

## Chapter 5: Open Space and Recreation

This chapter inventories Acton's existing open space and recreation resources. This chapter includes:

- An inventory of existing open space.
- An inventory of existing recreation resources.
- A brief section on Acton's 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan.

### **Why Acton's Existing Open Space and Recreation Resources are Important to the Comprehensive Plan**

Acton was settled in the 1600s because it had many open meadows for grazing. To this day Acton's open spaces and natural resources play a crucial role in establishing the Town's rural characteristics of protected natural areas with trails, tree-lined roads, stonewalls, ponds, meadows, wetlands, forests, wildlife habitats, and farmland. These characteristics and areas for recreation help define its sense of place and contribute greatly to the quality of life of its residents.

One of the primary ways to help preserve the Town's character that was identified in developing a vision for Acton's future was the preservation and additional acquisition of open space.

The following is a summary of some of the most important considerations for the development of the comprehensive community plan. Potential conflicts may exist between identified goals related to natural resources and other components of the Plan, such as traffic and economic development.

- Acton has a vital interest in expanding protected open space as a strategy for preserving town character, protecting water supply and other environmental resources, and improving recreational opportunities.
- Protecting open space can also play an important role as a strategy for assuring the town's future sustainability.
- Ongoing support for and improvement of Acton's parks and recreational facilities can help assure the town's future as a livable community.

### **Relationship to Planning Goals**

*Goal: Preserve and Enhance Town Character*

Natural resources and protected open spaces are critical aspects of Acton's character. Wetland, forest, ecological, and topographic/geologic features, as well as recreation potential, are major factors considered when deciding to protect open space.

*Goal: Ensure Environmental Sustainability*

Open space and recreation are important for a sustainable future. Forests and wetlands help clean the air, convert carbon dioxide to wood, provide oxygen, and help keep the surrounding area cool. Recreation helps residents maintain their physical and mental health.

*Goal: Improve Connections*

## Open Space and Recreation

Open space and recreation provide places for quality connections between people as they enjoy nature or sports together. Open space can also directly provide connections via trails—connecting one place to another.

### *Goal: Enable Diversity and Inclusion*

Recreation and enjoying nature have nearly universal appeal. Diverse forms of recreation promote inclusion as diverse groups play together.

### *Goal: Provide Places for Gathering*

Open space and recreation areas provide important gathering places and opportunities for developing future places for gathering.

### *Goal: Maintain and Enhance Town Assets*

Open space and recreation areas are among the Town's most important assets. Open space is also a means for protecting such town assets as water resources.

## **Summary of Key Points**

### *Open Space Resources*

- Approximately 25% of Acton's 13,000 acres of land (3,253 acres) is in some form of public open space or recreation use. This is a higher percentage than Chelmsford, Westford and Littleton, but less than Concord, Carlisle, Maynard and Stow, and about the same as Boxborough.
- More than 2,000 acres are permanently protected (Conservation Commission – 1,615 acres, Water District – 390 acres).
- There are over 6 miles of paths and 15 miles of trails in Acton including a portion of the Bay Circuit Trail – a 200 mile greenway corridor between Rt. 495 & Rt. 95.
- Some of the major open spaces include: Acton Arboretum, Great Hill, Camp Acton, Spring Hill, Grassy Pond, Wills Hole, NARA Park, and Nagog Hill – All have trail systems and maps available on-line (see <http://www.actontrails.org> ).
- Many of the Town's open spaces protect important natural resources, as well as historic and geological features.
- Many privately owned open spaces (common land, back land, etc.) contribute to the Town's sense of nature, and some create important corridors. Open space in cluster developments is protected by Special Permit Conditions.

### *Recreation Resources*

- Recreation Department has an active and varied program of activities and events.
- Recreation Department manages activities at:
  - 7 baseball/softball fields,
  - 9 soccer fields,
  - 1 outdoor basketball court,
  - 7 playgrounds,
  - 2 practice fields,
  - 2 fishing areas,
  - 1 swimming beach,
  - 1 amphitheater,
  - a skate park, and
  - 3 picnic areas.

