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## **SECTION 6 - COMMUNITY VISION**

### *A. DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS*

Throughout the history of Sterling's efforts to develop its open space and recreation plans, the planning committee has opted to use public opinion surveys as its primary method of obtaining public input to the planning process. In 1999, the Open Space and Recreation Plan committee canvassed regional committees and town committees to incorporate ideas from different viewpoints, updated a survey from 1990 using surveys from Gardner and Templeton, and eventually published the survey in local newspapers and distributed it at public gatherings. Response to the 1999 survey was quite limited, with only 31 respondents. Development of neighborhood park areas and improved public access to public water supply protection properties were highly favored. Respondents also favored the Kristoff properties, once the site of a proposed racetrack, for protection or acquisition for conservation or recreation, as well as the area near Sholan Park, Justice Hill, Hycrest Farm, and Davis Farm. Respondents predominantly supported town purchases of land as the preferred protection technique. Very few indicated that they would support protection options that might cost them individually.

In 2001, the committee engaged the services of the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) and the Nashua River Watershed Association to develop another survey, conduct a public forum, update quantitative information in the draft, develop maps for the plan, determine community compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and outline an Action Plan for the next five years. MRPC published another public opinion survey in *The Landmark* in April 2002 and distributed another 450 surveys through Chocksett Middle School, 400 through the soccer league and softball league, and 500 through the Butterick Municipal Building. The committee received a total of 150 survey responses. Survey results were published in *The Landmark* and presented at a public forum in June of 2002, along with an interactive demonstration of the power of geographic information systems to illustrate key concepts. The 2001 survey showed strong support for purchasing watershed lands at important water bodies to protect them from development (67%), restricting the land uses permitted within the watershed (67%), adopting performance standards to regulate development to limit contaminant flow (67%), passing a bylaw to establish a watershed protection district (61%), and increasing the minimum lot size requirement for creation of new lots (53%).

Using the survey results and the data collected to write the draft plan, the Committee, NRWA, and MRPC worked together to develop an action plan. The committee assessed selected several town-owned conservation and recreation properties for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act to lay groundwork for a transition plan recommended in the Action Plan, and submitted the final 2002 open space plan to the Board of Selectmen for its approval and support in September of 2002. As the first action of the plan, the committee asked the Town at Town Meeting to create a permanent Open Space Implementation Committee (OSIC), to accomplish the goals and objectives in the plan. The acquisition of the Waushacum Overlook soon afterward was spearheaded by the Conservation Commission with assistance from members of OSIC and other interested citizens.

In 2007, the OSIC began updating the 2002 plan, developing a 4-page survey for distribution in September of 2007. OSIC ran a pilot survey at the Sterling Fair, and published the survey in the Sterling Meetinghouse News (a free newspaper mailed to all residential locations) and on the official Town of Sterling website. The OSIC distributed the survey through email and hard copies at the Butterick Building, the Conant Library, the 1835 Town Hall, and at other venues. OSIC members compiled the survey results. The response rate to the 2007 survey was similar to that of the 2002 survey at 130 respondents, and demographics of respondents for all three surveys are very consistent regarding years in town and household composition. The OSIC took an interest in comparing the survey results across the three survey instruments (1999, 2001, and 2007), to assess the level of consistency and continuity in public opinions of open space protection and provision of recreation opportunities. The surveys revealed some consistent issues:

1. Protection of water resources is among the most important issues.
2. Protection and preservation of Sterling's rural/historic character, including farms and agriculture and scenic vistas, is also a highly important issue. Many comments tended to focus on this constellation of issues.
3. Maintenance of recreational resources including sidewalks, playing fields, the town beach, and other properties, has become a much more significant priority for the respondents since the 2002 survey. Again many comments focused on this constellation of issues.
4. Improving sidewalks and creating safer pedestrian environments increased in priority, especially in 2007.
5. The percentage of respondents who felt no action was needed on issues of recreation improvements declined from 18% to 5% indicating increased interest in recreation improvements, though the interest was not deemed as important as it was in 2002.

