

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

Introduction: The term "open space" usually refers to those undeveloped natural lands that have been permanently protected for the public's enjoyment. Protected farmlands offer panoramic views of Dudley's rural character while reminding people of the Town's agricultural heritage. Protected wetlands and habitat areas help to maintain the Town's diversity of wildlife while giving people a chance to view nature in action.

For planning purposes, the term "recreation" is usually broken down into two categories: active and passive. Active recreation refers to athletic fields, swimming areas and playgrounds; while passive recreation refers to areas for walking and hiking. Protected open spaces can be used for passive recreation, while active recreation needs a designated area and a much higher degree of management and maintenance. This chapter of the Dudley Master Plan will inventory and analyze all of Dudley's protected open spaces, as well as the Town's active recreation areas.

Economic Benefits of Open Space: On the macro-development level, the current trend is the rapid expansion of low density development along the metropolitan fringe (i.e. "sprawl" development). Although planners are making a concerted effort to revitalize our nation's compact metropolitan areas, more houses continue to be built along rural roads and more retail development is taking place outside of urban centers along community gateway roads. This development trend has a negative impact on a community's fiscal health as municipal services are expanded and radiate further and further away from the urban core, and the urban core itself loses businesses and population; setting the stage for urban blight, poverty, crime and despair. Of course, this is more of a problem for cities than a small town like Dudley, yet the potential for residential and highway commercial sprawl does exist.

In an effort to champion the cause of open space protection, planners have begun to assess the economic benefits of protecting open space. In recent years fiscal impact analysis has been applied to open space preservation, comparing the net effects on municipal budgets of open space to other forms of land use. The general conclusions of the studies conducted to date are as follows:

- Residential development typically incurs a net fiscal deficit (unless they are time-shares or second homes);
- Nonresidential development (business and industry) generates a fiscal surplus, but attracts residential development; and
- Open space is fiscally better than residential development and equal to or better than nonresidential development.

There are two studies in particular that have relevance for Dudley:

- The Northeastern Office of the American Farmland Trust studied six rural towns in

Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York and found that, on average, residential development required \$1.13 in municipal services for every \$1.00 of tax revenue generated. Farm, forest and open space land required only \$0.29 in services per dollar of tax revenue (Freegood and Wagner 1992).

- The Commonwealth Research Group (1995) studied eleven southern New England towns and found that, on average, towns spent \$1.14 in services for every dollar raised from residential development; \$0.43 in services for every dollar raised from commercial/industrial development; and \$0.42 in services for every dollar raised from forest, farmland and open space.

In terms of a hierarchy of land uses based on the cost of services/tax dollars generated ratio, research office parks are the highest (net fiscal surplus), while mobile homes are the lowest (net fiscal deficit). In this hierarchy, open space lands fall somewhere in the middle, above the break-even line for municipal budgets.

Active Recreation Facilities:

1. *Shepherd Hill Regional High School:* there are a number of active recreation facilities associated with the High School including: basketball courts; fields for baseball, softball, soccer and football; a track; and tennis courts.
2. *Nichols College:* football field; baseball fields; track; tennis courts; and swimming pool. Nichols does allow the Town's organized sports groups to use their fields on occasion.
3. *Crawford Memorial Field:* baseball and softball fields (four in total), and swing sets. Although technically under the jurisdiction of the Dudley Recreation Commission, the fields are managed by Dudley Little League.
4. *Eben Stevens Park:* soccer field. Although technically under the jurisdiction of the Dudley Recreation Commission, the field is managed by the Dudley youth soccer organization.
5. *Pine Street Field:* this is an undeveloped piece of land near Pine Street. Although the property is under the jurisdiction of the Dudley Recreation Commission, there are no facilities at this site and the fields are not maintained.
6. *Merino Pond Recreation Area:* town beach with lifeguard during the summer; bathroom facilities; small playground and picnic tables. None of the facilities at this site are handicap accessible, i.e., ADA compliant. This site is managed by the Dudley Recreation Commission. The Webster-Dudley Rotary Club will be erecting a gazebo at this site in the near future.
7. *Mellea's Winery Soccer Field:* This is a private piece of property associated with the Winery located in West Dudley. The Winery allows Dudley's youth soccer organization to use the field.
8. *Webster-Dudley Golf Course:* This private golf course, located off of Dudley Center Road, belong to Nichols College until recently. The golf course is now owned and operated by Webster-Dudley Golf Course Inc.

