

VII. OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION

INTRODUCTION

Open space is essential to the quality of life within the community and should be viewed as the Town’s “green infrastructure” that supports and links the built and natural environments. It consists of a network of waterways, wetlands, woodland and forests, parks and conservation lands, and working farms. It provides ecological, social, economic and health benefits which can be described as follows:³¹

- **Ecological benefits:** Open space provides natural water filtration, drinking water protection, flood and erosion control, wildlife habitat and migration stopovers, and biodiversity conservation. Biodiversity encompasses all life and includes genetics, species, ecosystems and ecological processes.
- **Social benefits:** Open space contributes to community and individual quality of life by providing opportunities for recreational, civic, social and education interactions. It can contribute to community identity and sense of place by connecting residents to their natural and cultural heritage and by linking neighborhoods to the larger community.
- **Economic benefits:** Open space is often important for attracting and maintaining businesses in a community and a region. Proximity to open space often increases land values, and recreation and leisure activities can make significant economic contributions. Natural processes such as water filtration are much less expensive for communities than engineered alternatives such as water treatment plants.
- **Health benefits:** Access to parks, greenways and trails creates recreational opportunities and encourages a physically active lifestyle. Open space helps to ensure clean and safe community water supplies and food production resources. It also mitigates air, water and noise pollution.

Goal Statement: *Manage, preserve and protect the open space and recreation resources and invest in the expansion of these areas in order to enhance the quality of life.*

- *Encourage the utilization and enjoyment of open space and recreational resources by town residents.*
- *Improve the management and maintenance of the town’s open space and recreation assets.*
- *Provide connections between the town’s open spaces and recreation areas, and provide a link to regional resources and facilities, where appropriate.*
- *Provide a broad range of recreational opportunities for residents of all age groups and abilities.*

³¹ American Planning Association, “Seven Principles of Green Infrastructure”, December 2002.

Chelmsford's green infrastructure must be managed and enhanced to support natural systems, protect groundwater, minimize flooding, improve economic viability, build community, and increase the well-being of residents. This section of the Master Plan provides an updated summary of the inventory of the Town's lands of conservation and recreation interests, and articulates the needs of the community, based on input received during the public input and plan development processes.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Approximately 991.16 acres of the 2,620.42 acres classified as open space in Chelmsford are considered permanently protected. For purposes of the Master Plan, open space is defined as land that, for the most part, is free of structures. Permanently protected lands include state lands and municipal properties subject to Article 97, a conservation restriction or other deed restriction, as well as private properties subject to a conservation restriction or deed restriction. Unprotected lands of conservation and recreation interest include those that are held for open space, historic or recreation purposes, but that are not permanently protected. Parcels that are under a Chapter 61, 61A or 61B agreement are considered to have limited protection.

Very little vacant land remains in Town, as shown in the Land Use section of this Master Plan. In 2008, the Town had 4,950 acres of undeveloped land³², of which 680 acres were considered to be developable.³³ As part of the Master Plan process, NMCOG staff updated the Town's inventory of lands of conservation and recreation interest, through an analysis of the Assessor's database, with input and review by Town staff and the Master Plan Committee. The inventory was categorized and compiled in matrix form using the Open Space and Recreation Plan Requirements outlined by the Division of Conservation Services (DCS). A copy of the updated NMCOG inventory is contained in Appendix D. The open space and recreation parcels are also shown on Map 17. A more detailed description and inventory of the individual properties can be found in the Town's Open Space and Recreation Plan prepared by the Town's Community Development Department. The Community Development Department's inventory was compiled using a different methodology than the one utilized by NMCOG.

The NMCOG open space and recreation parcels are broken out below according to ownership classification, i.e. publicly-owned and privately owned parcels. The information is broken out further in subsequent sections of this chapter, according to the level of protection from development that is afforded each property in the inventory by public, private and nonprofit owners.

³² McConnell Land Use Data, University of Massachusetts

³³ 2008 Chelmsford Buildup Analysis Update, Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

Table 6.1 below summarizes NMCOG’s Open Space and Recreation Land Inventory by ownership and classification (regardless of level of protection). The data shows that the Town’s open space inventory now contains 2,620.42 acres, compared to 2,209.97 acres in 2003.

TABLE 6.1
2009 OPEN SPACE LAND ACREAGE BY OWNERSHIP/CLASSIFICATION

Ownership/Category	Acreage
Commonwealth of Massachusetts	73.75
Town of Chelmsford	1,439.34
Chelmsford Land Conservation Trust	74.28
Conservation Restrictions	71.03
Water Supply Districts	391.24
Cemeteries (Public)	56.38
City of Lowell	14.20
Chapter 61	112.23
Chapter 61A	256.97
Chapter 61B	28.93
Institutional and Other Private	102.07
Total	2,620.42

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

Permanently Protected Open Space

Permanently protected open space includes lands dedicated to conservation and wildlife habitat by state agencies, non-profit organizations, and the Town, as well privately-owned land under a conservation restriction (CR).

