

Open Space and Recreation

Introduction

- **Open Space** - land that is set aside for conservation, agricultural, forest, park, a green buffer, or any open area owned by a conservation agency/organization that is used for either passive or active recreation.
- **Recreation** - any activity, such as play, that diverts, amuses or stimulates¹

Merge the above two things and the result is something that is very important to many people's quality of life. The Commonwealth recognizes this importance and encourages each community in the state to have a current Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) approved by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) Division of Conservation Services (DCS) every five years. An OSRP is both essential to sustaining a community's appeal, enhancing its quality of life, and maintaining its environmental stewardship.

When a completed OSRP has been approved by the DCS, the applicable community is eligible for grant programs administered by the Division. An OSRP is meant to be a living document, and the DCS makes sure of this by withholding potential grant funding to communities that lapse on the five year timeline.

At the time of this Master Plan's completion the Town of Charlton was in the process of updating its previous OSRP from 1996. Because of this, most of the following text is based on the 1996 OSRP and the 2000 Charlton Master Plan. This Master Plan incorporates the policies and goals statements put forth by the committee updating the OSRP and approved by the community at a public forum (separate from the Master Planning process) held on April 30, 2007.



¹ <http://en.wiktionary.org>

Current Situation

Charlton is still very much a rural community. As shown in Chapter 2 *Land Use & Growth Management*, nearly half of Charlton's land area is forest, wetland, water and open space. The landscape of Charlton is one full of vistas, some often extending the whole of 80 miles from their vantage point. One of the most significant is the view off of Dresser Hill on Route 31. Along with these fantastic views Charlton reminds one of a lost means of living by way of Charlton Center and Charlton Depot. Up until the middle of the 20th century these small enclaves of activity nourished the Town with products, employment, and housing. A significant factor in the formation of these villages was the ability of workers to walk to and from their place of employment. These compact village centers preserved open space in Charlton as a trait, and were a significant factor in forming the rural aesthetic of present day Charlton. Now, because employment for Charlton residents is moving outside of Town, the village centers that were once drivers of preservation now serve less significant roles in shaping Charlton.

The need to live in an area within walking distance of the workplace is no longer the norm. With the advent of the automobile, regions shrunk and employment opportunities drastically altered in location. The 20th century produced a paradigm shift in the way Americans perceived space and time. Not only did this affect where industry and commercial facilities located, but it also meant residential development was no longer confined geographically. Whereas the former village centers constricted growth to a distinct area, the present form of auto-oriented growth tends to exaggerate the scale of communities. That is why importance should be placed on effective and sustainable open space planning in the Town. As Charlton increases in population, the need for a framework that balances development and preservation of open space in a creative, consistent, and innovative way intensifies.

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Amenities

Charlton is full of amazing amenities such as trails, scenic drives, and a large inventory of existing open space.

Trails

Most of the trails that exist in Charlton are on private land. The Midstate Trail runs through the southeastern corner of Charlton, and is maintained by the Worcester Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club; this is the primary trail in Charlton and it connects to subsidiaries via side trails. These subsidiary trails include: Fay Mountain Farm, Charlton Orchard, Bement Camp, and the Engineers trails at Buffumville Lake among others. Much of the Midstate Trail in Charlton consists of off-road trails, although several local roads are also used. Additionally, an extensive

trail system can be found all around the Buffumville Reservoir recreation area. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) manages the 488 acres of the Buffumville Reservoir and its trail network is used extensively for a variety of recreational activities. There is also an interior trail system within the Capen Hill Nature Sanctuary, a non-profit-managed open space system that provides educational and social programs and wildlife rehabilitation. .

Most property owners have historically accepted the use of their property to access a trail or open space parcel; however, increasing population and development has caused more strain between the user and the owner. With the instruction of groups like the AMC, cross country skiers and hikers have earned the respect of property owners by minimizing their impact on trails. However, these are typically low impact uses; other higher impact uses have faced more stringent restrictions in recent years, among these are: mountain biking, hunting, horse riding, fishing, and four wheeling.

