

Chapter 5: Open Space and Recreation

This chapter inventories Acton's existing open space and recreation resources. Open space includes forest, wetlands and streams, most agricultural land and other undeveloped uplands. It can be viewed as the town's green infrastructure. This chapter includes:

- An inventory of existing protected open space.
- An inventory of existing recreation resources.
- A brief section on Acton's 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan.
- A list of Opportunities and Challenges posed by the existing conditions.

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

Acton was settled by European colonists in the 1600s because it had many open meadows for grazing. To this day Acton's open spaces and natural resources provide 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, protection, and additional acquisition of open space.

Potential conflicts may exist between identified goals related to open space and natural resource protection and other components of the Plan, such as traffic and economic development.

Relationship to Planning Goals

Goal: Preserve and Enhance Town Character

Natural resources and protected open spaces are critical aspects of Acton's character. Wetland, grassland, forest, ecological, and topographic/geologic features, as well as recreation potential and the connectivity to currently protected open spaces, 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 and water, convert carbon dioxide to plant material, provide oxygen, and help keep the surrounding area cool. Recreation helps residents maintain their physical and mental health. Open space in agricultural use advances a sustainability objective. Protecting open space can help ensure that significant wildlife habitat does not become further fragmented and is sustained.

Goal: Improve Connections

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

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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 include important gathering places and provide opportunities for developing future places for gathering safely.

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 other town assets such as water resources, historical sites, plants, and wildlife.

Goal: Maintain and Improve the Financial Well-being of the Town

Investment in open space must be considered in the context of competing priorities for the use of Community Preservation Act funds and other funds. Open space almost always consumes less town services than developed space. Some, but not all, developed space generates more in tax revenue than it uses in services. Some open space is privately owned and still generates some tax revenue.

Key Points

Open Space Resources

- Approximately 29% of Acton's 13,000 acres of land (3,717 acres) is in some form of public open space or recreation use. This is a higher percentage than Chelmsford, Westford, Boxborough, and Littleton, but less than Concord, Carlisle, Maynard, and Stow.
- More than 2,000 acres are considered permanently protected (Conservation Commission – 1,642 acres, Water District – 395 acres).
- There are over 6 miles of paved 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

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- 2 practice fields
- 2 fishing areas
- 1 swimming beach
- 1 amphitheater
- a skate park
- 3 picnic areas
- 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 several 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 (excluding private agricultural land) according to MassGIS and Acton GIS information.

Table 5.1: Open Space Acreage

Owner	Total Acres
Town of Acton (includes School Dept. & other)	773
Town of Acton Conservation Commission	1,642
Town of Acton Water Department	395
Commonwealth of Massachusetts (includes Department Of Corrections)	192
Non-profit Land	78
Private Land (includes golf course, common land & other)	659
Other Town (Maynard, Concord) Land	71
Total	3,810

