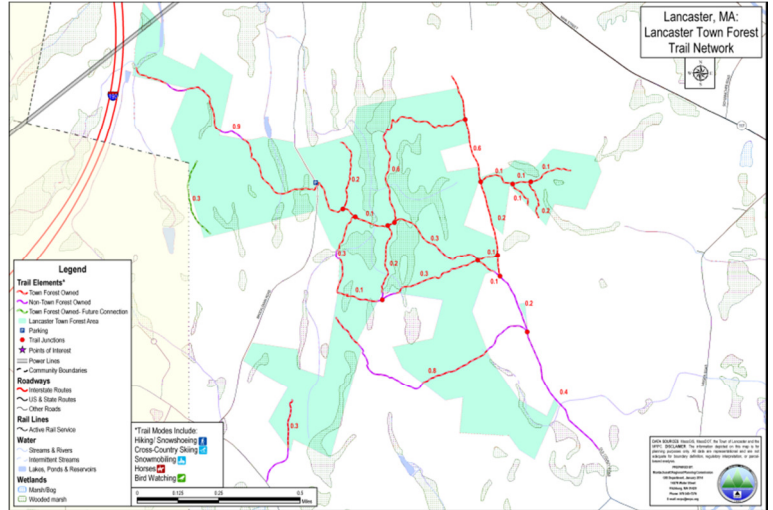
1. Cook Conservation Area



Area Name	Cook Conservation Area with 3 sub-areas and 7 trails
Trail Location	Lunenburg Road
Acreage	800 acres
Owner/Steward	Lancaster Conservation Commission/Lancaster's Friends of the Nashua River
Improved or Raw	Improved
ADA Compliant	No
Modes	Hike, Bike, Horse, Ski, No Motorized
Signage	Entrance/Trails
Parking	Yes



2. Lancaster Town Forest

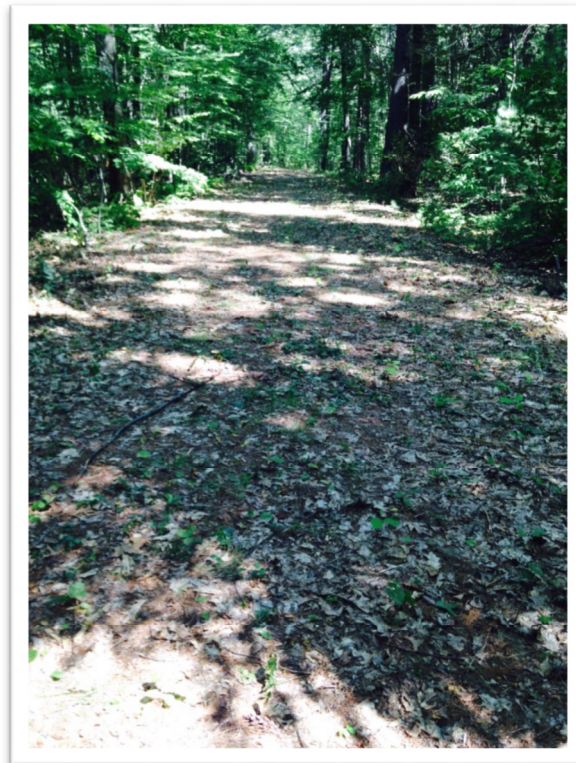
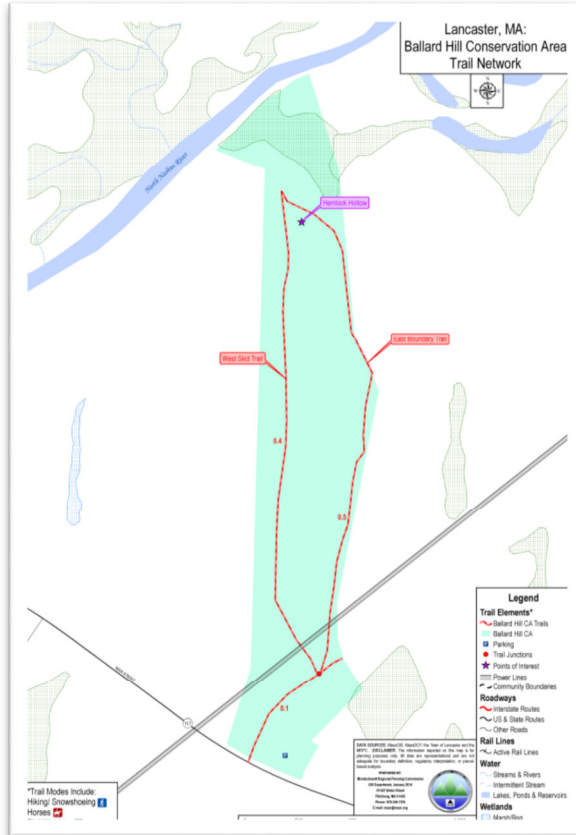