Chelmsford has nearly one thousand acres of permanently protected open space owned by the State, the Town, the Chelmsford Land Conservation Trust and the Water Supply Districts, or subject to a Conservation Restriction. Protected open space provides a number of important benefits to the community including water supply protection, preservation of natural resources and habitats, recreational opportunities, and retention of community character. Table 6.2 below summarizes the statistics regarding level of protection and ownership of the permanently protected parcels.

TABLE 6.2
PERMANENTLY PROTECTED LANDS

Ownership/Protection	Number of Parcels	Total Acreage
Commonwealth of Massachusetts	4	64.97
Town of Chelmsford	100	778.11
Chelmsford Land Conservation Trust	13	74.28
Conservation Restrictions (Public and Private)	10	71.03
Water Supply Districts	2	2.77
Total	129	991.16

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

State Lands: The State owns a total of seven parcels in Chelmsford, of which four (4) are permanently protected, comprising 64.97 acres. The two largest parcels are on Billerica Road (27.64 acres) and off Zeus Drive (20.60 acres). The State also owns the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail right-of-way, which runs through the Town, from the Lowell/Chelmsford line near Cross Point, to the Chelmsford/Westford line near Heart Pond.



Cranberry Bog Reservation in the winter months.

Town Lands: The Town owns 778.11 acres of permanently protected land. The five largest protected areas are the Cranberry Bog Reservation (180 acres), Russell Mill Town Forest on Mill Road (132 acres), the Lime Quarry Reservation on Littleton Road (60 acres), the George B.B. Wright Reservation (90.1 acres), and the Thanksgiving Forest (45.6 acres). It should be noted that only twenty (20) of the Town-owned, permanently protected parcels contain more than ten (10) acres.

Water Supply Lands: There are a total of 391.24 acres of water supply lands owned by the three Water Supply Districts within the Town, however, only two (2) parcels containing 2.77 acres are classified as permanently protected.

Conservation Restrictions (CR): A Conservation Restriction is a voluntary and legally binding document through which a land owner agrees to limit the use of his or her property for the purpose of protecting the conservation value of the land. The land owner receives an immediate tax deduction, and the grantee, usually a non-profit or municipal entity, receives assurance that the land will not be developed. There is one (1) Town-owned permanently protected parcel totaling 5.06 acres, and are nine (9) privately-owned permanently protected parcels totaling 65.97 acres, subject to a CR.

Land Trust Parcels: There are thirteen (13) parcels totaling 74.28 acres owned by the Chelmsford Land Conservation Trust. The largest land area held by the Trust is the Warren Wildlife Sanctuary (24 acres) on Boston Road.

Unprotected/Limited Protection Lands

Unprotected and limited protection lands include public lands currently held as open space, historic parcels, or recreation land that does not have legal permanent protection, as well as private parcels with limited or no restrictions on development. Limited protection open space includes land covered by revocable restrictions against development or a change in use. A farm that is under a Chapter 61A agreement is an example of temporarily protected open space. Similarly, school athletic fields, or other open space on school grounds, could be converted to another use and is included within this category. The following provides a summary of properties that fall under this classification:

Schools: There are 230.46 acres of school property in Chelmsford that are not permanently protected, including school athletic fields and playgrounds.

Town Parks: The Town owns 86.06 acres of park and playground land. The Community Education Office schedules use of outside school fields and Town athletic fields. The Town Common and North Common are also included in this category, but are currently under the control of the Board of Selectmen. While many residents may think of the Commons as cultural resources, they also provide important open space within the Town Center and Vinal Square, serving as a public gathering place for festivals, concerts, and other local events. While the Commons do not appear to be permanently protected from a legal perspective, public sentiment would most likely prohibit their conversion to another use.

Water Supply Lands: Five (5) parcels, totaling 34.10 acres, owned by the East Chelmsford Water Supply District, twelve (12) parcels totaling 87.94 acres owned by the North Chelmsford Water District, and fifty-eight (56) parcels totaling 266.43 acres owned by the Chelmsford Water District, are classified as having limited or no protection. Land under the ownership of the water districts is protected from development while the associated water supply is in use. It is important to note, however, that development of facilities related to water treatment, distribution and maintenance are allowed on these parcels and should a drinking water source be decommissioned, the land could be sold and developed.

Cemeteries: Chelmsford contains 56.38 acres of public cemetery lands, which are unlikely to be developed in the future. This includes one (1) cemetery parcel containing 0.43 acres, which is owned by the City of Lowell.

Other: There are eight (8) parcels in this category comprised of 20.38 acres of capped landfill at Swain Road.

