

Section 7: ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

The preservation of a community's open space and recreation areas serves many purposes. First, the conservation of valuable natural systems provides habitat to a vast array of wildlife and endangered species. Secondly, the hydrological networks associated with lakes, streams and underground aquifers provide storage capacity for floodwaters, natural purification for drinking water and a source of irrigation for farming. Preservation of aquifers provides protection of drinking water supply. As vital as these and other natural factors associated with open space preservation may be, it is equally important to recognize the many cultural factors associated with the preservation of important natural resources. A network of open spaces often serves as an identifying element, which provides a community's recognized rural character and historic integrity. The same open space networks provide valuable opportunities for recreation with town commons, public squares, parks, play fields, with walking paths serving as a linkages between larger tracts of permanently protected open space.

The following analysis is divided into both a summary of Grafton's Resource Protection Needs, Community Needs and Management Needs. Specific opportunities or actions associated with this needs analysis can be found in the sections that follow, specifically Section 8 (Goals and Objectives), and Section 9 (Five Year Action Plan).

A. Summary of Resource Protection Needs

Resource protection is based upon the need to preserve existing natural and cultural resources that are finite in quantity and otherwise irreplaceable. Wetlands, rivers, streams, aquifers, historical resources and scenic views all encourage participation in recreation and outdoor activity. However, once these resources are destroyed they cannot be replaced. Through public hearings, committee meetings and workshops, the following resource protection needs have been identified.

This analysis of natural resources targets those areas most in need of immediate protection, maintenance or development in order to best serve the present and future inhabitants of the Town of Grafton:

1. Encourage the protection of undeveloped open space through land acquisitions either through the State, Town, the Grafton Land Trust, other non-profit land trusts, through partnerships among such entities, and also by encouraging private landowners to place conservation restrictions on their property for permanent protection.
2. Protect the water resources of the Town, including new well locations and their underlying aquifers.
3. Protect the Town's surface waterbodies and improve their water quality.
4. Protect the Town's rivers, streams, wetlands and vernal pools and improve their water quality.
5. Encourage the continued use of farmland for agricultural purposes.
6. Prevent the ecological isolation of conservation lands.
7. Increase public awareness of the importance and value of wetlands.
8. Preserve parcels containing unique natural features and/or other areas of special interest.

9. Increase the level of protection afforded to critical parcels of open space.
10. Protect forested open land and habitat corridors.
11. Encourage the creation of trail systems that link existing open space parcels together for the recreational enjoyment of Grafton residents and visitors.

In coordination with the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, Grafton would like to purchase and protect relevant parcels that would assist in watershed and wildlife protection, and the creation of greenway links for hiking and cross country skiing.

B. Summary of Community Needs

In 2004 the Grafton Recreational Fields Committee engaged the services of Pare Engineering Corporation out of Lincoln, Rhode Island to prepare a Recreation Fields Master Plan for the Town. For this effort, Pare Engineering enlisted the partnership team of Gates, Leighton & Associates Inc., the Heritage Design Group Inc., and Shepherd Engineering Inc. Finalized in May of 2005, the Recreation Fields Master Plan evaluated existing conditions at four sites in Grafton that have the potential to accommodate new recreation facilities, reviewed the Town's recreation programs that would utilize these new facilities, and developed schematic designs for the construction of the new recreation facilities at these four sites. The four evaluated sites include:

- Airport Park – Bedford Drive
- Riverview – Providence Street
- Follette Street (Dauphinais Park) – Follette Street
- Hennessey II – Old Westboro Road

It should be noted that the 2005 Recreation Fields Master Plan builds from a previous report entitled, Town of Grafton Master Planning and Design of Recreational Facilities Report. Prepared by Weston & Sampson Engineering Inc. in 2003, this study utilized the Level-of-Service (or LOS) guidelines for planning new active recreation facilities, as recommended by the National Recreation and Parks Association and the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration. These two entities have jointly prepared a set of guidelines for the local provision of open space and recreation facilities that are based on an LOS analysis. The 2003 study utilized the LOS analysis method to determine the Town's recreation facility needs.

For the four sites listed above, the 2005 Recreation Fields Master Plan outlined the following recreation opportunities:

Airport Park: Consisting of three parcels under Town control totaling 34.75 acres, Airport Park can be accessed via Airport Road and Bedford Drive from Worcester Street. Existing facilities at this site include two baseball fields that double as soccer fields in the off-season, a children's play area, a basketball court and off-street parking. The Recreation Fields Master Plan identified the renovation and expansion of this park as its highest priority. The Plan recommends that the two existing ball fields be removed and subsurface drainage improvements be made prior to construction of regulation Little League and Senior League baseball fields. As is the case today, these fields could be utilized for soccer during baseball's off-season. The report also

recommends relocating the playground to a more convenient location closer to the parking lot. Expanding the parking lot to 66 spaces with a separate entrance and egress is also recommended. The cost of the above renovations is estimated at \$508,000.

