

SECTION 7

ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

The Wendell Open Space and Recreation Plan incorporates the inventory of all natural, scenic, and cultural resources that are available in Town (Section 4), and identifies the most important parcels of land containing these resources (Section 5). Based on the community's general goals outlined in Section 6, this section makes comparisons between the supply and the demand of resources. In the following subsection, a Summary of Natural Resource Protection Needs, the environmental values that have already been addressed in Sections 4 and 5 are summarized. In the Summary of Community's Needs section, the recreation and open space needs of residents are discussed, using the 2008 Open Space and Recreation Survey and specific elements of Section 3, Community Setting. Finally, in Management Needs, the obstacles to the effective resolution of these needs are addressed, including organizational barriers and the most significant land use conflicts concerning open space and natural resource use.

A. SUMMARY OF NATURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION NEEDS

Wendell residents value their forests and the ways in which the Town still feels rural. They want to keep it that way. According to the 2008 Open Space Survey, 90 percent of survey respondents stated that it was important to protect forests, clean drinking water, clean air, lakes, streams, and ponds, open fields, rural character, wetlands, wildlife habitats, farmland, and wilderness. Unfortunately, the quality of these resources is threatened indirectly through humans' use of the landscape. New development, if poorly planned, could have a negative impact on both the quality and quantity of all of these resources. Residents are well aware of these threats. The 2008 Survey results described the two most significant threats to Wendell's sense of community and rural character as being residential development and commercial/institutional development.

The four things that are most important to Wendell residents, according to the 2008 Survey, may all be potentially impacted by unplanned development:

- Clean streams and water bodies
- Moose, bobcat, deer, and other wildlife
- Large forested areas
- Quiet

Large areas of forest unbroken by roads and development support the other three of these important values. Much of Wendell's land is already protected from development by virtue of being under the control of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and of the nonprofit Massachusetts Audubon Society. The Town has been involved in several land

conservation projects in recent years, such as the purchase and protection of the 125-acre Fiske Pond Conservation Area in 2005. Wendell residents have been involved in large private land conservation efforts, including the donation by Mason and Ina Phelps in 2009 of a conservation restriction on over 220 acres of land to MassAudubon's Whetstone Wood Wildlife Sanctuary. Other private properties in Town are protected by conservation restrictions held either by the state or by local land trusts, such as the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust and the Franklin Land Trust.

The Town of Wendell has been actively planning for both appropriate growth and open space protection for decades. Past plans have consistently identified the need to protect intact ecosystems and large blocks of forest land and have made broad efforts to identify appropriate areas for development. Beginning with the 1987 Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town has worked to develop a vision of future development through the "Wendell Places of the Heart Plan" in 1990, the 2002 Western Millers River Watershed Growth Management Plan, the 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan (of which this plan is an update), the 2004 Wendell Community Development Plan, and the 2007 Pelham Hills Forest Conservation Project.

Since the publication of the 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town of Wendell has evolved from having zero acres of Town-owned, permanently protected conservation land to designating a total of 444 acres as conservation lands. This includes the Fiske Pond Conservation Area, which the town acquired with the help of a Self Help Grant, the Montague Road Town Forest, the Phelps Forest Conservation Area, and several smaller lots which were already owned by the Town. The Town has completed stewardship plans for Fiske Pond and the Montague Road Forest and preliminary studies of the other conservation areas are ongoing. With the help of the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, the Fiske Pond Advisory Committee, and local volunteers, many improvements have been made to protect and enhance the Fiske Pond Conservation Area. The trail system has been marked to connect Fiske Pond with the Phelps Forest Conservation Area and the Metacomet-Monadnock (M&M) Trail which currently passes through this conservation area.

Along with establishing and managing a variety of conservation areas since completing the 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town has also accomplished many of the goals and objectives outlined in the 2002 Action Plan. This includes the establishment of the Open Space Committee in 2002 by Town Meeting; development of a draft policy for exercising the Town's right of first refusal to purchase land under the Chapter 61, 61A and 61B tax reduction programs; review by a consulting forester of all Town-owned parcels greater than 10 acres; sponsorship by the Open Space Committee of combined recreational and educational Earth Day Celebrations in 2008, 2009, and 2010; establishment of a community garden in 2009; and the auctioning off of smaller Town-owned parcels not deemed to be of significant conservation value.

