

STEPS IN THE OPEN SPACE PLANNING PROCESS

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This paper presents the steps involved in developing an open space plan. The steps are generic in that the methods may be applied to various size communities. The intent is to provide a framework to develop an open space plan that meets Massachusetts requirements for funding of open space acquisition.

Introduction

Open space is being depleted across the state of Massachusetts at an alarming rate. Although Massachusetts is only recently showing signs of economic recovery after several years of recession, many communities have seen major increases in the areas of residential, and commercial and industrial development. In many communities the number of new subdivisions has dramatically escalated over the past decade. For example, Pembroke, a small community midway between Boston and Cape Cod, showed an increase of ten percent in the total housing stock over the past seven years.

Along with housing projects, many communities have also seen a dramatic rise in commercial and industrial development. Due to the economic conditions, many communities have supported incentives for industrial development in order to improve the tax base of fiscally constrained budgets. In Northampton, a mid-size city in western Massachusetts, an industrial park was proposed ten years ago to entice light and heavy industrial development in a specified district of the city. In Worcester, a large city in central Massachusetts, a "medical city" is planned. Projects will include major hospital and ancillary medical facilities, as well as biotech plants and supporting services. Communities continue to offer financial and political support to commercial and industrial developers, particularly for clustered, specialty development.

Farmland has also been depleted in areas of central and western Massachusetts. Over one hundred and sixty thousand acres of Massachusetts farmland are tended by dairy farmers. Out of eight hundred dairy farms in the state, over fifty percent have been lost in the past ten years. The main reason for this is that Massachusetts dairy farmers are receiving the same price for their milk that they did in 1978.

Farmers have recently been voicing their concerns that they can no longer afford to farm at 1978 income levels and pay for costs that have risen steadily for the past thirteen years. For these reasons, many farmers have been forced to apply for dairy and livestock buy-out programs, initially introduced by President Bush in the early 1990s. As more and more farmers decide to sell, communities should be aware that they are losing revenue, as well as aesthetic value, when each farm is sold. In fact the dairy industry contributes nearly three hundred million dollars to the Massachusetts economy annually.

In the urban areas of the state the main problem of loss of open space occurs in recreational areas. Funding has been cut back for organized sports, as well as passive recreational areas. The Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) in Boston closed down the public pools in the city in 1991 due to severe budget

problems. As inner city problems intensify, the need to preserve open space for recreational use becomes more acute.

The point is open space will continue to be depleted for housing, and commercial and industrial projects. In order to manage the growth, and still provide for recreation and open space preservation, an open space plan should be developed. The open space plan should be written as a guide for the community to follow. The plan should clearly state the parcels that should be preserved, and the parcels that should be developed for recreational use. An open space plan provides land use techniques to balance growth and conservation in a community.

Before the planning process begins, planners should determine the available allocations of funding for the various land use programs at the federal and state levels. Criteria and standards for the open space programs should be matched to the characteristics of the particular community. For example, if a community has farmers interested in applying for reduced tax abatement under a farmland program, the planner should determine the amount of funding available for farmland preservation in the state. In Massachusetts, the governor recently approved an increase in the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR) funding. Land trusts and land banking programs have also become widespread across the state. For these reasons it is appropriate to conduct a farmland inventory to determine the farms that should be recommended for the APR program. The farms should be prioritized in terms of which ones are most susceptible to development pressures.

Other land use grants that could potentially provide funding for open space planning are Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG). The availability of funding for these grants should especially be investigated if recreational activities can be linked to community development programs.

The following open space planning process steps include methodological techniques that can be applied in the specified community. The steps should be considered sequentially. However, not all the steps need necessarily be applied in each community. For example, a mid to large urban community may not need a farmland inventory. Conversely, a rural community with a small population base may not need additional recreational facilities.

The planning steps should be applied individually for each community. In this way, the planning model can be tailored to meet the needs of each community. It is also important that open space plans be revised every few years in order to take into account any changes that have occurred in the community or the region. Demographic changes showing an influx of retirees, such as Cape Cod is now experiencing, would indicate a change in services for the area. In another case, if a regional sports complex is proposed for a community, the surrounding communities should consider the impacts of the complex on their recreational needs. An illustration of this regional planning problem is occurring now in Worcester, Massachusetts. The state is considering building a major sports complex in Worcester. If the sports arena is constructed, surrounding communities will have to rethink their recreational needs. In some cases it is cost-effective to pay user fees to the nearby town, rather than building a similar complex and duplicating facilities.

STEP 1: Prepare a Community Profile

The profile of the community should include a physical geographic description, including an inventory of the topographic features, and watershed and aquifer areas. The profile should also include a socio-economic study of demographic statistics. The current demographic statistics should be classified into age and gender groupings in order to determine existing and potential needs for the town or city. Income levels and amount of affordable housing should also be collected. From these data projections can be made to determine capital facility needs for the community.

A regional perspective of the surrounding area should be included in the profile. This helps to create a complete picture of the community in terms of duplicating and sharing facilities. A capital facilities study should also be included. This study should list existing and future facilities including schools, libraries, and cultural centers. Monies allocated for future projects should be discussed.

STEP II: Generate A Land Use Inventory

A land use inventory of conservation and recreation parcels should be compiled. An existent land use inventory map should be generated. The land use data should include; ownership, current use, condition, recreation potential, public access, zoning, and degree of protection for each parcel. Any public or private grants that have been awarded to the community should be listed. The most effective way to present this information is by map and matrix with accompanying narrative. These narratives should include "degrees of protection" for each parcel, deed restrictions, updated listings of lands under chapter 61, 61A & 61B and watershed protection parcels.