Riverview: This 6.2-acre property is under Town control and is located on the shoreline of Fisherville Pond, a tributary of the Blackstone River. Access is provided by a 20-foot wide right-of-way through the adjacent Riverview Apartment complex. Gravel excavation at this site has left the Fisherville Pond peninsula as an unattractive haven for undesirable activities. The only “facility” located at this site is a gravel bank used as a boat ramp. This site is not maintained for public access and does not include any site improvements. The Recreation Fields Master Plan identified improving this facility as its second highest priority. The Recreational Fields Committee is considering two options to develop the site as a 360-foot by 220-foot recreation field, picnic area, playground, boat launch and gravel parking area for 56 cars. The cost of the above renovations is estimated at \$476,000.

Follette Street (Dauphinais Park): This 57-acre property is under Town control and is located at 21 Follette Street. A public trail located within an open space parcel in the adjacent Southfield Court subdivision provides pedestrian access to the site. The property contains over half a mile of frontage on the Blackstone River and abuts the future Blackstone Valley bike path along the Providence-Worcester Railroad. Facilities at this site include one of the Town’s water wells, a pump station and an unmarked trail system. The Recreation Fields Master Plan proposed the construction of two 200-foot by 140-foot multi-purpose recreation fields, a larger 350-foot by 220-foot multi-purpose recreation field, three Little League or Softball fields with a 200-foot by 140-foot multi-purpose field located in the outfields for Autumn use. The existing gravel parking area would be supplemented with grass overflow parking for an additional 117 vehicles. Access to an existing trail system would also be improved/expanded. The cost of the above renovations is estimated at \$2.5 million.

Hennessey II: This 47-acre property is under Town control and is located at the corner of Old Westboro Road and Estabrook Avenue. The property is located in a rural section of Town and is not within walking distance of any neighborhoods. This property is unimproved and contains no amenities. The Recreation Fields Master Plan considers improving this site to be a long-term project for the community. Proposed improvements include the construction of a 350-foot by 220-foot multi-purpose recreation field, three 200-foot by 140-foot multi-purpose recreation fields, a network of hiking trails, a playground, an upland area designated for passive recreation and a gravel drive with a parking area for 204 cars (including 63 overflow spaces on the grass). Site access would be via a gravel drive from Old Westboro Road, south of the Massachusetts Turnpike Bridge. The cost of the above renovations is estimated at \$1.22 million.

C. Management Needs, Potential Change of Use

The villages of South Grafton represent a significant redevelopment opportunity for the Town. In 2005, Grafton used funding provided by the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor to hire a team of consultants that included Dodson Associates Ltd., Mullin Associates Inc., and the Horsley Witten Group to investigate redevelopment options for the villages. In July 2006, the consultants released the South Grafton Villages Master Plan, which

put forth several planning ideas aimed at revitalizing the village areas. One idea called for the adoption of a Mill Village Overlay District for Fisherville and Farnumsville that would allow for a mixture of dense residential development along with commercial and retail uses within former mill structures and adjacent properties. Another idea called for creating a Chapter 40R Smart Growth Zoning District for the villages. The district would be in the form of an overlay zone and allow for high-density residential development. Per Chapter 40R, the district must provide a minimum allowable density of eight (8) units per acre for single-family homes, twelve (12) units per two and three-family homes, and twenty (20) for multi-family dwellings. Twenty percent (20%) of the units would need to be affordable to households earning 80% or less of the median area income and be deed restricted for at least 30 years. The Town is now considering which revitalization concept would best serve the South Grafton villages.

Identification of funding and staffing resources will be key elements of the Town's strategy for open space acquisition and upgrading recreation facilities. In regard to potential changes of use, several of the properties identified for protection on the Action Plan Map are in the State's Chapter program and their permanent protection would technically constitute a change of use. Changes to Chapter 61 were recently passed through the legislature and became effective March 2007. One such change exempts municipalities, state agencies and nonprofits from conveyance or rollback taxes for properties that have been acquired for natural resource purposes.

The Town needs to improve access to its passive and active recreation areas by providing a comprehensive network of sidewalks alongside major and significant roads.

One of the most significant management needs for the Town's active recreation areas is ensuring that all facilities are handicapped accessible. All of Grafton's recreation facilities have been evaluated for handicapped accessibility and the results of this evaluation can be found in Appendix B.

The Town will need to prioritize its open space and recreation needs on an on-going basis. Communities acquiring land for open space, recreation and conservation purposes frequently attempt to devise a method to compare or prioritize land for acquisition. These systems often list locations of threatened or endangered plant or animal species as among the highest priority land to buy or protect. Also, usually highly ranked is water supply protection land. Agricultural land, particularly productive land, ranks high as does keeping open land undeveloped in more densely settled areas without open space at present. Land that connects existing open space areas and/or creates buffers between sensitive natural resources may rank high as well. It is proposed that land for acquisition should either protect present or future water supplies, sensitive natural resource areas, provide public access to natural resources, connect existing open space land, or provide recreational facilities, particularly to those neighborhoods that do not have such facilities within walking distance. Land that achieves more than one of these objectives would be highly ranked.