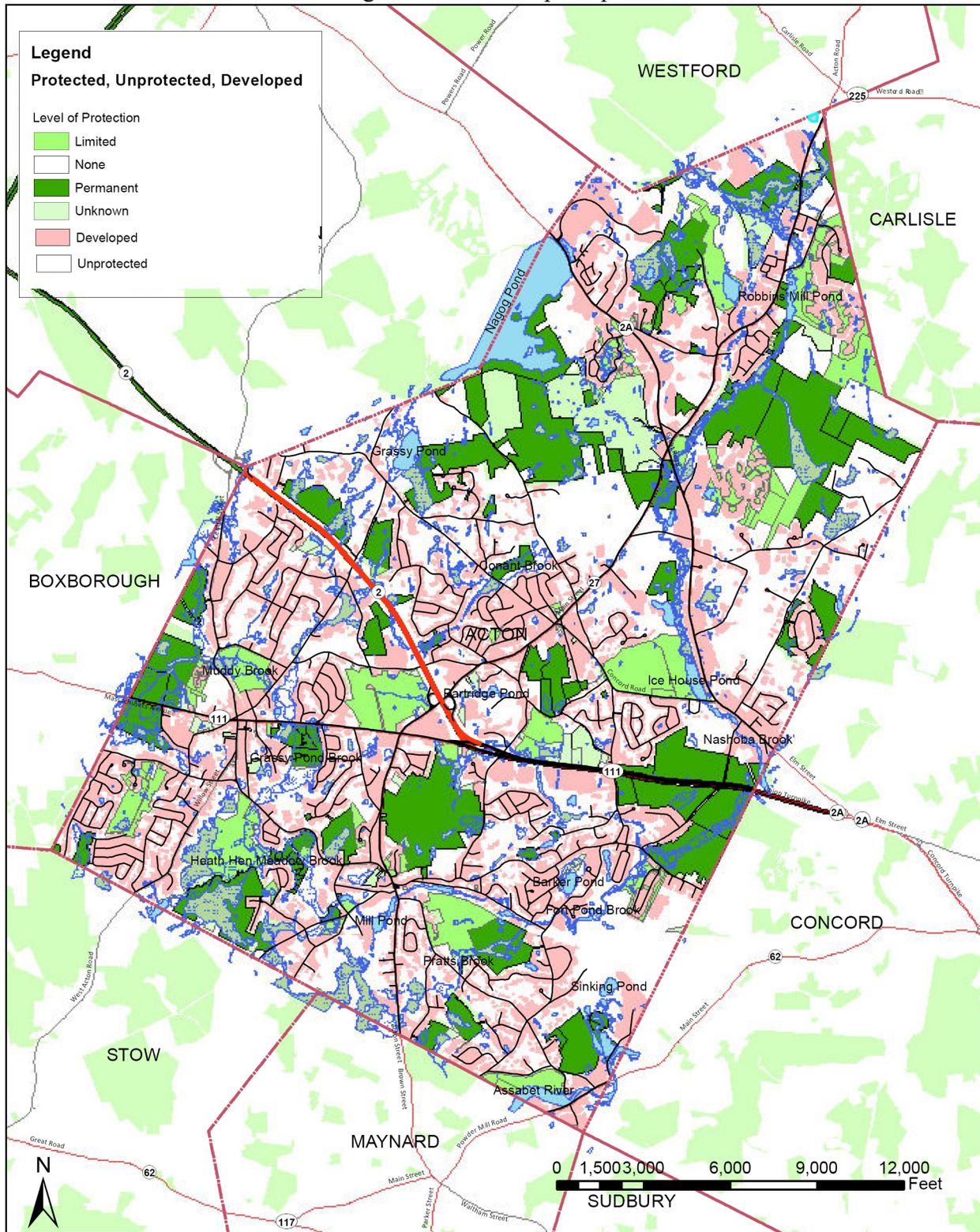
This represents 29% of the town’s total area. This is higher than Chelmsford, Boxborough, Westford and Littleton, but less than Concord, Carlisle, Maynard and Stow. However, not all of the open space is permanently protected. Conservation Commission (1,642 acres) and Water Department (395 acres) lands are generally considered permanently protected. Some advocate additional layers of protection, such as conservation restrictions, for key conservation areas to assure that they are truly 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.

An additional 119 acres of open space land are coming for an acceptance vote at the 2011 Town Meeting. This will be common land/open space set aside for municipal use as part of the Robbins Mill subdivision. It will include about four acres of recreation land (playground and ball field).

Open Space and Recreation

Figure 5.1 shows the town's extensive open space.

Figure 5.1: Acton Open Space



Open Space and Recreation

There are over 6 miles of paved paths and 15 miles of trails in Acton including a portion of the Bay Circuit Trail – a 200 mile greenway corridor between the two major highways that circle Boston, 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.

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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	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	40 acres NARA	37 acres
Regional Park Min size 500 acres	15 acres per 1,000 persons	500 acres	acres	?	?
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 several nearby	0
Indoor Recreation Center	1 per 10,000 persons	2	2	Schools Access? Private/ membership facilities	?
Water Sports Rowing, Fishing	1 lake or river per 25,000 persons	1	1	3	0

Standards suggested by National Recreation and Park Association.

