

## RESPONSES TO OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Although residents cite open space and rural landscapes as Dunstable's greatest assets, like all small towns, Dunstable will likely not have the funds to buy all of the land its residents would like to save. Should the Town develop a comprehensive resource protection strategy, to assure that limited resources will be used to meet the most important open space needs?**

**Respondent 1:** Yes, the key phrases being “protection strategy” and “limited resources.”

Dunstable comprises 10,700 acres. Of this, almost half (4,821 acres) is classified as open space. Of this open space, more than 62% is already permanently protected.

Forty years ago, when the population and the need and desire for commerce was considerably less, Dunstable had 341 acres of protected open space. Over time, the population grew, the need and desire for commerce have become tangible and inevitable, and the amount of protected open space has increased from 341 to 4,821 acres. While this dichotomy is contrary to the usual course of growing a community, it served well as a safeguard for maintaining the rural character of the town.

We're at a point, however, where we are forced to embrace continuous property tax hikes and overrides, all of which essentially put a bandaid on our failing infrastructure and declining school system. If we continue to buy up/protect more open space without identifying and establishing required revenue streams for said property (e.g., produce, lumber), and we fail to rezone the town center (farm-to-table restaurant, neighborhood shops, local services), and specify carefully considered open space to support eco-agri-businesses and services that align with our goals of retaining our rural character (zipline park, farmers' market, recreational facilities) – we will accelerate our downward spiral and fall to ruin.

We need to protect our resources in a way that safeguards the health of and supports the economic well-being for the community. The comprehensive resource protection strategy should

- 1) mandate prioritization of funding open space that protects resources serving or impacting the community at large
- 2) identify and mandate specific, measured revenue streams for current and future protected property as dictated by CR requirements to provide economic return
- 3) For open space that is not protected, and current and future commercial space, implement detailed guidelines within the bylaws that promote revenue streams where viable and maintain the rural character of our community.

**Respondent 2:** I don't know what more we can do than keep getting parcels as they become available. It would be nice to control all the river and stream banks and watersheds, but if owners don't want to give them up or restrict them, we can't force it. The Conservation Commission and Rural Land Trust seem to be doing a good job of identification and acquisition of what becomes available.

**Respondent 3:** I think this is vitally important to help the public understand why a certain parcel of land is being pursued. I have often had conversations with fellow Dunstable residents who wondered why certain parcels were purchased. It could also help direct those who pursue public lands for the town to focus on what is outlined in the master plan.

**Respondent 4:** I think an open space plan already exists. I wouldn't want to see a revised plan that lays out too many limitations or criteria. You never know what land might become available and the Town needs freedom to seize the opportunities as they come up.

**Respondent 5:** I believe that these priorities have already been addressed in the Open Space and Recreation Plan. Highest priority has been given to the Rt 113 entrance to the town and to protection of Salmon Brook and the surrounding watershed.

**Respondent 6:** Dunstable should have a strategic plan to utilize available resources in a measured way. Targeting parcels that would form continuity with existing parcels and connecting those not currently connected would make sense. We should also engage the Conservation Commission to identify parcels of concern and use those recommendations to assist in the prioritization of acquisitions and protected areas.

**Respondent 7:** Yes, but it should be noted that the Town does always and entirely bear the brunt of these costs. Many of the lands purchased have had contributors such as Mass Fish & Wildlife, the DRLT. Other lands are placed into CR's or APR which does not necessarily cost the town money.

**2. Is there a need for additional playing fields? If so, what types of fields are needed and where would they be located?**

**Respondent 1:** I don't know if there is a need for additional fields.

**Respondent 2:** I don't know the answer; I don't have anyone using the fields at present.

**Respondent 3:** I do not think we need more playing fields. They are used mostly by the youngest residents. I would rather see the money spent on expanding services for example perhaps at the library for our seniors and teen agers and every age in between.

**Respondent 4:** I'm not sure there is a need for more playing fields. It seems as if Dunstable has a good amount of playing fields already available, given the size of the Town. The tennis courts need repair and I'm a believer that if they are fixed up "they will come".

