

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION INVENTORY

There are two Fitchburgs, in one sense. The urbanized/suburbanized city--and, the rural country side. It is this rural country side that actually comprises the majority of the land area of the city. Fitchburg's rural half includes the wooded hills to the north of the city, and to a smaller extent, the open lands in the southern part of the city near the city boundary. The vast majority of this "open space" is privately owned--and may not be viewed as "open space" in the minds of the owners. The future of this land, if historic patterns are to continue, is largely expected to be in some form of development. How that issue is addressed is a key concern of this element of the master plan.

While the majority of this land is located in the city's northern section, there are a number of green spaces within and directly adjacent to downtown. The uses range from agricultural to recreational, and include parochial schools, private schools and Fitchburg State College. The city has a number of properties held for the purpose of conservation. These properties contribute to the aesthetic qualities of many of the more pastoral areas of the city, and contribute to the protection of water quality and wildlife habitat.

OPEN SPACE

Large tracts of open space are distributed throughout the City of Fitchburg. Though most of this land is located in the city's northern section, there are a number of green spaces within and directly adjacent to downtown, such as Rollstone Hill. The proximity of natural areas to the city's urban core provides is an asset which is not present in most urbanized areas. A large percentage of Fitchburg's open land is held privately, with uses ranging from agriculture to recreation. Educational institutions own many acres of open space. The city has a number of properties held for the purpose of conservation. The Natural,



Open space in Fitchburg is found near its densest urban areas.

Cultural, and Historic Resources element of the Master Plan contains information under those categories.

Open space serves many important functions in a community. Open space protects ecologically sensitive areas, including wetlands and other water resources, important habitats and sensitive soils. The preservation of open space not only directly protects these resources but can also serve as an important buffer zone, without which such sensitive resources might not survive. Agriculture is an important open space resource that can also be protected through the utilization of buffer zones.

Open space serves as an important recreational resource. Passive recreational uses which are becoming increasingly more popular rely on vast open areas. Trail systems can also require large open spaces. Fitchburg has already established a significant trail system. To continue filling in appropriate holes in this system, protection of specific sites will be required.

Open space plays an important role in shaping the character of the community. Nothing can replace the visual impact of vast open spaces, whether it is agricultural land or large woodlots. The city must continue to take appropriate measures to ensure that the most critical areas are protected. Whether it is through purchasing a particular parcel, the establishment of conservation easements, or through the use of innovative planning and development techniques such as clustered developments that preserve open space, the city must be pro-active. It may be appropriate for the city to use a variety of these and other techniques to meet its goals.

Protected open space resources (i.e., publicly-owned, or privately-owned with some legal protection from development) are shown in the "Open Space" Map.

PARKS

Fitchburg is fortunate to have a number of large parcels dedicated to public use near its most densely populated areas. The Parks and Recreation Department, a division of the Department of Public Works, is responsible for 479 acres of land. The character of these properties varies greatly, including tracts of forest, play areas such as Howarth Park, athletic facilities such as Crocker field, historic urban greenspaces such as the Upper Common, and monuments such as Morin Square.

<u>Park</u>	<u>Acres</u>
City Forest	31.9
Grant Park	0.24
Falulah Park	1.4
Moran Square	0.01
Coolidge Park	79.25
Heritage Park	0.24
Woods Haven Park	0.76
Cleg Pocket Park	0.08
Caldwell Park	7.52
Cleghorn Square	0.19
Lowe Playground	4.12

<u>Park</u>	<u>Acres</u>
Bird Sanctuary	50.0
Upper Common	1.04
S. Fitch Playground	11.0
Litchfield Park	0.1
Crocker Field	1.55
Green Corners Park	1.0
Cogshall Park	212.7
Monument Park	0.64
Forest Park	0.43
Moran Field	15.0
Stanley Park	0.49
Dextraze Circle	0.18
Maverick St. Playground	0.5
Brigham Park	0.40
Parkhill Park	45.0
Goodrich Playground	0.16
Franco Park	0.14
First & RR Park	0.33
Howarth Park	2.18
Phillips Playground	0.40
Middle Street Playground	0.37
Bartley-Nolan Playground	0.46
Salem Street	1.0
Crocker Playground	0.49



CDBG funds are used to make playground improvements.

