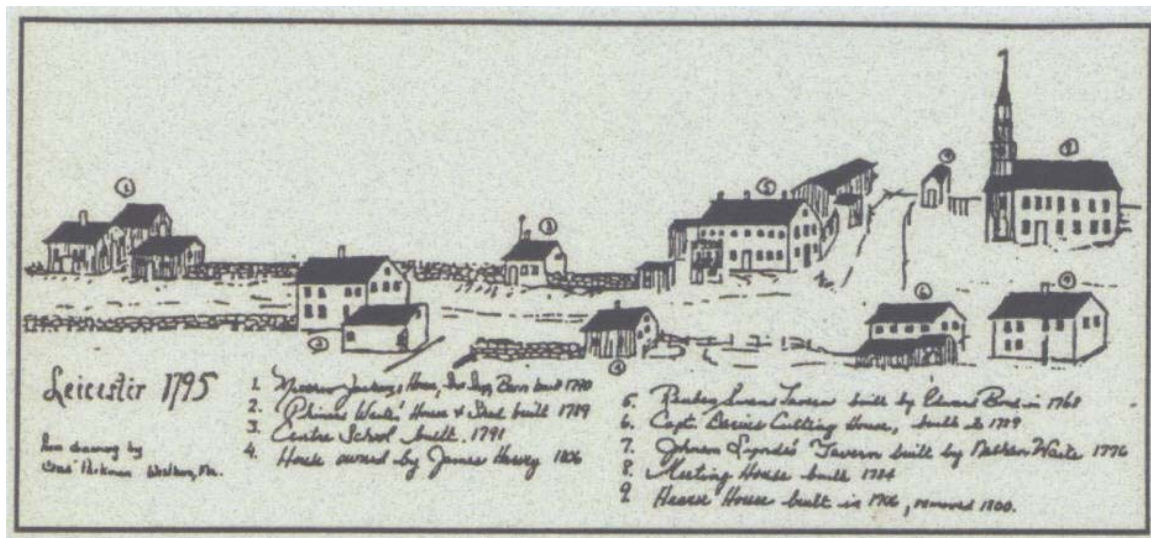


# GREENER VIEWS: PLANNING FOR AN EVOLVING COMMUNITY



## LEICESTER OPEN SPACE & RECREATION PLAN NOVEMBER 2007

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## **Special Mention:**

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# Section 1

## PLAN SUMMARY

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**L**eicester, a rural community with a population of just under 10,500, is located in Central Massachusetts, just west of the City of Worcester. Leicester encompasses an area of 24.53 square miles, and is bisected by Route 56, and by Route 9, which carries a high volume of traffic to Worcester, the second largest city and a major employment center in the state.

Leicester's development over time can be traced to the abundant water resources found within its borders, much of which provide drinking water for neighboring towns. Settled as a farming community, Leicester thrived during the Industrial Revolution in the manufacture of hand cards for the textile industry. Today, although Leicester is no longer an industrial center, its waterways continue to suffer the effects of industrial development.

At the headwaters of three drainage basins, Leicester affects numerous communities downstream; the Blackstone, French and Chicopee River Watershed regions collectively drain over fourteen hundred square miles. As a member of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, it shares remnants of the region's industrial past as well as the support of regional redevelopment efforts. Protecting water resources in Leicester, especially ground water resources, is a priority for the town, as is recognizing and protecting cultural and historic resources.

Water resources encouraged industrial development in Leicester; they have also limited residential development. Ranging in size from less than one acre to more than 100 acres, ponds, lakes, and reservoirs cover approximately 850 acres of Leicester. Surface waters, including thirty-seven streams and twenty-six bodies of water, seven of which are drinking water reservoirs, are evenly distributed throughout the town. Four of the seven reservoirs serve the city of Worcester and are located in the northeast quadrant of town, within the

Blackstone River Watershed. Despite the numerous water resources within the town, no town beaches are open to the public for swimming, and there are few points of access for fishing. Many in town indicate that existing recreational facilities are inadequate, but the town has not conducted a comprehensive analysis of its recreation and conservation needs and existing resources.

Forest and agricultural lands account for the majority of open land in Leicester. While dairy farming was once the dominant agricultural business in the town, today only one working dairy farm remains. Other agricultural business in Leicester includes nurseries, swine, horse stables, llama farms, maple sugaring, vegetables, and Christmas trees. Active agriculture contributes to Leicester's rural character and provides a continued source of fresh, locally grown produce and dairy products. Residents have identified a range of visually, culturally, and historically significant resources that contribute to Leicester's character, including the Cooper's Hilltop Farm (the town's only active dairy farm), the Town Common, reservoirs, lakes, ponds, and farmlands.

Approximately one quarter of Leicester is protected to some degree in an open space program (the second highest amount of open space among all Blackstone Valley municipalities); however, approximately 28% of these protected lands are temporarily in Chapter 61 (which provides a tax incentive to property owners managing their land for forestry, agriculture, or recreation), and risk

development. According to a growth strategy prepared by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) in 2004, the west subregion of Central Massachusetts, which includes Leicester, lost roughly 3,000 acres of farmland (the most of any of the subregions) and gained roughly 3,500 acres of new residential development between 1985 and 1999. The protection of agricultural and rural land is not only regionally important, it is important to Leicester's residents.

The community of Leicester is working towards acquiring and protecting land to protect open space and support recreational needs. Since the last Open Space and Recreation Plan update in 2000, the town has begun work on a stormwater bylaw, has placed Leicester Center on the National Register of Historic Places, and has acquired, with the assistance of the Trust for Public Land, a 310-acre mixed conservation and recreation site.

This draft plan suggests a course of action by which the town may protect natural resources, protect native habitats and ecosystems, promote optimal land management, and take advantage of existing opportunities to preserve its scenic, rural, and historic landscape and direct growth appropriately.

Recommendations are summarized by five overall goals:

- Preserve, protect, connect, and enhance Leicester's conservation and natural land resources.
- Provide, maintain, and improve diverse recreational opportunities to meet the needs of Leicester's growing population.
- Preserve and improve the quality, character, and health of Leicester's community and environmental resources by remediating degraded lands, protecting common resources, and preserving cultural heritage.

- Build a strong constituency of open space and recreation advocates through education and collaborative partnerships.
- Identify funding and other resources to support implementation of the actions identified in the Open Space and Recreation Plan Update.

Some key preliminary recommendations, based on input from the community, suggestions from town boards and citizens, and the preliminary findings, include:

- Hold a series of public meetings to discuss the Community Preservation Act (CPA), which promotes historical preservation, affordable housing and the acquisition of open space.
- Teach children through the school curriculum about environmental science and sustainable natural resources using open space land as outdoor classrooms.
- Evaluate existing recreational facilities (passive and active) and create a comprehensive plan for the town's recreational needs.
- Identify wildlife corridors and plan for their protection.
- Identify existing trails and plan for their expansion and/or preservation.

A five-year action plan attempts to be specific enough to guide decision making and planning while allowing flexibility to respond to changing opportunities and constraints. The action plan includes specific tasks to implement each goal, identifies the responsible agency or board, and recommends a timeline.

"My favorite place would be the Common. It is a place where the community can gather & interact"  
-Resident

## Section 2

# INTRODUCTION

---

### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

**T**he Town of Leicester has historically placed a high value on open space in the community, and provides a number of recreational facilities for passive and active use. Leicester has participated in open space and recreation planning since the first requirements were enacted. The 2007 plan is an update of the previous plan approved in 2000.

The 2007 Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) for the Town of Leicester:

- Updates the town's 2000 Open Space and Recreation Plan.
- Assesses the natural resources within the town and inventories the current open space.
- Establishes goals and recommendations for open space preservation and recreation opportunities.
- Involves as many residents as possible in the decision-making process.
- Meets the requirements of the

Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) for an Open Space and Recreation Plan. Approval is required from the Division of Conservation Services (DCS), and will make Leicester eligible to participate in DCS grant rounds for up to five years.

An assessment of the natural resources within Leicester and an inventory of current open space is also included.

A five-year action plan establishes goals and recommendations for open space preservation and recreation. Specific action steps establish guidelines for implementing each goal.



# PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

**L**eicester's Open Space and Recreation Plan was developed by the members of the Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee (OSRPC). Two students from the Conway School of Landscape Design (CSLD) assisted in the process of updating information, facilitating public forums, and producing a draft document to help focus subsequent community discussions.

To gather information and direction from community members, meetings were held with the Town Planner, the OSRPC, elected and volunteer officials, and the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC).

A public survey was distributed at the Town Hall, posted at various neighborhood locations, and sent home with students in the public schools. Notice of availability of the survey was distributed to all Town Departments and posted online and on Leicester's Local Cable Access channel. An online version of the survey was also posted on the Leicester town website. There were 569 responses gathered; 79 online and 490 paper copies. A copy of the survey and tabulation of the responses are found in the Appendix; all of the quotes on the section dividers of this plan are anonymous survey responses. (As is noted in more detail in the Appendix, the usefulness of the survey is somewhat limited because surveys disproportionately represent Leicester High School students.)

In addition, community forums were held on February 8 and March 8, 2007. To encourage participation, notices were placed in the local newspapers and posted in the Town Hall. Announcements were also broadcast over the local cable channel. Despite these efforts, attendance was sparse; seven residents attended the first community forum, and eight attended the second. Additional attention to generating public involvement is one priority in the action plan.

The CSLD team produced the Draft Open Space and Recreation Plan document, shaped by community responses, to provide the basis for further community discussion. Following receipt of the Draft Plan in May of 2007, the plan was distributed for review and comment by Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee members, other Town Departments, and the general public. These comments, and review and comment by Committee members, were the basis of changes and additions to the final Plan approved by the Committee.

"I love to go to the areas around the reservoirs to walk with my kids and my dog."

-Resident

## Section 3

# COMMUNITY SETTING

---

### REGIONAL CONTEXT

**T**he abundance of water that made Leicester a vibrant mill town during the Industrial Revolution has limited development and consequently helped Leicester retain its rural character. However, development pressures have encouraged the town to revise their zoning bylaws to encourage reuse, infill and other "smart growth" techniques.

Leicester, a rural town in Worcester County, is bordered by Paxton on the north, Auburn and Worcester on the east, Charlton and Oxford on the south, and Spencer on the west. Leicester encompasses an area of 24.53 square miles, or 15,900 acres, 1.3 square miles of which is water.

Two state highways bisect the town (State Routes 9 and 56), dividing it roughly into quarters. These roads carry considerable amounts of traffic to the Massachusetts Turnpike and to Worcester, the third largest city in New England and the major employment center in Central Massachusetts.

Worcester has historically looked to Leicester to supply its drinking water, as well as open space and recreational opportunities. Most of Worcester's Kettle Brook water reservoir system is in Leicester, along with much of the Worcester Regional Airport property.

The town has three distinct villages: Leicester Center, Cherry Valley (on the east side of town, near Worcester), and Rochdale (a crossroads in the southeast, near the Oxford line, that includes Greenville). The village boundaries have no official standing, although some Cherry Valley and Rochdale residents identify more strongly with their village than with Leicester.

Leicester is a member of the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC), which encompasses the southern two-thirds of Worcester County. To assist communities in meeting the challenges of future growth, CMRPC is currently working on a number of statewide and regional initiatives. Current initiatives include establishing subregional councils to promote dialogue and regional cooperation on growth issues; passing legislation for a state matching program to acquire municipal open space; undertaking a natural resource inventory; and prioritizing natural resource areas for future protection or acquisition.

Leicester's development is part of a larger pattern in the region – along with twenty-three other cities and towns, Leicester is a member of the John H. Chafee Memorial Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (BRVNH), stretching from Leicester in the north to Providence, Rhode Island, to the south. Leicester is home to Kettle Brook, which is the largest headwater tributary of the Blackstone River, and once supported eight mills and small villages. As late as 1971, the Blackstone was listed by *Audubon* magazine as one of America's most polluted rivers. Organizations and individuals in the region are still working to clean up the river.

The Corridor, an affiliated area of the National Park Service, was established by Congress in 1986. State and local corridor partners work together to tell the story of the American Industrial Revolution, promote the environmental recovery of the Blackstone River, and encourage preservation of historic resources.

BRVNH officials are currently working with

Leicester residents to identify and document heritage landscapes in town, as part of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation Heritage Landscape Inventory Program. The program aims to increase awareness about the many different types of heritage landscapes found throughout the Commonwealth, and help communities plan for their preservation.

## HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

**L**eicester's growth and development can be traced to the abundant water resources found within its borders. Settled as a farming community, Leicester thrived during the Industrial Revolution in the manufacture of hand cards for the textile industry. Today, although Leicester is no longer an industrial center, its waterways continue to suffer the effects of industrial development.