**Respondent 5:** I am unable to answer this from a truly informed standpoint.

**Respondent 6:** Current usage levels should be assessed against current and projected demographics to determine the future need for additional playing fields. Resources that might be available through partnering (sharing maintenance and development costs) with GDRSD should also be part of the planning process.

**Respondent 7:** I don't know, are the Larter, fields, Cow Pond, High School and Middle school field not sufficient?

**3. Should the town develop a maintenance and management plan for its conservation and recreation facilities to address such issues as allowed uses and activities, trail and facilities maintenance, and habitat management?**

**Respondent 1:** Yes.

**Respondent 2:** Yes, that sounds like a good idea, although one that could be incorporated into Safe Pathways or Parks and Recreation charges.

**Respondent 3:** I think this would go a long way in getting popular support for more conservation land. I realize there is a balance between protecting and preserving for the value of air and water quality and wildlife habitat alone but ensuring plenty of parking is available year round, trails are cleared and marked and even perhaps some guided nature walks would go a long way in boosting support with minimal impact to the natural balance.

I also think that in addition to the initial purchase prices, funds should be set aside for parking lot maintenance and snow clearing.

**Respondent 4:** Yes

**Respondent 5:** Again, I am under the impression that addressing this is already in place.

**Respondent 6:** Yes, to better utilize increasingly scarce resources there should be an assessment of appropriate uses of conservation and recreation resources. Consideration should be made to allow limited commercial enterprises to operate utilizing current resources for a reasonable fee for non resident users, for example, bicycle or canoe rental including a modest user fee as part of the rental of equipment.

**Respondent 7:** Many of the properties held by the Conservation commission already have management plans- those purchased with CPA funds and have CR's are required to have them. Most of those lands also have trails. It would be helpful to have a trails group- though it seems like there was one that kinda fizzled...

4. **Does the Town have a formalized process for addressing properties being removed from Chapter 61 status?**

**Respondent 1:** I'm not aware of any such process.

**Respondent 2:** I don't know.

**Respondent 3:** I do not know. Perhaps we should if we do not.

**Respondent 4:** I don't know. Isn't there already a seven-year tax penalty in place?

**Respondent 5:** This process is the responsibility of the Board of Selectmen. They should be aware of all Chapter 61 lands and, with input from other boards (Planning, conservation, recreation, Parks), should know if the land being taken out of Ch. 61 constitutes a priority for purchase or other protections. The homeowner also has the responsibility to notify the town of the intended change and how that will impact their ownership/taxes.

I believe that both State MGL and town by-laws address this. If they don't, they should.

**Respondent 6:** There should be a well defined process for removal and reinstatement of Chapter 61 parcels similar to that defined for the initial placement into that status.

**Respondent 7:** Does the Town need one? That is a State status. The town gets first refusal-- a decision gets made within 90 days as to whether it is a property of interest and can it be afforded..

5. **Should criteria be established for determining which board or commission should be given care and custody of parcels acquired by the Town?**

**Respondent 1:** Yes, though I thought this was already in place.

**Respondent 2:** Yes, see also question 3.

**Respondent 3:** I know that currently the Conservation Commission's charter is wetlands focused but perhaps it should be expanded. I am not in favor of turning over control of conservation land to the DRTL because the DRTL is a private entity

and can make access rules they see fit instead of in keeping with town laws and desires.

**Respondent 4:** I would think the Conservation Commission would oversee most of the open space parcels, unless the land has something to do with the schools or housing etc. Are criteria necessary to sort this out? I'm not sure when this would become an issue.

**Respondent 5:** From the recent maneuvering and questioning of who is in charge of which parcels, it would seem that it needs to be put into a single, easily read document.

**Respondent 6:** There should be a collaborative effort by all appropriate parties for conservation, recreation, planning and others with ultimate determination by the Selectmen. Input from the residents for major decisions regarding use of town resources should be canvassed in the form of a ballot question before major issues are considered for determination.

**Respondent 7:** Any of the properties that the Commission has purchased maintains the custody of it. It seems that this is self selecting... who ever pursues the purchase has the custody. I don't think there is a lot of dissent on this, is there??