Publicly-owned Unprotected/Limited Protection Lands

Unprotected/limited protection public lands include lands that are held as open space or used as recreation land, but do not have permanent protection. As shown in Table 6.3 below, there are two hundred seventy seven (277) parcels of unprotected/limited protection publicly-owned lands within the community, comprising a total of 1,129.06 acres. This includes eleven (11) cemetery parcels totaling 56.38 acres.

TABLE 6.3
UNPROTECTED/LIMITED PROTECTION PUBLIC LANDS

Ownership	Number of Parcels	Total Acreage
Commonwealth of Massachusetts	3	8.78
Town of Chelmsford (Including cemeteries)	199	717.18
City of Lowell	2	14.63
Water Supply Districts	73	388.47
Total	277	1,129.06

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

School properties comprise a portion of this land. Other properties include Southwell Field (26 acres), Swain Road Landfill, Roberts Field (20.6 acres), and the Chelmsford Country Club (35 acres).

There are three (3) water supply districts in Chelmsford which own seventy-three (73) parcels of land totaling 388.47 acres. In addition to the cemeteries that are publicly owned, there are six (6) privately owned cemetery parcels totaling 102.07 acres.

Private Unprotected/Limited Protection Lands

As show in Table 6.4 below, there are forty five (45) parcels of privately-owned land with limited or no protection. Collectively, these parcels comprise 500.20 acres.

TABLE 6.4
UNPROTECTED/LIMITED PROTECTION PRIVATE LANDS

Category	Number of Parcels	Total Acreage
Chapter 61	12	112.23
Chapter 61A	24	256.97
Chapter 61B	3	28.93
Cemeteries	6	102.07
Total	45	500.20

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

Under Chapters 61, 61A and 61B of the Massachusetts General Laws (M.G.L.), a land owner who has ten (10) contiguous acres being actively used as forest (Chapter 61), or five (5) contiguous acres in active agriculture (Chapter 61A), or five (5) contiguous acres of open space/recreational land (Chapter 61B), is entitled to certain local tax abatements. These abatements are given in exchange for the property owner retaining the land in its current use as agriculture, forest, recreation or open space.

Chelmsford currently has 398.13 acres of private land enrolled in the Chapter 61, 61A and 61B tax abatement programs. Over half of this land (65%) consists of twenty four (24) agricultural parcels in the Chapter 61A program. Should the current land owners decide to sell or develop property covered under these programs, the Town of Chelmsford will have an opportunity to exercise its right-of-first-refusal, or may alternatively elect to assign this right to a non-profit conservation organization or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. A land owner who has his property classified under Chapter 61, 61A or 61B, must notify the Chief Elected Official (Board of Selectmen Chairman), the Board of Assessors, the Planning Board, the Conservation Commission and the State Forester, when all or a portion of the land is being sold or converted to a disqualifying use.

It should be noted, that parcel 81-321-1 is classified and taxed by the town as being in both Chapter 61 and Chapter 61A categories. The acreage listed corresponds to the acreage in those categories, and the parcel is listed twice on the attached inventory (See Appendix D).

Recreation Programs

Chelmsford is an active, sports-oriented community, and the Town provides facilities and programs for its residents, including playing fields, courts and playgrounds for organized activities and leisure pursuits. In spite of recent budgetary challenges, the Town still manages to provide an array of programs for residents of all ages by partnering with private youth sports organizations, using volunteers wisely, and working collaboratively with non-profits, such as the Friends of the Library and the Friends of the Senior Center.

Public recreation facilities are detailed in Table 6.5 on page 246. All recreation facilities and programs are scheduled by the Community Education Office located at the Westlands School at 170 Dalton Road.



Varney Park in North Chelmsford

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MAP 17: OPEN SPACE

**TABLE 6.5
PUBLIC RECREATION FACILITIES (EXCLUDING SCHOOLS)**

Name	Location	Facilities
Old Town Hall	North Road	Various rooms, auditorium
Chelmsford Country Club	Park Road	Golf course, function hall
Chelmsford Forum	Brick Kiln Road, N. Billerica	Skating rink
Town Common	North Road & Westford Road	Open area
Highland Field	Highland Road	Soccer field
Little League Fields	Chelmsford Street	Baseball fields (4)
McFarlin Field	Chelmsford Street	Softball field
Murphy Field	Raymond and Mill Road	Soccer Fields (2)
Robert's Field	Old Westford Road	Baseball Fields (2), soccer field, playground, skating pond
Southwell Field complex	Wotton Street	Softball fields (3), Walking trail, playground, boat ramp, beach
Varney Playground	Adams & Sherman Streets	Baseball field, basketball court, tennis courts (2), beach, playground
Strawberry Hill Field	Jordan Road	Baseball field, playground

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

The nine (9) public schools all have athletic facilities, fields and/or playgrounds. Table 6.6 details the specific recreational resources that are available at each school.