## Open Space and Recreation

- Schools have fields and indoor recreation facilities.
- There are two Community Garden sites – North Acton Community Gardens and Morrison Farm Community Gardens.
- Major recreation sites include NARA Park, School Street Field, Veteran’s Field, Elm Street Fields, Great Hill, Jones Field, and Gardener Field.
- There is one golf course in town and two in adjacent towns.

### Existing Open Space

Acton has a considerable amount of open space. *The following table summarizes the major town, state, and privately owned open space acreage according to MassGIS and Acton GIS information.*

Table 5.1: Open Space Acreage

Owner	Total Acres
Town of Acton (includes School Dept. & other)	698
Town of Acton Conservation Commission	1,615
Town of Acton Water Department	390
Commonwealth of Massachusetts (includes DOC)	164
Non-profit Land	78
Private Land (includes golf course, common land & other)	291
Other Town (Maynard, Concord) Land	71
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,307</b>

This represents 25% of the town’s total area. This is higher than Chelmsford, Westford and Littleton, but less than Concord, Carlisle, Maynard and Stow and about the same as Boxborough. However, not all of the open space is permanently protected. Conservation Commission (1,615 acres) and Water Department (390 acres) lands are generally permanently protected. The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) generally considers most Commonwealth lands, other than Executive Office of Transportation land, as permanently protected but some may be subject to future development. School Department, cemeteries, and Recreation Department lands are considered to have limited protection because their character can be altered by future facility construction. Much of the other Town land is considered to be unprotected and some is developed for town services.

*Figure 5.1 shows the town’s extensive open space.*

Figure 5.1: Acton Open Space  
[see “2010 12 08 5-Open Space and Recreation - Maps”]

There are over 6 miles of paths and 15 miles of trails in Acton including a portion of the Bay Circuit Trail – a 200 mile greenway corridor between Rt. 495 & Rt. 95.

Many of the town’s open spaces protect important natural resources, as well as historic and geological features. The Massachusetts Audubon Society has developed an “Index of Ecological Integrity” that tracks and ranks towns in terms of their ecological quality of wildlife habitat as sites for biodiversity. Acton ranks 176 out of 351 in terms of percent of land protected. (See

appendix for a chart comparing Acton and nearby towns developed from the Massachusetts Audubon Losing Ground website.)

In 1975 Acton had permanently protected just over 1,000 acres and by 2010 more than 2,300 acres (about .1 acre per capita). The open space map shows protected, developed, and unprotected land in Acton.

The Massachusetts Audubon Losing Ground report (based on MassGIS orthophoto interpretation) showed that, from 1999 to 2005, a total of 141 acres (92 acres of forest, 33 acres of farmland, and 16 acres of other open land) were converted from natural land (unprotected open space) to development.

## Existing Recreation Resources

The Conservation Commission lands are available for passive recreation—hiking, nature study, etc. Active recreation areas, fields for sports, etc., are distributed around town. Town-owned lands provide the most significant areas of recreational space for residents. The most obvious of these lands are several recreation areas and some sites owned by the School Department that have ball fields, courts and play equipment that are available to residents in off-school hours. There are also several privately owned areas and sport/exercise clubs that provide recreation opportunities for their members and town residents. See the Appendix for a complete listing of the town’s park and recreation resources. The locations of recreation resources, with a one half mile radius to show convenient walking distance, are shown on Figure 5.4.

## Recreation Standards

The National Recreation and Park Association is the only organization that has suggested standards for recreation facilities—including playgrounds, playfields, neighborhood parks, community parks, regional parks, baseball fields, trails, tennis courts, soccer fields, football fields, picnic areas, golf courses, indoor recreation centers, and water sports facilities.

*The accompanying table is a brief analysis of Acton’s existing recreation facilities compared to national standards.*

Table 5.2: Recreation Standards

Type	Standard	Suggested for 2010 Population	Suggested for 2020 Population	Existing	Needed to Meet 2020 Suggestion
Playgrounds and Playfields	1.5 acres per 800 persons	39.4 acres	42 acres	14.7 acres not counting soccer fields	27.3 acres
Neighborhood Parks	2 acres per 1,000 persons	44 acres	acres	?	?
Community Park Min size 40 acres	3.5 acres per 1,000 persons	74 acres	77 acres	58.5 acres NARA	18.5 acres
Regional Park	15 acres	500 acres	acres	?	?

