
SECTION

7

ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

This Open Space and Recreation Plan incorporates an inventory of natural, scenic, agricultural and land-based recreational resources in Montague (Section 4) and identifies the most important parcels of land that contain these resources (Section 5). Based on the community's general goals (Section 6) the plan compares the supply of land and resources with the demand for services related to those resources (Section 7).

This section summarizes the environmental values addressed in Sections 3, 4 and 5. The recreation and open space needs of residents are identified using the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Survey and data presented in Section 3. Finally, obstacles to effective fulfillment 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

Montague residents value farms and forests, surface and groundwater resources, wildlife habitat, native plant communities, the Connecticut, Millers, and Sawmill Rivers, scenic views, and special publicly-owned conservation lands such as the Montague Plains. Current land uses and policies leave the future integrity of these resources in doubt. New development, if poorly planned, could have a negative impact on both the quality and quantity of all these resources. That is one argument for developing this Open Space and Recreation Plan and for determining which natural resources need the most protection.



According to the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Survey, residents believe that the Town's highest natural resource protection priorities should include the following: 1) Productive farmland/encouraging agriculture (68% of respondents); 2) Groundwater resources (55% of respondents); 3) Forest land (50% of respondents); 4) Land along the Connecticut River (33% of respondents); and 5) Land along the Sawmill River (33% of respondents). There is consensus among the members of the Open Space and Recreation

Planning Committee that protection of all of these resources is critical to the future of the Town.

Fortunately, these priorities are highly compatible. A significant amount of active farmland is located in or near the Connecticut River floodplain in southwestern Montague. Montague's forests help protect the quantity and quality of water in aquifers by providing water retention and by slowing the release of stormwater to streams to permit groundwater recharge.

Scenic views are also considered to be very important and their protection is included in the goals of this Open Space and Recreation Plan. Long-range scenic views in Montague include vast areas of forest in the eastern section of town in the vicinity of Quarry Hill and Dry Hill, and of agricultural landscapes in southwestern Montague and off East Mineral Road. Less than forty percent of this forest and farmland is permanently protected from development. The quality of scenic views and Montague's rural character will likely be diminished if future development fragments these landscapes. (*See the Scenic Resources and Unique Environments map in Section 4*).

Different methods of land protection have different consequences. For example, lands that are protected by a conservation restriction usually stay in private ownership. Decisions regarding the property's management rest with individuals, instead of a non-profit organization or a state or federal agency, which may not be able to respond as well to local concerns. The responsibility and costs of managing the land are borne by private parties. In this case, the land also remains on local property tax rolls. Although public access is sometimes required in conservation restrictions purchased by state conservation agencies and land trusts, this is not always the case.

Land that is purchased outright by state agencies or land trusts is more likely to provide access to the general public, but revenue to the Town through the Payment In Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program is uncertain. Public ownership of land also means that public agencies are responsible for land management. This can be a problem when funds for land management are limited, and when the public owner of the property has different goals and priorities for management of the land than residents who live nearby.

The questions of open space connectivity, management and public access will gain importance as the population of Montague grows and land protection activities continue. Without targeted land protection, even low-density residential development can reduce the long-term viability of local and regional wildlife habitat areas and recreational open space. Much of the permanently protected land in Montague is surrounded by unprotected properties. Right now, the differences between protected and unprotected land are not visibly significant. But land use change can occur relatively quickly.



For example, Montague could lose one or two of the large blocks of forested land in parcels that are currently enrolled in Chapter 61. Forest-based business activities like timber harvesting benefit landowners, foresters, loggers and buyers of wood products, as well as the Town, which receives tax revenues from timber sales. As forest landscapes become fragmented through residential development, however, commercial harvest of timber becomes more difficult. Access to remote parcels may be lost, and new residents who have moved to the area to appreciate the beauty of the forest may object to the use of chainsaws, skidders and other logging equipment. As timber harvesting becomes more difficult and less profitable, the incentive to sell land for development increases.



Owners of agricultural businesses face similar challenges. Conversion of even small parcels of farmland to residential use can create serious conflicts between the needs of farm businesses and the expectations of homeowners. Some farms in Montague depend on rented land. If key parcels of rented land were to become unavailable, larger operations could be threatened. Many farmers in Montague believe that high property taxes are a serious obstacle to continued profitability of their operations. Finally, farmers are affected by what they perceive as the general climate and future prospects for local agriculture. When land values for development are high, the opportunity costs of keeping the land in agricultural use are also high.