Agrarian European settlement by the mid-seventeenth century essentially replaced the local Nipmuc Native American population who had fished and farmed the fertile floodplains. These Native Americans succumbed to diseases brought by explorers, fishermen, and fur traders. William Blackstone, for which the valley was named, was typical of these early settlers: religious dissidents who sought freedom and farmland.

Farmers settled Leicester, the only flourishing community between Worcester and the Connecticut River during the early years. The farms were focal points for roads developed to facilitate marketing; these roads still exist as Routes 9 and 56. Local tradition holds that "plot one," where the Reverend Samuel May's house stands, was the site of the first residence in the community; the original house, however, no longer exists. Samuel May was a pastor and active abolitionist in the 1860s, and the May House, now the property of Becker College, was a stop on the Underground Railroad. The oldest house remaining in town, the Henshaw Place near Henshaw Pond, was built in 1720 by one of the original town proprietors, Judge Menzies.

Established on February 15, 1714, and incorporated as a town on June 14, 1722, Leicester still has an open town meeting form of government headed by a five-member Select Board. The first recorded Town Meeting was held on March 17, 1722. Leicester is currently included in the 2nd

Massachusetts Congressional District, the 7th Councilor District, the 1st Worcester and Middlesex State Senatorial District, the 17th Worcester Representative District, and the Worcester Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Religion played an important part in the early life of the town. One of the earliest buildings was the Congregational Meeting House, constructed before 1722. In 1736 a society of Baptists formed in Greenville, where they continue to this day, although not in the original building. The Society of Friends had a meetinghouse as early as 1732. The Episcopal Church was formed in Clappville (now Rochdale) in 1823 and the church building (the oldest in the county) was consecrated in May 1824. The Unitarians organized their society on April 30, 1833, and built a church, which is still in use on the Town Common. In 1846, the Methodists built two town meeting houses: one in Cherry Valley, the other in the center of town. The first Catholic Church, built in 1855, was eventually moved to Rochdale. Architect Elbridge Boyden, who also designed the famous Mechanics Hall in Worcester, designed the brick church currently used, which replaced the original building. Churches and their grounds continue to serve as centers of many social and recreational activities in the town.

The floodplains were cleared of forests and plowed and the early European settlers harnessed the river. Small sawmills, gristmills, and forges furnished

materials needed on the farms. In 1790, Samuel Slater built the first American water-powered textile mill, in the Blackstone River Valley in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, establishing the first manifestation of the industrial revolution on this continent. The mills and the accompanying mill villages were built to implement a set of business practices that came to be known as the Rhode Island system of production. Small, independently owned mills, each with exclusive waterpower supplies, and families of labor housed in the adjacent villages characterized these mill villages. Examples are evident throughout the region and Rochdale is an important example within Leicester. Today the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor has formed to recognize the important cultural contributions of this region to our national history and to identify and address the effects of industrial development on the natural resources of the region, especially the waterways.

By 1814, all available dam sites were occupied on the river, creating the first major ecological impact brought on by human use of this resource. As mills and villages were established to harvest the waterpower, structures were built within, immediately beside, and overhanging the water. The moving water was intercepted to provide power to run the mill machinery and used as a disposal system for both human and industrial wastes. Flood storage capacity for the river, habitat for native plants and animals, and breeding grounds for wetland species were eliminated as buildings displaced riparian areas.

Before cotton and wool fibers could be spun into threads to be woven into cloth, they were untangled and straightened by means of leather “cards” set with bent wire teeth. These cards were manufactured in Leicester. By 1826, card manufacturing establishments in Leicester were powered mainly by water, sometimes by hand or by

steam. As the century progressed, the mills gradually shifted from water to steam power. The high brick chimneys typical of mill boiler houses were once a prominent feature of Leicester, but few remain today. One chimney, in ruin, still stands over the remains of the mills on Rawson Street by Rawson Brook. Today, silted ponds and numerous dilapidated dams remain as a legacy of the mills. Only one of the old mills remaining in Leicester is currently used in the manufacturing of textiles.

While Leicester dominated the manufacture of hand and machine cards, accompanying industry sprang up in town. By the early 1800s, Worcester began producing textile machinery, surpassing Leicester in card production, and the manufacture of spinning, weaving, and shearing machines. Footwear production replaced card production in Leicester, and the production of wire products increased.

The completion of the Blackstone Canal and the Providence & Worcester Railroad solidified the centralization of administration and transportation in Worcester that exists today. From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Worcester began acquiring the waterways in Leicester in order to establish a reservoir system for its growing population. This change effectively ended Leicester's hydro-industrialization.

Leicester's Town Common has been the center of life in town for nearly 300 years, and was recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places. As a crossroads, it was the site for the meeting house and several taverns along with a few small shops. The Common has also been a center of education since 1784 when Leicester Academy was established. Today, Becker College sits on the eastern side of the Common and owns many of the historic buildings along Main Street.

# POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

**L**eicester's population is relatively evenly spread across age groups; just under 60% of the 10,471 residents are under the age of 44 years. Population projections suggest that the percentage of residents over 45 will increase through 2020. Planning for future open space and recreation needs will need to address a range of age distributions.

According to 2000 US Census data, Leicester's population is relatively evenly spread in terms of age (see Table A.) In the past, the population was younger. In contrast with the 1990 census data, the older populations are experiencing growth, while the younger populations today are declining. The Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research (MISER) projects population increases through 2020 in the percentage of residents who are 65 and older, and a relative decrease in the percentage of residents between the ages of 5 and 44. (MISER is the liaison between the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the U.S. Bureau of the Census.) Recreation opportunities must address a range of age distributions and provide for all community members.

**TABLE A**  
**Population Projection by Age**

Age	# and % of Population 2000	# and % of Population 2010	# and % of Population, 2020
<b>Under 5 years</b>	617 (5.9%)	596 (5.6%)	602 (5.6%)
<b>5-14</b>	1,647 (15.7%)	1,329 (12.5%)	1,312 (12.2%)
<b>15-44</b>	4,558 (43.6%)	4,270 (40.3%)	4,114 (38.4%)
<b>45-64</b>	2,353 (22.4%)	3,057 (28.8%)	2,887 (26.9%)
<b>65 and older</b>	1,296 (12.4%)	1,354 (12.8%)	1,812 (16.9%)

Source: MISER

The 2000 US Census reported 3,683 households in Leicester, of which 35.3% had children under the age of 18, 21.9% were made up of individuals, and 9.3% were individuals 65 years of age or older. The

average household size was 2.73, and the average family size was 3.21. The racial makeup of the town was 96.29% White, 1.75% Hispanic or Latino, 1.28% African American, 0.31% Native American, 0.74% Asian, and 0.37% from other races.

The median household income at the time of the 2000 US Census was \$55,039, while the per capita income was reported to be \$15,806. US Census figures also indicate that 4.3% of the population was living at or below the poverty line.

Leicester's population growth is influenced by its proximity to Worcester; many in the Worcester workforce seek a home away from the city. The pattern today shows the majority of Leicester's workforce commuting to Worcester, with many others commuting to Boston.

Neighboring Worcester, the third largest city in New England (after Boston and Providence), has a population more than ten times as high as Leicester. Other neighboring communities are, for the most part, approximately the same size (see Table B).

**TABLE B**  
**Population: Leicester and Surrounding Communities**

Paxton	4,386
Leicester	10,471
Charlton	11,263
Spencer	11,691
Oxford	13,352
Worcester	172,648

Source: US Census Bureau

Compared to similar-sized communities in the region, Leicester's population is experiencing relatively slow growth (see Table C). The growth rate for all of the communities listed does show a slower growth from 1990-2000 than in the previous

ten years. *MISER* projections for Leicester indicate that the town's population will grow by 2.4% over the current size, to 10,727 residents, by the year 2020.

**TABLE C**

**Population Size and Percent Change - Comparable Communities**

Figures in parentheses represent growth over previous decade.

Year	Charlton	Dudley	Leicester	Oxford	Spencer	Uxbridge	Webster
1980	6,719	8,717	9,446	11,680	10,774	8,374	14,480
1990	9,576 (42.5%)	9,540 (9.4%)	10,191 (7.9%)	12,588 (7.8%)	11,645 (8.0%)	10,415 (24.4%)	16,196 (11.8%)
2000	11,263 (17.6%)	10,036 (5.2%)	10,471 (2.7%)	13,352 (6.1%)	11,691 (0.4%)	11,156 (7.1%)	16,145 (1.3%)

Source: *US Census Bureau*.

## GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

**The areas of population density mirror the historic villages built around the former mills in Cherry Valley, Rochdale, and Leicester Center. Between 1980 and 1990 Leicester experienced a 7.9% increase in growth; however, *MISER* projections indicate that by 2020, Leicester's population will increase by only 2.4% over the current total.**

Historically, slow growth has allowed Leicester to maintain and enjoy a rural atmosphere. The areas of population density mirror the historic villages built around the former mills in Cherry Valley, Rochdale, and Leicester Center.

For the most part development and expansion have been constrained by the lack of sewer and water services in many areas. Severe limitations for septic systems due to soil conditions occur on over half of the land in Leicester, including moderately to excessively drained poor filter soils, shallow depth to bedrock soils restricted by Title 5, and high water table soils restricted by Title 5 (see Septic Suitability map). On-site septic systems that are not properly sited or maintained contribute pathogens and nutrients to groundwater and surface water, endangering drinking water supplies, shellfish beds, and surface water bodies. Title 5 of the State Environmental Code dictates proper siting,

construction, upgrade, and maintenance of on-site systems.

The three privately owned water districts of Leicester, Hillcrest, and Cherry Valley/Rochdale serve approximately 65% of the residential households. Because special provisions are required for private water supply and sewage disposal, development traditionally has been costly for single-family builders and especially for large scale subdivisions requiring individual septic systems. However, with the recent dramatic increase in housing costs in nearby Worcester, relatively lower costs in Leicester have made the town more attractive to developers. From 1990-2000, the number of residences in Leicester increased by 6.5% (see Table D).

Land use changes have historically taken place over long periods of time. Today's technology allows

these changes to occur much more rapidly, and for building to take place on more marginal lands. A significant factor affecting land use development today is increased mobility, resulting in more choices of where to live and work. Low-density housing subdivisions, commercial facilities to serve them, and employment centers in suburban office and industrial parks have proliferated. This type of development typically occurs on undeveloped lands rather than on former industrial sites, such as mill complexes, or in commercial centers of town.

**Table D**  
**Housing Unit Growth in Leicester**

Year	# of Occupied Housing Units	Numerical Change	% Change
1980	2,961	---	---
1990	3,458	497	16.8%
2000	3,683	221	6.5%

*Source: US Census Bureau*

Developed land constitutes approximately 14% of Leicester, and is concentrated in the central and southern portions of town; most new building is on frontage lots on established roads (see Land Use map). This pattern of development fragments open space and leaves large unbuilt areas behind the frontage strips.

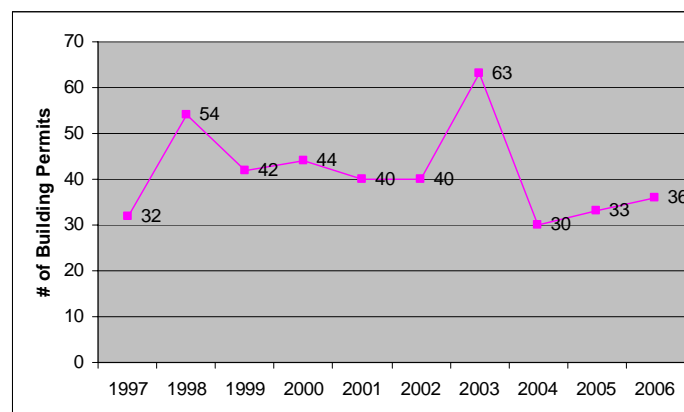
Land use patterns in Leicester mirror the changes in the region. As agriculture has declined, open space and scenic landscapes have been lost. Forests have increased through woody growth on abandoned farm fields, a process ecologists call natural

succession. Urban land has increased, along with car-oriented commercial uses and the accompanying impervious surfaces. Increasing numbers of housing developments are depleting open space resources as the demand for single-family homes rises, and the relatively high cost of redeveloping former industrial sites, such as mill complexes, for mixed-use residential and commercial centers is prohibitive; however, there is one mill building near the center of town on Route 9 that is being considered for conversion to housing units. In 2006, the town adopted an Adaptive Reuse Bylaw to encourage reuse of historic mill buildings, former municipal buildings, and former religious buildings.