Asked to rate the importance of several categories of natural and cultural resources for preservation, respondents indicated that all categories were considered highly important in varying degrees as follows:

	<b>1999 (31)</b>	<b>2002 (150)</b>	<b>2007 (130)</b>
▪ Preservation of wetlands and water resources	87%	90%	88 %
▪ Undeveloped scenic views and vistas (and farmlands)	70%	88%	N/A
▪ Sites with historic value	51%		
Buildings of historic architectural interest		90%	N/A
Farms and active agriculture		88%	80%
▪ Rural character and wildlife	80%		86%
Rural character		62%-I, 10%-A	
Disappearing wildlife		52%-I, 17%-A	
▪ Balance needs of people, wildlife, and industry	N/A	N/A	68%-I, 27%-A
▪ Open space for recreation	63%		
Adequate recreation facilities, fields, courts		69%	35%-I, 48%-A
Access to open lands and trails		53%-I, 27%-A	

Note: I = Important; A = of Average Importance; N/A = Not Asked

Regarding actions to consider taking pertaining to recreation improvements in the next five years, survey results are compiled for only 2002 and 2007. At the time of this writing, access to the 1997 survey results was unavailable beyond what had previously been reported in the 2002 Open Space and Recreation plan. Priorities identified concern maintaining the existing recreational facilities and improving the regional trail connections, as well as improving recreational access to public lands (though the percentage of respondents who prioritized this dropped slightly). It would prove useful to explore this element with a separate survey to ascertain what respondents are looking for in recreational access on public lands that they do not already have, and on what public lands they wish to obtain this public access. Of note is the increasing interest in improving sidewalks and creating safer pedestrian spaces, as well as improving handicapped accessibility.

	<b>2002 (150)</b>	<b>2007 (130)</b>
• Improve maintenance of and enhance existing recreational facilities	38%	
Improve regional trail connections (rail trail, etc.)		63%
Maintain existing recreational facilities		68%
• Improve recreational access to public lands	53%	47%
• Provide more recreational facilities	31%	27%
Programs	19%	N/A
• Install lights at soccer and baseball fields to increase access	27%	N/A
• Improve parking/access	25%	17%
• More programs at East Lake Waushacum	23%	N/A
• Improve sidewalks/Create safer pedestrian spaces	23%	39%
• More publicity for recreation programs/opportunities	20%	16%
• Enable more water-based activities	N/A	10%
• Improve handicapped accessibility	13%	18%
• No Action, programs adequate	18%	5%

Of the most frequent responses for the open space and recreation resources used, corridors, bike trails, walking on the road, and hiking/cross country ski trails top the list. Note that open space corridors was not listed as an option on the latter two surveys; responses for the 1999 survey are incomplete in the table due to lack of access to the survey data; and tennis or basketball courts were not listed on the 2002 survey. The Town Beach increased significantly in popularity between 2002 and 2007, though this may simply be a matter of different people responding. Conservation areas and playing fields capture the attention of between 40 and 52 percent of the respondents in both the 2002 and the 2007 surveys. Playgrounds seemingly diminished in popularity; though this may reflect changes in demographics, or a limited survey response rate, since there is considerable support for the new playground facilities at the Sterling Greenery Community Park.

	<b>1999 (31)</b>	<b>2002 (150)</b>	<b>2007 (130)</b>
▪ Open space corridors (greenways)	80%	N/A	N/A
▪ Bike trails	54%	36%	
Rail trail			83%
▪ Walking			
Preserve space/wilderness	93%		
Walking on road		57%	77%
▪ Hiking/cross-country ski trails	64%	47%	70%
▪ Town beach	N/A	19%	69%
▪ Conservation areas	74%	41%	52%
▪ Playing fields	N/A	40%	43%
▪ Organized events	N/A	59%	40%
▪ Playgrounds	N/A	47%	32%
▪ Fishing/hunting areas	N/A	37%	31%
▪ Skating rink	N/A	27%	15%
▪ Tennis or basketball courts	N/A	N/A	14%

## ***B. STATEMENT OF OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION GOALS***

Open Space is not a luxury or an added attraction to the quaint rural atmosphere of farming towns. It is the main component of any effort to protect the environment, conserve water resources, manage storm water flow, and protect wildlife. Sterling residents want to protect their environment and maintain the rural character of the Town by continuing its long tradition of open space conservation.

Goals for conserving open space include continuing vigilance in regulating land uses so that they are proper for their setting, taking all measures necessary to protect the town's water resources, acquiring parcels of land that fit into the Conservation Commission's land holdings program, and protecting the scenic waterways, hillsides and open lands where possible. The Town will continue to expand its recreational land holdings, developing paths and trails where appropriate and preserving land for future use by the town, such as organized sports fields and future school locations for the expanding population. Increased access for handicapped individuals will be developed and maintained. Smaller neighborhood parks and playgrounds will be encouraged in new developments and in the downtown area. New outdoor recreational and conservation education programs will be sought, particularly with the DCR-DWSP, whose holdings in town increased in the past five years.

