

[OSR]

Open Space & Recreation



Schunder's Field

Photo Credit: Bill Shelley

Open Space & Recreation

6

The term “open space and recreation” refers to conservation land, agricultural land, parks, recreation areas, and any other open area dedicated to conservation or recreation. These components are essential to a healthy and livable community as they provide opportunity for participation in a wide range of passive and active, outdoor and indoor recreational experiences, and offer a focus of community life along with significant environmental, social, and economic benefits. The Open Space and Recreation Element of the Master Plan offers a high-level inventory of the Town’s open space and recreation resources, and explores issues and needs related to the preservation and enhancement of these resources for public benefit.

Key Findings

- Northborough has an abundance of open spaces and recreation areas, with a majority owned by the Town and maintained by the Conservation Commission and Open Space Committee. These areas support a high quality of life for residents and provide economic benefits.
- The Town has leveraged the CPA, guided by the Community Preservation Committee, to successfully fund the protection and acquisition of its open spaces on numerous occasions since the CPA was adopted in 2004 and funding became available in 2006.
- Chapter 61 lands are prevalent in Town, protecting parcels in the forested, agricultural, and recreational tax categories and giving the Town first right of refusal.
- The Town has an active and appreciated Recreation Department that offers a variety of programming for persons of all ages and abilities – including persons with special needs.
- Existing field space is at capacity supporting youth activities. Additional field space expansion is necessary to accommodate adult recreational needs.
- The community has expressed interest in creating a designated off-leash dog park with connections to existing walking or hiking trails.

- The trail system within Northborough, maintained by the Northborough Trails Committee, is a popular Town asset.
- The Hudson Street Bridge is considered an iconic symbol of Northborough and the CPC desires to see it restored to enable pedestrian access and use for greater recreational activities.

Baseline Conditions Analysis

The Town of Northborough has a wide variety of open space and recreation resources within its approximately 18.5 sq. mi. (see **Figure 6-1** at the end of this chapter). These resources include forests, conservation land, trails, public parks, school parks, golf courses, and ponds and rivers. Stakeholders speak highly of the Town's commitment to acquiring and protecting open spaces and the quality and varied programming offered through the Town's Recreation Department. As noted in the most recent Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town believes that open space and recreation make important contributions to the quality of life of residents. The Town also believes that these resources provide economic benefits, as research indicates that proximity to recreation and open space is one of the key factors in choosing the location of a small business.

According to the latest open space data available through MassGIS, there are approximately 3,250 acres of open space and recreation areas in Northborough. These lands have various ownerships including the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Department of Agricultural Resources, the Department of Fish and Game, the Town of Northborough, and private owners, although the majority are owned by the Town (approximately 24 percent).

A number of privately-owned parcels provide open space and opportunities for recreational and agricultural pursuits. These properties include the Tougas Family Farm, the Davidian Brothers Farm, the Berberian's Farm, Bigelow Nurseries, Indian Meadow Golf Club, Juniper Hill Golf Course, and the Northcourt Swim and Tennis. Altogether, there are approximately 700 acres of privately-owned open spaces. Some, but not all, of these properties are publicly accessible.

Northborough has partnered with the Towns of Berlin and Boylston to protect additional conservation land on Mt. Pisgah. It also partners with Southborough, Westborough, and Marlborough on the Boroughs Trail and creating access to the Wachusett Aqueduct Trail. The Town has the opportunity to work with Westborough on the Boston Worcester Airline Trail, which is a proposed multi-use path spanning several regional communities from Worcester to Framingham utilizing portions of the original Boston and Worcester Air Line Trolley route. Sudbury Valley Trustees, which owns conservation land in Northborough including the Sawink Farm and Cedar Hill, is another important conservation partner of the Town.

Some of the open space and recreation resources in Northborough overlap into neighboring communities including Mt. Pisgah in Berlin, the New England Forestry Foundation in Shrewsbury, and associated land with the Westborough State Hospital in Westborough. Additionally, the Shrewsbury Ridge, which has been designated a "distinctive" landscape by the Massachusetts Landscape Inventory, extends from Littleton

to the southern portion of Worcester County, and includes the Mt. Pisgah Conservation Area.