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Montague's farmers like to remind residents that the best way to keep farmland undeveloped is to remove barriers to profitability. What can Montague do to support local farmers and other residents with livelihoods tied to the working landscape? The Town might use a variety of strategies, including but not limited to protection from nuisance complaints through a Right to Farm Bylaw (making it hard for abutting residents to stop normal farm and forestry activities due to odors or sounds), offering tax incentives for creation or expansion of an agricultural business, supporting changes in state and local policy to reduce property and

excise taxes on farms, and promoting farm businesses through road signage and other publicity. ***The Town should research specific needs of its farmers, and determine which of these could be appropriately addressed at the local level.*** A growing number of rural towns in Massachusetts are addressing the needs of farmers by forming Agricultural Advisory Commissions. Montague already has an Agricultural Commission, however it has been inactive in recent years. The Town should determine whether its farmers and residents would be interested in reactivating the commission.

The Turners Falls Fire District owns and controls approximately 1551 acres of land, roughly 12 percent of the total undeveloped land in Montague. This watershed land provides a critical connection between protected forest east to the Quabbin Reservoir, and west across the Montague Plains to the Connecticut River. The Turners Falls Water Commissioners have always been vigilant in their stewardship of this land, and emphatic about its critical role in protecting the quality of drinking water in Montague. A future Commission with different priorities could propose sale of portions of the land to raise revenues. Advocates of open space protection and resource conservation should work closely with the Fire District and Water Commission to safeguard the future of the watershed lands. (See the Water Resources map in Section 4).

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The Montague Plains is a unique forest ecosystem. According to the 2009 Survey, 50 percent of respondents, representing all of Montague’s five villages, use the Plains for recreational purposes. In addition to their recreational value, the Plains provide extensive forest habitat, scenic views, and recharge for a large, high-yield aquifer. Illegal dumping degrades the value of all natural resources on the Plains, but is particularly problematic for groundwater quality. Dumped hazardous materials, including petroleum

products and solvents, can contaminate groundwater. The Town needs to take a proactive role in helping the state Department of Fish and Game develop a management plan that addresses access and dumping issues on the Plains. In addition, Montague should work with Northeast Utilities and scientists to identify the most important wildlife habitat areas on portions of the Plains owned by the utility so that future development can be planned to minimize negative impacts to these rare ecosystems and to native plant and animal species.

The Plains is not the only area of Town where increased vigilance is required to protect groundwater supplies. There is a significant amount of undeveloped land in the recharge areas for the Turners Falls and Montague Center wells, and there are existing land uses in these areas that have the potential to contaminate the water supply. ***The Town needs to work closely with the water districts to develop additional strategies to protect municipal drinking water reserves, including public education, land use regulation and protection of key parcels.***

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There are several natural resource protection needs that are site specific but also have importance because they represent problems that could occur in other areas in town. Erosion is a serious problem in several areas, including the banks of the Connecticut and Sawmill Rivers and on Dry Hill Road. Northeast Utilities (now SUEZ Energy) developed an erosion control plan for the “Turners Falls Pool” of the Connecticut River, which encompasses the length of the river from the Northfield Mountain Pumped Storage Facility to the Turners Falls Dam. The Town should continue its involvement in the regional Connecticut River Streambank Erosion Committee to oversee implementation of this plan. More needs to be done to address erosion along the banks of the river south of the Turners Falls Dam to the town line. With respect to streambank erosion along the Sawmill River, since the 2003 Montague Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town has worked with the Franklin Conservation District (FCD), the Natural Resources Conservation Service and other resource conservation agencies to research the extent and causes of the problem, and in 2006 a restoration report was completed through a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The report included preliminary designs to divert one section of the river located just south of Route 63 back to its original floodplain. The FCD was awarded an implementation grant from the DEP in 2010, and the project is currently moving through the approval process (FCD personal communication).

Resolution of erosion issues on Dry Hill Road will depend to a large extent on future uses of the road. The Town should initiate a public discussion on whether the road should be fully restored for general use, partially restored so that it could safely serve as access for forestry and recreational use, or permanently discontinued and abandoned. These options have very different implications for future land use and development in the area. Full restoration in particular could result in fragmentation of extensive forested areas and a decline in commercial timber harvests. In any case, plans for the road should include stabilization of severely eroded areas.



The Turners Falls Airport is undergoing total upgrade of the taxiway, apron, and a 1000 foot extension to the runway. Portions of the airport site are culturally significant to Native Americans and negotiations are underway between the Town and Narragansett and Wampanoag Tribes to preserve the sites. The plans are also sensitive to the ecological integrity of the site. Public access for non-aviation purposes is not allowed and increased site security will be developed in accordance with FAA regulations. There is a public sitting area adjacent to the terminal which provides the opportunity for birding, picnicking, and plane watching.