**TABLE 6.6
SCHOOL-BASED RECREATIONAL RESOURCES**

Name	Location	Facilities
Byam School	Maple Road	Playground, open area
Center School	Billerica Road	Playground
Chelmsford High School	Richardson Road	Football stadium, track, tennis courts (6), basketball courts (3) outdoor hockey courts (3)
	Graniteville Road	Baseball Fields (2), softball fields (2), football field, field hockey fields (2), soccer fields (2)
East School	Carlisle Street	Softball field, basketball court, playground
Harrington School	Richardson Road	Soccer fields (2), playground
McCarthy Middle School	North Road	Football field, baseball field, softball field, soccer fields (2), basketball courts (2) Track, skateboard park, playground
Parker Middle School	Graniteville Road	Baseball field, softball field, playground, open area
South Row School	Boston Road	Softball field, soccer fields (4), tennis courts (5), basketball courts (2), playground

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

A complete detailed listing of the facilities and fields can be found on the Town's website at www.townofchelmsford.us/recreation-facilities-fields.com. Additional information regarding these facilities can also be found in the Facilities and Services section of this document.

The Town owns a public indoor skating rink, the Chelmsford Forum, which is operated by FMC Ice Sports. The facility is located on Route 129 at the Chelmsford/Billerica line, seats 3,500 patrons and offers a full service professional shop and ice skating instruction. The rink can be rented for private functions.

Chelmsford also owns two Town beaches at Freeman Lake and Heart Pond. From June to Labor Day, the beach at Freeman Lake is open and staffed. During the public input sessions, it was suggested that the beach at Freeman Lake/Varney Park be open to Town residents only, in order to avoid the security issues that occurred there in the past. It was also suggested that a ramp be constructed from the parking lot area to the playground.

The recently opened Bruce Freeman Rail Trail traverses the Town for more than six miles. The entire Phase I section of the trail extends from the Lowell line to the intersection of Routes 27 and 225 in Westford. The section of the Phase I project located in Chelmsford is 5.2 miles long, while an additional 1.6 miles are located in Westford. The trail is widely used by hikers, bicyclists, inline skaters and runners. Future phases of the trail outside of Chelmsford are in the planning and design stages, and when these phases are complete the trail will eventually extend all the way to Framingham. The Rail Trail is also a key link in completing the larger Bay Circuit trail which loops around the Boston metropolitan area, extending from Newburyport to Duxbury.

The Town has several other marked trails, mostly located in Conservation land, across fields and along waterways. These trails offer a variety of passive recreation opportunities including hiking, jogging, bird watching, mountain biking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing. Maps of these trails can be found on the Chelmsford Open Space Stewardship Program website at www.thechelmsfordian.com/thechelmsfordian.

The Chelmsford Council on Aging, located at the Town's Senior Center at 75 Groton Road, offers recreational programs designed for senior residents. Educational programs in computers, dancing, exercise, band, chorus and woodworking are among the items offered, along with quilting, bingo and card games. The Council also sponsors day and bus trips, adult day care, and walking groups. More complete information can be found at www.townofchelmsford.us/Aging-Human-Services.com.

There are several privately-owned recreational facilities that serve the needs of town residents. These include the Chelmsford Swim and Tennis Club, the South Chelmsford Rod and Gun Club, and the Lowell Sportsman's Club.

LOCAL CAPACITY

Chelmsford has several organizations working to preserve open space and natural resources within the community. The various Town departments, water districts and conservation organizations work together to ensure that these resources are protected for future generations:

- The Chelmsford Conservation Commission administers the Massachusetts Wetland Protection Act and the local wetlands bylaw. The Commission also acquires, holds and maintains property on behalf of the Town in order to protect land and water resources. The Commission has one staff person who administers the permitting process and oversees day-to-day activities.
- The Planning Board is responsible for implementing the Town's Zoning Bylaw and working with developers to ensure that important conservation land and natural resources are protected during the development process. The Community Development Director oversees the administrative functions for the Planning Board.
- The Town's three water districts manage the Town's water supply, storage, and distribution system. They also provide public education regarding water conservation and environmentally- sensitive lawn care techniques.
- The Chelmsford Land Conservation Trust is a non-profit organization, founded in 1961, which focuses on land preservation in Chelmsford. The Trust works with local landowners in an effort to determine appropriate ways to preserve the Town's remaining undeveloped properties and open areas. Currently, the Trust owns eighty (80) acres of conservation lands.
- The Chelmsford Open Space Stewardship is a group of volunteers working on behalf of the Chelmsford Conservation Commission and other open space organizations. The Open Space Stewards maintain and improve the trail systems and facilities within these open spaces. Their activities range from picking up trash and keeping the trails free of fallen trees, to replacing worn out bridges, kiosks and other facilities. While the Conservation Commission protects and manages open space property, the Stewards maintain and improve the trail systems within these properties, and provide a daily presence that serves to deter vandals. To date, the Stewards have rehabilitated and improved trails on more than 1,000 acres.