Typical housing subdivisions consist of home sites of an acre or more. Large properties with high-maintenance lawns strain local resources, particularly water supplies. Suburban landscape practices can pollute or degrade water resources when added high nitrogen fertilizers and pesticides leach into groundwater.

Density figures provide an understanding of how Leicester has changed over the years. The 24.68 square miles of the town support a current average density of 448.3 persons per square mile. This is more than double the 1940 density figure of 214 persons per square mile. Building permits for single-family homes between 1997 and 2006 have fluctuated from a low of 30 permits in 2004 to a high of 63 in 2003 (the average number for this period was 41 permits per year). See Chart A for detail.

**Chart A**  
**Leicester Single Family Building Permits, 1997-2006**



### ***Transportation***

The principal highways through Leicester are Massachusetts Route 9, which runs east-west through the state, and Massachusetts Route 56, running north-south. The Massachusetts Turnpike (Interstate 90) passes near the southern boundary of the town and is easily accessible from Route 56 through Auburn. Leicester is served by the Worcester Regional Transit Authority and has regular daily service.

Traffic is a growing concern for Leicester residents, particularly along Route 9. A Wal-Mart opened near the Spencer border in March 2007, and a traffic light was added to help manage anticipated increases in traffic volume. Data from the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission indicates a weekday volume (combined east and westbound vehicles) as high as 20,286 per day near the intersection of Routes 9 and 56.

Areas in the region expected to experience the most development growth over the next five years are those near Worcester along Route 9 on the eastern

boundary, and along Route 56 near the southern boundary, via the Massachusetts Turnpike. Potential consequences include increased air and water pollution due to auto emissions and highway runoff, more impervious surfaces resulting in less groundwater recharge, loss of habitat for wildlife, and increased erosion.

### ***Municipal Service and Utilities Infrastructure***

As development increases in Leicester, the demand for services will also increase. These include sewers, solid waste disposal facilities, gas and electric lines, schools and municipal services. Water lines serve the majority of existing structures in the eastern, central and southern sections of Leicester. Sewers are currently available in Leicester center and Rochdale. Development has been constrained by the lack of sewer and water services in other areas so far, but this is not a reliable land use control, as rising prices in nearby communities make the expense of installing service less onerous to prospective developers.

## **Z O N I N G**

**A**lmost ninety percent of the undeveloped land in Leicester could become residential land use according to current zoning laws. Approximately forty percent of the town lies within the Water Resource Protection overlay zone which limits activities, such as applications of fertilizers and pesticides, to protect water quality. Since the last update of the Open Space & Recreation Plan, several zoning amendments, including the adoption of an Adaptive Reuse Bylaw, have been adopted by the town.

The Town of Leicester is zoned with the following districts (see Zoning map):

RA	Residential A
RB	Residential B
SA	Suburban-Agricultural
B	Business
I	Industrial
BI-A	Business-Industrial A
RD	Recreational Development
BR-I	Business-Residential 1
RIB	Residential Industrial Business
HB-1	Highway Business-Industrial District 1
HB-2	Highway Business-Industrial District 2
NB	Greenville Village Neighborhood Business
CB	Central Business

Additionally, there are two zoning overlay districts: the Water Resource Protection District which limits activities for the protection of water resources within the district, and the Flood Plain District which prohibits loss of flood storage capacity. In 2003, the Flood Plain District was amended to comply with National Flood Insurance Program requirements.

The Water Resource Protection District was adopted after the Lycott Engineering study in 1987. The purpose of this district is to “prevent the contamination of those areas within Leicester that contribute ground or surface water to existing or planned public water supplies,” according to the



zoning by-laws. This district encompasses much of the important water resource areas in Leicester: the zone of contribution for a drinking water well in Leicester Center, Henshaw Pond, a drinking water well near the Memorial School, the Kettle Brook Reservoirs, and the Moose Hill Reservoir. In this district, application of fertilizers and pesticides are permitted by special permit only. Building and subdividing are not prohibited in the Water Resource Protection District. The boundaries of this district were expanded in 2002 to include the Conceptual Zone II of the Grindstone Well, a new drinking water source for the Cherry Valley and Rochdale Water District.

The zoning bylaws regulate the type of land uses and population density permitted in Leicester; most of the land area of the town is zoned for residential use. Within the suburban agriculture district, the minimum lot size was increased to 80,000 (from 50,000) in 2001. Residential districts A and B make up the remainder of the residential land and require minimum lot sizes of 50,000 and 20,000 square feet respectively.

The minimum lot size in RA was increased from 20,000 to 50,000 in 2001 (40,000-square-foot lots are allowed where both public water and sewer are available.) The remaining land area is zoned for business and industrial uses. These zones are concentrated along the major highways in the town, Routes 9 and 56, with the exception of the Greenville Village Neighborhood Business District.

In addition to the town's zoning bylaws, Leicester has a separate body of Subdivision Regulations that affect residential development. These regulations specify construction standards for new subdivisions. Changes to the Subdivision Regulations, such as narrower roadway pavement requirements and updated stormwater management requirements could reduce the environmental impacts of new subdivisions.

Unique to Leicester is the Recreational Development District. This district only encompasses land now maintained as the Hillcrest Country Club, along Route 56 south of Leicester Center. The intent of this district is "to provide recreational opportunities for the residents of Leicester, to allow more effective and efficient use of large tracts of land in the rural areas of Leicester, and to minimize town service responsibilities"

(Town of Leicester Zoning bylaws).

Although this District was intended to protect the Hillcrest Country Club, this zoning designation ultimately did not provide sufficient protection. After a large subdivision was proposed on the site of the Hillcrest Country Club, the Town purchased the property so that it could be permanently protected as recreational and water supply protection land.

Even with Leicester's current zoning bylaws and lands protected by the Wetlands Protection Act, the town could still lose much of its open land, fields, and forests if it were built out to its maximum capacity. The town would certainly see negative effects on its natural resources, especially degradation of surface water quality.

Since the last Open Space Plan Update in 1999, the Town has been very actively amending the Zoning Bylaw and Zoning Districts. There have been several dozen amendments (see Appendix), with the major focus on implementing the goals and objectives of the Leicester Master Plan (adopted in 2000).

Notable zoning changes include the following:

- A Senior Village Development bylaw allows higher density residential construction for housing for residents age fifty-five or older, in exchange for the permanent protection of 25% of the site as open space (5/2002)
- Accessory Apartment Bylaw (5/2003)
- An amendment requires compliance with Massachusetts Stormwater Policy in all zoning districts (5/2006)
- An Adaptive Reuse Bylaw allows easier reuse of former mills, religious buildings, and former municipal buildings (11/2006)

There has been a substantial increase in the amount of land zoned for commercial and industrial use, especially on Route 9 and Route 56. Much of the commercial re-zoning was done through creation of new zoning districts customized to the particular neighborhood area. New commercial districts include the Central Business District, Highway Business-Industrial 1 & II Districts, and the

Greenville Village Neighborhood Business District. All new commercial districts include site development standards for landscaping, buffering, and parking requirements. Commercial districts have also been amended to restrict residential construction.

The zoning changes illustrate Leicester's attempt to direct growth in a way that provides appropriately for a growing population, while preserving the open space and recreational opportunities that make the town appealing. Encouraging the reuse of existing buildings and allowing higher density development with provisions that large tracts of open space be preserved and natural resources be protected accommodate a growing population without greatly adding to the amount of developed land.



"We need to protect our wetlands and open spaces for future generations."

-Resident

# Section 4

## ENVIRONMENTAL INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

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### GEOLOGY, SOILS, AND TOPOGRAPHY

**G**laciers sculpted the earth in Leicester, leaving a series of north-south oriented drumlins upon a relatively level river-dissected plateau with bedrock exposures. The soils in Leicester are primarily excessively to well drained, which can pose a threat as contaminants do not filter properly through the soil before reaching the water supply.

Leicester lies in the Eastern Upland Physiographic Province of Massachusetts, a plateau-like region which was subject to continental glaciation approximately 14,000 years ago. This glaciated plateau slopes gently to the south, is highly dissected by streams and rivers, and has a mean elevation of approximately 900 feet, ranging from 820 feet to 1,180 feet above sea level.

Slopes are generally low to moderate except along stream valleys and a few isolated hills. The land surface is smooth where covered by thick deposits of glacial till, a dense mixture of boulders, gravel, sand, and clay which is relatively impermeable. The streamlined hills of till, elongated in the direction of

glacial advance from north to south rising 50 to 150 feet above the surrounding land surface, are known as drumlins. Elsewhere, bedrock outcrops are at or near the surface, and the ground is irregular.

Soils in Leicester range from poorly drained in the floodplain zones to excessively drained in more than half of the town. The Canton-Montauk-Scituate soils are deep and well to excessively drained, and make up almost half the town. The Paxton-Woodbridge-Ridgebury series are deep soils that range from poorly to well drained. The excessively well drained soils can pose a threat, as contaminants do not filter properly through the soil before reaching the water supply (see Soils map).

## LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

**A combination of woodlands, open fields, and farms characterizes the landscape of Leicester. An abundance of surface water has provided the town with brooks, wetlands, and ponds for wildlife habitat and recreation.**

The many rivers and streams in Leicester have anchored the town to a pattern common throughout New England: populations clustered near the lowlands where the soils are arable and where the rivers historically provided power for the mills. Leicester's involvement with the birth of the American Industrial Revolution has left its mark on the landscape in the form of numerous mills and twenty-six bodies of water, most the result of publicly or privately owned dams. Currently, these old mill ponds are used by wildlife or for general recreation and enhance the scenic views.

The landscape of Leicester consists of a variety of hills, valleys, swamps, lakes, and streams. The variety adds scenic beauty to the town and provides opportunities for recreation. Nearly 70% of Leicester is second growth forest which is distributed relatively evenly throughout the town. Although this is substantial, it represents a major

change in the landscape character over the last thirty-five years. In 1971, just over 90% of Leicester was undeveloped land. About 15% of the town's forestland is protected for Worcester's water supply and is not available for development or public recreational use.

Forest and agricultural lands account for the majority of open land in Leicester, creating a rural atmosphere. While dairy farming was once the dominant agricultural business in Leicester, today only one working dairy farm remains. Other agricultural businesses in Leicester include pig farms, horse stables, sugar houses, nurseries, vegetable farms, and Christmas tree farms. Active agriculture contributes to Leicester's rural character and provides a source of fresh, local produce and dairy products.

## WATER RESOURCES

**There are approximately 850 acres of ponds, reservoirs, and streams in Leicester. These areas provide wildlife habitat and flood storage, and are the major source of municipal drinking water for Leicester, as well as neighboring Worcester and Spencer. The Wetlands Protection Act and the Water Resource Protection Overlay zoning bylaw protect these water resources at the state and municipal level. Despite the abundance of water in Leicester, no town beaches are available for public swimming.**

### *Watersheds*

Leicester is located at the critical headwaters of three watersheds, those of the Blackstone, Chicopee and French Rivers, which together drain an area of over 1,400 square miles. The health of its waters effect numerous communities downstream.

### *Surface Waters*

Leicester has thirty-seven streams and twenty-six

bodies of water, seven of which serve as drinking water reservoirs. Ranging in size from less than 1 acre to more than 100 acres, ponds, lakes, and reservoirs cover approximately 850 acres of

Leicester. These surface waters are evenly distributed throughout the town (see Water Resources map). Four of the seven reservoirs serve the city of Worcester and are located in the

northeast quadrant of town, within the Blackstone River Watershed. Although there are numerous water resources within the town, no town beaches are open to the public for swimming. Burncoat Park has 1,400 feet of waterfront and is Town-owned land. This was used for years as a beach and swimming area and should be reviewed again as a possible beach area.

Leicester was included in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor because the headwaters of the Blackstone River, the Kettle Brook, are within the borders of the town. In addition to the Blackstone River Watershed to the east, Leicester also contains the headwaters of the French River to the south and the Chicopee to the west.

Small feeder streams are critical to the condition of mainstem rivers. Maintaining a vegetative corridor along streams cleanses the water, and reduces temperature and pollution downstream. By protecting corridors of vegetation along these streams, the town is maintaining healthy ecosystems, providing wildlife habitat, protecting natural methods of flood control, and maintaining water quality.

Floodplains lie along Kettle Brook, Grindstone Brook, and Town Meadow Brook (see Flood Hazard Zones map). Floodplains are vital geomorphic features. Their normal function is to handle large volumes of water in times of flood. The periodic overflowing of the banks of a stream builds alluvial soil deposits upon which the floodplain vegetation develops.

The Wetlands Protection Act and the Army Corps of Engineers regulates development on the floodplains to ensure that flood storage capacity remains unchanged. Since the floodplains change constantly and flood periodically, communities restrict land use on these sites to agriculture, recreation, and other activities that permit the river to use floodplains without destroying capital improvements. Any development that restricts the river's flood capacity is undesirable.

