

Open Space Committee
Grantham, NH 03753
Sept. 8, 2016

To: The Board of Selectmen

CC: Conservation Commission

From: Open Space Committee

Subject: OSC Final Report

The Open Space Committee was established by the Board of Selectmen in 2013. The committee was charged with inventorying all Grantham's undeveloped land parcels of 10 acres or more with the goal of identifying and prioritizing land that could be considered important in preserving Grantham's rural character. The committee has completed this task and compiled a file of 125 such parcels (i.e., the Open Space Inventory) which was submitted to the Town. Data sheets were completed to summarize the details of each open space parcel's features and characteristics. This data was collected with a result of key observations as follows:

- 65% of the town's total acreage was included in the 125 parcels.
- 46% of the town's total acreage was included in 20 parcels over 100 acres.
- Of the 11,250 acres inventoried, 10,100 acres or 90% are wooded.
- The northwest portion of town contains the greatest concentration of wooded parcels.
- 40 of the 125 parcels have some sort of covenant restrictions and comprise 55% of the inventoried acreage.
- 84 or 67% of the parcels inventoried are in Current Use designation.

From this analysis, the committee was asked to provide input to the town's Master Plan (subject to update in 2016). For this purpose, the committee developed an Open Space Protection Plan which was delivered to the Master Plan Committee in the spring of 2016. The plan addressed Open Space from the following parameters:

- A definition of Open Space
- The importance of Open Space with the Community
- The prioritization of Open Space
- Alternatives to Acquire Open Space Parcels
- Alternatives to Protection Open Space
- Engaging the Community

As the committee began to analyze the work necessary to identify and implement its protection plan, it prioritized the main actions required. This included activities and detailed plans such as:

- Community outreach and education
- Open dialog with other conservation organizations such as Society of the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust, New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, Upper Valley Land Trust, and New Hampshire Department of Resources and Economic Development.
- Engagement with large tract property owners
- Understanding possible impacts on zoning regulations, property tax rates, and other infrastructure issues

As we further analyzed the work necessary to implement these actions, it was the view of the committee that there were existing commissions and committees that were already engaged in these activities. Some specific groups were the Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Capital Improvements Committee.

Accordingly, the Open Space Committee feels that its mission as defined by the Board of Selectmen has been completed. Therefore, we are hereby disbanded, and defer to the Town to incorporate our findings within the existing Town committee and commission infrastructure as appropriate. The committee also extends its appreciation and thanks to the Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission, and the staff for their support and assistance.

Respectfully submitted,

Open Space Committee
Thain Allan, Chair
Allen Wilson, Vice Chair
Craig McArt, Secretary
Conrad Frey, Zoning Board Representative
Charles McCarthy, Planning Board Representative
Susan Buchanan, Conservation Commission Representative

Attachments:

Open Space Protection Plan
Open Space Inventory Database
Highest Ranked Wildlife Habitat (2015 ed.)

Town of Grantham
Open Space Protection Plan

BACKGROUND

Open Space Committee

The Open Space Committee was established in 2013 by the Board of Selectmen based on a proposal from the Conservation Commission. The commission's proposal recommended the establishment of a 5-member committee consisting of 3 members of the community and a representative each from the Conservation Commission and the Planning Board. The membership was extended to include a member of the Zoning Board as well. The Open Space Committee (OSC) strongly felt that participation by representatives of the three groups was critical for success.

The purpose of the OSC was to map, inventory and analyze all open space (undeveloped land) parcels of 10 acres or more, and then to prioritize the ones that would be considered most critical to preserving the rural character of Grantham.

During the initial meetings of the OSC and discussions with the Conservation Commission, it was determined that the mission would be amended to map, inventory and analyze the open space parcels of 10 acres or more, but that prioritization of specific parcels would be better addressed by the Conservation Commission and the Board of Selectmen. Prioritization by the OSC would be focused on general areas of the town.