Providing adequate park facilities for inner city residents is a priority for the city. In 1996, the city appropriated \$225,000 of Community Development Block Grant funding for improvements

to Howarth, Green Corners, and Coolidge Parks. While CDBG funding is useful in upgrading parks within the target area, loosely defined as Fitchburg's central neighborhoods, many city

parks do not qualify for funding due to their location. Furthermore, the Parks Department has a total of three full time employees to manage nearly 500 acres of land, and CDBG funding cannot be used to pay for maintenance. Thus, the city has encountered difficulty in maintaining its facilities. Private groups, such as Friends of Coggs Hall Park, have provided volunteer labor and limited funding for projects.

CONSERVATION PARCELS

The term Conservation Land refers to property acquired by the Conservation Commission for the purpose of conservation. These areas provide species habitat, protect water supplies, and provide recreational opportunities for city residents.

Green's Pond Area - Located on the east and west side of Ashby State Road, approximately 1,000 feet north of the intersection of John Fitch Highway and Route 31, the conservation area comprises 28.5 acres. The pond, originally built for harvesting ice, covers approximately 14 acres. Today the pond can be used for fishing, walking, bird watching, and picnicking. A trail goes around about two thirds of the pond.

Putnam Pond - Located at the corner of John Fitch Highway and Pearl Hill Road, only half the pond, commonly referred to as Putt's Pond, is owned by the City. Erosion and runoff from winter sanding operations on John Fitch Highway as well as nearby construction have led to decreased oxygen levels in Putts Pond.

Littlefield Conservation Area - Straddling Ashburnham Hill Road, this 32 acre parcel is located approximately halfway between the intersections of Caswell Road and Williams Road in northwest Fitchburg. The heavily wooded parcel is a good example of Fitchburg's scenic quality.

Dolloff Conservation Area - Located near Coggs Hall Park and the Bird Sanctuary, this 14.04 acre parcel is a stand of mixed hard and softwoods with an understory of Mountain Laurel.

Gillman Conservation Area - A gently rolling upland area of 13.3 acres, this land also abuts the Bird sanctuary near Coggs Hall Park.

Airport Conservation Areas - Two parcels, comprising a little more than 18 acres, abut the Nashua River and Baker Brook confluence near the Airport in Southeast Fitchburg.

Brown Land Conservation Area - Near St. Bernard's Cemetery, this 12 acre parcel is in the marsh and flood plain area of Baker Brook. Use of the land by dirt bikes and ATVs has led to significant erosion.



Coggs Hall Park: Over 200 acres of historic beauty.

DeNeufville Conservation Lands - The lands, nearly 10 acres, are wooded lowlands, wetlands, and border near Falulah Brook. When the parcels were donated to the City in 1970, it was stipulated that the lands would be used in perpetuity for conservation exclusively.

Westminster Hill Property - This property is located south of Westminster Hill Road and north of Senna Road. It includes approximately 9.1 acres. It was donated to the Conservation Commission.

Rollo Property - This 1.96 acre parcel was donated to the Conservation Commission in 1993 to serve as a buffer to Baker

Brook. It is adjacent to existing Conservation Land, and will serve to protect the scenic quality of the southern end of Rindge Road.

Central Nashua River - 1 acre off Rollstone Street, adjacent to the Nashua

Cressey Conservation Area - .5 acres, located on Falulah Brook above Rindge Road.

Southern Nashua River Areas - Two parcels, each .25 acres, bordering the Nashua River. Both parcels are located off Airport Road.

Triangular Conservation Area - .61 acres located off Flat Rock Road, is completely surrounded by Mass. Audubon Society Land.

Viewig Conservation Area - .11 acres, bordering Phillips Brook, off Potato Hill Road.