Area Name	Town Forest with 7 trails
Trail Location	Brockelman Road
Acreage	441 acres
Owner/Steward	Board of Selectmen/Town Forest Committee
Improved or Raw	Improved
ADA Compliant	No
Modes	Hike, Horse, Ski, Snowmobiles, No ATVs
Signage	Entrance
Parking	Yes

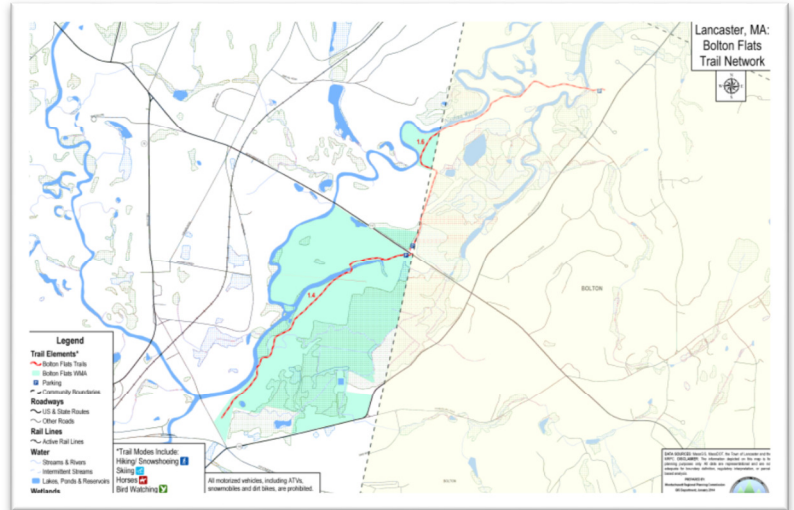


3. Ballard Hill Conservation Area

Area Name	Ballard Hill Conservation Area with 2 trails
Trail Location	Route 117 (Main Street)
Acreage	34 acres
Owner/Steward	Lancaster Land Trust
Improved or Raw	Improved
ADA Compliant	No
Modes	Hike, Horse, No Motorized
Signage	Entrance
Parking	Yes



4. Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area

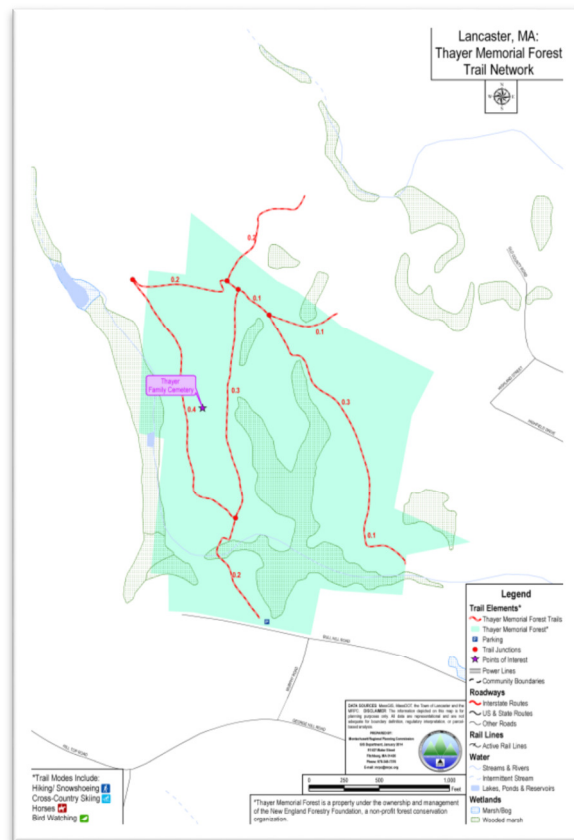


Area Name	Bolton Flats with 2 trails
Trail Location	Route 117 & Route 110 (Bolton)
Acreage	1,320 acres
Owner/Steward	MA Fish & Game
Improved or Raw	Improved
ADA Compliant	No
Modes	Hike, No Motorized
Signage	Entrance
Parking	Yes



5. Thayer Memorial Forest

Area Name	Thayer Memorial Forest with 6 trails
Trail Location	Bull Hill Road
Acreage	100 acres
Owner/Steward	New England Forestry Foundation
Improved or Raw	Improved
ADA Compliant	No
Modes	Hike, Horse, Ski, No Motorized
Signage	Entrance
Parking	Yes – on road



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