**6. Should the Town work toward creating a public swimming facility? If so, where would it be located?**

**Respondent 1:** Yes. This was part of the 2010 Open Space plan goals and should be completed.

**Respondent 2:** No answer

**Respondent 3:** I personally see this as a small bang for the buck. So many Dunstable residents have there own pools. I don't think a public swimming facility would be widely used. I'd rather use funds to convert the basketball courts at Larter Field to ice skating rink in the winter similar to Roby Park in Nashua or the rink in Brookline NH

**Respondent 4:** That is a great idea, but where would it go?

**Respondent 5:** Over the years the town has had opportunities to purchase frontage on Lake Massapoag, and to construct other accessible swim areas. These have not been passed at town meetings.

Currently the town does have a small sandy beach located at the "Arched Bridge" conservation area. It is probably not what most parents are looking for.

One consideration as this comes up for discussion is that since 2000, over 50 above-ground pools and over 60 in-ground pools have been constructed in town. How

many residents truly long for a sandy public beach such as the Y camp on Massapoag or the Silver Lake beach in Hollis? I think that during the writing of the last Open space and Recreation plan, residents were surveyed on this. That info should be available.

**Respondent 6:** It is unlikely that the development and use of this would be economically viable. This could be determined by offering a concession to develop and operate such a facility. Such a consideration should only be made after determination of suitability through a ballot initiative.

**Respondent 7:** I am not particularly interested in this. I cannot think of a town owned property that would meet the criteria for such a thing.

**7. How can the town identify and acquire key properties that would provide critical linkages and connectivity between its open space and recreation areas?**

**Respondent 1:** If we do not currently have a board or committee that is qualified to carry out this task, then the town should hire someone to do it.

**Respondent 2:** The identity should not be hard; we already know what we own, have CR or AR on, so finding the ones in between is easy. It's acquiring them that is difficult.

**Respondent 3:** I suggest outlining in the Master Plan that we should creating a committee to do an evaluation. Examine a map of the current recreation and public land and identify where connective paths could be created, how, what kinds and at what cost... all to be presented to the Selectmen and CPA for funding

**Respondent 4:** I know the Conservation Commission already does this well- and I can speak for the Rural Land Trust, this organization also prioritizes properties that provide critical linkages. They also have an excellent sense of the Town's conservation objectives and act on them when it seems appropriate.

**Respondent 5:** I believe that our Conservation Com considers this part of their role and is constantly vigilant regarding such pieces.

**Respondent 6:** Input from the Conservation Commission, Recreation, DRLT, Historical Society and others could be gotten through a special committee called for by the Selectmen to study this issue and make specific recommendations. Broad inclusion of all interested parties and citizens should be encouraged.

**Respondent 7:** That is part of the open space plan (currently being updated). Need to assess the properties themselves for suitability. Need to check actual ownership, and any deed restrictions.

**8. Is there more the Town could do to engage developers as partners in protecting open space and providing recreation opportunities?**

**Respondent 1:** Yes. They should be mandates that are integral to our zoning bylaws and contracts with developers.

**Respondent 2:** Yes; although it would mean some really strict subdivision and zoning bylaws, and really hard negotiation with developers.

**Respondent 3:** I think we would how to motivate developers to convince them to partner with us on protecting open space and recreation opportunities. A committee to study this could be part of the suggestions in the Master Plan.

**Respondent 4:** I think this is a tricky question. The guidelines would have to be very carefully drafted. The asphalt plant folks in Westford are developers that promised town improvements (repaving of tennis and basketball courts) and where did that lead??

**Respondent 5:** Yes, I believe that the Planning Board could do more in this area.

**Respondent 6:** The Town could offer some portions of Town owned property for selected development. Perhaps a bicycle or canoe rental concession coupled with commercial development (restaurant) coupled with those recreational opportunities might be economically viable.