While the Town's Department of Public Works Parks Division consists of one full-time employee who maintains the Center and North Town Commons, as well as the Town's traffic islands, the Town devotes very few of its budgetary resources to maintaining its conservation lands (a figure of 25 cents per acre was cited by the Chelmsford Open Space Stewardship during

the public input process), and relies heavily on volunteers. This is offset with the use of Community Preservation Funds for capital improvements.

During the Visioning Session for the development of the Master Plan, residents cited the Conservation Commission's ability to partner with local groups as one of the Town's strengths. It was noted that there are a multitude of entities who volunteer to maintain these facilities such as the Chelmsford Business Association, the Garden Clubs, the Lowell Sportsman's Club, the Police Department and the Fire Department.

OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLANNING EFFORTS

Chelmsford's 2003 Open Space and Recreation Plan established the following goals:

- Protect water resources;
- Expand access to and awareness of designated conservation areas;
- Improve existing conservation and recreation areas; and
- Create additional opportunities for passive recreation.

These goals depend upon a coherent strategy for open space acquisition, land management and stewardship, along with dedicated funding. Absent both the requisite policy framework and adequate staff capacity, the Town has implemented some of the 2003 action items. However, in some cases, recommendations have not been worked on since the plan was initially completed. For example, the 2003 action plan called for improving accessibility to the Town's open areas for persons with disabilities. Little progress on this issue has been made since 2003. The Town is in the process of preparing an updated Open Space and Recreation Plan.

As expressed during the public input process for the Master Plan, Chelmsford residents have long valued the Town's open space and recreation resources and have consistently demonstrated their commitment through actions such as the approval of local funding for open space acquisition and the adoption of the Community Preservation Act (CPA). In April 2001, Chelmsford voters passed a ballot question that allowed for a ½% surcharge on residential property tax bills, with an exemption for the first \$100,000 in value. In April 2007, voters passed a ballot question that increased the surcharge to 1.5 %, with an exemption for low-income families and moderate-income seniors.

As discussed in the Cultural and Natural Resources section, the Community Preservation Act (CPA) provides a source of funding for Open Space Preservation, Historic Preservation and Affordable Housing through a surcharge on the property tax. The money is kept in a separate CPA account by the Town. Each category (Open Space, Historic Preservation and Affordable Housing) must receive a minimum of 10% of the CPA funds available each year. The remaining 70% may be allocated for any one of the three categories, as Town Meeting sees fit.

The CPA is administered by the nine-member Community Preservation Committee (CPC). The CPC holds an annual public hearing to receive comments on the proposed Community Preservation Plan. The CPC then finalizes the plan for allocating the funds, and presents its plan to Town Meeting for approval. Town Meeting then votes on the proposed recommendations.

The Open Space goals outlined in the FY 2010 Community Preservation Plan for FY 2010 include the following:

- Preserve open spaces that have value as water, wetland and wildlife habitat;
- Pursue the acquisition of parcels that will enhance linkages to existing open space;
- Preserve agricultural lands protected under Chapter 61A which represent Chelmsford's farming heritage and which add to the local food supply for humans and livestock;
- Meet current and future Town recreational needs for recreation areas; and
- Improve access to trail linkages to conservation and recreation land.

The CPC has established specific eligibility and selection criteria for Open Space projects seeking CPA funding.³⁴ Eligible projects include those that:

- Permanently protect important wildlife habitat, including areas that:
 - are of local or regional significance for biodiversity;
 - contain a variety of habitats, with a diversity of geologic features and types of vegetation;
 - contain a habitat type that is in danger of vanishing from Chelmsford; or
 - preserve habitat for rare species of plants or animals.
- Preserve Chelmsford's agricultural areas;
- Provide opportunities for passive recreation and environmental education;
- Protect or enhance wildlife corridors, promote connectivity of habitat or prevent fragmentation of habitats;
- Provide connections with existing trails and/or potential trail linkages;
- Preserve scenic views and/or lands bordering a scenic road;
- Protect drinking water quality and quantity;
- Provide flood control/storage capacity;
- Preserve important surface water bodies, including wetlands, vernal pools or riparian zones; and
- Preserve any primary or secondary priority parcel in the Open Space Plan.

The eligibility and selection criteria for CPA funded recreation projects are as follows:

- Enhance the quality and/or variety of passive and active recreational opportunities for all age groups (or more than one age group) and abilities;

³⁴ Chelmsford Community Preservation Committee Selection Criteria

- Supports multiple recreation uses;
- Creates new recreational opportunities;
- Serves a significant number of residents;
- Preserves or restores and/or expands existing recreational facilities (excluding maintenance);
- Addresses the needs targeted in the Open Space and Recreation Plan;
- Promotes links connecting parks and open space where possible;
- Public access to recreational resource by a variety of means;
- Consideration for parking requirements;
- Plan for maintenance of recreational resource;
- Include all normal safety considerations, including building and safety codes; and
- Availability of other sources of co-funding.