Scenic Roads

In addition to Charlton's trails there are also quite a few scenic roadways that provide plenty of opportunity for both passive and active recreation. Whether it is a bike ride in the summer or a slow drive in the fall, the following roads provide remarkable serenity:

- Buteau Road
- Cemetery Road
- Gould Road
- Horne Homestead Road
- Jones Road
- McIntyre Road
- North Sturbridge Road
- Smith Road
- Tucker Road
- Wheelock Road

Under Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40, Section 15C (The Scenic Roads Act) Towns in Massachusetts can designate any road – other than a numbered route or state highway – as a scenic road and can adopt scenic road bylaws as a means of protecting the scenic character of an important roadway. Most towns use the scenic road bylaw to limit the cutting of trees, avoid the destruction of stone walls, and monitor road and driveway construction.



Open Space

The following tables provide an overview of the open space and recreation land in Charlton. Thirty (30) percent of the town's open space and recreation land is publicly owned, 12 percent is privately owned, 22 percent is owned by a non-profit group, 24 percent is owned under Chapter 61, 61A or 61B, and 13 percent is APR land. Table 6-1 inventories publicly-owned open space and recreation parcels in Charlton. The

following information is courtesy of the 2006 Open Space and Recreation Plan, with updates provide by the 2000 Master Plan, the Town Planner, the Open Space Committee and the Recreation Committee. Nearly half the land (1,900 acres) designated in Table 6-1 below is used for active or passive recreational purposes.

**Table 6-1
Publicly Owned Land in Charlton**

Property	Owner	Size (acres)	Use	Protected	Access
Buffumville Reservoir	ACOE	221.0	Flood control; active and passive recreation	yes	public
Bennett Meadows Wildlife Management Area	DFW	211.0	Conservation	yes	public
Glen Echo Lake Access	DFW	1.1	Recreation; Conservation	yes	public
Charlton Elementary School	Town	6.5	School; Recreation – soccer and playground	no	public
Charlton Center / Memorial Field	Town	8.0	Active Recreation – softball, baseball, tennis, basketball	no	public
Charlton Recreation Land	Town	23.0	Active Recreation – soccer and football	no	public
Heritage School	Town	89.3	School; Recreation	no	public
Prindle Pond Recreation Area	Town	2.5	Recreation; Conservation	unknown	public
Stafford Street Conservation Area	Town	40.0	Passive Recreation – nature trails; Active Recreation – senior little league, basketball, tennis	Y	public
Town Common	Town	1.0	Passive Recreation	unknown	public
Bay Path Vocational School	RSD	190.7	School; Recreation – football, baseball, tennis, basketball	no	public
TOTAL		794.1			

Source: Charlton Open Space and Recreation Plan, 1996

Notes: ACOE = Army Corps of Engineers (Federal) DFW = Division of Fish and Wildlife (State)
RSD = Dudley Charlton Regional School District

Table 6-2 is an inventory of open space that is contained within developed areas. There open areas, amounting to nearly 400 acres, are permanently preserved and held in ownership by various agencies and organizations, as detailed below.

Table 6-2
Inventory of Open Space in Charlton Subdivisions

Name	Preserved Open Space (acres)	Percent of Subdivision	Designated Open Space Owner
Tucker Farm	17.9	18.0%	Division of Fisheries and Wildlife
Cranberry Meadows*	57.0	84.0%	Heritage Preservation Trust
Dresser Hills*†	6.0	39.1%	Heritage Preservation Trust
Hammond Woods	27.4	39.9%	Heritage Preservation Trust
Preservation Estates ‡	1.6	30.0%	Heritage Preservation Trust
Reindeer Estates* ‡‡	10.7	50.0%	Heritage Preservation Trust
Waters Edge* (3 parcels)	15	18.3%	Heritage Preservation Trust
Manor Ridge	4.4	30.3%	Heritage Preservation Trust
McKinstry Drive Extension*	9.0	35.0%	Homeowner's Association
Potter Village Estates*	13.9	44.0%	Homeowner's Association
Ponnakin Hill Estates*	27.7	29.5%	n/a
Scott Drive Extension	18.7	47.0%	n/a
Stonegate Estates	4.4	22.5%	n/a
The Reserve at Barton Hill East*	32.5	32.8%	n/a
The Reserve at Barton Hill West*	51.0	30.9%	n/a
Pike's Pond	15.7	28.8%	National Heritage Foundation
Larned Hill Farm	4.6	18.7%	National Heritage Foundation
Angalie	21.8	61.0%	Town of Charlton
Applewood	46.3	32.7%	Town of Charlton
Henry Richards Circle*	6.4	30.0%	Town of Charlton
TOTAL	392	-	-

Source: Charlton Planning Board

Notes: These numbers are approximate

* Subdivisions approved through Charlton's Flexible Design bylaw.