The completed inventory was presented to the Board of Selectmen in the fall of 2015. At that time, the OSC was asked to provide input to the upcoming Master Plan and to draft an Open Space Protection Plan that could help provide a blueprint to preserve the rural nature of Grantham, identify ways to protect wildlife corridors, and provide recreational opportunities for the community. The Grantham Open Space Inventory is available at the town offices and includes the inventory detail, resultant analysis, and a map of the detailed parcels with appropriate land use coding.

OPEN SPACE INVENTORY

The OSC identified and inventoried 125 parcels over 10 acres in size. The following attributes of each parcel were captured utilizing town tax maps, tax cards, Grantham habitat maps as defined in the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan of 2010, and visual observation via available on line aerial imagery:

Farms and Fields	Woodlands and Forests
Wildlife Habitat and Corridors	Ponds and Lakes
Streams and Rivers	Wetlands
Hills and Mountains	Scenic Vistas
Trails and Class VI Roads	Unpaved Roads
Cultural and Historical Sites	Parks and Recreational Sites
Aquifer Proximity	

Key findings from this work were:

- 65% of the town's total acreage was included in the 125 parcels analyzed
- 46% of the town's total acreage was included in 20 parcels that were over 100 acres
- Of the 11,250 acres inventoried, 10,100 acres or 90% are wooded
- The northwest portion of town contains the greatest concentration of unfragmented wooded parcels
- 40 of the 125 parcels have some sort of covenant restriction and they comprise 55% of the inventoried acreage
- 84 parcels are in current use

OPEN SPACE PROTECTION PLAN

Definition of Open Space

Protecting the Town of Grantham's open space and, thereby, preserving its rural character is a dominant theme of the Master Plan. But what is "open space"? Open space means different things to different people: for some, it connotes image of farms and fields; for others, a picturesque mountain view; while still others may picture a barren landscape or even paved areas. For the purpose of the open space initiative in Grantham, "open space" refers to any undeveloped land. This inventory and plan focuses on open space parcels of 10 acres or greater. Parcels that contain a single structure (e.g., house or barn) on a piece of otherwise undeveloped land have been included. Within Grantham, open space parcels comprise a wide variety of characteristics including woodlands, meadowlands, wetlands, farmlands and recreation areas.

Importance of Open Space

Open space provides countless benefits to the quality of life for the surrounding community. An important priority for the protection of open space in Grantham, as expressed by residents in the 2005 Master Plan Community Survey, was preservation of the town's rural character. Opportunities for recreation abound in towns with large plots of open space, whether one is drawn to the beach, open water, wooded trails, rolling hills, or flat plots of grassy fields for various sports. Inherently, towns with large amounts of open space are attractive, and draw new residents who value living in areas of aesthetic beauty, as well as business owners who desire a rural setting. Scenic roads and vistas provide daily sources of enjoyment for those who live near them, and often will attract travelers from more congested areas, whose visits have the added benefit of bringing business in to the town.

Each type of open space area serves an important ecological role. Contiguous woodlands provide vital habitat corridors for large mammalian wildlife and also act as a carbon sink. Surface waters can provide drinking water for wildlife, water storage to recharge aquifers, and essential habitat for fish, waterfowl,

and aquatic vegetation. Grassy fields are important habitat for migratory birds and small animals. Wetlands act both for flood mitigation and as natural filters for removing contaminants and protecting water quality. Vegetated land surrounding public waters helps intercept surface runoff and increase subsurface flow which, in turn, recharges deeper groundwater flows and mitigates and mitigates the effects of pollutants from upland sources. Each type of open space hosts different types of flora and fauna. Rare, threatened, and endangered species often rely on specialized habitats, so the conservation of as many natural habitats as possible will help preserve biodiversity. Accordingly, New Hampshire has taken legislative action to protect sensitive natural resources, such as shorelands and wetlands, and has placed a priority on open space by passing bipartisan Senate Bill SB388 in 2014, establishing a committee to study land conservation in New Hampshire.

Although some might argue that protecting open space will come with a trade-off of foregoing greater tax revenues for the Town, in reality, open space areas cost very little in the way of services compared to residential developments, which cost the community more than they generate in income.