The land conservation and planning efforts undertaken by the Town over the last several decades put Wendell in a unique position in regard to open space planning and priorities compared to Towns that have not been as active in land conservation. In the coming

years, the Town may want to prioritize the protection of more accessible land and open agricultural fields, since so much land has already been protected for wildlife habitat. For many Wendell residents, it is important to preserve the working landscape including farmland, woodlots, and areas of early successional habitats that provide food for wildlife and support a diversity of small game for hunting. Preserving agricultural lands and especially prime agricultural soils is of special importance because there is such a small amount of it in Town. The recent increase in local lands being actively farmed, and growing concern about increasing local food self reliance that was emphasized in the June 2010 report of the Energy Task Force to Town Meeting, suggests that open fields and farmland are of special concern to many residents. Due to the Town's abundance of permanently protected land, some residents are concerned about also preserving some areas to site additional housing. The Pelham Hills Forest Conservation Project focused on allowing for a balance of land preservation, working landscapes, and housing. However, it is important to retain the core values identified in the 2008 survey and to expand on previous land conservation and planning efforts, as future development, without adequate planning, could continue to fragment the surrounding landscapes and further isolate protected lands.

Overall, rising costs and the expenditure of money seemed to be on the minds of survey respondents. Rising residential taxes are a concern for many Wendell residents. In the survey, it was the second most important threat to the valued natural resources. Continuing this theme, it was clear that survey respondents wished to be proactive towards open space conservation, but were concerned about costs associated with such actions. The top two most strongly supported actions to protect open space do not require any town funding. According to the 2008 Open Space survey results, at least 80% of the respondents support the Town using the following methods to protect open space:

- Accept donated conservation land and development rights; and
- Encourage conservation by state agencies or a combination of parties.

Sixty-one percent of survey respondents also supported making zoning changes for open space protection (although, conversely, 28% of respondents said they would not support this measure). Town purchase of conservation land and development rights were also supported at 72% and 50%, respectively. However, 21% and 32% (respectively) of respondents also said that they would not support these measures.

The ways in which lands are protected from development produce different values. For example, lands that are protected through the use of a conservation restriction can stay in private ownership. This places decisions regarding the property's management in the hands of individuals, instead of a large non-profit or a state or federal agency, which may not be able to respond as well to local concerns. In the case of a conservation restriction, the land also remains on the local property tax rolls. Although public access is sometimes required in conservation restrictions purchased by state conservation agencies and land trusts, it is not guaranteed. Lands that are purchased in fee by state agencies and large land trusts are likely to provide access to the general public and sometimes offer payments in lieu of taxes.

The questions of connectivity, management, and public access will gain importance as the population of Wendell grows. Additional residential development will undoubtedly decrease the connectivity between existing blocks of protected open space. Most of the permanently protected land in Wendell is surrounded by unprotected properties. Right now, the differences between protected and unprotected land are not visibly significant. Often it is only when a residential subdivision is proposed near protected parcels that residents are made aware of the value of the surrounding landscape, but it may well be too late then to protect it. Identifying key parcels for protection that make significant contributions to connectivity, management, and public access is an important part of open space planning. Further, identifying locations that would be appropriate for residential development and providing for types of development that promote the conservation of open land (such as the proposed Conservation Development Bylaw currently under development by the Planning Board) will allow for growth while also continuing to protect the rural nature of the Town of Wendell.

New home construction along the Town's major roads could also diminish the quality of significant historic landscapes and the future use of prime farmland soils. Many of Wendell's remaining open vistas are dependent on the maintenance of farm fields, the scenic value of which could be severely diminished by the construction of homes. Agricultural land also provides wildlife habitats that (along with forests, wetlands, and stream corridors) create a diversity of habitats across the landscape. Finally, the value of prime agricultural soils is reduced once the land is developed.

Water is probably the most valuable resource because all of life depends on it. Water in the form of precipitation recharges the ground water, which fills streams, ponds, wetlands, and rivers. Even without the human use of water, natural periods of drought produce changes in plant and animal species populations. Therefore, as people consume water from shallow wells and aquifers, it is logical that they could negatively impact animal and plant communities, which are naturally water-dependent. Much of the water consumed by Wendell residents is deposited back into the groundwater after having been treated by their own on-site septic system. The Board of Health's regulations limiting development to soils with a minimum of eighteen inches to groundwater is one tool for protecting residents' drinking water supplies. Another approach to be considered would be the development of a Water Supply Protection Overlay District that would impose stricter zoning requirements in these sensitive areas. For the long-term, Wendell may want to do what other larger communities have done to protect their ground water supplies: permanently protect the land covering the Town's most significant aquifers.