Wetlands, waterways, and other water resources are protected by the Wetlands Protection Act and the Town of Leicester Wetland Bylaw. Wetland areas

subject to protection are regulated in order to contribute to the following eight interests: protection of public and private water supply, protection of ground water supply, flood control, storm damage prevention, prevention of pollution, protection of land containing shellfish, protection of fisheries, and protection of wildlife habitat. The Conservation Commission in Leicester is the regulatory agency responsible for carrying out the provision of the Act. The Leicester Conservation Commission also operates under a local wetlands bylaw which allows the town to request posting of a bond with surety to secure faithful and satisfactory performance of work.

In addition, hydrologic features and wetlands are protected by Title 5 Setbacks, established by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in order to protect groundwater and surface water, drinking water supplies, shellfish water beds and surface water bodies from contaminants. The Title 5 buffer area is 50 feet around all hydrologic features and wetlands, except within the drainage basin for a public surface water supply, where the buffer zones are 100 feet around wetland features, 200 feet around streams and ponds, and 400 feet around public surface water supplies (see Title Five map).

Following a 1987 hydrogeologic study for the Town of Leicester by Lycott Environmental Research, Inc., the town designated a Water Resource Protection Overlay Zone. The overlay zone was established to prevent contamination of those areas within Leicester that contribute ground or surface water to existing or planned public water supplies. This zone encompasses land owned by the City of Worcester Water District in the northeast quadrant of town, including Kettle Brook and Lyndebrook Reservoirs. Also included are the Moose Hill Reservation and Reservoir, Henshaw Pond, and three public water supply wells, one north of Leicester Center and two south of Leicester Center.

Leicester is currently developing a comprehensive stormwater bylaw, with the assistance of a consultant hired through a SmartGrowth grant received in October 2006. The consultant and a town committee are currently drafting the bylaw; it is anticipated the bylaw will be complete in time for the Fall 2007 Town Meeting.

## VEGETATION

**W**orcester County is a transitional area between the Carolina zone to the south and the Canadian zone to the north. The Carolina forest type is made up of oak, hickory, red maple, pitch pine, hemlock, white pine, and gray birch. The Canadian zone includes beech, varieties of birch, sugar maple, white pine, hemlock, fir, and spruce. The dividing line between these zones extends from the northeast to the southwest corner of New England, cutting through northern Worcester County.

In 1793, the highland forests of Spencer and Leicester were dominated by oak, walnut, and chestnut, while the swamps supported maple, birch, and elm. Originally, white pine dominated the terraces of the county, while soft maple dominated the bottomlands. Much of the pine was cut in the uplands, yielding a secondary growth in which oak predominated, and abandoned fields often grew back with pioneering species such as gray birch and aspen species. Today approximately 70% of Leicester is forested, which contributes greatly to the rural character of the town. Forestland has been increasing over time as farmlands have been abandoned, resulting in decreased diversity of wildlife habitat.

Burncoat Park, conservation land owned by the town, contains one hundred fifteen acres of secondary-growth forestland, as well as alder and red maple trees within a five-acre wetland site. Also found at Burncoat are several rare plant species such as the yellow lady slipper. Uncommon species include water willow and marsh blue violet. Other

wildflowers noted include sessile-leaved bellwort, meadow rue, northern blue violet, foamflower, goldthread, miterwort, swamp saxifrage, wood anemone, and pink lady slipper. Wildflowers indicate an intact, healthy ecosystem. They are difficult to establish, and form interdependent relationships with the immediate location which are vital to their survival.

In January of 2007, the Massachusetts Audubon Society acquired a sixty-acre parcel of land surrounding Burncoat Pond in the neighboring town of Spencer, enlarging their Burncoat Park Wildlife Sanctuary to a total of 179 acres (source: [massaudubon.org](http://massaudubon.org)).

An inland Atlantic white cedar swamp, a rare natural community that is well-buffered by upland forest, is located in the northwest section of town. This forested wetland, of good quality and moderate size, is dominated by Atlantic white cedar, with hemlock, spruce, red maple, and yellow birch. Water-saturated peat overlies the mineral sediments.

## FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

**L**eicester's waters, wetlands, and uplands provide habitats for numerous species of wildlife. Two certified vernal pools, state priority habitat areas, possible primary forest, and several rare species have been identified in town. Opportunities for recreation and education abound; however, there are few points of access for fishing.

Typical upland wildlife that frequent the natural areas of the town include white-tailed deer, coyote, raccoon, cottontail rabbit, chipmunk, woodchuck, and skunk. Animals that thrive near wetland habitat include beaver, wood ducks, and several species of snake, salamander, and turtle. Neighboring wildlife habitat areas in Paxton, Charlton, and Oxford are

linked to Leicester by important wildlife corridors along streams and wetlands. The Audubon's recent acquisition of land in neighboring Spencer increases opportunities for wildlife around Burncoat Pond.

Leicester's abundance of warm-water ponds provides nearly year-round potential habitat for

lunker, anglers, large mouth bass, bluegill, and sunfish. The Massachusetts Division of Fish and Game stock Town Meadow Brook with brown, brook, and rainbow trout. The watersheds of many ponds, especially the Grindstone Brook drainage between Henshaw and Rochdale ponds, provide good waterfowl and furbearer habitat. Muskrat, fox, beaver and mink are perhaps the principal furbearers, with an occasional sighting of otter.

The lowland west of Henshaw Street and the area east of Parker Street provide suitable cover for hare and are stocked following the closing of the hare hunting season. Leicester is also included in the pheasant stocking program, and has a native population of upland game species such as rabbit, squirrel, grouse, migrant woodcock, and deer.

In the northwest section of Leicester, the Leicester Rod and Gun Club has maintained more than 100 acres as a wildlife preserve that is open to its members for hunting year round. This preserve is stocked with pheasant and grouse annually.

Besides their importance in the ecological food web, wildlife species provide opportunities for hunting and fishing. The biggest problems facing recreational fishing in Leicester is the lack of access to the lakes and rivers and the need for water quality protection. There are no public boat ramps on the rivers and few public places to fish from riverbanks; however, hunting opportunities exist on the many private woodland and meadow parcels throughout town.

### ***BioMap and Living Waters Core Habitats***

The Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP), part of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, is responsible for the conservation and protection of hundreds of species in the state. Two of its statewide biodiversity conservation planning projects are *BioMap* and *Living Waters*. The *BioMap* program identified and mapped the areas in the state that are most crucial to protect for the long-term viability of terrestrial, wetland, and estuarine biodiversity. The *Living Waters* program identified and mapped rivers, streams, lakes and ponds that are most crucial to protect for freshwater biodiversity in Massachusetts. Both projects mapped these areas based on documented observation of rare species, natural communities, and exemplary habitats.

NHESP has documented the following *BioMap* and *Living Waters* Core Habitat in Leicester, along with a rare natural community and supporting landscape and watershed areas (see Plant and Wildlife Habitat map):

**BioMap Core Habitat BM840** consists of the human-maintained grasslands of the Worcester Airport, which support a small breeding population of grasshopper sparrows, a state-protected rare bird.

**BioMap Core Habitat BM825 and BM834** contain an Inland Atlantic White Cedar Swamp, a rare natural community that is well-buffered by upland forest. The swamp, of good quality and moderate size, is located in the northwest section of town. This forested wetland is dominated by Atlantic white cedar, with hemlock, spruce, red maple, and yellow birch; water-saturated peat overlies the mineral sediments.

**Living Waters Core Habitat LW260** consists of Town Meadow Brook, which supports a robust population of the triangle floater, a rare freshwater mussel that requires good water conditions to maintain healthy populations. Supporting Natural Landscape identified by NHESP includes large, naturally vegetated blocks of land that buffer and connect Core Habitat areas. Critical Supporting Watersheds include areas that make immediate hydrologic contributions to Living Waters Core Habitat; two areas of Critical Supporting Watershed in the northwest corner of Leicester area at risk of contamination from agricultural activities and dam intensity.

While some of the supporting habitat is in lands that are permanently protected as open space, none of the core habitat is currently in protected lands. The permanent protection of these areas will insure the long term viability of the rare and endangered species found here; large blocks of unfragmented protected land offer the best opportunities to maintain species populations.

### ***Vernal Pools***

Vernal pools are isolated, shallow ponds characterized by periods of dryness that prevent fish from surviving and thus provide vital habitat to a variety of wildlife species, including some amphibians that breed exclusively in vernal pools. When they appear in clusters, vernal pools can be especially valuable habitat, as each pool provides



slightly variable habitats in different seasons and different years.

The Massachusetts Surface and Water Quality Standards, in accordance with the state and federal Clean Water Acts, protect certified vernal pools from being filled in or used for waste water discharge. They are not protected under state wetland protection regulation as resources unto themselves. To date, two vernal pools have been certified with the State of Massachusetts. NHESP has also identified sixty-eight probable vernal pools in Leicester by interpreting aerial photographs. There are also several clusters of potential vernal pools, one of which is also on likely Primary Forest (see Appendix). Certifying these potential vernal pools with the State is an important step towards the protection of vital habitat.

### ***Primary Forest***

Researchers at Harvard Forest (a Harvard University research and education facility) recently digitized 1830s Massachusetts maps, and compared forested areas in the 1830s maps with forested areas in 1999 aerial photographs. Leicester is one of the towns that showed an overlap between forested areas in both the 1830s and in 1999, indicating that such lands may be Primary Forest.

Primary Forests are woodlots and wood pastures occurring on ground that has not been tilled, and are important because they retain more biodiversity than sites that have been tilled. (Note that this is not the same as old growth forest, which has never been harvested or pastured.) Surveys of the soil structure would need to be conducted at the probable Primary Forest sites to determine if the land has ever been tilled. Probable Primary Forest in Leicester includes an area partially located in the Cherry Valley and Rochdale Water Districts (see Appendix).

### ***Rare Species***

Endangered species are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range or are in danger of extirpation from Massachusetts. Threatened species are likely to become endangered in Massachusetts in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of their range. Special concern species have suffered a decline that could threaten the species if allowed to continue unchecked, or occur in such small numbers or with such restricted distribution or specialized habitat requirements that they could easily become

threatened in Massachusetts.

Several rare plant and animal species have been documented in Leicester (see Table E), including the endangered Henslow's sparrow and threatened grasshopper sparrow. Endangered swamp lousewort and threatened great laurel have also been documented in Leicester. Special concern species documented in town include the wood turtle, Eastern box turtle, and triangle floater mussel, found in Town Meadow Brook (see Appendix for a Natural Community Site Report Form from the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, along with species information sheets).

Henslow's sparrow, a species of tallgrass prairies, agricultural grasslands, and pine savannas of the eastern United States, has declined by more than 80% since 1966. Remaining grassland habitats are being lost to both reforestation and sprawl.

Grasshopper sparrows are known to nest at fewer than twenty sites in Massachusetts. They are very sensitive to change in habitat and will often abandon a breeding site if it has been disturbed. In Leicester, grasshopper sparrows make their home in the human-maintained grasslands of the Worcester Airport. Habitat has been lost to land development, changes in agricultural practices (early harvesting and fewer fallow fields) and natural succession (abandoned fields growing up to shrubs and woods). Openings created by forest fires once provided habitat, but these are now rare.

Wood turtles prefer slow-moving streams with sandy bottoms and vegetated banks, which provide places to hibernate in the winter, and nest in the spring. This species has declined due to development along wooded stream banks, mowing, roadway casualties and the collection of the species for pets.

Two ways to help reduce mowing casualties of the wood turtle include raising mower blade height to above six inches, and restricting mowing to the turtles' hibernation period of early November to mid-March. These measures are recommended by NHESP as standard practice on right-of-ways, roadsides, and other state properties on and near wood turtle habitat. Appropriate wildlife corridor structures that allow turtles to safely travel under or over roadways should be considered for bridge and culvert upgrade and road-widening projects within

or near wood turtle habitat.

The Eastern box turtle, a small, terrestrial turtle ranging from four-and-a-half to eight inches in length, is a woodland species found in both dry and moist woodlands, brushy fields, thickets, marshes, bogs, stream banks, and well-drained bottomland. Populations have been declining due to habitat destruction and fragmentation resulting from development and road-building, collection by individuals for pets, and destruction of nests by other species like skunks, coyotes, and dogs. The greatest threat to this species is habitat fragmentation and destruction; preserving large, roadless areas of optimal habitat is important to the species' survival.

The triangle floater is a small freshwater mussel with an oval to nearly triangular shell. Like many freshwater mussels, this species has likely been adversely affected by habitat degradation, pollution and excess sedimentation, which can smother

mussels, causing suffocation and inhibiting effective filter-feeding.