Prioritization of Open Space

Prioritization of Open Space was focused on geographical areas of Grantham. The criteria for defining high priority for open space were essentially twofold: first, large tracts containing woodlands suitable for recreation and wildlife habitat, and second, areas that afforded protection of natural resources for the benefit of the community as a whole.

The first, high-priority open space areas are of most value when comprised of large, unfragmented tracts. Privately owned parcels, especially those that are contiguous with parcels that are covered by conservation easements, are prime examples. Three regions in the town that apply are the northwestern and southwestern areas (collectively referred to as the Western Corridor) and the northeastern area.

The second open space area priority was determined to be the area above and surrounding Stocker Pond. This area overlies a confirmed aquifer that is a potential source of a future municipal water supply. While this area is not comprised of large, undeveloped parcels as in the first general area, it is in need of protection.

Acquisition of Open Space

There are several ways in which open space can be acquired by the community. Many communities have directly purchased desired parcels by warranty vote at town meeting. These acquisitions have been paid for by capital appropriations through the town budget, bonding, and funding grants through the state or federal government. Parcels may also be acquired by gift or outright purchase. Property owners have often deeded tracts of land directly to the town.

In other instances property may be acquired by third parties that make the property available for the use and enjoyment of the community. There are non-profit organizations that will acquire conservation properties from private landowners. The Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, Upper

Valley Land Trust and the Ausbon-Sargent Land Preservation Trust are three of these organizations. An example of this means of acquisition is the Reney Forest on Route 10.

Protection of Open Space

There are several ways to protect open space, some of which are temporary (and possibly not driven by the concern for the protection of open space) as well as others that are more permanent through legal documentation, which might, or might not, stand the test of future challenge. The use of zoning is also sometimes used as a tool in protecting open space.

Landowners in Grantham may apply for and receive Current Use classification of parcels or portions of parcels of ten acres or more. This provides a lower tax status for as long as the Current Use classification is maintained. In effect, it protects against subdivision and development. Landowners can only withdraw their land from Current Use by paying a penalty. In Grantham, landowners must pay 10% of the fair market value of the land removed from Current Use, the money going to the Grantham Conservation Commission. Therefore, this classification is, in reality, a temporary preservation of open space dependent on the determination of the landowner.

Conservation easements vary in legal terms and usually allow a tax benefit to the donor. A specific parcel of land can be donated for conservation purposes, usually in perpetuity. In most cases, a land trust organization is involved in such a transfer and may be designated as holder of the land. Sometimes the land is donated outright to the organization or the landowners might sell to the organization, which, in turn, solicits the public for contributions towards the purchase. Such easements are presumed to be permanent but there is always the possibility of legal challenge in the future.

A town may zone a particular area or district to be designated as open space. This could be challenged by large landowners if their land is involved at the time such designation comes to a vote. In Grantham, there is no such designation. However, parcels in Grantham that are designated as conservation lands are listed in an Article of the Ordinance, and should, for any reason, the legality or informal arrangement creating these conserved parcels be reversed, the Ordinance comes into play by limiting future use of the parcel to only a few possible uses which, in effect, help to preserve open space. These might include recreation, agriculture, and forestry.

Engagement of the Community

A key to protecting open space in Grantham will be engagement of the community in activities that build appreciation of open space in the town through active exposure to its attributes. Programs of educational outreach would inform the community of open space issues and suggest activities. One strategy would be to offer programs to schools, Scouts and Youth Conservation Corps that would engage adults through parental involvement.

Hiking Grantham's trails is an excellent activity that would encourage residents to visit and become familiar with Grantham's open spaces. To encourage this, a GPS-compatible trails map could be developed by volunteers with assistance from the Upper Valley Lake Sunapee Regional Planning Commission and the Upper Valley Trails Alliance. Help could be enlisted from the Highway Department in earmarking possible locations for construction of trailhead parking. Other volunteers would, in the

process of developing and maintaining the trails, become invested in protecting open space. Finally, a cadre of volunteer hike leaders could be trained to conduct community hikes into open space areas of Grantham, using the occasions to promote the importance of conserving and protecting the open spaces we have.