† CHPT did not accept the open space or Conservation Restriction associated with this subdivision.

‡ Only the Stafford Street parcel has been currently conveyed. The remaining 4.6 acres is under written commitment to be conveyed to CHPT.

‡‡ Once official, the town will own the open space but CHPT will hold the Conservation Restriction.

In addition to town-owned land inventoried above, the Charlton Heritage Preservation Trust (CHPT) also owns over 150 acres of protected open space in Charlton, as shown in Table 6-3 below. CHPT is a volunteer-based 501(c)3 non-profit land trust formed to protect the natural beauties and rural character within the town of Charlton. The Trust maintains all the land under its ownership. Although the CHPT's main goal is the preservation and conservation of land and water resources within Charlton, the organization also works with neighboring towns when the opportunity to link regional open space arises.

Table 6-3
Charlton Heritage Preservation Trust Property List

Name	Size (acres)	Use	Protected	Access
Little River/Fulling Mill	6.7	open space	yes	public
Little River/Fulling Mill	7.4	open space	yes	public
Little River/Manor Forest	1.0	open space	yes	public
Great Blue Heron Cove/Daniels	18.9	open space	yes	public
Cranberry Meadow/N. Sturbridge	57.0	open space	yes	public
Preservation Estates/Stafford	1.6	open space	yes	public
Manor Ridge Estates/Sydney	4.4	open space	yes	public
Potter Village Estates/Lelandville	13.7	open space	yes	public
Ponnakin Hill/Pheasant	8.1	open space	yes	public
Ponnakin Hill/A Young	7.1	open space	yes	public
Ponnakin Hill/Meadow	3.3	open space	yes	public
Hammond Woods/Hyde	27.4	open space	yes	public
TOTAL	156.6			

Source: Charlton Heritage Preservation Trust

Open space and recreation resources owned by non-profits other than the Charlton Heritage Preservation Trust are inventoried below in Table 6-4. However, aside from the Capen Hill Nature Sanctuary, these are all private resources which require membership or homeownership for access.

Table 6-4
Other Non-Profit Owned Land

Property Name	Owner	Size (acres)	Use	Protected	Access
Camp Foscett	YMCA	116.5	Recreation	yes	members
Capen Hill Nature Sanctuary	CHNA	72.0	Open Space	yes	public
Diocese of Western Mass.	DWM	220.4	Recreation	yes	members
Elliot Joslin Camp	JDF	102.6	Recreation	yes	members
Masonic Home	MHI	314.3	Housing; open space	yes	members
St. George Greek Camp	SGOGC	54.1	Recreation	unknown	members
TOTAL		879.9			

Source: Charlton Open Space and Recreation Plan, 1996

Notes: YMCA = YMCA of Southbridge

DWN = Diocese of Western Mass.

MHI = Masonic Home, Inc.

CHNA = Capen Hill Nature Association

JDF = Joslin Diabetes Foundation

SGOGC = St. George Orthodox Greek Church

Preserving and protecting undeveloped land is necessary for conserving biodiversity, preserving the character of the landscape, and protecting the drinking water supplies. One way to limit development is through land acquisition. Protected lands include land owned by certain state agencies that are preserved pursuant to Article 97; land under the jurisdiction of the Charlton Conservation Commission or

Water Department; and, some privately-owned land under a conservation restriction (also called conservation easement) approved by the state. The conservation restriction prevents development of the land for a specified time, usually in perpetuity.