### **Identify and seek to preserve significant open space, cultural, and recreational resources that will sustain the quality of life and the rural character of the town.**

Protecting water quality is the most important goal of this Open Space and Recreation Plan. Environmentally sensitive areas such as streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, wetlands, aquifers, floodplains and steep slopes should be preserved as much as possible. Low density land uses such as farming, forestry, conservation and passive recreation can offer some protection. Zoning and permitting regulations should be amended to improve their capacity to protect these areas. Strategies for monitoring water quality and preventing and mitigating pollution should be developed.

Water is also a powerful draw for tourist attraction. People everywhere seek opportunities to be near water for recreation. Public access to Sterling's water bodies should be enhanced to improve recreational opportunities in the community.

Prioritizing areas for protection efforts is of paramount importance in an age of scarce financial resources. Sterling needs to develop a set of criteria for evaluating its protection priorities to use as a filter in ranking properties. A survey of the flora and fauna in town, for example, would aid the town in documenting the occurrences of unique environments and rare species. Other criteria might include linkage potential, scenic value, and relevance to other community needs. It was recommended that the Town engage in a review of all existing surveys of biodiversity.

### **Develop a master plan for East Lake Waushacum that addresses watershed protection, pollution control measures, and town resident recreational opportunities.**

Addressing water quality concerns and the life of East Lake Waushacum is a long standing priority in Sterling. These efforts require cooperative and systematic approaches including fully identifying the existing conditions and alternatives for mitigation, conducting feasibility analyses, developing funding strategies, and garnering public participation and support. Strategies to consider include identifying appropriate properties for protection, developing recreational opportunities and public access that are sensitive to the lake environment, managing sources of pollution and invasive species of plants, and improving the wastewater and stormwater infrastructure for developed areas around the lake. Coordination of efforts between the Conservation Commission, the East Lake Waushacum Association, the Recreation Department, the Police, and the DPW will facilitate developing educational venues to engage the public, and will support funding requests to granting agencies.

### **Broaden local community and regional awareness of the value and importance of open space, and natural and cultural resource areas.**

Open Space Committee members, survey respondents, and Public Forum attendees all expressed a need for broadening community awareness of the value of open space and natural and cultural resources. They perceive a gap in understanding that leads to lost opportunities for preservation. It is also seen as important to create a broad based regional understanding of the potential for greenway linkages across community borders, the need for preservation of scarce water resources that will eventually face increasing demand pressures independent of political boundaries, and the synergies that can be created through interregional cooperation.

**Improve communication, planning, and coordination with related entities regarding open space and recreation needs and issues.**

This goal is aimed at identifying priority areas and developing a means for acquiring them at the moment they become available. It is also aimed at developing a strong partnership between the key agencies, community boards, and property owners that targets community needs and attempts to balance them. For example, the town has need of a recreation site, and there may be potential to accommodate such a site through a partnership that targets both the recreational need and the environmental protection need.

**Enhance the number, variety, access, and maintenance of recreation areas and facilities.**

Increasing demand for participation in organized sports has placed significant pressure on the existing recreational resources for soccer and other organized sports. Existing recreational facilities should be improved to meet ADA standards. To accommodate the demand for community playgrounds, residents in the Town have concentrated on improving a park area near the school playgrounds on Muddy Pond Road. In the process, needs for maintenance and improvements to existing resources such as ball fields and tennis courts, were also identified. Community efforts have also focused upon development of rail trails and hiking trails within the town that afford opportunities for linkages with similar trails in neighboring communities.

**Support development of an ADA Transition Plan for Open Space and Recreation resources in the town.**

Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act is a priority for the Town and it requires local capacity to accomplish the task. The Commission on Disability has vacancies and there is a need to clarify the status and role of the review committee. The Recreation Department has strong interest in hosting a regional workshop focusing on ways to make outdoor programming accessible. Development and implementation are priorities for the next five years, however funding is an issue and it will be important to identify funding options to accomplish the ADA transition plan incorporating recommendations for ADA improvements to conservation and recreation properties and programs.

**Ensure timely updates, revisions, and implementation of the Open Space and Recreation Plan.**

OSIC recognizes the difficulties and time constraints associated with both implementing and updating an open space and recreation plan without a budget, and advocates for an increased budget accomplish its goals and acquire needed professional and technical assistance. Protecting land for conservation requires funding for purchasing land and conservation restrictions, as well as inter-board coordination, to enable the Town in timely action to protect priority parcels when they become available.

To this end, OSIC will seek assistance from the Board of Selectmen and the Finance Committee to develop a proposed five-year budget and a fundraising strategy that supports both operating expenses of the committee and financing of its programming and protection strategies to further its objectives in recreation. OSIC will coordinate with the Conservation Commission to educate Town residents about the Commonwealth Capital fund ranking process through public forums, and will encourage the Town to invest in the Conservation Land Acquisition Fund to enable the Town to protect appropriate parcels as they become available.