The recreation facilities under municipal management are shown on the Town-Owned Properties and Facilities Map found in the Community Facilities and Services chapter, and a numerical index of all Town-owned properties can be found in A.

Permanently Protected Open Space: All told, Dudley has 1,777 acres of permanently protected open space. The majority of these lands are active farms; however, the Dudley Conservation Commission and the Dudley Cemetery Commission also manage several permanently protected properties. In addition, the Massachusetts Audubon Society manages several permanently protected properties. All of Dudley's permanently protected properties can be seen on the Permanently Protected Lands Map on the following page.

Conservation Commission Properties: The Commission has management jurisdiction over several properties at five distinct locations within Dudley. The Commission's largest land holding is the Ardlock Acres conservation area (94 acres) located northwest of New Boston Road. The Commission also manages land along the shorelines of Gore Pond and Pierpoint Pond; as well as a small property at the corner of Pierpoint Road and Shine Avenue, and a bit of land abutting Low Pond. All told, the Commission manages roughly 200 acres of land.

Cemeteries: Dudley's Cemetery Commissioners have jurisdiction over seven cemeteries: Albee/Durfee Cemetery on Durfee Road; Corbin Cemetery on Corbin Road; Marsh Cemetery on Henry Marsh Road; Perryville Cemetery on Carpenter Road; Waldron Cemetery on Ramshorn Road; Village Cemetery on Dudley-Oxford Road; and Calvary Cemetery on Cemetery Road (currently maintained by the Diocese of Worcester). There are two other cemeteries in Dudley that are privately maintained: Sayles Cemetery off of Intervale Road, and the Holy Trinity Cemetery off of New Boston Road. Dudley's cemeteries are depicted on the Town-Owned Properties Map and the Permanently Protected Lands Map.

Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Properties: This State program is administered by the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture (DFA). The program insures that active farms stay in agricultural production. The State purchases a farmer's development rights. The price paid is the difference between the full market value of the property and its appraised agricultural value. A permanent restriction is then put in place prohibiting all non-agricultural uses on the parcel. The farmer is taxed at the agricultural value rather than the highest use value. According to the State, there are 27 (some under common ownership) Dudley properties in the APR Program, comprising 1,472 acres. This represents the second largest amount of APR land for all of the communities in Massachusetts; only Amherst has more APR land.

Massachusetts Audubon Society: The Society owns and manages three properties in the vicinity of Marsh Road and Dudley-Oxford Road. The properties encompass roughly 105 acres and are considered to be permanently protected.

Town-Designated Conservation Districts: In 1969, the Town created four conservation districts. The location of these districts can be seen on the Zoning Map found in the Land Use chapter. A brief description of each conservation district is provided below:

1. *Pierpoint Pond/Marsh Road Conservation District* - This district consists of 34 acres and is located on the eastern side of Pierpoint Pond, extending east to Marsh Road and Dudley-Oxford Road. The district's northern end covers a large piece of protected land owned by the

Massachusetts Audubon Society. The Dudley Conservation Commission manages two properties (totaling seven acres) along Hayden Pond Road. Both of these properties fall within the district. The potential exists to permanently protect more land within this district.

2. *Town Beach Conservation District* - This district consists of roughly 14 acres and is located along the southwest shoreline of Merino Pond, just off of West Main Street and behind the Mason Road School. The Town Beach within this district consists of a third of an acre and is actively managed by the Dudley Recreation Commission.

