

*This is the third installment in a series submitted by Stow's Master Plan Committee to keep townspeople apprised of the issues it faces in drafting a Master Plan Update. Each installment is dedicated to a different major topic of the Master Plan. This article focuses on open space and recreation.*

## **OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION: HOW DO WE PRESERVE THE TOWN'S RURAL CHARACTER WHILE ALSO ENSURING THAT AVAILABLE LAND AND WATER RESOURCES ARE PUT TO THE BEST POSSIBLE USE?**

**Submitted by the Master Plan Committee**

**By Nancy West and Michelle Ciccolo of The Ciccolo Group, LLC**

As evidenced by the recent Master Plan Survey, few resources are as highly valued by Stow residents as their open space. "The town's rural character" was the number one answer to the question "What do you like best about Stow?", and not surprisingly, preserving that character showed up recurrently on the question about what residents want to see in 2020. But how exactly can that priority be implemented? Agreeing that rural vistas and undeveloped fields and forests in which we can exercise, play with our children, meditate and admire nature is one thing, but what mechanisms are in place to ensure that the town is able to act on that priority?

The most important step a community can take toward this goal is to file an Open Space and Recreation Plan with the Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services (DCS). Seen as a critical tool for creating an inventory of a community's protected land and water areas and for identifying undeveloped parcels, an OSRP is valid if it has been accepted by the state and is updated every five years. By having a valid OSRP, a community becomes eligible for grant programs offered by the DCS, many of which are specifically geared to land and water preservation. Stow's last OSRP was released in earlier this year and will soon be available for downloading on the Town's web site. The plan represents an enormous amount of work by the Open Space and Recreation Committee.

In the context of a Master Plan, an OSRP is a critical factor to consider in making recommendations or decisions about how land and resources can best be deployed. On the one hand, the Master Plan Committee (MPC) places significant value on Stow's open space and recreation options. On the other, the MPC is also responsible for finding ways to use available resources to meet emerging needs. Sometimes the challenge lies in reconciling those two priorities. For example, do we need a new school, playing fields or a fire station enough to justify the use of a parcel of open land to build those facilities?

In addressing the topic of Open Space and Recreation within the greater context of the Master Plan update, the Master Plan Committee met recently with the OSRC to discuss its perspective. The MPC hopes that the finalized Master Plan can satisfy as many of the OSRC's goals as possible while also integrating the many varying requirements of a Master Plan that could potentially conflict with a priority on open space.