However, not all town-owned land is protected from development. For example, land under the jurisdiction of other town departments can be sold or developed with very few restrictions. Land enrolled in various tax abatement programs such as Chapter 61, 61A and 61B, (“Chapter” land) which promote preservation of open space by providing tax benefits to maintain lands, are not permanently protected. Land held under Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B are managed for forestry, agricultural or recreational purposes, respectively. These lands are considered to be only temporarily protected – the landowner manages the land for those specific purposes and receives some tax benefit in exchange. However, the land can be converted to other uses, with the repayment of back taxes, and may no longer be characterized as open space.

All Chapter parcels are considered important unprotected parcels. Charlton has a remarkably high amount of land under the Chapter 61, 61A or 61B programs, as detailed below in Table 6-5.

**Table 6-5
Chapter 61, 61A and 61B Land**

Category	Size (acres)
Chapter 61	4,508.6
Chapter 61A	107.9
Chapter 61B	1,452.7
TOTAL	6,069.2

Source: Town of Charlton Assessor’s Office, 2007



Recreation

For the most part, active and passive recreational facilities have been discussed above in the discussion of key open space parcels. A summary by ownership of those parcels identified as used for recreational use and other private recreational parcels is provided below in Table 6-6. The primary focus of this section is those public recreational facilities, for which the Town of Charlton has control, and future needs.

**Table 6-6
Recreation in Charlton by Ownership**

Ownership Type	Size (acres)
Public	583
Chapter 61B	1,453
Non-Profit †	494
Other Private ††	136
TOTAL	2,666

Source: Town of Charlton, 2000 Master Plan, 1996 Open Space and Recreation Plan

Note: † All Non-profit owned recreational land limits access to members only.

†† This category includes two private campgrounds, presumably accessible for a fee.

The Town of Charlton’s active recreational facilities are overseen by the Charlton Recreation Committee. This committee is responsible for the maintenance of existing recreational facilities and the development of additional facilities.

All of Charlton’s fields – used for soccer, baseball, softball, football, etc. – are currently being used at full capacity. Charlton has a large and active youth sports program which uses the fields in the center of town. Saturday mornings when sports are occurring can be quite busy in town. While it is generally viewed as positive that the fields are located in the center of town and thus promote use of local retailers and restaurants, there are some concerns. In particular, the impacts of this level of field usage on parking and on traffic are significant.

Charlton is undertaking a field complex construction project; the Town acquired 40 acres of land at Flint Street. The fields to be constructed include soccer and football, among others. It is believed that the town’s recreational fields should be self-sufficient; that is maintenance and upkeep should be minimal. In order to best achieve this goal of self-sufficiency, the fields are best located proximate to each other. Additional recreational fields and courts are located at the Middle School.

Though the recreational space for spring, summer and fall activities on these fields will be considerably improved with the Flint Road project, the Town has no space for winter activities such as skating and sledding. Furthermore, the Town has very few playgrounds or tot lots for younger children not yet involved in competitive athletics. Each elementary school has a playground area. After the Flint Road project, a recreational facility on Stafford Street is the next priority parcel.



Recent Initiatives

Charlton’s staff and volunteers and regional counterparts have pursued initiatives to expand the natural resources in Charlton and to better understand these resources. A few recent initiatives are described below:

Open Space Digitization

The need for a map, guidebook, and signage system was mentioned in the 2000 Master Plan. In March of 2003, the Planning Board initiated the comprehensive planning effort to advance long-range open space, greenways & trails planning efforts. The established project goal, which was funded in part by a grant from the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor's *Partnership Program*, was to create a Geographic Information System (GIS)-based series of environmental data layers to be used in the creation of a multi-layered environmental information map of the Town, as discussed above. The final project product would serve as a critical tool for understanding and furthering local environmental planning efforts to preserve open space, foster greenways creation and implement a walking trails network as recommended by the Town of Charlton 2000 Master Plan. Significant locations incorporated into the data system and map product included the walking trail system implemented by the 2000 Master Plan Implementation Committee (MPIC) in the Town Common area, Mid-State Trail locations, Capon Hill Nature Sanctuary trails, subdivision open space walking trails and the ongoing trails efforts being implemented by the Charlton Heritage Preservation Trust.

The map was completed in June 2004 and public outreach was conducted that following summer. It is anticipated that this resource will be utilized by Town government and local community interests as a crucial reference source in furthering proactive open space preservation, greenways corridor protection and walking trail implementation efforts.