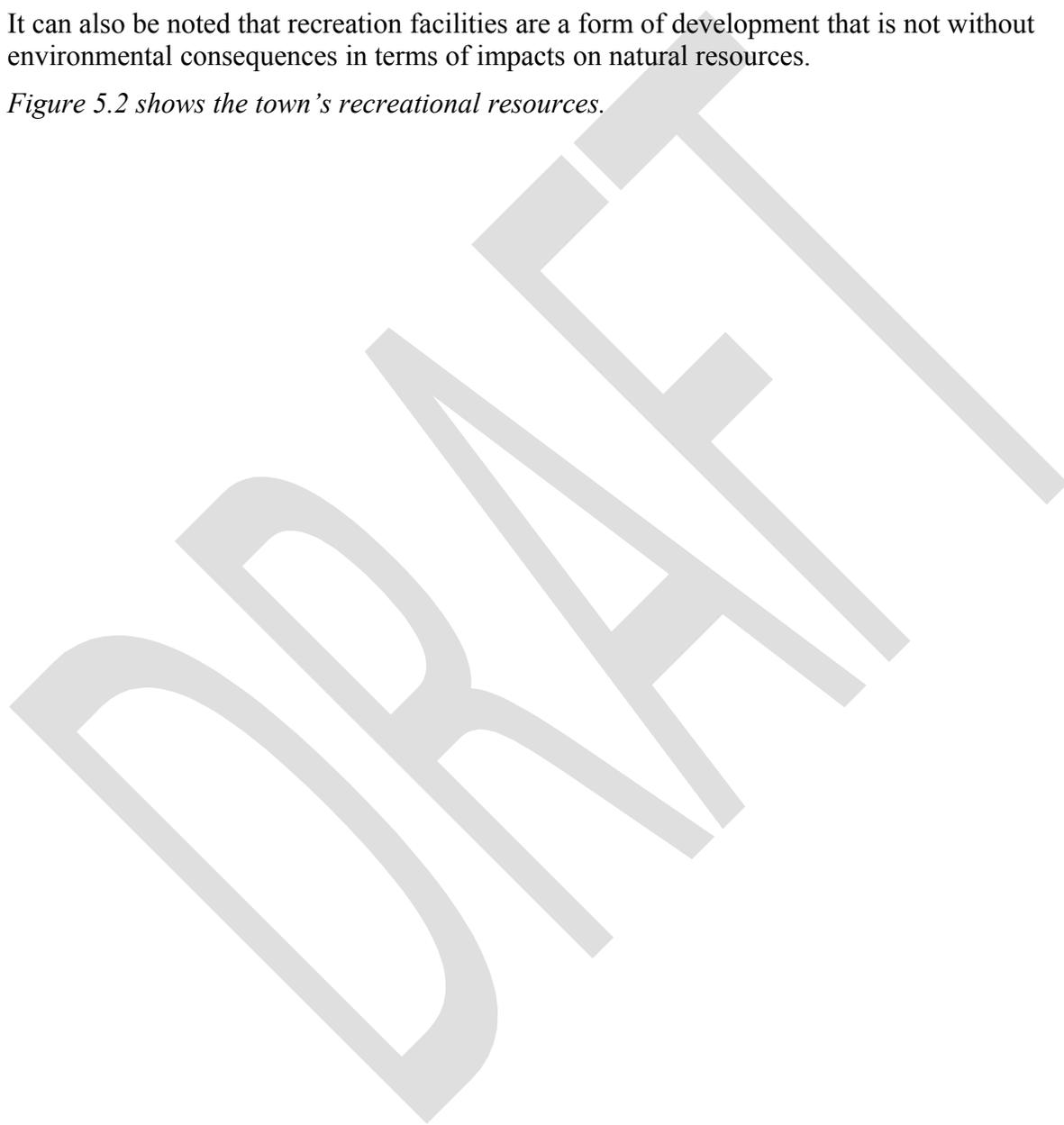
Note: Some fields are multi-use. 2020 Population is projected to be 22,500.

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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.