Community Preservation Committee

The CPA is a tool to assist in the protection and acquisition of open space, preservation of historic resources, and the creation of affordable housing. It was adopted by the Town in 2004 and the first round of funding became available in 2006. This has proven to be a successful tool in meeting the open space and recreation goals outlined in the Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan.

The Northborough Community Preservation Committee (CPC) is made up of nine members from various Town committees, including the Open Space Committee, the Conservation Commission, the Planning Board, and the Parks and Recreation Commission. The CPC is responsible for the CPA Fund and consults with Town departments on where and how the funds will be spent.

There have been 17 open space and recreation projects completed in Northborough with CPA funding between 2010, when the most recent Open Space and Recreation Plan was approved, and 2017, the latest year data is available. Projects primarily involved the acquisition of open space and the construction of new/improved recreation areas, as well as early planning for the new Town Common. As an example, in 2011, a 52-acre parcel on Green Street was purchased using \$807,000 of CPA funding to be conserved as an open space area. As another example, in 2013, \$7,000 of CPA funding was used to purchase the construction materials used to create new trails and repair existing trails in Town.

Open Space

According to the Massachusetts's Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, open spaces are comprised of "conservation land, recreation land, agricultural land, corridor parks and amenities such as small parks, green buffers along roadways or any open area that is owned by an agency of organization dedicated to conservation." There is an incredible amount of open space in Northborough for the benefit of the Town's environment and enjoyment of its residents. Approximately 170 acres of publicly-owned and accessible open space areas are available per 1,000 persons in the Town. This is far greater than the recommended standard of 10 acres per 1,000 persons set by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA).

Much of the open space in the Town is maintained by the Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee. The work of the Northborough Conservation Commission involves development projects, wetland protection, and advising various Town boards on projects involving natural resources. The Open Space Committee is responsible for the identification and preparation of proposals for Town Meeting of properties to be acquired for open space and/or recreational use. The Open Space Committee also considers alternative methods for open space preservation (e.g., grants, donations, and conservation easements). The Trails Subcommittee of the Open Space Committee is responsible for maintaining the Town's existing trails network, as well as for identifying appropriate places to create and build new trails.

While much of the open space in Northborough is publicly-owned and accessible there remains potential issues regarding conservation of and access to privately owned land. A substantial number of acres in Northborough is protected under Chapter 61, including the forest, agricultural, and recreational tax categories. This ensures that the Town gets first right of refusal if a privately-owned parcel of land is put on the market. However, some of the farm property in the Town, including Berberian's Farm, is only protected due to the difficulty of developing the land and through the Wetlands Protection Act.

The Community Preservation Plan (2016) reviewed the two open space-related goals from the Open Space and Recreation Plan. These two goals were: 1) Preserve open space for the Town's overall benefit and 2) Improve community appreciation, understanding, active involvement and commitment to conservation. It was noted that Northborough residents place a high value on open space and support land conservation efforts, however, ongoing education is needed about how important this effort is to increase awareness among younger and future residents.

Recreation

The Town's Recreation Department is self-funded through its programming, which is extended to residents in neighboring towns such as Shrewsbury, Boylston, and Berlin. This programming covers activities for all ages and abilities (including special needs) and ranges from aquatics, to camps and clinics, to special trips planned throughout the year. The department offers its programs at facilities such as the Town's public parks and schools, the Town Hall Gym, the Northborough Free Library, the Northborough Community Gardens, and the Senior Center, among other locations.

The Northborough Parks and Recreation Commission maintains six public parks in Town. These are the Ellsworth-McAfee Sports Field, Assabet Park, Howard Street Recreation Area, Memorial Field, the parcel at 119 Colburn Street, and undeveloped areas off Valentine Road and Carriage Hill Road. The largest among these, Ellsworth-McAfee Park, features basketball courts, bocce courts, an exercise/walking track, a gazebo and pavilion, playing fields, a skateboard park, a volleyball court, and general field space.

There are plentiful areas in Town set aside for recreational activities that allow Northborough residents to engage in a variety of activities and actions should be taken to ensure this continues and grows. These areas provide space for both passive and active recreational pursuits and range in size from the four-acre Howard Street Recreation Area to the 186-acre Mt. Pisgah Conservation Area. Existing field spaces, however, are noted to be at capacity for youth programming and would need to be expanded to also accommodate adult recreational needs. In addition, the community has expressed interest in improving access to the Town's rivers, lakes, and ponds, as well as developing an off-leash dog park.