Swamp lousewort, a plant that prefers wet woods, swamps, and wet meadows, is found in Leicester and only nine other locations in the state. Its current habitat in Massachusetts is an ecotone (an area where two habitat types meet) between the moist shrubby border of a stream and an open pasture where the soil has a near neutral pH.

Great laurel, an evergreen shrub or small tree with clustered pink or white flowers, is found in moist woods and swamps (including Atlantic White Cedar Swamps), and at the edges of ponds. Leicester is one of only six current locations in Massachusetts with documentation of great laurel, which has declined largely because of collection for home landscaping.

**TABLE E**  
**Rare Species Documented in the Town of Leicester**

<u>Scientific Name</u>	<u>Common Name</u>	<u>MESA Status</u>	<u>Most Recent Year</u>
<b>VERTEBRATES</b>			
<i>Ammodramus henslowii</i>	Henslow's Sparrow	E	1974
<i>Ammodramus savannarum</i>	Grasshopper Sparrow	T	1993
<i>Glyptemys insculpta</i>	Wood Turtle	SC	1989
<i>Terrapene carolina</i>	Eastern Box Turtle	SC	1985
<b>INVERTEBRATES</b>			
<i>Alasmodonta undulata</i>	Triangle Floater Mussel	SC	1998
<b>VASCULAR PLANTS</b>			
<i>Pedicularis lanceolata</i>	Swamp Lousewort	E	1940
<i>Rhododendron maximum</i>	Great Laurel	T	2006

**KEY:** E = Endangered; T = Threatened; SC = Special Concern; **MESA** = Massachusetts Endangered Species Act

**SOURCE:** Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Division of Fisheries & Wildlife. As of February 27, 2007.

A wealth of vegetation and wildlife resources are invaluable contributions to the character of the town – these resources provide visual background, habitat, and recreational opportunities like hiking, wildlife viewing, and fishing. Protecting these resources is a vital piece of maintaining these

opportunities; an awareness of the natural environment, and the role that vegetation and wildlife play, can help build support for conservation efforts.

Habitat reduction and fragmentation at many scales have been widely acknowledged as a primary cause

of the decline of many species worldwide. Fragmented habitat can lead to smaller and more isolated animal populations that are more vulnerable to local extinction. To reduce this isolation of habitat fragments, many conservation biologists recommend maintaining connections, or corridors,

between remaining fragments. The size of the connections or corridors varies depending on the species who may use them, but in general, the wider the corridor, the better.

## SCENIC RESOURCES AND UNIQUE ENVIRONMENTS

**R**esidents have identified a range of sites in town – built and natural, large and small, old and new – as significant places that help to define Leicester's character, including the Town Common, Hillcrest, Burncoat Park, the Moosehill area, millponds, reservoirs, and farmlands. Few residents cited remnants of the industrial revolution, although these sites were key to Leicester's inclusion in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

At a public meeting and in a survey that was distributed around town and posted on the town website, residents identified a number of special places in town that represent a wide range of historic and cultural landmarks. Some examples are Friends Cemetery, a historic Quaker cemetery also known as Spider Gates; Cooper's Hilltop Dairy Farm (the only dairy farm still in operation), where many people make a special trip for fresh milk in glass bottles; and Hot Dog Annie's, which has been serving hot dogs with a special secret sauce since 1947. Other features identified as contributing to the town's character include more elusive qualities, like the feel and identity of the distinct villages in town (see Unique Features Map).

Many houses, factories, villages, and millponds date to the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, and their histories are researched and documented by the Leicester Historical Commission. Despite an active local Historical Commission, and federal recognition through the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, residents responding to the survey generally do not rate these historic features as highly significant. Leicester Town Center, however, was recently added to the National Register of Historic Places, and is a favorite spot of many residents. The Town Common is surrounded by historic buildings, and is still used for summer concerts and special

town events. The Common has potential to be used for many more community-building activities.

The Leicester Historical Commission plays an important role in identifying historic resources, promoting strategies to increase public awareness of these resources, and suggesting preservation tools to town decision makers and landowners. The Historic Commission has mapped and published a driving tour of historic landmarks in town, and also periodically conducts walking tours focusing on the history of the villages. Other accomplishments include community outreach, and placing interpretive signs in each of the four villages and in Towtaid Park.

In 2006, Leicester was selected to participate in the Heritage Landscape Inventory program, a joint project of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the BRVNHHC. The town is working with these groups to develop lists of potential heritage landscapes in town, which are defined as special places created by human interaction with the natural environment that help define the character of a community, and reflect its past.

Natural and historic features in the town should not be overlooked when the town is considering conservation techniques to best preserve the

character and resources of the landscape. Efforts to preserve single buildings or sites, while important, may not be as significant as identifying, describing,

and prioritizing districts or zones, like the historic villages in Leicester.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

**L**eicester's industrial and commercial activity has left a legacy of environmental problems, particularly with regard to the abundant water resources in town. Many of the sources of point pollution have been identified and contained, but potential problems may exist from new development, hazardous waste sites, erosion, and sedimentation that threaten ground and surface water. Leicester's industrial legacy also has impact on environmental quality. The soil's retention of toxic materials from the manufacturing process at many of the mill sites will pose a threat well into the future.

Roadway construction, maintenance, and typical highway use can all be potential sources of contamination. Accidents can lead to spills of gasoline and other potentially dangerous transported chemicals. Roadways are sometimes sites for illegal dumping of hazardous or other potentially harmful wastes. De-icing salt, automotive chemicals, and other debris on roads are picked up by stormwater and wash into catchbasins; impervious surfaces concentrate runoff and contaminants.

There is cause for concern along Route 9 from Leicester Center east to the Leicester/Worcester border. Much of this stretch of road lies within the Water Resource Protection Overlay District where the porous soils have a poor ability to filter contaminants. Development along this road has the potential to pollute surface and groundwater supplies. The Massachusetts DEP, which monitors reported spills, has identified thirty-eight sites in Leicester, mostly along Route 9, where spills of fuel oil or other hazardous materials have been handled improperly between 1995 and 2006.

De-icing of the runways at the Worcester Airport and a capped landfill have also been identified as possible sources of contamination of surface and ground water within the Water Resource Protection Overlay District. Monitoring wells have been installed around the landfill to test the groundwater for contamination. To date there appears to be no significant threat at the landfill, but on-going airport de-icing could be an issue.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency defines

brownfield sites (with certain legal exclusions and additions) as "real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant." There are currently five brownfield sites in Leicester, including Fournier Lagoon on Stafford Street, Iroquois Chemicals on Main Street, Worcester Spinning and Finishing Company on Chapel Street, Worcester Tool and Stamping Company on Hankey Street, and the former Leicester Municipal Landfill. These brownfields are being addressed on the state level, but Worcester Spinning and Tool is listed as a Tier One D priority site, which means that it is not fully in compliance with the regulations.

From 2000 to 2005 the average daily consumption of water from Henshaw Pond was 254,631 gallons per day. However, consumption spikes, especially during the summer season, have exceeded the 375,000 gallon per day registered safe yield of Henshaw Pond. In 2005, the district's new bedrock source known as the Grindstone Well received DEP approval. A Declaration Order of Water Emergency for the Cherry Valley and Rochdale Water district, which had been reissued every six months since its implementation in 1989, was lifted.

Since the last OSRP update, the town has addressed the failing septic systems in the Cherry Valley section of town by expanding the sewer system. The Hillcrest Sewer System added seventeen more sewer connections in 2005.

Other causes of environmental problems are erosion and sedimentation of streams and rivers and erosion on slopes greater than 15%. Due to the lack of hydrogeologic barriers, like clay, that can prevent contaminant migration, wells and reservoirs are at risk. Development on unsuitable land and in existing

open space threatens not only the character of the town but also ground and surface water supplies that the town relies on so heavily.

"Both Rochdale and Burncoat Park are hidden gems. They could both be fantastic playgrounds and family areas if they were cleaned up and fixed up."

-Resident

## Section 5

# INVENTORY OF LANDS OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION INTEREST

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**M**ore than just an open field or an area of cleared land, "open space" in the context of the Open Space and Recreation Plan includes conservation land, recreation and park land, agricultural land, cemeteries, or any undeveloped land with conservation or recreation interest, including woodlands. Open space can serve a variety of purposes, including passive recreation, like walking or hiking, active recreation, like baseball or soccer, wildlife habitat, protection of wetlands or water resources. Lands or areas with scenic or historic value are also essential components of a community's public spaces.

Hillcrest, a 310-acre property just south of Leicester Center, is a good example of the broad meaning of open space. At the time of the last Open Space and Recreation Plan update in 2000, the community rated the acquisition of conservation land, protection of water resources, and increase of recreational opportunities as high priorities. Establishing these priorities helped the town gather support for the purchase of Hillcrest, when the alternative proposed was an intensive residential development of more than two hundred new homes. Protecting this large, centrally located property from development offers vital protection for Henshaw Pond, which supplies drinking water to roughly forty percent of the town's residents, and creates multiple recreation opportunities, including a municipal golf course and hiking trails.

The purchase of Hillcrest addressed the

community's priorities by acquiring what is now the largest single permanently-protected open space in town, protecting the valuable water resource of Henshaw Pond and providing new public recreational facilities. This purchase was funded by the Town of Leicester and a Land & Water Conservation Fund Grant from the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. The Trust for Public Land also assisted with the purchase of the property. The Hillcrest site is divided into three general use restriction areas: 1) water supply/protection, 2) public outdoor recreation, and 3) recreation with the ability to convert to general municipal use with Town Meeting approval. Any changes to the golf course portion in particular require a complicated conversion process. Such changes must be for another public outdoor recreational use, unless an equivalent additional parcel of land is provided to substitute (such land may not currently be in use for

recreation). See Appendix for detailed information related to the Hillcrest Country Club. An ad hoc committee has been formed to determine the best future uses of the property.

By protecting conservation and recreation lands, Leicester can protect its natural resources for the future. Farm and forest land in the region is being developed for business and housing needs at ever-increasing rates – in fact, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission's *2020 Growth Strategy for Central Massachusetts* says that the West Subregion of Central Massachusetts (which includes Leicester, Spencer, Hardwick, New Braintree, Warren, Brookfield, North Brookfield, East Brookfield, and West Brookfield) lost approximately 3,000 acres of farmland and gained roughly 3,500 acres of new residential development between 1985 and 1999. Worcester alone lost half of its agricultural land in that same time period. It is

important to protect conservation land in town, while allowing for responsible growth and recreational opportunities.

An inventory of lands of conservation and recreation interest lists both protected and unprotected land (see Appendix). Protected lands, include parcels permanently committed for conservation, park, or recreational use. Unprotected lands include Town-owned and private land that is not permanently committed for conservation, recreation, park, or other open space purposes (including some Town-owned parks and recreational land). Chapter 61 properties have temporary protection as agricultural, forest, or recreational land. The inventory in the Appendix also includes large parcels of privately-owned open land. Privately-held open land faces the greatest threat of development.

## PROTECTED LANDS

**L**and enrolled in all open space programs accounts for 25.37% of the total acreage in Leicester (see Levels of Protection for Open Space map). Only 3.9% is fully protected: the only town-owned conservation lands are 115-acre Burncoat Park and the 310-acre Hillcrest property. State-owned Moose Hill Reservation and land owned by the Worcester Land Trust are protected in perpetuity. Municipal lands, such as town parks, schools, and the landfill make up the semi-protected land, constituting another 1.6% of the town. Lands managed for water resources by the towns of Leicester, Spencer, and Worcester represent 12.69% of the town. Agricultural lands, forests, and private recreational sites are minimally protected under Chapter 61 provisions, and represent 7.02% of the town. A summary table of the protected lands can be found in the Appendix.

Temporarily protected Chapter 61 lands represent 27.78% of all protected land. However, landowners can withdraw their properties from Chapter 61 at any time. If the property is up for sale, the town has the right of first refusal, or the ability to assign its right to a nonprofit, but only within one hundred-twenty days. It is important for the Conservation Commission and the Open Space and Recreation Committee to evaluate and prioritize Chapter 61 lands, so that when they come up for sale, the town has a good sense of whether it serves its long-range goals to spend limited resources on acquiring them. A notice of intent to sell must be sent to the Board

of Selectmen, Board of Assessors, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, and the state forester. It is recommended that a copy also be sent to the Open Space and Recreation Committee.