3. *French River Conservation District* - This district consists of 4.3 acres located between the River to the east and the following roads to the west: Oxford Avenue, Cemetery Road and Old Oxford Road. The district consists entirely of privately owned land.

4. *Mosquito Pond Conservation District* - This district consists of 12.6 acres and is located just north of the intersection of Charlton Road and Dudley-Oxford Road. The district covers almost all of Mosquito Pond. Again, this district consists entirely of privately owned land.

Unprotected Open Space: Parcels taxed under Chapter 61 (Forestry), Chapter 61A (Agriculture) and Chapter 61B (Recreation) are in private ownership and *are not* permanently protected open space areas. This tax classification enables the lands to be taxed at their use value rather than their full fair market value. The Town has the right of first refusal if the parcels are sold prior to the expiration of their tax abated status. This allows the Town to protect individual open space parcels as they enter the market or become threatened by development. According to the records of the Town Assessor, here is the breakdown of Dudley properties enrolled in the above tax programs:

Chapter 61 (Forestry) properties: one property.

Chapter 61A (Agriculture) properties: 69 properties.

Chapter 61B (Recreation) properties: none.

Unique Scenic Areas (Scenic Roads and Landscapes): Dudley has given the "Scenic Road" designation to only one of its local roads thus far. At the 1999 November Town Meeting, voters approved this designation for a section of Baker Pond Road, beginning at its intersection with Dresser Hill Road and ending at its intersection with Ramshorn Road. This is indeed a scenic road as there are open fields on either side and a great view of Gore Pond along its northern section. The scenic road designation means that any maintenance (tree cutting, brush clearing, moving stonewalls, etc.) along this road will be carefully reviewed by the Town's Highway Commissioners before the work begins.

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM) prepared an inventory of the State's most scenic landscapes in 1982. Entitled, Massachusetts Landscape Inventory: A Survey of the Commonwealth's Scenic Areas, this document identified a large portion of western Dudley as a scenic landscape. The identified area begins in Charlton and extends through the length of Dudley in a north-to-south direction. The area encompasses Gore Pond and either side of the entire length of Route 31 (Dresser Hill Road). According to the 1982 Inventory, "This unit contains some of the finest pastoral scenery east of the Connecticut Valley."

Open Space and Recreation - Needs Assessment: While Dudley has an abundance of protected open space, the Town does not have much in the way of active recreation facilities. According to the standards developed by the National Recreation and Park Association, a Town with Dudley's population should have roughly 90 acres of active recreation areas (or nine acres per 1,000 people). Dudley's active recreation areas (Nichols College included) constitute roughly 15-20 acres.

The 1999 Master Plan citizen survey clearly identified that Dudley residents desire more active recreation areas/facilities. According to the survey respondents, here are the top five types of recreation facilities that they would like to see more of in Dudley:

1. Hiking trails
2. Biking trails
3. Swimming areas
4. Playgrounds
5. Ice skating rinks

In terms of the preferred method of paying for new recreation facilities, the institution of users fees received the highest number of votes and general tax revenues received the second highest. In the comments section of the survey, many residents indicated that they did not know where the active recreation facilities were in Dudley. Recreation as a municipal service received the second lowest rating of all the municipal services (only road maintenance was rated lower).

Open Space and Recreation - Goal

To promote Dudley's rural character by retaining its open space lands and expanding the Town's passive and active recreation facilities for the enjoyment of the community.

Open Space and Recreation - Recommendations

1. In terms of creating more public open space for hiking/biking trails, the Town should focus on two areas: western Dudley, and along the banks of its two major rivers. If one looks close enough, remnants of historic trails and rail lines can still be detected in western Dudley, particularly in the area south of Dudley-Southbridge Road. The Old Stage Coach trail cuts through this area in a west-to-east direction, and portions of the former Grand Trunk rail line can be found here as well. The former Grand Trunk rail line runs parallel to the abandoned P&W Southbridge railbed and then cuts through the south of Dudley in an easterly direction.