Trail Connection Feasibility Study

In October 2001, the CMRPC conducted the *Southwest Subregion Inter-Community Trail Connection Feasibility Study* in which five potential trails were identified to link the seven communities and increase the viability of the regional trail system. One of the five trails proposed, the Dresser Hill Road Bicycle Route, extends from Dudley through Charlton and links up with the Mid-State Trail

Choices Confronting the Town

Charlton, like most communities in Massachusetts, is experiencing rapid population growth. The influx of more people into Charlton is predicted to continue and these newcomers will need housing. Concurrently, Charlton's population increase makes it a more desirable location for certain retailers and other commercial entities. This housing and commercial development will in turn threaten the preservation of open space. So the question that immediately surfaces is where is the balance between development and conservation? In public meetings held during the Master Plan process, residents of the Town pointed out that retention of Charlton's rural character is one of their most important concerns. It was also mentioned that one of Charlton's biggest weaknesses was lack of innovative zoning. In order for Charlton

to preserve its rural charm, the use of innovative zoning bylaws, such as the flexible residential zoning or a transfer of development rights, should be encouraged to allow for development patterns that preserve contiguous open space. Building single-family homes on one acre lots does nothing in the way of conservation and will only exacerbate the problem of open space and recreational resource loss.

Charlton has neither a comprehensive management plan nor an acquisition plan to ensure that important Town lands are protected, that budget resources are in place and available to respond when an opportunity to purchase arises, and to provide maintenance and oversight of these properties.

As shown above in Table 6-2, most Town-owned properties are open to the public. However, most are unmarked. Internally, the Town maintains a listing of these sites, but does not promote their use. A map, guidebook, and/or standard signage program would inform townspeople about the resources already available to them, where to park, and how to enter the sites.

Charlton's open space resources are not well-connected. Connectivity of open space is important for two reasons. First, it allows human users to take advantage of the multiple open space resources in Charlton without having to leave one area, return to the public way, and drive to another area. Second, connectivity helps to restore corridors in which wild habitat can travel. Development of open land impacts the animals as well, by cutting off their natural travel corridors. As a result, animals, like deer and coyotes, are more frequently found in backyards and on the roads.

The growth of Charlton is likely to consume some valuable open space and recreation resources. However, intelligent planning can mitigate this reduction and still preserve Charlton's rural feel.

Open Space Preservation

In addition to rethinking the Town's zoning and building more dense developments, Charlton must continue to preserve important open space parcels by way of permanent protection. This can be accomplished with the help of both public and non-profit groups which support preservation. Charlton Heritage Preservation Trust is local non-profit organization whose purpose is to protect the natural beauty and rural character of the Town. Another similar organization that can help Charlton protect resources, albeit with a larger geographic reach, is the Trust for Public Land.

The 2000 Master Plan identified six resources to serve as the starting point for identifying sites worthy of preservation. These resources – determined to best contribute to the rural character of Charlton – are:

- Agricultural land,
- Rare wildlife habitats,

- Aquifers,
- Floodplains,
- Wetlands, and
- Scenic areas.

The second criteria established by the 2000 Master Plan was a related to the relative accessibility of open space resources. The Plan proposed a “10 minute walk” standard. This simply meant that a parcel proposed for acquisition would be weighted heavier if it were a ½ mile (10 minute walk) from residential properties in the Town. Through the Open Space and Recreation Plan process, the town should prioritize those key parcels for preservation and connectivity of open space resources.

A third criterion, added in this Plan, considers the connectivity of open space parcels. A potential open space acquisition will be rated higher if it connects previously connected resources for either humans or wildlife habitat.

Goals for Open Space and Recreation Element

The following goals were derived through a process undertaken by the Conservation Commission for the 2007 update of the Open Space and Recreation Plan, which was ongoing during the writing of this Plan.