Wetlands, waterways and other water resources are protected by the Wetlands Protection Act. Jurisdictional wetland areas are regulated in order to contribute to the following eight interests: protection of public and private water supply, protection of ground water supply, flood control, storm damage prevention, prevention of pollution, protection of

land containing shellfish, protection of fisheries, and protection of wildlife habitat. The Conservation Commission in Leicester is the regulatory agency responsible for carrying out the provisions of the Act.

Leicester's open space is part of a larger regional pattern; it lies on an edge between areas to the east and south that have very little protected space, and areas to the north and west that have substantially more protected open space (see Regional Levels of Protected Open Space map). Lands in Leicester's northeast corner protected for water supply are part of a band of water-related protected open space that extends to the northeast. Leicester has much less

permanently protected open space than neighboring Spencer, but much more than Oxford to the south, which has almost no protected land. Temporarily protected lands, including Chapter 61 lands for agriculture, recreation, and forestry, form a north-south running band that runs through and to the west of Leicester. Understanding regional priorities and developing links to larger systems of greenbelt corridors and natural resources can help to prioritize Leicester's actions.

## RECREATION LANDS

**While there are abundant opportunities for passive recreation in Leicester, only a small amount of land in town is dedicated to organized recreational use. Lands used primarily for recreation make up 2.4% of the total acreage in Leicester (see Recreation map).**

Existing fields are in constant demand by local users in every age group, including soccer leagues, softball teams, Little League, Legion baseball and football teams. At Rochdale Park alone, nine different teams vie for use of one field. This demand by multiple users and overlapping programs affects the quality of maintenance of the fields, which can't get a rest from season to season; the field at the middle school, for example, is prone to flooding.

Town-owned recreation lands are limited to seven sites, three of which (the high school, Memorial School grounds, and Community Fields) are open to the public by permission only. Rochdale Park and Towtaid Park offer active recreational opportunities, while Burncoat Park currently offers passive recreational opportunities in a 115-acre woodland setting. Hillcrest, purchased by the town in 2005, offers both passive and active recreational opportunities (just over 200 acres is reserved for watershed protection, the remainder for recreation or general municipal use). While these four facilities are open to all, they are in disrepair. The town is working to address issues with its recreational facilities – an ad hoc committee is currently determining the best uses of the Hillcrest property,

and a Master Plan was completed in 2004 for upgrades to Towtaid Park.

The Town Common in Leicester Center is used for town functions, such as a July Fourth Arts and Crafts Festival, the Harvest Fair, a Mother's Club Apple Festival, and summer concerts. This spot, a favorite of many residents, has potential to be used for additional community-building events, such as a farmer's market.

Becker College, which has a Leicester campus abutting the Town Common, allows the town use of its recreational facilities during the summer months.

Commercial recreational lands also contribute a limited amount to the recreational opportunities in Leicester. These include the Leicester Country Club and the Rod and Gun Club land. The Rod and Gun Club is for members only, and has a policy prohibiting applications for membership from single women. Leicester Country Club is enrolled in State Chapter 61B program, which is for private lands that receive a property tax reduction in exchange for maintaining a particular recreational use that is open to some portion of the public.





"...I would hate to see all our farms and fields disappear."

-Resident

# Section 6

## COMMUNITY VISION

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### DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS

**A**n updated community vision for the future of the town's open space and recreation resources was developed using several strategies, including two community forums, a paper and web-based survey, and conversations with town residents and officials.

In January 2007, a team of graduate students from the Conway School of Landscape Design (CSLD) developed an open space and recreation survey under the direction of the Open Space and Recreation Committee. This survey was posted on the town website and distributed to the library, post office, town hall, and other locations around town. It was distributed by the Leicester School Department (see Appendix for a copy of the survey and responses). Five-hundred sixty-nine residents responded, 79 online, and 490 on paper. Though the responses may not be reflective of the opinions of all Leicester residents, they do represent a significant source of community input.

Two community meetings, hosted by the Open Space and Recreation Committee, and facilitated by the CSLD team, were held at the town hall. The first meeting was held on February 7, 2007, and was attended by seven residents. The second meeting, held on March 7, 2007, was attended by eight residents, who provided insight into recreation and open space issues in town, and feedback on the

maps and analyses presented by the CSLD team (see Appendix for meeting announcements and agendas).

The CSLD team, under the direction of the Open Space and Recreation Committee, developed a draft of the Open Space and Recreation Plan Update, including GIS maps and analysis. Following receipt of the Draft Plan in May of 2007, the plan was distributed for review and comment by Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee members, other Town Departments, and the general public. The Open Space and Recreation Committee made modifications to the plan based on public comment. In particular, Goals & Objectives were changed and re-formatted to be easier to understand. Also, more detail regarding the Hillcrest Country Club was added to the plan. Other changes were minor edits and clarifications. Comments are included in the Appendix.

# STATEMENT OF OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION GOALS

**L**eicester residents would like to retain the town's rural character; they value the diverse landscapes in town, including working farmland, open fields, wooded lands, and open water. Residents would like to avoid development that compromises the rural character of the town, but do not always agree about what kind of growth and development, if any, would be appropriate.

Residents who participated in the process of developing this plan have different visions for the future of Leicester's natural, recreational and historical resources. Some residents are skeptical of the recent rezoning of Route Nine; one survey respondent wrote:

"The biggest threat facing Leicester is the potential for out-of-control growth and development throughout Route 9 west. There needs to exist a certain balance between residential and commercial development."

While some people see commercial development as a potential threat, others see it as a possible opportunity. Another respondent wrote"

"I think things are going to change with the development of the Route 9 west area, and hopefully for the good."

Although there may be disagreement regarding the commercial development of Leicester, it is clear that people value the character of their town. In an ideal world the town would be able to have commercial opportunities while preserving Leicester's unique and rural character, providing

habitat for wildlife and providing recreational opportunities for all. Goals for the town were created through meeting with the Open Space and Recreation Committee, input from both the public meetings and the surveys. Through this process five overall goals were drafted:

1. Preserve, protect, connect, and enhance Leicester's conservation and natural land resources.
2. Provide, maintain, and improve diverse recreation opportunities that meet the needs of Leicester's growing population.
3. Preserve and improve the quality, character, and health of Leicester's community and environmental resources by remediating degraded lands, protecting common resources, and preserving cultural heritage.
4. Build a strong constituency of open space and recreation advocates through education and collaborative partnerships.
5. Identify funding and other resources to support implementation of the actions identified in the Open Space and Recreation Plan Update.

"Cooper's Hilltop Farm...this place is special because it maintains open productive space; it's a working farm, the last one in Leicester."

-Resident

## Section 7

# ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

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### SUMMARY OF RESOURCE PROTECTION NEEDS

Note: The survey results are referred to frequently in the Analysis of Need section. While the survey provides useful information, some caution should be used regarding the use of the survey results. Some of the surveys were completed online using a web-based survey company (79); the remainder (490) were filled out by hand and tabulated by Planning Office staff with the assistance of Leicester High School students. There are some differences in the tabulation methods for the online versus the paper versions of the survey, which are explained in detail in the Appendix. Also, it appears that the overwhelming majority of paper surveys were filled out by Leicester High School Students. While input from this segment of the population is very valuable, especially in terms of future planning, this age group doesn't necessarily reflect the interests of the entire population of the Town of Leicester. The survey results should be reviewed in context with the above information.

**R**esource protection needs include protection of large, scenic parcels, farmland, land surrounding reservoirs, trail access, and wetland and upland habitat.

Lands most vulnerable to subdivision are large, unprotected parcels, such as farms and properties managed under Chapter 61 programs. As in many communities, farmland is threatened by potential subdivision. Loss of land for crops, pasture, and orchards represents both a loss of open space and of locally grown farm products.

In addition to subdivision, Approval Not Required (ANR) development is a threat to open space along existing roadways. Under Massachusetts law, Leicester has limited control over development of new lots on along existing roadway corridors.

Development in the Water Resource Protection district and in areas surrounding reservoirs could threaten the future drinking water supply for Leicester and other neighboring towns that rely on those reservoirs. The Worcester Airport and Leicester landfill have been identified as potential threats to the reservoirs in the northeast region of town; in the past, oil and gasoline spills have resulted in contamination of soil and groundwater.

Heavy development along Route 9 west of Leicester Center could impact Burncoat Park, the Chicopee

and French Watersheds, and Leicester Water Supply District. As indicated on the Plant and Wildlife Habitat map, much of the area falls within NHESP Living Waters Critical Supporting Watersheds, which are areas that make immediate hydrologic contributions to Living Waters Core Habitat. Living Waters Critical Support Watershed areas represent the areas with the highest potential to degrade or sustain Core Habitats. Use of pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers around reservoirs is extremely undesirable and should be discouraged.

Wetlands and their regulated buffer zones form an intricate network throughout Leicester. This network protects the town's water supply, provides

critical corridors for wildlife movement, and controls flooding and sedimentation. The Wetlands Protection Act needs to be strictly enforced, as development in or around wetland areas is cause for concern.

Within the town limits, lands that are protected to some degree do not adjoin each other. Establishing links between these areas will help maintain corridors for wildlife habitat, travel, and protection. Working with neighboring communities and the regional planning commission to establish corridors of preserved land will help the larger, regional community to preserve wildlife habitat and open space for passive recreation.

## SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY NEEDS

**Its rural, open character and proximity to metropolitan areas contributes to making Leicester an attractive, enjoyable place to live. Taking steps now can ensure that future development is compatible with Leicester's character.**

### *Protect Natural Resources*

To ensure the health of its residents, Leicester needs to continue to focus on improving its protection of water resources, especially surface waters.

Leicester and neighboring towns rely heavily on Leicester's surface waters to serve the drinking water needs of many residents. Uses near these reservoir areas should be limited to those appropriate to maintaining clean waters. Leicester must join together with neighboring communities to preserve the integrity of the watersheds.

Leicester's existing open space provides habitat for a range of plant and animal species. Habitat that is not currently protected includes two certified vernal pools and over sixty potential vernal pools, as well as two NHESP sites that support endangered or threatened species. One of these sites provides habitat to the Henslow's sparrow. The other is a rare inland Atlantic white cedar swamp. Vernal pools are inadequately protected by current laws and the Town should consider local bylaws or regulations to provide greater protection.

The Conservation Commission has indicated a need to adopt revisions to Leicester's local Wetland Bylaw to better regulate wetlands.

### *Increase Recreational Opportunities*

Residents have expressed concern that active and passive recreational opportunities are limited. To promote the wellbeing of its residents and enhance quality of life, Leicester needs to increase recreational opportunities for its residents.

Many residents who responded to the open space and recreation survey indicated that they would like to see more walking and hiking trails in town, a family-friendly park or summer program, biking trails, and swimming. Many residents also indicated that they would like new or improved fields, including soccer, softball, or baseball fields.

Survey results indicate that residents feel current recreational facilities are not adequate to meet the needs of the town. The construction of new homes, exacerbates this need. In addition, the needs of the growing older population should be taken into account when planning new recreational facilities. A more in-depth study of the recreational needs of residents and the status of current facilities is needed.

Playing fields and facilities that are inadequately maintained require a management plan. Residents

have indicated that many of these facilities are in disrepair, including Burncoat Park, Rochdale Park, and Towtaid Park.

Surveys also indicated that residents would like to have a map of the trails in town. This would be useful to help provide passive recreational opportunities such as walking and hiking. Mapping the existing trails would be a first step towards accessing what is already there – connections to the Midstate Trail and the Moose Hill reservation area are two that were suggested by multiple residents.

A majority of survey respondents indicated that they would use a map of trails in town if one were available. Schools could be linked with a trail system so that they can share recreational facilities, and could also be connected to existing recreation facilities and parks. Links to existing trails in the region, and to cultural and natural resources in nearby communities, would help to expand recreational opportunities.

The Parks & Recreation Commission has indicated a need for better scheduling of the use of fields. In

addition, they are interested in pursuing private club maintenance of recreational facilities, such as what is already being done with Little League fields.

### ***Maintain Character***

To maintain its rural, open character, Leicester needs to preserve open space in areas at risk of developing and to preserve these open lands for the scenic qualities the residents value.

Adopting the Community Preservation Act would help provide Leicester with access to state money for help preserving open space and historic sites, and creating affordable housing and recreational facilities.

The Leicester Historical Commission expressed interest in listing additional historic districts with the National Register of Historic Places. This will create visibility, educate the public, and establish the identities of Leicester's unique historical neighborhoods.

## MANAGEMENT NEEDS, POTENTIAL CHANGE OF USE

**M**anagement plans for existing conservation lands will help to ensure that they remain in good condition. Upgrading facilities to provide universal accessibility should be specifically addressed and integrated into the responsibilities of managing town lands. The involvement of residents in active stewardship of conservation lands may help to relieve some need for funding; existing funding levels are inadequate to meet current maintenance and upgrade needs.