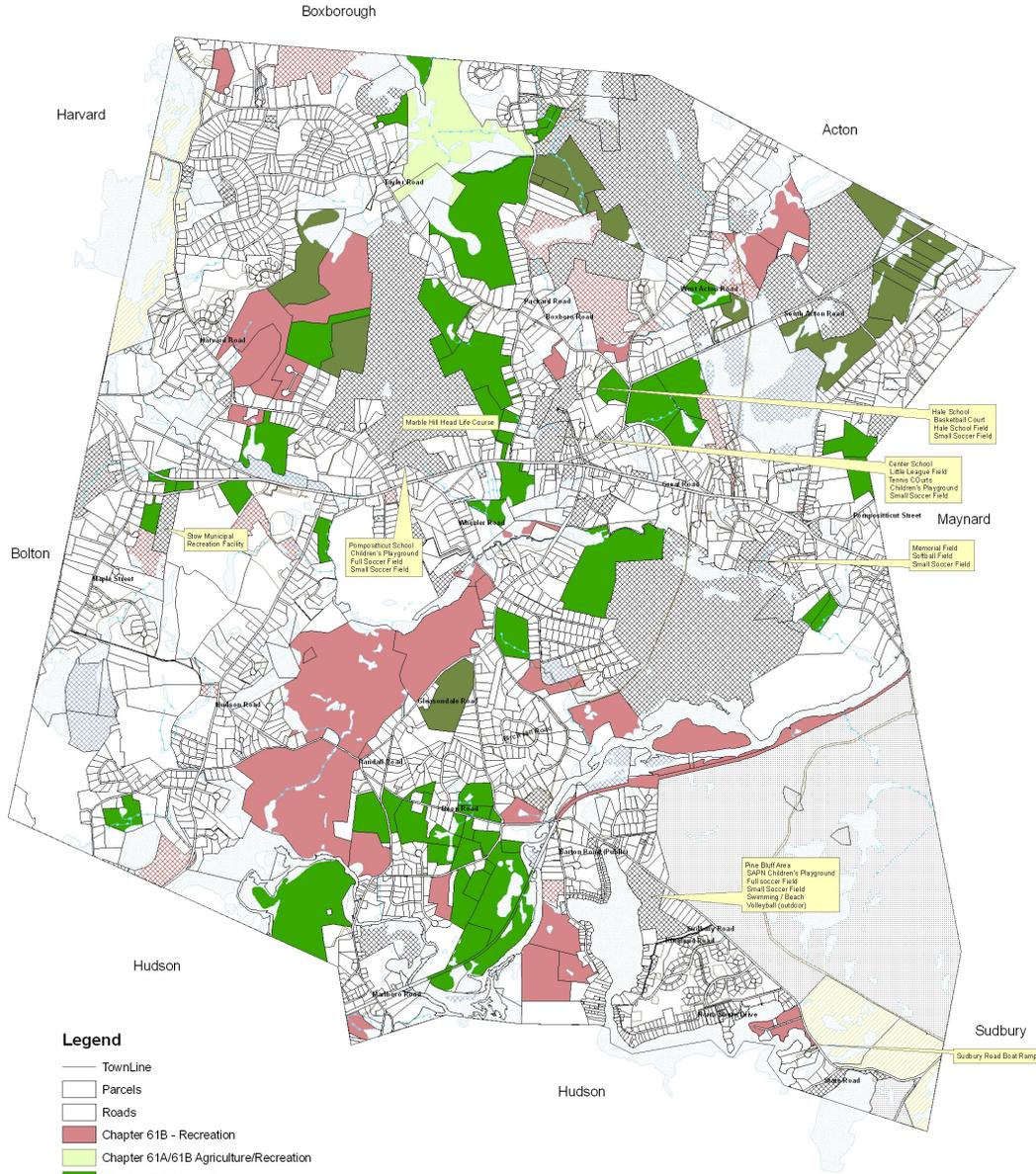
Other important considerations in constructing this section of the Master Plan include the Land Use Task Force Report, to be released next month, and those land parcels classified under Massachusetts General Law Chapter 61, which allows certain privately held properties used for recreation or agriculture to receive reduced tax assessments. Normally, such a classification includes a commitment by the land owners to offer the town first refusal on these properties if they are ever to be put up for sale, and may require the payment of back taxes if the usage changes.

The MPC met recently with the Land Task Force and with the Recreation Commission to seek their input. How can we use existing land and water resources to meet the town's needs as it grows but still avoid

the overdevelopment that would dilute Stow's highly valued rural character? If new municipal structures such as schools are needed, can we accommodate their requirements for well water? Not only personal preferences but also Department of Environmental Protection guidelines, Board of Health requirements and the protection of land around wellhead areas need to factor in to these discussions.

The overall goal of the MPC is to continue receiving input both from designated committees and from concerned residents. Help us identify the proper course of action for Stow's future. Participate in Master Plan Committee discussions (we generally meet on alternate Wednesdays – check the town website or schedule at Town Hall for exact dates and times); or contact the Master Plan Committee at 978-897-5098 or [planning@stow-ma.gov](mailto:planning@stow-ma.gov).

# Stow 2008 Open Space & Recreation



## Legend

- TownLine
- ▭ Parcels
- ▭ Roads
- ▭ Chapter 61B - Recreation
- ▭ Chapter 61A/61B Agriculture/Recreation
- ▭ Chapter 61A - Agriculture
- ▭ Chapter 61 - Forestry
- ▭ APR / Conservation Restriction
- ▭ Commonwealth of Mass
- ▭ Charitable Organization
- ▭ Town of Stow
- ▭ U. S. Government