The required maps for the open space planning process for Massachusetts include privately and publicly mapped parcels. Privately mapped parcels include agricultural lands(61A), forest lands less-than-fee-interest, private recreation lands(61B), estates, farms not under 61A, major institutional holdings and land for available reuse.

The public and non-profit parcels that must be mapped include public conservation and recreational resources, semi-public lands, other public lands and state or federal institutions.

STEP III: Environmental Analysis

The purpose of this section is to provide a description of the environmental and cultural makeup of the region. It is at this stage that preliminary goals and objectives about environmental impacts should be formulated. This is necessary to make different boards aware of any adverse effects development would have on the environmental attributes of the community. By mapping the environmentally sensitive and fragile areas of the community, it will be easier to identify them when making land use decisions.

The environmental analysis section should be divided into the following categories; geology, soils, topography, landscape character, water resources, vegetation, fisheries and wildlife, scenic resources, unique environments and environmental problems. A brief description of the geographical and environmental attributes in each category should be provided. These descriptions are necessary in order to identify any adverse negative environmental impacts that may occur with the development of expanded recreational facilities.

STEP IV: Community Goals

The write up of community goals portrays an outline of what the citizens of the community value. These opinions should be used to guide and direct the articulation of the community's overall plan. These factors should also take into account the previous examination of trends and resources. This process can be completed by using surveys, questionnaires or public meetings to allow the community to voice its opinion.

When stating the goals it should be done in very general terms. It could be described as; "What the community should be and what the community should look like." The community's "ideal open space system" should also be included. This ideal model meets the variety of needs that were expressed in the community's surveys, inferred from facility use, or implied by local policies and any other existing resources protection plan.

STEP V: Prepare an Analysis of Need

At this stage all of the previously acquired material should now be reviewed and analyzed to present any impacts that might result from the proposed development. This section should be a systematic explanation of what is needed to achieve the community's stated goals. The data is collected and synthesized in order to

identify potential problems. The findings of this study will indicate the possible solutions to the problems. Any solution that the community has proposed should also be included in the findings.

The analysis of needs section should also include a summary of resource protection needs. The statement must be backed up with data from environmental inventory of public and private lands of conservation and recreation interests. Gaps in existing trails, greenways and linkages to major resources in adjacent communities should be noted. Data on recreation and conservation needs from the Community Setting section should also be noted.

STEP VI: Develop Goals and Objectives

This step involves expanding on the Analysis of Need section and the Statement of Community Goals to create a comprehensive set of goals and objectives. In this stage describe the present goals and objectives and include any previously stated ideas.

It is important to distinguish between what are considered general concepts and ideas, with actions for accomplishing intended goals. Throughout this part of the planning process, the planner must be aware that goals and objectives may be altered several times due to changing needs.

STEP VII: Draft a Five-Year Action Plan

A yearly timetable for specific actions to accomplish the objectives listed previously should be established. This process clearly identifies the priorities of the plan, and provides background to support the plan. This is important for public hearings and town meetings when citizens question the feasibility and effectiveness of the plan.

The five year action plan should avoid long lists of actions presented in a random order. If the goals are presented in a specific order, it helps assure that those with top priority will be addressed. There should be flexibility provided within the time table of when the actions occur. This is important because, for example, a property may be put on the market earlier than anticipated.

Each year the Open Space Plan Advisory Committee should evaluate implementation of the previous year's actions and revise the Action Plan accordingly. This will make the formal five-year update a more workable task.

STEP VIII: Solicit Public Comments

A letter of approval is required only from the Division of Conservation Services. The Open Space Plan itself must be distributed to several different boards and officials. This includes chief elected officials, boards of planning, health, appeals, recreation, and conservation commission. A dated distribution list and any comments received from the plan must also be submitted.

Required Maps

The following five maps are required in order to meet the Massachusetts requirements for funding. Each map should include the indicated attributes if applicable to your locality.

- The Special Landscape Features map should display scenic, cultural, historical and architectural resources, geological features, chapter 61, 61A and 61B parcels and soils.
- The Open Space Map should present public conservation, recreational resources, semi-public and APR lands.
- The contents of the Water Resource map should include the location of any aquifers, surface water, watershed or water supply areas and wetlands.
- The Zoning map should indicate zoning of all the parcels in the town.
- The Five-Year action map should illustrate the effects that the successful completion of any projected development or conservation restriction would have on the town.

References

All reference documents and experts consulted in preparing the community's Open Space and Recreation Plan should be cited. There are many planning agencies; such as regional planning agencies, local planning boards and commissions, that are helpful in gathering information for the Open Space Plan. Interviews with planning boards, select boards, planning commissions and citizens should be conducted. The Open Space Planner's Workbook lists resources to contact. These include local land trusts, Offices of Environmental Affairs, Department of Environmental Protection, Historical Commissions and different sources for technical and planning assistance.

Other data sources include tiger files, census data and SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) on computer software. Town reports, previous open space plans and master plans should also be reviewed. Assessor's maps, land use maps, soil conservation service maps, and G.I.S. maps for the community should be reviewed. Surveys and questionnaires concerning the community should be updated and analyzed.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the need for open space plans is becoming more critical. As the third most dense state, Massachusetts is continuously facing the depletion of open space. The open space plan is effective in protecting remaining open space. It is also a useful tool in long range planning to maintain and improve the character and aesthetics of the community. Since open space parcels include conservation, recreation, agricultural, park, buffer and conservation areas, the process sets future land use patterns and trends. The open space plan sets a framework for overall sound planning for the community.

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