**Respondent 7:** Make the Open Space Residential Development design mandatory.

**9. Does the Town have an established dialogue with adjacent communities regarding common natural resource/open space protection efforts?**

**Respondent 1:** If we don't, we should!

**Respondent 2:** I don't know.

**Respondent 3:** I do not think we do. This could be complicated by the fact that Dunstable, not only borders other Massachusetts town but also shares a border with a different state.

**Respondent 4:** Yes, I believe so – I know for example the Rural Land Trust is part of a larger group the Mass Land Trust Coalition. Leah could probably speak for the organizations and towns that the Conservation Commission has collaborated with.

**Respondent 5:** Yes, I believe they do. Again, this lies with the Conservation Com.

**Respondent 6:** Unknown, but should be further explored and developed.

**Respondent 7:** Not an ongoing one, but there have been involvements with Pepperell and perhaps Groton for some properties.

**10. The lack of athletic facilities for older children and adults was identified as a weakness during the Visioning Sessions. What types of facilities are needed for these age groups?**

**Respondent 1:** A park or athletic field that caters to multiple age groups would be fantastic.

**Respondent 2:** At least a softball field would be a need.

**Respondent 3:** Maybe athletic facilities are not what is needed. Maybe it would be better to research expanding services for example perhaps at the library having facilities to encourage use of trails on open space...

**Respondent 4:** I mentioned earlier fixing up the tennis courts – perhaps some leagues or matchplay would bring more people together. Adult/young adult soccer or softball leagues are great recreational opportunities- perhaps this could be facilitated by our rec department.

**Respondent 5:** This should be part of the goals of the Parks and Recreation groups. I believe we will see a more aggressive stance on these issues from the newly elected members. I see the recent passage of a large amount of CPA funds for the playground as an indication of what can be done when groups get together and work towards shared goals.

I would expect that they will be looking at the Tennis Courts and other facilities which may have appeal to adults.

**Respondent 6:** See comment to item 2., above. Much of the opportunity for older children might be available through GDRSD.

**Respondent 7:** I don't know.

**11. Limited parking at open space areas was identified as a weakness. Where do you believe additional parking is most needed?**

**Respondent 1:** I don't know.

**Respondent 2:** I don't know, since I don't use the trails.

**Respondent 3:** There is very little, especially in the winter, parking available at any of our open space. Flat Rock Hill has decent parking available but there is none available in the winter. My understanding is that there is land right on Mill St that



could be developed for year round access. Winter access for cross country skiing and snow shoeing would be fantastic. Other neighboring towns do a far better job of encouraging and enabling year round access to open space.

**Respondent 4:** I'm not sure there is a parking problem, I've never had trouble parking at any of the trailheads.

**Respondent 5:** Unsure.

**Respondent 6:** Additional parking should be made available along River Street for the Rail Trail. Parking for the Salmon Brook access at Jack's Bridge and Stone Arch Bridge is needed.

**Respondent 7:** I only heard that the Rail trail needs more.

## **12. Should Dunstable establish an open space and trail stewardship program?**

**Respondent 1:** Yes.

**Respondent 2:** This question seems to relate to #s 3 and 5 again. If not, what would be the difference?

**Respondent 3:** Yes, mostly because I think it could help engage more town residence and to help propagate awareness and appreciation. A nice example is described here:

<http://jeffco.us/open-space/trail-stewardship-team/>

**Respondent 4:** Yes, I think this is a key question as the Town now has wonderful open space trails that could be even more easily accessed with the help of willing volunteers – which there are in town. I know the Boy Scouts have been involved- but perhaps a family or neighborhood could tackle certain trail areas to keep them open and easily accessed.

**Respondent 5:** Conservation Com oversees paths on town lands often partnering with Scouts to create new paths. A more formalized process might encourage more participation from interested residents.

DRLT has their own program and since they are privately owned, the town really has no say regarding those lands.

The Pathway committee hopes to help any of these groups if they would like to structure a program which might include trail maintenance and the publishing of maps and booklets.

**Respondent 6:** Perhaps in working with NGO's such as Appalachian Trail and Sierra Club development of an open space and Trail stewardship program could be relatively easily developed.

**Respondent 7:** To manage which properties? What would they do exactly?