

Section 6

Community Vision

6A. Description of Process

The Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee was formed to update the Town's 1997 Open Space and Recreation Plan. The Committee is composed of representatives of the Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee, and private citizens. Much of the background information from the 1997 Open Space and Recreation Plan was retained and updated as needed. The needs and goals have been developed anew in response to current and projected conditions.

The Open Space Committee met in open session on numerous occasions beginning in 2003 to develop this updated plan. The findings of the Master Plan Committee's town survey and public meetings were reviewed and incorporated as appropriate. Drafts were discussed by the committee and a final draft version was prepared. Representatives of the Committee met with a wide variety of town boards to present the plan and solicit feedback. The report was circulated to numerous town boards and committees for their comments and a public forum was held in which citizen input was obtained. These comments were used to prepare the final plan.

6B. Statement of Open Space and Recreation Goals

Stow is a very special place. Despite increasing development pressures, Stow has managed to maintain a rural flavor that has been lost in most, if not all, surrounding communities along the Route 495 corridor. A wide range of agricultural products including fruit and vegetables, lamb, Christmas trees, and greenhouse and cut flowers continue to be produced in Stow and are a major element of our community's heritage and economy. Economically viable farms preserve open space and contribute in many other ways to Stow's quality of life. Many roads are lined with stone walls and there are numerous highly valued scenic vistas such as Pilot Grove Farm, Carver Hill, Lake Boon, the Assabet River, and the town's many beautiful golf courses. With only 6000 residents, Stow still has a "small town" feel – it is town where you know the people you see in the post office and in the grocery store. And where annual events such as Springfest, the Harvest Ball, Run for the Woods, and washing the fire truck are important aspects of the community's character. Other less tangible aspects of small town character prevail – the skies are still dark at night, affording excellent stargazing opportunities, and on summer afternoon, the rustling of leaves and the songs of birds are more noticeable than sirens or traffic noise.

The recent Master Plan Survey indicates that most people chose to move to Stow for what it still is, more than for what it could become. Sixty two percent of residents said that rural character (open space, farms and orchards, Lake Boon) was the main reason that they decided to live in Stow. Almost half cited "small town community" as the main reason.

At the same time, these aspects of Stow that are prized by residents also draw newcomers, making the continued growth of Stow inevitable. This reality jeopardizes the very qualities that make Stow a desirable community. One traffic light becomes two. The intersection of Rt. 62 and 117 becomes increasingly congested. It is harder to take a left turn out of your driveway. A patch of woods is subdivided for large new homes. Class sizes increase. Little by little, the sense of "elbow room" is diminished. Our demographics are also changing – with homeownership increasingly out of reach for many and those on fixed incomes struggling to keep up with rising property taxes. At the same time, there is a strong desire to maintain the existing small town character in Stow for its many benefits. Growth will continue to affect our tax base, requiring costly services such as increased police and fire

protection and additional classroom space. Protection of our important remaining open lands can maintain or enhance our quality of life and be beneficial to the town's budget in the long run.

We are used to looking at the landscape and imagining that what we are used to seeing and experiencing will always be there. Yet, build out studies that have been developed for Stow depict a future – where all of the existing unprotected open land has been developed – that seems unimaginable. Many Stow residents do not fully appreciate the magnitude of the changes that will occur with buildout or the speed with which it is likely to occur. Most communities in eastern Massachusetts are looking at a “buildout” time horizon of 5 to 15 years. The reality is that the decisions that are made within the next five to ten years will play a major role in shaping the future of Stow. To the extent that the existing build-out projections are undesirable, the town must act now to change this blueprint and to create the “green infrastructure” that will sustain this community over the long term.

This plan calls for specific actions on several fronts – ranging from active efforts to acquire or otherwise protect priority lands that are important for the nine objectives identified in this plan, to adoption of creative zoning changes to reduce and/or concentrate future development and preserve areas not suitable for development. It is clear that given the short amount of time remaining, the town needs a strong, ongoing and well-prioritized land protection effort that makes use of all of the “tools” in the toolbox – encouraging donation of land and conservation restrictions, purchasing key properties, and making use of limited development, zoning incentives and creative land protection partnerships with private organizations that can assist with raising funds. In addition, more attention needs to be given to coordinated marketing of Stow's assets – its farms, orchards, golf courses, bed and breakfasts, recreational lands, and small businesses. We should be able to purchase Stow apples in the supermarket and should encourage more visitors to consider Stow as a weekend or vacation destination. In addition, the town needs to ensure that land use and open space decisions are coordinated, so that infrastructure and capital facilities decisions support efforts to preserve important lands and do not conflict with open space priorities and so the various staff, boards and organizations involved in open space protection maximize their effectiveness. Finally, the plan looks across Stow's borders to identify key linkages with open space and greenway efforts in surrounding towns and within the region.