As previously noted, periods of rapid climate change such as we are presently experiencing are especially favorable for rapidly reproducing species such as insects and diseases and promote conditions that can enhance the spread of problematic species. For this reason we are likely to see increasing problems related to introduced pests, invasive species, and the spread of diseases that impact the health of local forests, crops, wildlife, and public health. In the years to come it will become increasingly important for the Town to stay abreast of the latest information about related problems that may impact local vegetation, agriculture, and forestry and related strategies for sustainable

management. Such efforts will require cooperation with state and regional efforts and may involve several Town boards and departments including the Open Space Committee, the Board of Health, the Agricultural Commission, the Tree Warden, the Conservation Commission, and the Highway Department.

B. SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY'S NEEDS

Planning for a community's open space and recreation needs must work to satisfy the present population's desires for new facilities, spaces, and services and also interpret and act on the available data to prepare for the future needs of Wendell residents. Although the Town plans to update the Wendell Open Space and Recreation Plan every seven years, the types of actions that are identified in Section 9 will take into account the needs of the next generation as well.

The 2008 Open Space and Recreation Survey, discussions at Open Space Committee meetings, and research into the ownership, protection status, and use of existing open space parcels in Wendell, helped to identify several potential community needs relating to open space and recreation resources: recreation facilities and programming; preservation of the town's rural character; and protection of large forested areas for recreational and wildlife use.

An Open Space and Recreation Plan typically includes an inventory and discussion of recreational facilities other than open space. Wendell has very few of these types of facilities, which is not unique among rural western Massachusetts towns. As was shown in Section 5, Inventory of Lands of Conservation and Recreation Interest, there are park or playground areas at the Swift River Elementary School and the Library. There are ball fields at Ruggles Pond, a basketball court at the Library, and people often use the Town Common for celebrations and fairs. The Council on Aging provides recreational programs for older residents of Town, and the Library sponsors a variety of programs for residents of all ages. The Library also received a grant from the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners in 2009-2010 which partially funded the position of Teen Coordinator that has enabled a broader range of programs for "Teens and Tweens."

It is unclear from the survey whether residents feel that additional recreational facilities are needed. According to the survey, when asked their opinion about the quality and quantity of recreational facilities and programming in Wendell, large percentages of respondents were unsure or had no opinion regarding tennis courts (62%), sports fields (48%), and recreational programming for teens (69%) and seniors (69%). Based on these replies, it can be assumed that existing recreational programs and facilities need to be publicized to town residents. In addition, survey respondents felt that the following facilities were at least adequate to meet their needs: hiking trails, community events and celebrations, swimming areas, and tot lots and playgrounds. Of these, survey respondents felt that the hiking trails and community events/festivals were in excellent condition (39% and 31%, respectively).

One way of interpreting these results is that most common recreational activities of people who reside in and visit Wendell today do not depend on facilities like sports fields, tennis, or basketball courts. The survey also suggests that the most popular recreational activities take advantage of Wendell State Forest and surrounding natural open spaces. Another interpretation of the survey is that people feel there is little need for these facilities in Wendell. Even if this interpretation is accurate today, Wendell might see demand for these facilities increase in the near future. Based on U.S. Census data, Wendell grew from 292 people in 1960 to 986 people in the year 2000.¹ Estimates show a current population of 1,002 as of 2009, a 1.6% increase since 2000.² Age distribution trends discussed in Section 3 show that segments of the population (those in their late teens and early twenties, as well Baby Boomers) are increasing in proportion to the rest of the population. Town residents have also observed an increase in the numbers of families with young children in recent years. These trends may translate into an increase in demand for programs and facilities for preschoolers, for residents in their teens/early twenties, and for the more active Baby Boomers, as well as for educational and volunteer opportunities, and safe access to hiking trails for all ages.

Public land will most likely be needed in the future for recreational facilities. Even if all new adult residents typify the survey respondents and participate in recreational activities mostly in the State Forest and on trails, Wendell may still need land for park and playground facilities for its youth and may need improved access to a network of recreational trails. None of the properties currently owned by the Town of Wendell would be suitable for these recreational purposes, with the exception of additional trails. If such needs were identified and prioritized, the Town would have to acquire additional land that would be appropriate for parks, playgrounds, or sports fields and that would be accessible to the physically handicapped and the elderly.