The CPC has funded the following Open Space projects from FY 2002 through FY 2010.³⁵

- Red Wing Farm acquisition - \$4,466
- Lime Quarry Parking Lot - \$25,000
- Red Wing Farm Parking Lot - \$25,000
- Cranberry Bog – Dam and Parking - \$60,000
- Lewis (Sunny Meadow) Farm Acquisition - \$1,500,000
- Open Space Capital Improvements - \$25,000
- Pond Street Beach acquisition - \$230,000

In addition, the CPC has created an annual “open space capital improvement” account to be utilized for improvements and replacements to trails, bridges, and other accessory structures.

³⁵ FY 2010 Chelmsford Community Preservation Plan

AGRICULTURE

In 2008, the Town acquired Sunny Meadow Farm (also called Walter Lewis Farm) using Community Preservation Act money. The 22.5 acre farm located between Robin Hill Road and Acton Road was sold to the Town for open space purposes and is subject to a Conservation Restriction, which will be held by the Chelmsford Land Conservation Trust. This agricultural property is managed by the Board of Selectmen as the site of Chelmsford's Walter F. Lewis Community Garden, a handicap accessible garden and tree propagation nursery, with remaining areas being leased to a private farmer for composting and plant propagation. A new parking area, irrigation system, and other improvements are planned to help support continued agricultural use of the open space.

The Town also acquired an additional 50-foot wide parcel of land that runs parallel to the transmission corridor between the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (BFRT) and Robin Hill Road. A bicycle and pedestrian path is planned within the parcel to link Sunny Meadow Farm to the BFRT.

Approximately 254 acres of private land is classified as Chapter 61A agricultural land according to the Chelmsford Assessors records. Properties enrolled in Chapter 61A are taxed based on the current use of the property (i.e., the productive potential of the land for growing agricultural products), instead of the fair market or development value. As discussed in the Land Use and Zoning section of this document, the Town should review its zoning bylaw and development regulations with an eye toward better accommodating the needs of agricultural enterprises. Such revisions would serve to promote the preservation of farmland, allow agricultural enterprises to remain viable, and enhance the agricultural economy in Chelmsford.

COMMUNITY NEEDS

Professional planners have used a number of standards over the past several decades to evaluate the amount of park and recreation land appropriate for a given community. These standards were meant to serve as a guide and were interpreted according to the particular situation to which they were being applied. Over time, the figure of 10 acres per 1,000 population became the commonly accepted standard developed by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), but this standard was determined to be inappropriate.³⁶ Currently, the NRPA recommends a range of between 6.25 and 10.5 acres of total open space per every 1,000 residents, and further refines these recommendations according to different types of open space, particularly active and passive open space.

³⁶ 1996 Park, Recreation, Open Space and Greenway Guidelines, National Recreation and Park Association.

NRPA standards only include municipally-owned, publicly accessible recreation and active parkland. Institutional, passive or privately-owned open space is not factored into the NRPA methodology. The standards are also organized according to the type of park, as shown in Table 6.7. (Note: there are no regional parks in Chelmsford, excluding Great Brook State Park which is principally located in Carlisle.) The NRPA Level of Service Approach standards are only applicable to park and recreation services. Therefore, natural resources and passive recreation open space parcels are excluded from the NRPA calculations.³⁷

**TABLE 6.7
NRPA STANDARDS FOR PARKLAND BY TYPE**

Park Type	Acres/1,000 Population	Minimum Size	Service Area Radius
Mini-Park	0.25-0.50	1 acre or less	< .25 mile/5 minute walk
Neighborhood Park	1.0-2.0	15 acres	.5 mile/12 minute walk
Community Park	5.0-8.0	25 acres	1-2 miles/5 minute drive
Regional Park	Variable	200+ acres	30 miles/1 hour drive

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

As shown in Table 6.8 below, based on the 2000 Census population, Chelmsford should have a minimum of 355 acres of parkland in order to meet the NRPA standards. In fact, the Town owns 1,448.05 acres of open space, well above the NRPA standards. However, approximately, 185 acres of the town’s open space are classified as “active recreation”, which falls below the NRPA standard of 247 acres by nearly sixty-two (62) acres.

**TABLE 6.8
PARK LAND ACREAGE NEEDS ANALYSIS USING NRPA STANDARDS**

Park Type	Required Acres	Percentage (Active or Passive)	Required Active/Passive Areas (Acres)
Mini Parks 5 acres/1000	16.93	100/0	16.93 active/0 passive
Neighborhood	67.72	100/0	67.72 active/0 passive
Community Park	270.88	60/40	162.53 active/108.35 passive
Total Parkland Need for Chelmsford	355.53	-----	247.68 active/108.35 passive
Chelmsford Actual Acreage	1,448.05	-----	185.00 active/1,246.07 passive

Source: Northern Middlesex Council of Governments

National standards should not be applied without critical evaluation in terms of the relevance to local conditions. While industry guidelines developed with input from various regions of the country are a useful starting point, the Town’s 2010 Open Space and Recreation Plan will serve as an effective public process and needs assessment for formulating recommendations and policies. The following section outlines the issues and opportunities identified during the public involvement process for the development of the Master Plan.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 49.

ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While the Town has successfully preserved open space, there are still large tracts of land that remain unprotected. The current economic climate, fiscal challenges and eventual limitations on Community Preservation funds can make it difficult to purchase additional land parcels, however, alternative methods of land conservation could be pursued. Restrictions and easements can limit the future use of land by restricting or prohibiting development. However, the land continues to be owned and operated by a private owner. If the restriction on development is in perpetuity, it provides as much protection for land as outright acquisition. In addition, it can cost less than outright acquisition, offers more flexibility to meet the needs of the landowner, and allows the property to stay on the tax rolls. In addition, grant funding is available from various state programs, including the Agricultural Preservation Restriction program, which purchases easements from farmers to restrict future development.

In the future, the Town could work with an interested landowner to create a limited development project. In a limited development project, a conservation group (usually a nonprofit but sometimes a governmental body) purchases a piece of land they are interested in conserving. A portion of the site that is less important for conservation purposes is carved off and developed, and the proceeds from the development are used to repay the money borrowed for the land purchase or used to fund future conservation efforts.

Bylaws and development regulations should include stronger incentives for developers to contribute to open space goals, such as creating linkages between existing conservation parcels or adding to the Town's pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. For example, the existing Planned Open Space Development zoning bylaw, section 195-92, could be revised to specifically target the remaining large developable tracts of land by providing incentives such as density bonuses in exchange for increased open space. Furthermore, there are many parcels of open space owned by the Town that are not permanently protected through a deed restriction or other legally binding mechanism. Such parcels include the golf course and many of the school properties. Future attention should be paid to protecting some of these areas, as well as agricultural lands, historic properties and resources, forested lands, riverfront areas, water resources, and wildlife habitat.

During the public input process, it was noted that the Town does not have a formal process by which all Town departments and local conservation organizations are notified when a property owner seeks to remove a property from Chapter 61 status. As required by law, notice is presently sent to the Board of Selectmen and Conservation Commission. The Town Manager also sends notification to the Community Preservation Committee. However, there is no formal process for notifying other parties that may be interested in the property should the Town choose not to exercise its right-of-first-refusal. The Town should periodically review its inventory of Chapter 61 parcels to determine appropriate measures for conserving these parcels should they

become available in the future.

While the Conservation Commission currently holds 800 acres of reservation property, there are no criteria utilized on a Town-wide basis to determine whether a specific property should be placed under the care and custody of the Conservation Commission or another Town entity. The Conservation Commission has also noted that there are hundreds of parcels, primarily consisting of tax title properties, located throughout Town for which there is no specific management entity identified. Therefore by default, the Board of Selectmen is the management entity.

The Town's 2003 Open Space and Recreation Plan identified a need for improving linkages between areas of open space. This need was confirmed through the input received during the Visioning Session for this Master Plan Update. Much of the Town's open space and recreation land is fragmented and isolated. Establishing linkages and connections between these parcels should be a priority for the Town. Acquisition and protection of parcels adjacent to existing conservation and recreation lands is critical. As the Town updates its Open Space and Recreation Plan, particular attention should be paid to identifying possible trail systems and linkages between parcels of open space, and on identifying missing links in the existing network of trails. Continued expansion of the Town's trail network, and efforts to make these trails more accessible to residents is important. The following steps should be initiated:

- Examine and map the existing trail and pedestrian circulation system;
- Identify the missing links and pursue opportunities for easements to provide linkages, where appropriate and practical;
- Distribute Town-wide trail maps to increase public knowledge and awareness, as well as use of the Town's trails and open spaces;
- As part of the development review process, seek permanent trail easements, parking, and linkages, where appropriate; and
- Coordinate trail planning and maintenance efforts with bordering communities to ensure regional connectivity.

A need for additional recreational opportunities for adults was expressed by residents during the public input process. In addition, members of the School Committee identified a need for additional soccer fields and track facilities, as well as another Skateboard Park. Accommodating conservation and recreation interests will be important in the future as maintaining a balance between protecting land for conservation purposes and developing additional recreation facilities continues to be a subject of debate in Town. Competing and increased demand for playing fields was identified as problematic during the public input sessions. Such demand does not allow sufficient time for rest and recovery of the turf or allow for rotation of the fields. Some field maintenance is performed by volunteer youth sports organizations. While this assistance is helpful and appreciated, it does not allow for a coordinated maintenance and management effort.