The Northborough trails system is a popular Town asset and is maintained by the Northborough Trails Committee. The trail system includes such sites as the Mt. Pisgah Conservation Area in Berlin and Northborough; the Edmund Hill Woods Area; Little Chauncy, Cedar Hill, and Sawink Farm Trail Areas; Watson Park Trails Area; Carney Park/Cold Harbor Trails Area; Carlstrom II Forest; Yellick Conservation Area; Stirrup Brook Trail; Assabet Park Trail with a story walk; Schunder's Field Trails; Aqueduct Trail; and the

Coyote Trail. Opportunities exist to expand this trail system; the Hudson Street Bridge, for example, is an iconic symbol of Northborough with an opportunity for restoration and use for pedestrian access and recreational activity.

In 2008–2009, Northborough conducted a Childhood Obesity Needs Assessment. This study included a sidewalk audit of streets immediately surrounding the Town’s schools; observations of parks and trails; and a questionnaire for parents, school principals, and other interested residents. Many persons who responded to the study requested that the Town’s Recreation Department provide additional programs on evenings and weekends. The study resulted in the development of a nine-point Strategic Plan, which included methods to increase the physical activity of Town residents, particularly children. Some aspects of the Strategic Plan that directly relate to open space and recreation resources are: to incorporate more non-traditional options for physical activity and to promote walkability between new and existing developments.

Open Space & Recreation Goals

G1

Maintain and expand opportunities for active recreation to residents of all ages and abilities. Active recreation activities such as baseball, soccer, and pickleball demand considerable exertion and often require significant infrastructure.

G2

Continue to create and maintain passive recreation opportunities throughout Town. Passive activities such as walking and hiking demand less exertion and resources.

G3

Promote public awareness and increased use of the recreational opportunities within the community.

G4

Better link existing open spaces and use these linkages to connect community assets and create a more walkable community.

Open Space & Recreation Recommendations

Goal 1: Maintain and expand opportunities for active recreation to residents of all ages and abilities. Active recreation activities such as baseball, soccer, and pickleball demand considerable exertion and often require significant infrastructure.

OSR1-1 Add more active recreational facilities outside of school grounds and provide lighting and other improvements for facilities where feasible to meet increasing teen and adult recreation needs. Evaluate the Boundary Street property as a possible location for the expansion of such facilities.

Goal 1: Maintain and expand opportunities for active recreation to residents of all ages and abilities. Active recreation activities such as baseball, soccer, and pickleball demand considerable exertion and often require significant infrastructure. (Continued)

- OSR1-2** Consider the development of a Town Dog Park.
- OSR1-3** Develop plans to improve facility maintenance.
- OSR1-4** Conduct feasibility analyses and capital planning for adding a turf field(s) in Town for active recreation use.

Goal 2: Continue to create and maintain passive recreation opportunities throughout Town. Passive activities such as walking and hiking demand less exertion and resources.

- OSR2-1** Strengthen trail connections among various trail networks as well as to key open space areas and community centers.
- OSR2-2** Increase public access to riverfront and water-based recreation opportunities.
- OSR2-3** Where possible, incorporate passive recreation opportunities into active recreation facilities.