Montague is fortunate in that it has relatively few “brownfields” or environmentally contaminated sites. The Town should continue its work with the Franklin Regional Council of Governments and property owners to assess the extent of contamination at these sites and promote industrial or commercial redevelopment of these areas. Finally, the Town needs to address the consequences of its own past activities. The old “Burn

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B. SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY’S NEEDS

Planning for open space and recreation needs in Montague must satisfy the present population’s desires for new facilities, spaces, and services, and interpret and act on the available data to prepare for the future needs of the citizenry. Although this Plan will be updated in seven years, the types of actions that are identified in Section 9 should take into account the needs of the next generation as well.

Presently, Montague’s recreation needs fall into the following categories: 1) Maintain existing facilities and programs and the accessibility of these programs and facilities to all residents; 2) Develop new parks and programs; 3) Improve opportunities for aquatic recreation; and 4) Develop bicycle and hiking trails that link parks with protected conservation lands via scenic roads and landscapes. According to the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Planning Survey, 33 percent of respondents felt the Town should focus its efforts on schools, roads, and other projects rather than recreation needs.



According to the survey, 58 percent of respondents thought that maintaining existing recreational facilities should be the Town’s highest recreation priority. Keeping existing recreational facilities in good shape makes sense, because it is less expensive to maintain infrastructure than it is to replace it. This is also consistent with the income data presented in Section 3, which shows that Montague residents earn far less than the county

and state averages, and the residents of the town’s most urban village, Turners Falls, may have other hurdles, including a lack of transportation and extra income to get to and pay for recreational programs in other parts of town. In difficult financial times, maintaining existing facilities and programs and making sure that these programs are accessible to all

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Maintenance of existing resources, however, is unlikely to meet the Town's needs in the long term. Increasing the amount of recreation programs for children was considered a high priority by 40 percent of survey respondents. Both survey respondents and the Parks and Recreation Commission consider the development of new parks and recreational facilities to be important. Overall, 33 percent of survey respondents thought the town's highest priority should be developing an outdoor swimming facility. Residents who participated in the development of this plan also emphasized the need for better public access to the Connecticut River. The Parks Commissioners believe that a new park in Montague City is a good objective.



Developing a new outdoor swimming facility is likely to be difficult in the short term. There is no consensus on where such a facility should be located, and development and maintenance of a swimming area is likely to be expensive. This does not mean, however, that residents should give up on their desire for a safe outdoor public swimming area. The Town should continue to provide swimming programs at the Turners Falls High School pool, and to offer transportation to swimming areas in other towns during the summer months. Currently the Town is

exploring the potential for offering alternative water recreation, such as a spray element, at Unity Park. If a property that offered the potential for a public swimming area were to become available for purchase, the Town should ask its residents whether they want to commit funds for this purpose. According to the 2009 survey, if the Town had an outdoor swimming facility, 68% of respondents would be willing to pay \$50 or less a year for a family permit, 26% would pay between \$50 - \$99, 6% would pay between \$100 - \$149, and 3% would be willing to pay \$150 - \$200 a year. The Town should also work with SUEZ Energy to improve access to the Connecticut and Millers Rivers for canoeing and fishing.

It makes sense to locate parks and playgrounds near neighborhoods that have the highest densities. As the population of Montague continues to age, seniors may be looking for better access to green spaces and walking paths near village centers—hiking trails in remote areas of town do not meet the needs of all residents. Attention to linking parks to where people live and play could involve a greening of urban areas, which could reduce blight in Turners Falls. The Canalside Trail Bike Path in Turners Falls, completed in 2008, is a good example of a facility that provides a much needed recreational resource. Sixty eight percent of respondents to the 2009 Open Space and Recreation Planning Survey stated that they or their family use the path, making it the most heavily used outdoor recreation area in the Town. The Town is exploring the creation of a new small park in Montague City, adjacent to the bike path, as a long term project. Montague City

is currently the only village in Montague without a park. The Town should also look for opportunities to create new recreational facilities as a component of any new large or high-density housing developments.

Another method for accessing the out-of-doors for all types of uses is via well-designed and maintained trails. Trails traversing the Montague Plains, if allowed, could connect the scenic farm landscapes of southwestern Montague to the breathtaking views from Dry Hill. Hiking and bicycle trails could overlap and be tied to existing trails in the region. These trails could be used by both residents and tourists. The Town could facilitate the creation of a volunteer Friends of the Plains group that could work with the Department of Fish and Game to design, construct, and maintain trails on the Plains. By providing safe access to the Town's major rivers as well as to some of the most scenic farm and forest landscapes in the region, Montague could provide for residents' recreational needs while at the same time establishing open space-based economic development likely to benefit farmers and create new economic opportunities for Bed and Breakfast facilities, stores, restaurants, and sporting equipment outfitters catering to visitors.