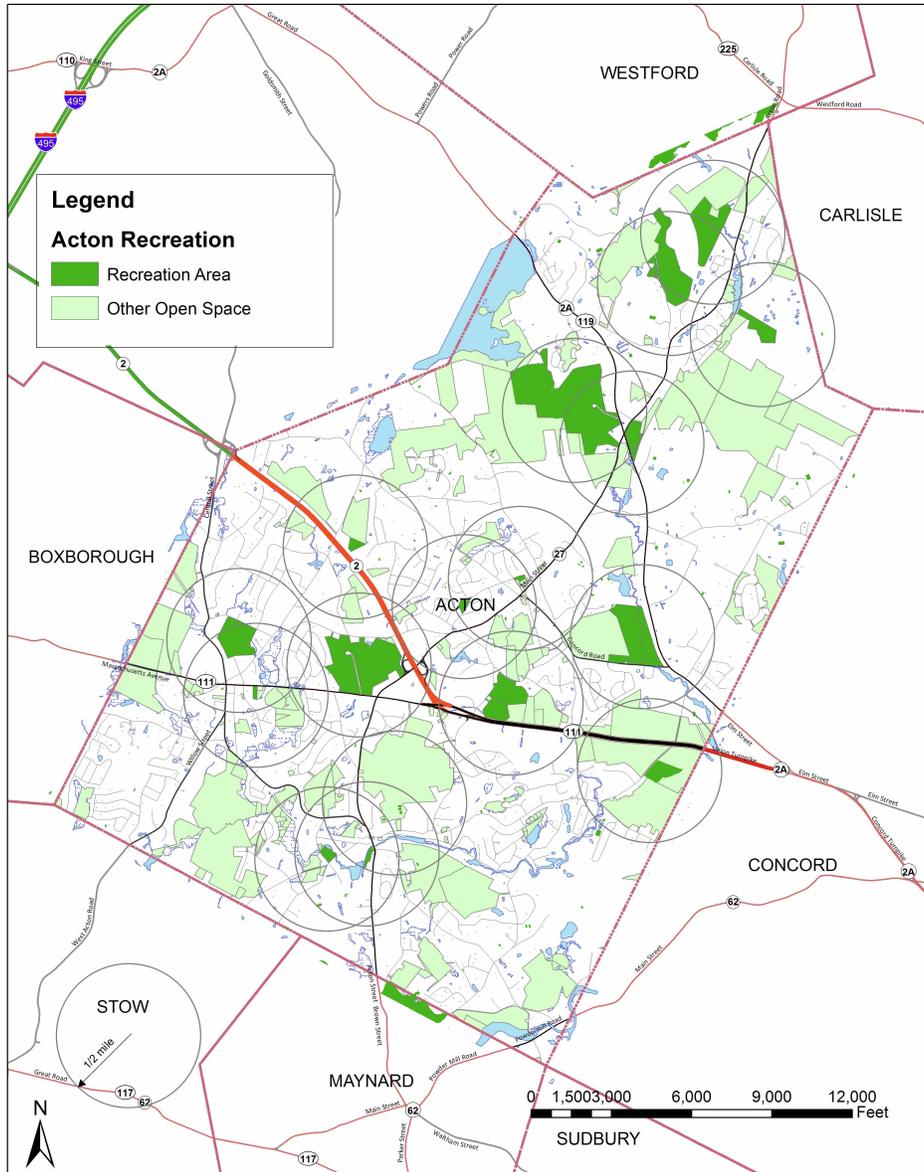
It can also be noted that recreation facilities are a form of development that is not without environmental consequences in terms of impacts on natural resources.

Figure 5.2 shows the town's recreational resources.



Open Space and Recreation

Figure 5.2: Acton Recreational Resources



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. The goals were the result of a town-wide survey and the input of the Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee, Land Stewardship Committee, Recreation Commission, and the Natural Resources Department staff. These groups are currently involved in an update of the Open Space and Recreation Plan that is due to be completed in 2011.

- 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.

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- Ensure handicapped accessibility is available for recreation activities (e.g. trails, picnicking, athletic fields, water-based recreation and camping) at both recreation and conservation areas.

Overall Summary of Existing Conditions

Acton has a large proportion of public open space and recreation land, two-thirds of it considered permanently protected. The Open Space Committee has considered conservation restrictions on all of the Town owned conservation land to assure an even greater level of protection. This open space includes many important natural resources and historical and geological features, and the active recreation land supports a wide variety of organized and informal activity. Acton's Open Space and Recreation Plan (currently being updated) includes goals that are consistent with the goals of the Acton 2020 Plan, and it identifies priority sites for acquisition that can help advance the Acton 2020 goals including sustainability and preservation of town character. The following are opportunities to advance the open space and recreation goals and the challenges that must be addressed to do that.

Opportunities and Challenges Posed by Existing Open Space and Recreation Conditions

- Acton still has some small privately owned and operated farms producing produce sold in local markets. These agricultural areas are highlighted in the Open Space and Recreation Plan as important assets deserving of protection. They also 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. They also have a greater value as sustainable, local sources of food.
- 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, grasslands, 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.

In conclusion, Acton has done an admirable job of preserving and managing open space and recreation resources, but continuing investment and effort to manage these resources will pay dividends in the Town's quality of life, help to preserve its character, and advance the goal of ensuring environmental sustainability.