Wendell contains many historical sites that require planning for their preservation. Some of these are visible foundations and burial markers, while others may be potential native sites of habitation. In either case, these sites require long-term care and protection to ensure that the most important signs of Wendell's roots are preserved in perpetuity. The Friends of the Wendell Meetinghouse have been working since 2002 on restoring this property, which is in the National Register Town Common Historic District, for use as a community and spiritual gathering space. There may be other historic properties in Town deserving of similar preservation and renovation efforts that should be identified and prioritized, such as the Revolutionary War Era Herrick homestead that was recently acquired by the Town in a tax taking.

Because wildlife is important to the Town, residents are interested in expanding protected greenways for wildlife and trail use that would build upon existing patterns of protected land in town. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Audubon Society own most of the permanently protected land in Wendell. Some of these lands provide public access and some do not. Although selecting specific parcels to protect may require a more refined level of planning than is available within an Open Space and

¹ U.S. Census Bureau – Decennial Census of Population and Housing 1990, 2000.

² U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates, June 2010.

Recreation Plan, identifying the most important gaps between protected lands would be a necessary first step. Following this, interested residents could work closely with local land conservation organizations to negotiate the purchase or donation of development rights or trail easements from willing landowners. One effort currently underway would potentially redirect along West Street a portion of the 114-mile Metacomet-Monadnock (M&M) Trail that runs from the Massachusetts/Connecticut border through Hampden, Hampshire, Franklin, and northwestern Worcester counties in Massachusetts to Cheshire County in New Hampshire. Further, the Town could adopt changes to its zoning bylaws that would help to protect the greenways that are being created.

C. MANAGEMENT NEEDS

As Wendell now has several larger conservation areas, the Town will need to provide for the continued management of the lands. It would be beneficial to continue to work on the Fiske Pond Trails in order to maximize protection of this sensitive ecosystem and increase accessibility for a broader segment of the population. For example, providing sturdier bridges with hand rails in select locations would make the trail more user-friendly for very young and older residents. Attention could be paid to the needs of those in wheelchairs to make these trails more accessible. The dam at Fiske Pond will also need ongoing maintenance as required by the state. An option for rerouting the M&M trail that is currently under consideration would include running the trail along the western edge of the Fiske Pond Conservation area and cutting a new one on the Fiske property in conjunction with this project. The stewardship plan for the Montague Road Forest called for thinning the trees in a small area initially. This was completed in 2009. A follow-up evaluation is needed to determine whether to continue thinning in another area of the forest. As all of the remaining conservation areas have access issues, discussions and agreements with abutters will be required in order to complete stewardship plans of these areas. The Town may wish to pursue permission to cut a trail across DCR land to access the smallest conservation area that is north of Farley Road.

The Town has not yet made any plans regarding several small Town-owned lots that border the Millers River. As these lots present some special challenges, (including wetlands, archeological remains, and clean-up), any plans for these areas will need to include several different town boards. Town officials are also exploring options for the future of property formerly owned by the late Marion Herrick and recently acquired by the Town through the tax taking process which includes a revolutionary era homestead. Because this property is surrounded by DCR land, the Town is working with officials from DCR to plan for the protection of this unique property.

Wendell is fortunate to have a great number of organizations interested in the environment in, and around, Wendell. There are a number of federal, state, and regional environmental organizations sponsoring land and natural resource protection projects including Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, Massachusetts Audubon Society, Franklin Land Trust, Trustees of Reservations, New England Forestry Foundation, Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), Division of Fisheries and Wildlife,

DCR's Division of Water Supply Protection, Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), Harvard University, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Millers River Watershed Council. The Open Space Committee could be given the responsibility to act as the liaison to these organizations reporting back to Town officials as necessary. Similarly, as Town officials are kept abreast of these local and regional efforts, there will be more opportunities for coordination with adjoining towns on the prioritization of land protection funding for the purpose of getting the most resource value out of every dollar spent. Such cooperation could also facilitate the protection and maintenance of shared resources, such as trails that continue beyond Town borders.

How a community chooses to spend its fiscal resources is decided at Town Meeting. The warrant articles prepared ahead of time are often the result of policy discussions among boards and a small proportion of the total population. A major factor in implementing the recommendations of this Open Space and Recreation Plan will be the effective coordination of all Town boards and commissions in a manner that promotes communication and discussion of open space and recreation issues between boards and among a broader portion of the general public. To facilitate this process, the Town might consider creating a position for a shared administrative assistant to serve the Conservation Commission, Planning Board, Open Space Committee, Zoning Board of Appeals, Tree Warden, Cemetery Commission, Historical Commission, Energy Committee, Agricultural Commission, Community Garden, and playground committee.