C. MANAGEMENT NEEDS

Montague has a variety of management needs with respect to open space and recreation, some general and others very specific. Perhaps most important is the need for local officials and community leaders to build consensus on a vision for the future of land use, development and conservation in Montague. This process was advanced by the 1999 Comprehensive Plan, the 2003 Open Space and Recreation Plan, and this Open Space and Recreation Plan

update, but more community discussion is needed to come to decisions about what parcels of land are critical to protect, and, just as important, how the Town should provide for housing, economic development and public services in the future. Without community consensus on what land should be protected and what land should be developed, decisions will continue to be made on a parcel-by-parcel basis, conflicts will emerge over the use of specific parcels of land, and the ability of the Town to protect its most important resources will be compromised.

To protect the land identified as important in this plan, the Town will need to be more aggressive in identifying land conservation opportunities, working with landowners, building community support for land acquisition...

In the past, land conservation efforts in Montague have largely been driven by landowners, citizen advocates, and state agencies. Specific parcels of land have been successfully targeted for protection. While the Town has supported these efforts, it has rarely taken a leadership role. To protect the land identified as important in this plan, the Town will need to be more aggressive in identifying land conservation opportunities, working with landowners, building community support for land acquisition, leading coalitions of residents, land conservation organizations and state agencies, and raising the



funds needed to complete deals. Taking this leadership role will require increased cooperation between Town boards and commissions and special districts.

Because Montague has a Representative Town Meeting form of government, it is critical to educate elected Town Meeting members about the need for and benefits of land and resource conservation. Town Meeting endorsement of this Open Space and Recreation Plan would be an important policy statement. The Open Space and Recreation Planning Committee recommend that this plan be brought to a Special Town Meeting for Town Meeting endorsement. The goals and objectives of this plan will also be advanced by endorsement from the Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, and Planning Board. Letters of endorsement from these groups are included in Section 10: Public Comment.



Primary leadership for implementation of this Plan could be delegated to a new Open Space Committee. As previously noted, the Town also should consider reactivating the Agricultural Commission to address the specific needs of agricultural operations. The Conservation Commission has the ability to purchase land for conservation and manages all Town-owned conservation land, while also weighing in on other issues such as Agricultural Preservation Restrictions. The Planning Board can facilitate land and resource conservation

through revision of the Zoning Bylaws and Subdivision Regulations, both to promote conservation of land with important natural resources, and to facilitate residential, commercial and industrial development in appropriate areas. It is important that these land use policies be clearly communicated to the Board of Appeals, which enforces them. The Parks and Recreation Commission clearly has a major role to play in guiding development of recreational programs and facilities. Because decisions about taxation can determine the future use and disposition of land, the Town should work with the Board of Assessors to implement policies that promote farming, forestry and conservation of ecologically important land and resources. Finally, the Town needs to work closely with the Commissioners of the Turners Falls and Montague Center water districts to ensure protection of drinking water resources.

Increasing Town involvement in land and resource conservation will in itself require new resources and policies. Planning for conservation and the ability to educate residents about the need for land and resource protection would be greatly enhanced by a Geographic Information System (GIS). The Town currently has



the latest GIS software and is working on connecting assessor data to parcel level data. Ongoing development of GIS capability should be a priority for the Town.

Montague should work with the Conservation Commission, Planning Board, land trusts, and the State to identify the conservation value of Town-owned land, and decide how to protect lands of significant value. Land could be held by the Conservation Commission, or offered to a land trust or the State for permanent protection. If the Town decides to hold land for conservation, it needs guidelines outlining how the land will be used and maintained. Site-specific management plans should be developed for all Town-owned conservation land that address issues such as permitted uses, hours of public access, parking, signage, and a maintenance schedule.

Montague residents also need to think about future leadership for land and resource conservation. Environmental education in the schools, with an emphasis on local ecology, can help ensure that young residents of town develop an appreciation of the importance of the Town's natural resources as well as the information and skills needed to protect them.

Finally, efforts to protect Montague's natural resources should not stop at the town line. Town officials should work with leaders and residents of abutting towns and the Franklin Regional Council of Governments to protect resources that span several communities. This is particularly important for aquifer protection, as part of the recharge area for the Turners Falls wells is located in the Town of Sunderland. Montague should continue to participate in regional natural resource based planning and economic development efforts, such as the Connecticut River Scenic Farm Byway, the Franklin County Bikeway and planning efforts in the Connecticut and Millers River watersheds.