## Open Space and Recreation

Min size 500 acres	per 1,000 persons				
Baseball/Softball Fields	1 per 1,500 persons	14	15	11 including school fields	3
Trails	3 mile per 3,000 persons	7 miles	7.3 miles	?	?
Tennis Courts	1 per 1,500 persons	14	15	11 + many private or commercial	3
Football/Soccer Fields	1 per 2,000 persons	10	11	14	0
Picnic Areas	4 acres per 1,000 persons	84 acres	90 acres	2.6 acres + other areas available	?
Golf Course	1 per 25,000 persons	1	1	1 plus two nearby	0
Indoor Recreation Center	1 per 10,000 persons	2	2	Schools Access?	?
Water Sports Rowing, Fishing	1 lake or river per 25,000 persons	1	1	3	0

*Standards suggested by National Recreation and Park Association.*

*Note: Some fields are multi-use. 2020 Population is projected to be 22,500.*

While national standards are useful for comparisons they do not define local needs and should not limit the desires of residents to improve their quality of life—minimums are not meant to be maximums. It should also be noted that the standards are developed from national averages and may not be appropriate for every city or town. Adequate recreation facilities are important for good health and enjoyment. It is also important to recognize the quality of the town's facilities. Good maintenance and management are crucial.

*Figure 5.2 shows the town's recreational resources.*

Figure 5.2: Acton Recreational Resources  
[see "2010 12 08 5-Open Space and Recreation - Maps"]

## Acton's 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan

Acton has a rich natural heritage worthy of recognition and pride. Several important initiatives have focused attention on the importance of open space and recreation. In 2002 Acton completed its Open Space and Recreation Plan. It included the following three goals and their related objectives.

- Preserve the remaining elements of Acton's rural character.
  - Improve communication from town staff and/or the Board of Selectmen regarding potential change of use for open space parcels.
  - Address citizens' concerns about mitigating growth.
  - Maintain the present ratio of protected open space per resident of 81 acres per 1,000 residents.
  - Preserve natural and manmade features that contribute to Acton's character such as open fields, woodlands, ponds, country roads, scenic vistas, and stone walls.
  - Preserve open space and develop additional public open spaces and parkland bordering Fort Pond Brook, Nashoba Brook, and the Assabet River.
  - Protect and maintain the remaining farmland in town, including the preservation of the open fields along Route 2.
  - Through advocacy create an environment that facilitates and encourages farming in Acton.
- Protect Acton's environmental resources.
  - Protect the quality and quantity of Acton's water supply.
  - Protect wildlife corridors, through land acquisition and public education.
  - Ensure the restoration of polluted environmental resources.
  - Strictly enforce federal, state, and local environmental laws.
- Improve recreational opportunities.
  - Promoted the development of the two regional bike trails planned to run through Acton.
  - Enhance possibilities for hiking, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding, boating and fishing on conservation lands. Expand public outreach to better inform the public of our available passive recreation opportunities.
  - Provide additional athletic fields to meet the needs of the town's growing population.
  - Encourage regional planning with abutting towns in order to create more expansive human (see 3b above) and wildlife (see 2b above) corridors.
  - Ensure handicapped accessibility is available for recreation activities (e.g. trails, picnicking, spitting at athletic fields, water-based recreation and camping) at both recreation and conservation areas.

## **Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Existing Open Space and Recreation Conditions**

- Acton still has some small agricultural areas that help provide some diversity of habitat. These scattered agricultural areas have value for wildlife and help provide some of the distinctive character of the town.
- Much of the town's wildlife diversity is a result of its variety of habitat types. The challenge of maintaining that diversity will require protection of both small and large areas like those identified in the Priority Habitats and BioMap Core Areas and areas of different habitats; non-forested wetlands, forested uplands, open/vacant areas, and open space corridors that make connections between areas.
- Protection of Priority Habitats and BioMap Core Areas is an important conservation priority for the region as well as the town. These areas include several already protected areas. There is an opportunity to expand protection of these important resource areas.
- Part of the town's scenic quality is due to the visual impact of broad vistas and more intimate views. Retaining that quality will be an on-going challenge and opportunity.