PRIVATE OR COMMERCIAL CONSERVATION AND RECREATION LANDS

These lands are held by non-governmental organizations. The Massachusetts Audubon Society, owns 291 acres of land adjacent to the hospital. This area is a popular four-season trail and nature observation resource. Saima Park is a private 33-acre recreation facility in northern Fitchburg. The Oak Hill Country Club is a privately owned 18-hole golf course with related amenities.

CITY-OWNED WATERSHED LAND

The City of Fitchburg is a landmark example of outstanding water resources planning for drinking water supply. Over the years, the city has developed a comprehensive system of drinking water reservoirs--both in the city and in nearby communities. Surrounding these reservoirs, the city owns varying amounts of upland area. Within the city, almost 1,000 acres are dedicated to watershed protection and owned by the city. This land is an important open space resource that is managed for water supply protection as a primary goal. The land is also managed as a working forest.

The city's drinking water reservoirs are recharged primarily through surface water flow from their feeder streams. The watershed lands above these streams and reservoirs are primarily in private ownership. Hence, the city has no direct control over the activities on those lands--or the impact those activities will have on the community's drinking water supply.



Protecting watershed land prevents drinking water pollution.

The protection of this water supply is vital for the city. A watershed protection strategy has been in place for over fifteen

years, but has yet to be implemented. As the city looks to the year 2000 and beyond, it is critical that an aggressive program of watershed protection be put into place to ensure that these resources are protected for the future. Such a program would include incentives to property owners to protect the water supplies, selective purchase of property or conservation easements to ensure public control of activities on the land in critical watershed areas, and a regulatory program to ensure land use activities are carried out in a manner that does no harm to these drinking water reservoirs. For additional information on the reservoir water supply system, see the Natural, Cultural, and Historic Resources element of this document.

These lands are a community asset. In other parts of New England, watershed lands also have served the public as both recreation resources and to support wildlife and nature conservation values. Given proper management, these uses can coexist along with the water supply function quite well. Recreation uses have included hiking, picnicking, and fishing, among others. These uses can add to the amenities available to Fitchburg residents, whose taxes have gone to support the acquisition of these watershed lands. In addition to recreation benefits, managed access to watershed lands can increase public awareness of the importance and value of this resource. This public awareness is critical to effectively managing the resource, and to build community support for watershed protection activities. Hence, it would be a valuable exercise to review the watershed lands owned by the city for their potential for limited recreational usage. Watershed protection programs are available

through the Metropolitan District Commission.¹

AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

Farmlands provide an important aspect to the character of Fitchburg. Whether it is enjoying a fall outing to Marshall Farms for the fresh apples and other produce, or in a scenic driving tour up into the hill country of northern Fitchburg. See the map "Agricultural Land"

Farmland is under significant pressure for conversion to housing and other forms of development. As farmland is converted to non agricultural uses, the community not only loses an economic resource associated with agricultural production, but also lost is a part of the character and history of the city. According to rough estimates provided by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs Geographic Information System, approximately 1,300 acres of land is in active agricultural use in the city. This is a minimal estimate, as a farm parcel also typically includes a portion of the site that supports the farm such as woodlots, hillsides, and watercourses that are not in active agricultural use.

¹Wachusett Reservoir 978-365-3272.

Protection of farmland from conversion to developed land is a policy of both the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the United States of America. Massachusetts has several programs to protect farmland. Two prominent programs are available. One program includes a tax relief element that permits farmland owners to apply for a special agricultural assessment to lower local real property taxes so the tax levy is more appropriate to farm use (rather than a higher tax based on a residential or other use). Fitchburg farmland owners have 833 acres enrolled in that program authorized under Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 61A. The owners apply each year through the assessor's office. If an owner wishes to withdraw the property from the program, there is a penalty levied in the form of a rollback tax. That program helps bring down the cost of holding farmland. However, tax relief alone will not solve the issue of farmland conversion.