Appendix

Protected Land

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

	Acton	Concord	Carlisle	Westford	Maynard	Stow	Littleton
Protected Acres	2,328 (169)	4,910 (74)	2,698 (149)	2,055 (189)	1,081 (263)	1,883 (198)	1,040 (267)
Percent Protected	17.9% (176)	29.7% (68)	27.2% (89)	10.2% (264)	31.5% (57)	16.4% (194)	9.3% (275)
Protected Acres/Capita	0.11 .19	0.28 .24	0.55 .39	0.09 .23	0.1 .19	0.28 .38	0.12 .22
1971 IEI	(250)	(226)	(136)	(229)	(244)	(140)	(231)
2005 IEI	(256)	(198)	(155)	(251)	(212)	(160)	(246)
% Loss in IEI 71-05	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](http://www.massaudubon.org/losingground), 2009 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

Site Name	Location	Facilities	Acres
North Acton Community Gardens	off Route 27 in North Acton	Community garden plots	5.1
Morrison Farm Community Gardens	116 Concord Road	Community Gardens	2
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, basketball court	0.6
Great Hill	Off School Street behind South Acton Firehouse	Soccer fields, 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, 1-mile accessible path, softball field, picnic area with pavilion, amphitheater, fishing area, soccer field	40
School Street Field	347 School Street	Soccer fields	14.4
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.

Farm Land in Acton

Chapter 61 lands – 97 acres

- Stonefield Farm
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

Open Space and Recreation

Acton Conservation Restrictions

FY	Grantor	Grantee	Acres	Term	Received	Approved	Book	Page	Comments
79	Harold & Devena Buxton	Town	13.90		12-Dec-78	27-Dec-78	13615	339	
90	R.Smith Associates, Inc.	Town	49.77	p	2-Oct-89	02-Feb-90	20065	420	
98	The Haartz Corp.	Con.Com.& town	14.5	p	15-Oct-96	10-Jan-97	27757	537	Industrial District Buffer
02	James & Mary Donald	SVT	11.20	P	15-Mar-00	13-Dec-01	34449	6	660' unnamed tributary to Fort Pond Brook
05	Leo F. Bertolami	Town	3.59	P	15-Apr-04	28-Oct-04			Canoe access part of DEP wetlands permit
05	Paul & Alan Wagner	Acton Water Supply	0.12	P	21-Jul-04	25-May-05			Groundwater protection/See Concord #118
07	The Haartz Corp.	Con.Com.& town	6.30	P	6-Jun-06	21-May-07	50696	555	Condition of permit
	The Woodlands @ Laurel Hills	Town	6.67	P	5-Oct-06				See Westford CR#59
07	William & Nancy Kingman	Acton Cons. Trust	6.41	P	17-Oct-06	07-Dec-06			Protects scenic view
08	John and Elizabeth Valintine	Carlisle Cons. Foundation	14.19	P	29-Oct-08	29-Dec-08	13615	339	See Carlisle #63

Horse Farms in Acton

Compiled by Susan Mitchell-Hardt (updated January 28, 2010)

For the purpose of this list a horse farm is defined as a property where one horse or more are kept, will be kept, or were recently kept.

Marilee Havel, 54 Esterbrook Road

Kim Sieurin, Esterbrook Horse Farm, 41 Esterbrook Road

Bill and Nancy Kingman, 65 Esterbrook Road

Stephanie & Graham Knowland, 29 Esterbrook Road

Rita McConnon, Hybrid Farm, 217 Nagog Hill Road

Morene Bodner, Lythrum Farm, 310 Nagog Hill Road

David & Carol Stone, Liberty Tree Farm, 24 Liberty Street

Amy Davis, 42 Carlisle Road

Ben and Andrea Starr, 22R Elm Street

Judy Kotanchik 48 Nashoba Road

Ainslee Sheridan, 14 Breezy Point

James and Maria Crowley, 19 Spring Hill Road

Pine Feather Farm, 366 Pope Road

Spring Hill Farm, 328 Pope Road

Stoneymeade Farm, 181 Pope Road

Bear Spot Farm, 276 Pope Road

David Veo, 145 Strawberry Hill Road (currently has cows, but has had horses)

Paul and Peggy Hebert, Hennesey Farm, 88 Prospect Street (currently has sheep, but has had horses)