One general open space issue relates to the different ways people believe land should be used. A combination of different uses can be planned for, so that the value of each use is represented in the Action Plan, as the result of consensus building among people holding different positions. The Town of Wendell produced a Community Development Plan in 2004 which contains elements of both economic and residential development and open space protection. The public participation process in developing this Open Space Plan update will help the community to decide where to direct new development and where to protect land from development, with specific recommendations included in the plan.

Conflicting perceptions of the issues are common in any community. In Wendell, there appears to be little conflict concerning whether the Town should stay the same or change and grow. Most people want Wendell to remain as the small rural community it is today. There is currently a 3-acre minimum lot size in the rural residential and agricultural district that comprises the entire Town. A Conservation Development bylaw exists, intended to encourage the preservation of open space by increasing density from a conventional subdivision, but this has not yet been applied. Revisions to this bylaw are currently being examined and are not yet complete, but soon will be. They include provisions that encourage "Conservation Developments" instead of conventional subdivisions and "approval not required" (ANR) lots along Town roads. A Conservation Development would be allowed anywhere in Wendell on lots of any size with Site Plan Review by the Planning Board. Through this process, a lot would be divided into two sections: 1) at least 75% of the lot, identified as having the most significant values for protection, would have a permanent conservation restriction placed on it; and 2) the remaining "development envelope" would be able to be developed with greater design

flexibility and streamlined permitting. No Special Permit would be required and the uses, density, and development rules would be allowed by right. This proposal is currently under review by the Planning Board.

There have also been discussions over time concerning whether there should be a zoning district that encourages smaller lot sizes or an area in Town that permits commercial and industrial uses by right. The Community Development Plan identified Wendell Center and Wendell Depot as potential Neighborhood Village Centers with residential and/or commercial development. This question was revisited in the Forest Conservation Project. During that project, in 2007, the Open Space Committee voiced unanimous opposition to decreasing lot size in Wendell Center as this is the site of much of the Town's limited agricultural land with prime farmland soils. They referenced Section 5 of the 2002 Open Space & Recreation Plan which notes that there is very little agricultural land in Town with prime agricultural soils and that much of it is located in Wendell Center along Lockes Village Road and Wendell Depot Road.

In response, the Forest Conservation project suggests some ways to modify this proposal:

“If the concern is preservation of prime agricultural land, it would be possible to create uses to support the existing village uses, such as senior housing, in the area immediately west of the town commons or in the area near the country store. Even if there was consensus that these uses were appropriate for farmland, the total footprint could be very small, since after all that is one of the defining features of a village center.”

While the total amount of agricultural land in Wendell appears to be increasing according to recent GIS data, from the perspective of open space and the community's concerns for increasing local food self reliance, protecting the town's very limited prime agricultural soils will remain a primary concern. This topic will surely be revisited over the course of future planning projects as Wendell planners continue to fine-tune proposals that integrate the social, economic, and environmental needs of the community.

Conservation has been a high priority for the Wendell Planning Board for decades and this trend is likely to endure in years to come. The 2007 Pelham Hills Forest Conservation Project also included an analysis of Wendell's Zoning Bylaws and Subdivision Regulations and suggested a variety of techniques that the Planning Board might employ to further protect the Town's open space. The Conservation Development Bylaw evolved from this project. It proposes to encourage a new pattern of development that supports working landscapes, recreation, and natural resources. The Planning Board will soon be turning its attention to revising the Town's Subdivision Regulations to include greater support for conservation efforts. The Board is also considering drafting a local bylaw to further protect the Town's scenic roads. In order to achieve strong community support and consensus, any future proposals will need to incorporate extensive public input and reflect a balance of community concerns.

Because of often conflicting views on how, or whether, growth should occur within Wendell, special attention should be paid to balancing the need for some residential growth in areas that are most appropriate, with protections placed in areas considered most valuable for its ecological value, water quality, and agricultural/forestry activity. It is likely that Wendell residents would agree that the permanent protection of private land should only occur with willing landowners and in a manner that in no way reduces the equity of the land without just compensation. Wendell has already employed many of the techniques that are used by towns and by conservation land trusts to direct new growth by protecting those areas that are recognized to contain the most important ecosystems, including the purchase of development rights and the outright acquisition of land of significant conservation value. However, the responses to the 2008 survey indicate that the top two most strongly supported actions to protect open space do not require any town funding, i.e., accepting donated conservation land and development rights; and encouraging conservation by state agencies or a combination of parties.