## Appendix

### What's protected and what's not and how does Acton compare to other towns?

Table 5.3: Protected Land in Acton and Surrounding Towns

	<b>Acton</b>	<b>Concord</b>	<b>Carlisle</b>	<b>Westford</b>	<b>Maynard</b>	<b>Stow</b>	<b>Littleton</b>
<b>Protected Acres</b>	2,328 (169)	4,910 (74)	2,698 (149)	2,055 (189)	1,081 (263)	1,883 (198)	1,040 (267)
<b>Percent Protected</b>	17.9% (176)	29.7% (68)	27.2% (89)	10.2% (264)	31.5% (57)	16.4% (194)	9.3% (275)
<b>Protected Acres/Capita</b>	0.11 .19	0.28 .24	0.55 .39	0.09 .23	0.1 .19	0.28 .38	0.12 .22
<b>1971 IEI</b>	(250)	(226)	(136)	(229)	(244)	(140)	(231)
<b>2005 IEI</b>	(256)	(198)	(155)	(251)	(212)	(160)	(246)
<b>% Loss in IEI 71-05</b>	49.3% (62)	30.5% (172)	40.0% (117)	57.4% (13)	25.8% (200)	39.0% (123)	51.1% (50)

Note: IEI = Index of Ecological Integrity (Massachusetts Audubon Society, *Losing Ground*, 2009 [www.massaudubon.org/losingground](http://www.massaudubon.org/losingground)), Rank in relation to other towns/cities is shown in parentheses. There are 351 towns/cities in Massachusetts

**Acton Recreation Sites**

Table 5.4: Acton Recreation Sites

<b>Site Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Facilities</b>	<b>Acres</b>
North Acton Community Gardens	off Route 27 in North Acton	Community garden plots	5.1
Morrison Farm Community Gardens	116 Concord Road	Community Gardens	35
Concord Road Field	near Ice House Pond	Soccer Field	1.5
Elm Street Fields	next to Douglas School	Playground, picnic area, tennis courts, multi-purpose field	4.8
Gardner	Mass. Ave. near Kinsey Road	Playground, basketball court, practice field	1.7
Goward Playground	Back of Town Hall	Playground	0.6
Great Hill	Off School Street behind South Acton Firehouse	Soccer fields, playground,, practice field, natural area	190
Hart Field	80 Taylor Road/Conant Elementary School	Baseball/softball field, playground, school	24
Ice House Pond	Off Concord Road	Picnic area, fishing area., pond	19.4
Jones Field	Off Martin Street	Playground, Baseball diamond	4.4
Little Great Hill	Off School Street behind South Acton Firehouse	Soccer Field (small)	0.2
MacPherson Field	Conant School	Baseball diamond	0.7
NARA Park	25 Ledge Rock Way	Playground, Pond and Beach, trail, softball field, picnic area with pavilion, amphitheater, fishing area, soccer field	58.5
School Street Field	347 School Street	Soccer fields	4.4
T J O'Grady Skate Park	Hayward Road near ABRHS	Skateboarding and rollerblading park	?
Canoe Landing	Route 62 at Assabet River	Canoe launch site	?
Veteran's Field	655 Main Street	Playground, baseball diamonds	13
Acton-Boxborough Schools	Hayward Road	Tennis courts, football/soccer field, track, baseball diamonds, playground, multi-purpose field, soccer fields, school facilities	102

*Source: Acton Recreation Department Webpage, MassGIS, ActonGIS, Acton Stream Teams brochure, 2008 aerial photos.*

**List of Acton Farm Land**

Chapter 61 lands – 97 acres

- Stonefield Farm

## Open Space and Recreation

- 91 Martin Street, South Acton  
61.5 acres including cropland and greenhouses
- Cucurbit Farm  
32 Parker Street  
18.4 acres including cropland and small forest area
- Idlewilde Farm  
366 Central Street  
25 acres and some other scattered fields
- Chapter 59 land
- Butter Brook Farm  
982 Main Street  
10.7 acres including cropland and forest
- State Land
- Northeastern Correctional Facility farm fields  
Route 2 gateway area  
73 acres