One program to provide long-term preservation of agricultural resources is offered by the commonwealth in the form of a "purchase of development rights". In essence, the Agricultural Preservation Restriction program permits farmland owners to sell their right to develop the farmland property to the state. The state obtains a permanent deed restriction that protects the best soils from development. The funding is through bonds issued by the Commonwealth as authorized by Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 32. Towns and cities are expected to contribute and co-hold the easement. This year, approximately \$1.7 million has been budgeted for the program. About the same is expected to be budgeted for next year. The Agricultural Preservation Restriction

Program is very successful and has a 3-year waiting list.² Permanent farmland protection offers many benefits. The benefits to the community and the commonwealth include the protection of an important agricultural and scenic open space resource. The benefit to the farmland owners is a reasonable return on the true value of their land without having to destroy the farmland through the development process. Local taxpayers benefit as typically agricultural uses contribute more to the tax base than they require in services. Two farm families in Fitchburg have taken advantage of the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program, the Marshall Farm, 99 acres on Marshall Road and the Hertle Farm, 207 acres on Ashburnham Hill Road.

²American Farmland Trust a non-profit farmland preservation organization has a field office based in Northhampton. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, 617-727-3160, Ms. Chris Chisholm, offers a resource conservation program that provides funding for restrictions for recreation and forest lands.

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Restore and rehabilitate existing park and recreation areas.

- Continue to improve the park maintenance program including funding for additional staff and equipment.
- Develop methods to utilize staff and equipment from other city departments to help maintain city parks.
- Capitalize on efforts to incorporate citizen participation on a volunteer basis in the maintenance of parks.
- Provide incentives to developers to include recreation and open space in their development plans, including provisions for maintenance.

Create additional funding sources for park maintenance and for future park and open space expansion.

- Seek additional state and federal funding for renovation and purchase of park lands.
- Stimulate interest from local private sources to adopt the smaller urban parks.
- Investigate user fees as a revenue source.

Create opportunities in rural areas for a diversity of recreational activities that will appeal to all age groups on a year round basis.

- Develop a multi-purpose trail system that includes all activities. (i.e., biking, walking, cross country skiing)

- Develop recreation opportunities on under-utilized City-owned property.

Develop recreation opportunities for under-served groups and in under-served neighborhoods.

- Develop tot lots in areas of need.
- Develop recreational opportunities for Fitchburg's maturing population.
- Respond to the needs of the physically challenged population while park and open space improvements are contemplated.

Maintain and preserve Fitchburg's historic farms and farm land.

- Encourage the purchase and consumption of locally grown produce and products.
- Encourage the expanded participation of local farms in preservation programs.
- Encourage expanded participation in M.G.L. Chapter 61A.
- Identify candidates for participation in the Agricultural Preservation Restriction program, M.G.L. Chapter 32.

Increase public awareness in both the benefits and the available opportunities in and near Fitchburg for recreation.

Increase opportunities for appropriate recreational uses on watershed and conservation lands.

**OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION
RECOMMENDATIONS**

- C Create an outdoor management plan which will cover the financing of capital improvements and maintenance of open space and recreation initiatives.
- C Prepare a detailed update of the open space and recreation plan.
- C Design a watershed / farmland protection program.
 - a. Program will identify priority farmland and other open space areas near reservoirs that need protection.
 - a. Program will prioritize which private lands should be acquired by the City.
 - a. Program will develop a protection plan for all sensitive lands both public and private.
 - a. The program will develop and recommend the introduction of appropriate water based activities for the areas.
 - a. The program will also recommend regulations to ensure the recreation opportunities will not threaten water quality.
- C Integrate open space and recreation opportunities into economic development promotional materials.
- C Implement changes to the zoning law that will protect rural Fitchburg.
 - a. Adopt changes requiring clustering in new developments.
 - b. Incorporate design guidelines for new development in rural Fitchburg that will protect its rural resources.
- C Design a trail master plan for Fitchburg which will incorporate the Nashua River Greenway and the existing trail network and will be coordinated with the transportation element.
- C Improve visual access to the Nashua River from downtown.
- C Develop new athletic facilities to attract tournaments and events to Fitchburg.