

Charlton Open Space, Greenways & Trails Planning Project

In March of 2003, the Planning Board initiated a comprehensive planning effort to advance long-range open space, greenways & trails planning efforts. The established project goal 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 of Charlton. 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 Master Plan.

To achieve this goal, the Planning Board and staff prepared and submitted a planning grant application of the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor's *Partnership Program 2003* grant program. The application was approved in May of 2003, providing \$3,550 toward a total project budget of \$7,175. Remaining project costs were provided by a combination of Planning Board cash match and in-kind staff and volunteer time.

GIS map data layers were proposed to include the following:

- Permanently-preserved open space holding in various ownership categories (i.e., Federal/State/Local government, private entries, etc.).
- Private open space landholdings in Chapter 61-A and 61-B classifications.
- Existing and proposed walking trails in Town within the trail system effort being planned and Implemented by the Town of Charlton Master Plan Implementation Committee (MPIC).

Upon approval of the grant application, the Planning Board contracted with the Central Mass. Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) for GIS data collection and mapping services. In-kind data collection and data analysis assistance was provided by Town Planner Alan I. Gordon and the Town Assessors Office. Planning Board and MPIC members William O. Hultgren and John P. McGrath received volunteer GPS training from the University of Connecticut Extension Services, and as such assisted CMRPC GIS Analyst Michael Morin in field plotting existing and proposed walking trail locations.

In September of 2003, Step One of the project began with the Data Collection phase. The Town Planner and Assessors Office compiled and provided CMRPC with a master list of open space parcels to be included in the GIS coverage. These included Chapter 61, 61A and 61B parcels, properties with conservation or agricultural restrictions, town, state and federal lands dedicated for recreation or park purposes, and privately-owned conservation and recreation properties. Parcel-specific information included map and lot number, ownership, use, assessed acreage and other information pertinent to the project. The Town Planner provided CMRPC with existing and proposed trail system maps drawn by the MPIC, and the Assessors Office provided CMRPC with a complete set of Town parcel maps.

Step Two of the project commenced in December of 2003 with Data Development. CMRPC GIS Analyst Michael Morin compared the Master List of parcels provided by the Town with the open space data layers provided by MassGIS and the Green Valley Institute, a research and planning affiliate of the U Conn Extension Services and Quinebaug-Shetucket National Heritage Corridor. CMRPC added those parcels missing from the MassGIS distributed data to complete the Charlton open space coverage data layer, and incorporated the trails map

information into the GIS data layer system. Various drafts of the developed data were reviewed by the Town Planner, Town Conservation Agent Karen Gauvin and the Assessors Office and revised or amended accordingly.

Step Three Map Creation commenced in February of 2004 with CMRPC issuing a first-draft large map plot of the collected and refined data in the various open space and trail categories. The draft map also detailed Town base features including roads, hydrography (water bodies) and elevation contour information. CMRPC also included bio-map and rare species habitat location layers delineated by the Mass. Natural Heritage Endangered Species Program.

From February to April, various draft versions of the GIS map were reviewed by the Planning Board, Town Planner, Conservation Agent and Assessors Office. At the Planning Board's recommendation, CMRPC made various factual corrections and adjusted labeling fonts and color schemes. The Board compiled a data layer of historic resources and historic cemeteries with CMRPC added into the GIS data layer system.

In May and June, trails mapping efforts were conducted. Mr. Hultgren and Mr. McGrath received GPS equipment training from U Conn Extension Services, and Mr. Michael Morin of CMRPC assisted the volunteers with field plotting of both existing and proposed walking trail locations. Significant locations incorporated into the data system and map product included the walking trail system implemented by the 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 Land Trust. By the end of June, the map creation phase of the project was complete.

Step Four Outreach represented the final phase of the project, and focused upon conducting a project public outreach session hosted by the Planning Board on August 4. A public outreach session press release was distributed and posted on the Town of Charlton webpage, at the Town Library and in the Town Hall. Specified invitees included the Town Conservation Commission, Charlton Heritage Land Trust, Capen Hill Nature Sanctuary representatives, and Town Historical Commission. CMRPC GIS Analyst Michael Morin presented the GIS map information, and the Planning Board and Town Planner led a discussion on trail planning, greenway connections and possible open space protection strategies.

Upon conclusion of the public outreach session, this narrative report was completed. Copies of the report along with the project map will be provided to all interested town government and local community environmental and historical interests, will be posted on the Town of Charlton webpage and will be made available as a reference at the Town Library. It is anticipated that the project information will be actively 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.

The Charlton Planning Board and all project participants wish to thank the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor and Corridor Executive Director Charlene Cutler for their financial grant support, without which this project could not have been successfully conducted.