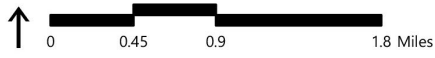
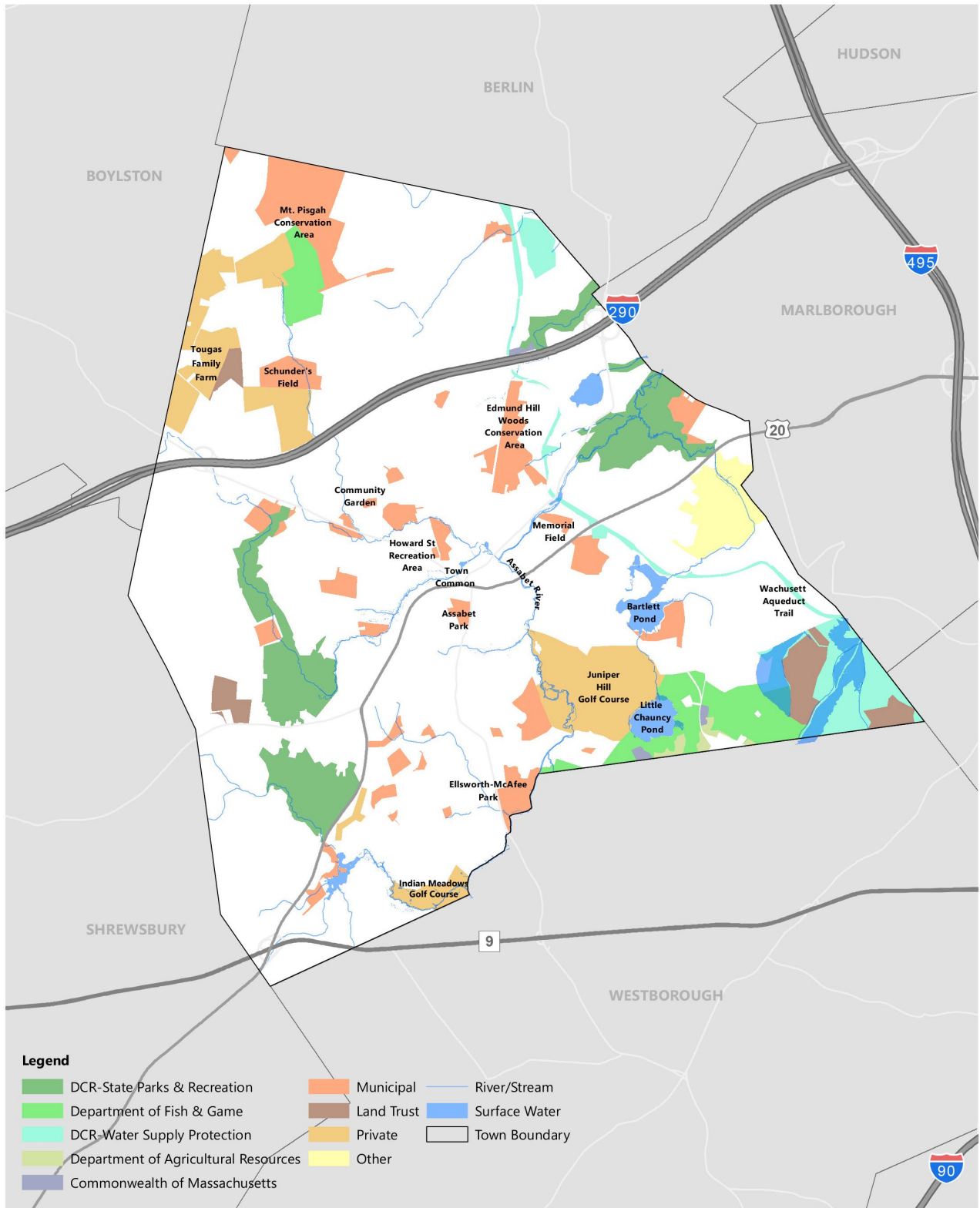
Goal 3: Promote public awareness and increased use of the recreational opportunities within the community.

- OSR3-1** Centralize information on recreation resources and opportunities for public access.
- OSR3-2** Promote one main community calendar that includes all Town-sponsored events, not just recreation-related events.
- OSR3-3** Increase awareness of the Community Preservation Committee and other very important efforts to preserve the character of the Town.

Goal 4: Better link existing open spaces and use these linkages to connect community assets and create a more walkable community.

- OSR4-1** Identify acquisition opportunities for parcels that provide/can provide key linkages among open spaces.
- OSR4-2** Integrate enhanced signage, visibility, and walkability at the Town's recreation facilities and trail heads into overall open space and recreation network improvements.
- OSR4-3** Identify opportunities to repurpose old infrastructure for trails development, such as the old trolley line and the Northborough Aqueduct Bridge, etc.
- OSR4-4** Ensure adequate preservation funding is available for open space acquisition as opportunity arises.

Figure 6-1 Open Space and Recreation Resources



Northborough Master Plan | Northborough, MA

Source: Town of Northborough, MassGIS, VHB

Open Spaces and Recreation Resources