The establishment of an Open Space and Recreation Advisory Committee should be explored to assist the Town with management and maintenance of existing facilities and in identifying future open space and recreation needs. The Open Space and Recreation Advisory Committee would also assist the Town in establishing use regulations where they currently do not exist.

While Chelmsford residents support protecting open space, the Town recognizes that it needs to focus on appropriately managing the properties that it already owns. Sometimes communities view open space acquisition as an end objective that requires no further action or investment. However, the absence of a management plan leaves open space properties vulnerable to vandalism and abuse, vegetation overgrowth, and eventually, a loss of public access. The best way to protect open space is to assure that residents use it properly, and, to encourage public use the property must be maintained.

While the Conservation Commission has a single set of regulations, referred to as the Reservation Use Restrictions, which pertain to the use of all its lands, the town should consider developing site-specific management plans for key parcels that would include such issues as allowed uses and activities, trail and facilities maintenance, and habitat management. The School Department has a set of use regulations for its recreational facilities.

It was noted during the public process that there is no maintenance funding provided for properties under the care and custody of the Board of Selectmen. Residents also voiced concern over the level of maintenance for athletic fields and facilities. The expansion of the Open Space Stewardship program or establishment of a similar entity should be explored to provide supplemental support to the Town for maintenance of recreation facilities and miscellaneous properties under the custody of the Board of Selectmen.

The Chelmsford Open Space Stewardship (COSS) provides an invaluable service to the community through their diligent efforts to maintain certain open space and conservation properties. All of its funds are from private contributions. While the use of volunteers is extremely important and helpful, over the long-term the Town needs to develop a long-term management plan to ensure the continued viability and stability of the COSS program.

During the Master Plan Committee meetings, the Fire Department indicated that emergency response for incidents occurring on conservation land can be difficult, due to the lack of location and address information. The Department is actively working to erect signage at these locations that will assign an address to each site. The Fire Department also noted that access to some of these areas, such as Deep Brook Reservation and the Russell Mill Town Forest, is difficult for emergency vehicles and personnel. The presence of the Chelmsford Open Space Stewardship program volunteers in these areas has significantly reduced the incidence of illegal burning, according to Fire Department officials. In responding to these concerns, the public has indicated

that there is a need to improve parking and access at many of these properties, and that a methodology is needed for calculating the number of parking spaces that are needed at each location. Throughout the Master Planning process, residents and officials noted the need for additional parking to accommodate those using the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail.

In summary, the Master Planning process has shown that the Town needs to maintain and care for the land and facilities it already owns, gradually acquiring additional holdings to connect open space where possible, and use its regulatory powers to assure high-quality open space in development and redevelopment projects. A comprehensive open space system requires criteria for evaluating open space parcels, zoning and non-zoning bylaws that can help meet open space goals, and dedicated funding to acquire, improve and manage these lands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify and prioritize open space and potential recreation parcels to be targeted for future acquisition and protection.
- Construct a playground at the Pond Street Beach property, and lay out and define an adequate parking area at this facility.
- Pursue alternative methods of land conservation, through easements, participation in the Agricultural Preservation Program, and the use of limited development projects.
- Strengthen conservation and preservation incentives with the Town bylaws and regulations.
- Maintain a current inventory of Chapter 61, Chapter 61A and Chapter 61B parcels and create a formal notification process to be utilized when a property owner seeks to remove a property from Chapter 61 status. This process should include notifying non-profit entities should the Town choose not to exercise its right-of-first-refusal.
- Develop criteria to determine the appropriate control, protection and management entity for Town-owned parcels that are presently undesignated, as well as for future properties that the town may acquire.
- Identify possible future linkages between open parcels and identify missing links within the town's trail network. This can be accomplished through GIS mapping. Promote a trail network that provides connectivity between neighborhoods, schools, recreation facilities, and conservation land.
- Seek trail easements through the development review process, where appropriate.

- Promote a regional approach to open space and recreation planning through outreach and cooperation with bordering communities.
- Distribute Town-wide trail and conservation land maps to enhance awareness and increase the use of the town's trails and open spaces. Production of the maps could be sponsored by the business community or other community groups in exchange for advertising.
- Develop an overall management and maintenance plan for the Town's open space and recreation properties. Site-specific management plans for key parcels should be developed that address such issues as allowed uses and activities, trail and facilities maintenance, and habitat management.
- As indicated during the public involvement process, the Town will need to create additional active recreation areas. The establishment of an Open Space and Recreation Advisory Committee, as outlined in M.G.L. c. 45, Section 2, would assist in providing additional direction and guidance in the future.
- Improve access to open space and recreation facilities for those with disabilities.
- Create additional parking for the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail and for other open space and recreational areas, as appropriate.
- Seek additional resources, support and monetary assistance for the Chelmsford Open Space Stewardship.
- Develop a Master Plan for the UMass Lowell West Campus and Oak Hill parcels that has an open space component.