Regarding Dudley's two major rivers (the French and the Quinebaug), these resources are all but inaccessible to Dudley residents. With roughly seven miles of river frontage (French and Quinebaug combined), the Town only owns one piece of riverfront property (see the Town-Own Property Map for its location). Less than 10,000 square feet, this property has roughly 200 feet of frontage on the French River and there are no signs indicating that this is public property. The water quality of the French and Quinebaug Rivers has been steadily improving over the last thirty years, and there is no reason why Dudley residents should not be able to enjoy the natural beauty of these resources. The Town should endeavor to open up these areas for public

enjoyment through land acquisition and easements. Signage on Town-owned properties along the rivers would inform the public that these areas are here for their enjoyment. The provision of park benches would make these areas all the more inviting. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Dudley Conservation Commission.

A list of open space preservation techniques and grant opportunities can be found in Appendix C.

2. The Town should acquire land for, and develop additional active recreation facilities including, but not limited to: new ballfields, playgrounds, parks, boat ramps and associated parking facilities. Clearly, Dudley is lacking in active recreation facilities and there is citizen support for additional facilities. Land acquisition and facility construction are expensive propositions; therefore, the Town should consider what it can accomplish with its own resources first. The Town-Owned Properties Map shows that the Town owns several vacant pieces of property scattered throughout Town, and perhaps some of these properties have the potential to be developed recreationally. Civic groups and other sources of volunteer labor could assist with facility construction. Please review Appendix C for a list of recreation-related grant opportunities. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Dudley Recreation Commission.

3. The Dudley Conservation Commission should update its Open Space and Recreation Plan of March 1988. Several of the recreation-related grant opportunities outlined in Appendix C require that the Town have an up-to-date Open Space and Recreation Plan in place. Such plans are reviewed and approved by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) Division of Conservation Services. Towns that do not have an up-to-date Plan are not eligible for most State recreation-related grants. As not much has changed since the 1988 Plan, preparing an update should not be too difficult. The EOEA has prepared two documents to help towns prepare an Open Space and Recreation Plan: 1990 Open Space and Recreation Plan Requirements (a full description of the State's requirements), and The Open Space Planner's Workbook (a step-by-step guidance document for preparing a plan).

The Conservation Commission could update the 1988 Plan on its own (quite cost effective); however, it may be a bit much for a volunteer board with a minimal budget. The Commission may want to ask for funds to update the 1988 Plan at a Town Meeting. There are a number of planning consultants in the area who do this type of work. A full-blown update of an Open Space and Recreation Plan could cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000, depending on the scope of the work and the chosen consultant.

Please be advised that any update of the 1988 Plan will need to include a "Section 504 Self Evaluation" for all properties under the jurisdiction of the Conservation Commission and Recreation Commission. The Section 504 Self-Evaluation is simply a detailed checklist that is used to determine the level of handicapped accessibility for each recreation facility/property. The Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan would need to identify how the Town plans to correct any deficiencies identified as Part of the Section 504 Self-Evaluation. This will be a considerable effort as most of the Town's recreation facilities are *not* handicapped accessible. This does not mean that the facilities have to be brought up to code immediately, or that funding has to be in place for the identified improvements, just that the Town understands what needs to be done and has an idea as to how to go about it. Once the Town's Plan is approved by the EOEA, the Town

can pursue a variety of grant opportunities to address the deficiencies identified in the Section 504 Self-Evaluation. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Dudley Conservation Commission in conjunction with the Dudley Recreation Commission.