### ***Defining Land Management Responsibilities***

The division of responsibility for the upkeep and management of town-owned conservation and recreation lands needs to be reviewed. Such assignments should be done based on the primary management objective of each parcel, taking careful consideration of the consequences and advantages of different designations. Successfully managing the land will require collaboration between town boards and the involvement of dedicated volunteers.

Management plans with clear objectives for each parcel will reduce conflicts and take advantage of the resources that these lands offer. Maximizing the resources that the town has will also provide a more accurate assessment of the need for additional recreation lands. Where specific expertise is needed, contracting professional resource managers will bring invaluable information.

### ***Coordination***

Following the completion of this Open Space and

Recreation Plan, the Open Space and Recreation Committee should formalize its purpose by reviewing the tasks outlined in the action plan. A subcommittee, composed of interested members of the Open Space and Recreation Committee and supplemented with resident volunteers, is suggested. The Open Space and Recreation Committee should coordinate and implement the various public educational tasks identified in Section 8, Goals and Objectives and Section 9, Five-Year Action Plan. This committee should monitor town boards on a yearly schedule regarding progress on the Five-Year Action Plan. This Committee should meet quarterly or twice per year and should have representation from Parks & Recreation, Conservation Commission, and Planning Board, as well as local residents. Funds should be allocated for these tasks and particularly for preparation of the next update of the Open Space and Recreation Plan in 2012. The Committee should also work with local land trusts (Common Ground Land Trust and Opacum Land Trusts)

Increased coordination between committees and organizations involved in open space and recreation needs, including the Open Space and Recreation Committee, the Planning Board, the Board of Selectmen, the Conservation Commission, the Assessor's Office, as well as Watershed Districts (Stiles, Burncoat, and Cedar Meadow) is recommended.

### ***Collaboration / Communication***

Collaboration is a recurring theme for the success of this plan. In the area of land protection, collaboration with a local land trust could be invaluable. The success of this type of work frequently depends on taking a long-term approach that can be difficult to achieve with volunteer boards. In taking on this responsibility, it is crucial for the Open Space and Recreation Committee to know which lands are at risk in the community, and to serve as a liaison between landowners and the land trust.

Additionally, the ongoing monitoring of the status of critical resource lands will be important in any land protection effort. The town has 120 days to exercise their first right of refusal for any Chapter 61, 61A, and 61B parcels that are being sold. Knowing ahead of time which parcels have the highest priority will enable the town to move quickly and allocate limited resources wisely.

### ***Resource Mapping***

Survey results indicate that protection of water resources is of highest importance to Leicester residents. Further studies of the important water resources of the town is a critical step in the process of ensuring clean drinking water for the community.

A digitized map of currently developed lots would be helpful to town committees making decisions about land acquisition, and also to the Town Assessor.

"The lakes and ponds are nice, but there is not enough public access for recreational activities on these waterbodies."

-Resident

## Section 8

# GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

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**T**he goals, objectives, and action items are derived from the 2000 Open Space and Recreation Plan, the 2007 community forums, town surveys, suggestions from town boards and citizens, and the results of the analysis contained in the previous sections. The numerical sequence of these goals is not intended to be a rank order but is included for cross-reference.

***GOAL 1: Preserve, protect, connect, and enhance Leicester's conservation and natural land resources.***

- A. Identify and eliminate threats to water quality.
- B. Engage in public education regarding household contaminants, septic systems, fertilizers, pesticides, and other threats to water quality.
- C. Monitor lakes, their drainage basins, and retention systems to ensure proper management.
- D. Certify vernal pools and monitor habitats of rare wildlife to ensure protection.
- E. Use town website, local cable access channel, and other forms of publicity to increase environmental and conservation awareness.
- F. Promote linkages between various resource lands and opportunities that exist, such as greenbelts which criss-cross Leicester and link with neighboring communities, to provide wildlife corridors and/or trail networks.
- G. Preserve and protect prime farmlands.
- H. Preserve and protect forested blocks from further fragmentation.

***GOAL 2: Provide, maintain, and improve diverse recreation opportunities that meet the needs of Leicester's growing population.***

- A. Increase public awareness of existing recreational facilities.
- B. Incorporate resident input into planning for and improvements to existing facilities.
- C. Evaluate existing recreational opportunities and identify gaps in service.
- D. Develop active and family-oriented recreation facilities in proximity to villages.
- E. Coordinate management and maintenance program for existing facilities.
- F. Continue to expand recreational opportunities at Burncoat Park.
- G. Map existing trails in town.
- H. Develop new local and regional trails for walking, hiking, and biking.
- I. Work towards bringing all facilities into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- J. Plan for viable long-term use of the Hillcrest Country Club



***GOAL 3: Preserve and improve the quality, character, and health of Leicester's community and environmental resources by remediating degraded lands, protecting common resources, and preserving cultural heritage.***

- A. Compile a list of lands of conservation and recreation interest.
- B. Preserve and protect prime farmlands in Leicester.
- C. Review Zoning Laws and Subdivision Regulations in Leicester to ensure sufficient flexibility and capability to protect open space.
- D. Ensure that all appropriate town entities are involved in protecting natural resources and acquiring open space.
- E. Develop appropriate bylaws and design guidelines to protect character of historic districts.
- F. Develop appropriate bylaws to protect natural resources.
- G. Improve degraded lands
- H. Protect important cultural landmarks, including historic neighborhoods.

***GOAL 4: Build a strong constituency of open space and recreation advocates through education and collaborative partnerships.***

- A. Use Leicester's Town Common and/or other Town properties for activities that foster community involvement.
- B. Use the town website and library to report OSRP survey results and recruit volunteers to take on activities that most interest them.
- C. Educate landowners about the advantages to placing conservation restrictions on land.
- D. Establish additional community gardens.

- E. Partner with open space and recreation committees of surrounding towns on regional land conservation projects that protect resources like trail systems, core habitat areas, contiguous forests, and aquifers.
- F. Partner with local schools, nonprofits, and businesses (e.g., Audubon Society, Becker College) to preserve open space and increase recreational opportunities.
- G. Partner with local land conservation organizations to better leverage limited town dollars and volunteer hours towards the conservation of priority resource areas.

***GOAL 5: Identify funding and other resources to support implementation of the actions identified in the Open Space and Recreation Plan Update.***

- A. Hold a series of public forums to discuss the Community Preservation Act, which promotes historical preservation, affordable housing and the acquisition of open space.
- B. Set up a conservation land bank fund that is financed through annual town appropriations.
- C. Apply for grants to assist in town acquisition of properties (State "Self Help" program, Federal Land & Water Conservation Fund, Local Bank Town grant program, etc.)
- D. Provide information and data to the Capital Improvement Committee to prioritize funding for capital projects listed in this Plan.
- E. Consider reasonable user fees, parking fees, or fundraising efforts to fund maintenance and/or improvements to Town recreational facilities
- F. Seek volunteers to participate in maintenance and improvement to Town recreational and open space facilities (For example: Host a "Clean Up Burncoat Park" day to clear trails, Earth Day activities, etc.)

"I think the town needs more playing fields for children."

-Resident

# Section 9

## FIVE-YEAR ACTION PLAN

**T**his five-year action plan outlines an action and proposed timetable for each open space and recreation goal and objective. All of the following goals, objectives, and actions are subject to funding and appropriation. The actions should be reviewed annually, updated, and reevaluated to ensure consistency with current goals and objectives. An Action Plan map is included in the Map section.

Key to groups potentially responsible for implementing action items:

AH	Ad hoc Hillcrest Committee	LA	Lake and Pond Associations
AO	Assessor's Office	OSRC	Open Space and Recreation Committee
BH	Board of Health	PB	Planning Board
BLC	By-Law Committee	PR	Parks and Recreation Committee
BS	Board of Selectmen	RC	Recycling Center
CC	Conservation Commission	SD	School Department
CIC	Capital Improvement Committee	TA	Town Administrator
EX	Expert or Consultant	TW	Tree Warden
HC	Historical Commission	V	Volunteers
HD	Highway Department	WD	Water Districts

### GOAL 1: Preserve, protect, connect, and enhance Leicester's conservation and natural land resources.

Objective	Who?	Year
<b>A. Identify and eliminate threats to water quality.</b>		
1. Review and update Water Resource Protection Overlay bylaws.	CC, WD	1
2. Adopt a local Stormwater Management Bylaw	BLC, PB, CC	1
3. Research methods to identify and evaluate underground storage tanks and non-point sources of pollution.	CC, V	1

Objective	Who?	Year
4. Review current state regulations governing UST's and consider establishment of a bylaw requiring registration of underground storage tanks (UST's) in the Water Resource Protection overlay district	BLC, CC, WD	3
5. Identify and locate all active private wells in town to determine if they are threatened by known environmental contamination.	CC	3-4
6. Continue to Hold hazardous waste disposal days to gather empty paint cans and other household pollutants.	V, RC, BS	1-5
7. Establish reduced road salt/sand and reduced herbicide policy.	HD, CC	1
<b>B. Engage in public education regarding household contaminants, septic systems, fertilizers, pesticides, and other threats to water quality.</b>		
1. Hold lectures and provide pamphlets to educate homeowners regarding recycling, solid waste disposal, and other threats to water quality	CC, BH, RC, V	1-5
2. Promote community participation in environmental protection programs.	CC, V	1-5
3. Work with water districts to include information about the use of non-toxic cleaners, alternatives to herbicides and pesticides, etc. in the annual water district mailings.	CC, WD	1-5
4. Facilitate communication & coordination between municipal water districts.	BS	1-5
<b>C. Monitor lakes, their drainage basins, and retention systems to ensure proper management.</b>		
1. Expand lake management efforts by working with existing lake and pond associations on such matters as weed control.	CC, LA, V	1-5
2. Educate lake homeowners on importance of reducing fertilizers and maintaining septic systems.	CC, LA, BH	1-5
<b>D. Certify vernal pools and monitor habitats of rare wildlife to ensure protection.</b>		
1. Protect known rare habitats in town through easements, acquisitions, and donations.	OSRC, PB, CC	1-5
2. Catalog important rare species of plants and animals in town by working with Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions (MACC) or the Audubon Society to coordinate annual spring walks to inventory animals, insects, fish, plants, and trees.	CC, EX, V	1-5
3. Work with volunteers to identify and remove invasive species.	CC, V	1-5
4. Certify known vernal pools for enhanced protection through training of local volunteers and students	CC, V, EX	1-5
5. Work with Worcester Regional Airport to protect habitat of endangered Henslow's sparrow and threatened grasshopper sparrow, including review of Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions airport vegetation guide for conservation commissioners.	CC, EX, V	1-5
6. Work with NHESP to develop guidelines that protect Eastern box turtle wood turtle on right-of-ways, roadsides, and other state properties on and near wood turtle habitat.	CC, PB, HD	1-2

Objective	Who?	Year
7. Consider adoption of a local vernal pool protection bylaw	CC, PB, BLC	
<b>E. Use town website, local cable access channel, and other forms of publicity to increase environmental and conservation awareness.</b>	ALL	1-5
1. Post Open Space and Recreation Plan Update draft for feedback, and final plan once approved.	OSRC	1
2. Post printed material about lawn treatments, rare and endangered species, and any other materials developed for seminars and workshops.	ALL	1-5
3. Create poster-sized watershed maps to display in the town hall, public library, and schools, showing Leicester's location within three watershed and describing the watershed regions.	OSRC, CC, CMRPC	3
<b>F. Promote linkages between various resource lands and opportunities that exist, such as greenbelts which criss-cross Leicester and link with neighboring communities, to provide wildlife corridors and/or trail networks.</b>		
1. Visit owners of parcels in key areas. Describe the purpose of the effort and ask for suggestions regarding how these links might be created.	OSRC	2
2. Incorporate this objective into the town's land use regulations and development and review and permitting process.	BS, OSRC, PB, CC	1-5
<b>G. Preserve and protect prime farmlands.</b>		
1. Promote Chapter 61A tax abatement programs.	PB, CC	1-5
2. Promote the Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program.	PB, CC	1-5
3. Educate farm owners and workers in better waste management policies.	BH, V	2 & 4
4. Promote a "buy local" campaign for agriculture; incorporate into weekly farmer's market on Town Commons (in season).	BS, CC	1-5
<b>H. Preserve and protect forested blocks from further fragmentation.</b>		
1. Promote Chapter 61 tax abatement programs.	PB, CC	1-5
2. Provide seminar on forest protection and wildlife enhancement to owners of large areas of land.	EX, CC, OSRC	3 & 5
3. Educate private forest owners regarding the protection and sustainable management of woodlands.	EX	3 & 5