Open Space Committee Goals

Expand and Protect Open Space Resources:

1. Look to expand and/or protect existing town-owned or land trust land by evaluating acquisition of adjacent parcels.
2. Develop new recreation facility on Flint Road property that has been designated for use by the Recreation Commission.
3. Develop recreation facility on Stafford Street property that has been designated for use by the Recreation Commission.
4. Look for opportunities to connect open space resources and create greenway corridors and trails.
5. Look to acquire land off of Richardson and Oxford Roads to link federal land up to Joslin property.
6. Establish a standard signage system, map and guidebook to identify Open Space and recreation facilities and spaces and their access points.

Policy:

7. Pass Community Preservation Act (CPA) as an open space funding source.
8. Continue to use recreation revolving fund to support new recreation programs.
9. Develop Open Space Preservation Zoning – emphasize land that will link open space resources.

10. Adopt Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) to develop and acquire Recreational and Open Space facilities.
11. Better integration with Quinebaug-Shetucket Corridor.

Protection:

12. Expand sewer system in areas to protect water resources
13. Establish mechanism for oversight and maintenance of open space resources (e.g. mapping, zoning).
14. Maintain the protection of the Bigelow property on Dresser Hill as a scenic area using 80A.
15. Assess all Chapter 61A properties that may be at risk for imminent development.

Other:

16. Construct a bandstand for community at one of the recreation facility sites.
17. Establish "Village Center" zoning in town center to help create "Sense of Place."
18. Establish programs and facilities to help build "Community."
19. Introduce diverse recreation winter activities such as cross country ski trails, skating and snow shoeing.
20. Relocate Skateboard Park to a more secure and accessible location.
21. Re-establish Tennis Courts in one or more locations.
22. Establish permanent easement along Mid-State Trail in Charlton.

General:

23. Maintain and upgrade existing facilities.
24. Maintain rural character and focus commercial development along Route 20.
25. Continue to enhance and reorganize Memorial Field and the Town Hall Annex Field.
26. Look to large developers and commercial developer to support Open Space and Recreation initiatives.
27. Maintain the fund that has been established for environmental management of lakes and watershed areas and also maintain town owned dams.

2000 Master Plan Goals

1. Protect Charlton's valuable open space resources for passive recreational and preservation purposes.
2. Protect Charlton's water resources for health and recreational purposes.
3. Provide adequate active recreational facilities and programs for all residents of Charlton.
4. Adopt and implement an Open Space & Recreation Acquisition and Management Plan to promote maintenance and use standards for town owned land, set usage goals for parcels with clear open space or recreational value, and strategically target for acquisition parcels, portions of parcels, development rights, and easements.
5. Increase public access to and use of open space lands.

6. Consider amending the zoning bylaws to create an Open Space Overlay Zoning District that restricts development activities within designated corridors to preserve wildlife habitats, greenway corridors, and other linkage of open space resources and recreational lands.
7. Establish a standard signage system, map, and guide book to identify open space and recreation sites and their access points.
8. Institute an assertive land acquisition program, seeking out funding sources other than the annual Town budget.
9. Consider amending the zoning bylaw to include a provision for the Transfer of Development Rights to conserve open space resources as part of the development process.
10. Strive for at least 25% of the Charlton land base to be permanently protected open space.

Recommendations

Those below are from the 2000 plan; these will be expanded on and others added.

In the 2000 Plan, the Town recognized the need to commit resources to adequately plan for acquisition of important open space and recreational resources. The recommendation was to set aside at least \$25,000.00 for Charlton land trust purposes. *HAS THIS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED?*

A transfer of development rights (TDR) zoning provision is another land use tool that can help in preserving open space.

How does one fund open space acquisition in the face of development pressure? One option is the Community Preservation Act of 2000, which provides legal authority for communities in the Commonwealth to collect a surcharge of up to 3 percent on the property taxes assessment. Of the resulting revenue at least 10 percent must be spent on the following:

- Open space and recreation
- Historic preservation
- Affordable housing.

Conclusion

Open space and recreation are quality of life issues for all the citizens of Charlton. Based upon the input at public forums, the importance of open space and recreation resources Charlton residents cannot be understated. It is central to the identity of the community and should remain so for years to come. The sake of future generations enjoyment of Charlton's aesthetic depends on the choices that are being made now.

Citizens and leaders of Charlton must work together to find a sustainable and sensible balance of preservation and development.

DRAFT