4. Dudley should take advantage of the recreation funding opportunities offered by the Quinebaug-Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor, which was recently expanded to cover Dudley and seven other Massachusetts communities. The Corridor program has already developed several successful recreation projects in Connecticut, most notably the extensive riverwalk located in downtown Putnam, Connecticut. Perhaps the Corridor program could be used to open up public access to the French and Quinebaug Rivers. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Dudley Conservation Commission in conjunction with the Dudley Recreation Commission

5. The Town should put together a brochure that outlines what is has for recreation programs/facilities and have them available at the Town Hall. A comment heard over and over in the 1999 Master Plan citizen survey was that people where not sure where the Town's recreation facilities were and did not know what the Town had to offer. A brochure could include a small map of the Town's recreation facilities and conservation lands, as well as a list of contacts for Dudley's recreation programs. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Dudley Conservation Commission in conjunction with the Dudley Recreation Commission.

6. The Town's Zoning By-Law should be amended to give the Planning Board the power to require conservation easements for large-scale residential and industrial development which have frontage on the French and Quinebaug Rivers. The Town needs to start protecting public access to these resources while it still has the chance to do so. It is suggested that new large-scale developments that front on the rivers be required to provide a 30-foot easement along the rivers edge. The land would still be owned by the property owner, but the public would have the right to walk/hike through the easement. For all large-scale development proposals, the Planning Board should encourage the creation of easements or land donations for public open space. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Planning Board.

7. The Town should lobby its representatives to the State Legislature in support of purchasing the abandoned Southbridge Branch rail line, owned by the P&W Railroad, for use as a recreational trail. This is the abandoned rail line that parallels the Quinebaug River, curves through Thompson, and concludes in downtown Webster. All told, the abandoned Southbridge Branch is roughly eleven miles in length. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM) has surveyed the condition of the railbed and has been negotiating a sale price with P&W intermittently over the last decade. The P&W is currently asking \$1.4 million for the railbed, while DEM is currently offering \$910,000. Perhaps the Quinebaug-Shetucket Rivers Valley National Corridor could provide a portion of the necessary funding for this effort. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Dudley Board of Selectmen in consultation with the Conservation Commission.

8. The Town should encourage its active farmers to protect their land under the State's Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) Program, administered by the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture (DFA). The program insures that active farms stay in agricultural production. The State purchases a farmer's development rights. The price paid is the difference between the full market value of the property and its appraised agricultural value. A

permanent restriction is then put in place prohibiting all non-agricultural uses on the parcel. The farmer is taxed at the agricultural value rather than the highest use value. As Dudley's rural character is highly dependant on farms staying as farms (as opposed to being developed residentially), the APR Program is an excellent method of ensuring farmland preservation. Responsible Municipal Entity: any of Dudley's land use boards including the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and the Conservation Commission.

9. The Town should encourage its active farmers to participate in the Farm Viability Enhancement Program offered by the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture (DFA). The program is designed to improve the economic bottom line and environmental integrity of farms through the development and implementation of farm viability plans developed by teams of agricultural, economic and environmental consultants. The team will assess the current farm operation and suggest ways to increase farm income through such methods as improved management practices, diversification, direct marketing, value-added initiatives and agri-tourism. Funding for implementation is available in exchange for an agricultural use covenant on the property. Responsible Municipal Entity: any of Dudley's land use boards including the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and the Conservation Commission.

10. The Dudley Historical Commission should complete its update of the Town's Historical Survey and then work with the Planning Board to pursue historic district designation for some of Dudley's more historic areas, such as Dudley Center and some of the Town's older cemeteries. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Historical Commission in conjunction with the Planning Board.

11. The Town should prevent all further development of the woodland it owns within the Town Beach Conservation District. Responsible Municipal Entity: Although this property is under the jurisdiction of the Water Department, it will take the full cooperation of the Department, Board of Selectmen, Recreation Commission and Conservation Commission to protect this area.

12. As it is highly unlikely that MassHighways will replace the bridge over the canal along Perryville Road (estimated repair cost: \$460,000), the Town should designate this road and its bridge as a trail for walking and biking. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Recreation Commission in consultation with the Board of Selectmen.

13. The Town should pursue the "scenic road" designation for some of its more rural roads in the north and west sections of Dudley. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Board of Selectmen.