**GOAL 2: Provide, maintain, and improve diverse recreation opportunities that meet the needs of Leicester's growing population**

Objective	Who?	Year
<b>A. Increase public awareness of existing recreational facilities.</b>		
1. Develop a one-page, easily reproduced flyer showing the location of recreational facilities in and around Leicester; distribute to residents and post on the Town's website	PR, OSRC, V	1

Objective	Who?	Year
<b>B. Incorporate resident input into planning for and improvements to existing facilities.</b>		
1. Review OSRP survey results.	OSRC, PR	1
2. Recruit volunteer resident community members to participate in Hillcrest ad hoc committee activities.	OSRC, PR, AH	1
<b>C. Evaluate existing recreational opportunities and identify gaps in service.</b>		
1. Conduct a level-of-service analysis (based on Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan) to determine guidelines for planning active recreational facilities.	PR, EX, OSRC	3
2. Create a master plan for improvements to existing facilities and development of new facilities.	PR, EX	3 & 4
3. Improve existing fields with volunteers.	PR, V	1-5
<b>D. Develop active and family-oriented recreation facilities in proximity to villages.</b>		
1. Conduct surveys in dense neighborhoods to assess specific recreation needs.	OSRC, PR	2 & 4
2. Conduct inventory of tax title lands and explore possibility of using a selection from these parcels as small parks, distributed as needed.	AO, PB	1-5
3. Expand the availability of existing ballfields and improve their condition by identifying land required and funding projects to meet project needs	RC, BS, PB, OSRC, SD	
<b>E. Coordinate management and maintenance program for existing facilities.</b>		
1. Identify responsibilities for management of existing facilities.	PR, HD	2
2. Create a management and maintenance plan for each public recreation facility, including field use schedules for times of optimal use and rest	PR, OSRC, V	2 & 3
3. Increase personnel and budgets to ensure an ongoing maintenance program.	BS	1-5
<b>F. Continue to expand recreational opportunities at Burncoat Park.</b>		
1. Work with resident and regional educators to utilize this facility as an outdoor classroom.	SD, EX, V	1-5
2. Reestablish swimming programs at the Town Beach.	BS, PR	1-2
3. Improve trails at Burncoat Park for special needs access and access for the elderly.	PR, OSRC, V	2-4
4. Investigate the possibility of conversion of a portion of Burncoat Park to active recreational use for soccer and baseball	PR, BS, CC, PB	1-2
<b>G. Map existing trails in town.</b>		
1. Inventory and catalog existing trails in town (consider resident volunteer program to collect GPS data)	PR, V	1-3
2. Maintain public access to trails on private lands through trail easements, conservation restrictions, or other protective measures.	OSRC, V	3-5

Objective	Who?	Year
3. Work with private landowners to develop a policy for usage of trails on private lands.	OSRC, PR	1-3
<b>H. Develop new local and regional trails for walking, hiking, and biking.</b>		
1. Develop a comprehensive trail plan in coordination with the regional planning agency.	OSRC, PR, EX	1-2
2. Create trails connecting schools to parks and to each other.	PR, SD, V	2-5
3. Work with Leicester's Snowmobile Club to see if existing snowmobile trails could be used for hiking off-season.	PR, OSRC	1
4. Work with the City of Worcester to complete the Tatnuck Bike Trail	OSRC, PR, V	3-5
5. Work with BRVNHC to develop the Midstate-Worcester Connector Trail.	OSRC, PR, V	3-5
6. Work with City of Worcester to examine possibility of hiking in Worcester water protection area (Look at Quabbin Reservoir recreation guidelines as a model)	OSRC, EX	2
<b>I. Work towards bringing all facilities into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)</b>		
1. Conduct an inventory and assessment of current facilities as to their universal accessibility in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.	PR	1-2
2. Plan revisions for priority facilities.	PR	2-3
3. Identify and apply to funding sources to make facilities accessible in priority order.	PR, V	1-5
<b>J. Plan for viable long-term use of the Hillcrest Country Club</b>		
1. Seek funding for emergency repairs to the Club House	BS	1
2. Continue to hold regular meetings of the Hillcrest Conservation Management Group and the Long-term planning Committee	BS, AH	1-5
3. Research options for the best possible long-term use of the various Hillcrest parcels to ensure long-term financial viability while protecting the watershed and outdoor recreational opportunities.	BS, AH, PB, CC, PR, EX	1-3

**GOAL 3: Preserve and improve the quality, character, and health of Leicester's community and environmental resources by remediating degraded lands, protecting common resources, and preserving cultural heritage.**

Objective	Who?	Year
<b>A. Compile a list of lands of conservation and recreation interest.</b>		
1. Work with Assessor's Office to develop a database of lands of conservation and recreation interest, including town-owned and private lands.	AO, OSRC, PB	1-2
2. Identify and update degrees of protection, condition, and accessibility needs for town-owned lands.	AO, OSRC, PB	1-5

Objective	Who?	Year
3. Develop criteria for prioritizing parcels for acquisition to fulfill recreation and conservation needs and a protocol for how the town would consider using its right-of-first-refusal (or assigning the right to a conservation land trust or conservation agency) regarding Chapter 61 properties	OSRC, CC, RC	1
4. Review tax title properties for potential open space, conservation, or recreational value prior to selling properties	BS, PB, CC, PR	1-5
<b>B. Preserve and protect prime farmlands in Leicester.</b>		
1. Prioritize parcels under Chapter 61A for future acquisition.	PB	1-2
2. Encourage prime farmland owners to protect these parcels through conservation restrictions or sale of development rights.	PB, CC	2-5
<b>C. Review Zoning Laws and Subdivision Regulations in Leicester to ensure sufficient flexibility and capability to protect open space.</b>		
1. Explore alternative development patterns that reduce lot sizes in exchange for protected open space.	PB	2
2. Amend Recreational Development (RD) Bylaw to better protect recreational areas	PB, PR	2
3. Consider changes to the Subdivision Regulations to reduce impervious surface and/or increase open space in new subdivisions	PB	3
<b>D. Ensure that all appropriate town entities are involved in protecting natural resources and acquiring open space.</b>		
1. Coordinate communication between town boards, commissions, and committees, especially the Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, Planning Board, and Open Space and Recreation Committee.	BS	1-5
2. Distribute lists of tax title lands to all town departments for review to see if they could meet the town's OSRP needs.	BS	1
<b>E. Develop appropriate bylaws and design guidelines to protect character of historic districts.</b>		
1. Develop Historic District design guidelines for villages.	HC, EX	1-2
2. Create a design review board to review new construction and additions to buildings.	HC, PB	2
3. Create a demolition delay bylaw.	PB, BLC	2
4. Implement a local option property tax assessment, which provides a tax savings to historic property homeowners who rehabilitate their property according to appropriate historic standards.	PB	3
<b>F. Develop appropriate bylaws to protect natural resources.</b>		
1. Review site plans for subdivisions, multi-family housing projects, commercial and industrial projects. Consider how project would impact circulation, noise, design, water pollution, scenic views and natural topography, and establish open space and recreation provisions.	PB	1-5
2. Create a slope and elevation protection bylaw to protect ecologically fragile hillsides from new development.	PB, BLC	4-5

Objective	Who?	Year
3. Revise local wetland bylaw to better protect natural resources and to provide a funding source for Conservation Commission	CC, BLC	1-2
<b>G. Improve degraded lands</b>		
1. Work with private owners to address brownfield cleanup on the four brownfield sites in town.	BH, CC	1-5
2. Work with Historical Commission and Historical Society on the rehabilitation of millponds.	HC, CC, V	2-4
3. Identify reuse potential for future recreational use of capped landfill.	CC, BH	4-5
<b>H. Protect important cultural landmarks, including historic neighborhoods.</b>		
1. Continue work with the BRVNHC / MDC and Recreation's Heritage Landscape Program Inventory Program to identify and document heritage landscapes.	V, HC	1-2

**GOAL 4: Build a strong constituency of open space and recreation advocates through education and collaborative partnerships.**

Objective	Who?	Year
<b>A. Use Leicester's Town Common and/or other Town properties for activities that foster community involvement</b>		
1. Hold weekly farmer's market in season.	BS, V	2-5
2. Continue to hold concerts in summer, July Fourth Arts and Crafts Festival, Harvest Fair, and Mother's Club Apple Festival.	BS	1-5
3. Consider holding a town-wide "Field Day" at Hillcrest.	PR, V	1-5
<b>B. Use the town website and library to report OSRP survey results and recruit volunteers to take on activities that most interest them.</b>		
1. Identify volunteer opportunities (e.g., funding research, grant writing, trail mapping, park clean-up)	OSRC	1
2. If volunteer recruitment is unsuccessful, seek funding to fund staff time and direct costs.	OSRC	2-5
3. Create town Volunteer Coordinator position.	BS	1
<b>C. Educate landowners about the advantages to placing conservation restrictions on land.</b>		
1. Send a letter to landowners with more than 10 acres of undeveloped land publicizing the town's goal of conserving natural and cultural resources for current and future generations of residents; provides a clear method for contacting and negotiating with the town concerning their land.	PB, OSRC, CC	3
2. Hold a minimum of 3 lectures each year on environmental issues such as rare and endangered species, vernal pools, and conservation restrictions, and provide informational pamphlets at town functions.	PB, OSRC, EX, CC	1-5



Objective	Who?	Year
3. Provide public information (printed or on town website) about the amount of protected open space in town, how much of the town is at risk for development, and the fiscal advantages of open space.	PB, OSRC	2-5
<b>D. Establish additional community gardens.</b>		
1. Determine possible locations for additional gardens, including areas with prime agricultural soils in close proximity to schools.	EX, V, PB	1
2. Develop partnership between senior center garden program and schools.	SD, BS, V	1
<b>E. Partner with open space and recreation committees of surrounding towns on regional land conservation projects that protect resources like trail systems, core habitat areas, contiguous forests, and aquifers.</b>	OSRC	1
<b>F. Partner with local schools, nonprofits, and businesses (e.g., Audubon Society, Becker College) to preserve open space and increase recreational opportunities.</b>	OSRC, PR	1-5
<b>G. Partner with local land conservation organizations to better leverage limited town dollars and volunteer hours towards the conservation of priority resource areas.</b>		
1. Invite members of OPACUM Land Trust and Common Ground Land Trust to a meeting of the Open Space and Recreation Committee as a first step to understanding the value and risks associated with having a local land trust.	OSRC	2
2. Work with local land trusts to create strategy for open space acquisition.	OSRC, PB, CC	2

**GOAL 5: Identify funding and other resources to support implementation of the actions identified in the Open Space and Recreation Plan Update.**

Objective	Who?	Year
<b>A. Hold a series of public forums to discuss the Community Preservation Act, which promotes historical preservation, affordable housing and the acquisition of open space.</b>	PB	1- 2
<b>B. Set up a conservation land bank fund that is financed through annual town appropriations.</b>	BS	1
<b>C. Apply for grants to assist in town acquisition of properties (State “Self Help” program, Federal Land &amp; Water Conservation Fund, Local Bank Town grant program, etc.)</b>	CC, V, PB, BS	1-5
<b>D. Provide information and data to the Capital Improvement Committee to prioritize funding for capital projects listed in this Plan.</b>	OSRC, BS	1-5
<b>E. Consider reasonable user fees, parking fees, or fundraising efforts to fund maintenance and/or improvements to Town recreational facilities</b>	PR, BS	1-5
<b>F. Seek volunteers to participate in maintenance and improvement to Town recreational and open space facilities (For example: Host a “Clean Up Burncoat Park” day to clear trails, Earth Day activities, etc.)</b>	BS, CC, PR, SD, V	<u>1-5</u>

"I would like to see Leicester retain some of its rural character."

-Resident

# Section 10

## PUBLIC COMMENTS

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The Town of Leicester received the draft Open Space & Recreation Plan in May of 2007 from the Conway School of Landscape Design. The Plan was distributed to the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, and Parks & Recreation Commission for review and comment in May 2007. The plan was also posted online and on the Town's local cable access channel. The draft was not submitted to the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission at that time because Open Space and Recreation Committee members felt that they would like to make additional changes and incorporate comments from Leicester Boards & Departments prior to submittal to CMRPC.

The Open Space and Recreation Committee met on August 21, 2007 to review comments received and to discuss changes to the plan. Updates to the plan were completed between August 2007 and October 2007. The updated plan was discussed and approved by the Open Space and Recreation Committee at their meeting of October 16, 2007.

The plan was sent to CMRPC and the Division of Conservation Services on October 26, 2007 for review & comment.

**See Appendix for all written Public Comments.**



"We need to promote responsible  
development and wetlands protection."  
-Resident

# Section 11

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