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SECTION 1 - PLAN SUMMARY

This plan comes on the heels of an unexpected downturn in the economy and a slump in the building industry following a prolonged boom in the economic development of Worcester County. During the 1980's, the Town of Sterling faced several years of rapid transformation of farmlands into residential developments. During the 1990's the rate of growth slowed briefly. As we entered the new century, Sterling again faced rapid residential development of open spaces and farmlands. Fortunately since the 1990's a serious effort to protect drinking water involved the state Department of Conservation and Recreation Division of Watershed Supply which purchased land parcels in fee or by conservation restriction of many parcels in town, in the defined Wachusett watershed drainage. By 2009, thousands of acres of land had been protected by these efforts.

The 1980s were witness to a severe decline in agriculture in town. Rapid growth and a changing economy may have induced property owners to shift their lands out of the Chapter 61a program to capitalize on the sale of their land for real estate development. Through careful consideration of our remaining resources, the Open Space and Recreation Plan continues to guide efforts to protect many of these open spaces in an effort to retain the rural character of Sterling when development pressures rise again, and to provide for the recreational needs of the town. The Open Space and Recreation Plan aims to balance the ecological, social, and economic needs of the community to create a more sustainable future. The plan seeks to:

- Highlight and promote the distinctive features that help define the community;
- Preserve the character of the landscape from the pressure of future development;
- Protect critical resources, especially drinking water supplies, from the adverse effects of development;
- Enhance recreational resources in the Town through linkages, facility upgrades and diversification;
- Encourage residents to take a proactive role in shaping the future of the Town;
- Address issues of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act on representative conservation and recreation properties, and
- Build local capacity for accomplishing specific actions to satisfy open space and recreation goals and objectives.

Significant elements of this Plan update include:

- a public opinion survey in September of 2007 and a comparison of its results with those from the earlier survey in April of 2002,
- an update of the Section 504 Self-Evaluation of selected town-owned properties conducted in 2002 for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act,
- revisions to the socioeconomic characteristics and the regional context,
- an analysis of land use characteristics,
- land use controls and long term development trends,
- a summary of the planning work completed under Executive Order 418 (buildout analysis completed in 2001 and community development planning work),
- an assessment of the compatibility of the Affordable Housing Plan with this plan,
- a description of infrastructure resources and environmental problems in the town,
- a comprehensive list of cultural resources and unique environments,
- an updated inventory of lands of conservation and recreation interest.

SECTION 2 - INTRODUCTION

A. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this plan is to update the previous approved 2002 Sterling Open Space and Recreation Plan. It is the latest step in the town's continuing active interest in conserving land for open space and recreation, providing information about the natural and cultural resources of the town and identifying environmental and recreation challenges that face the town. Notable accomplishments since the 2002 efforts included:

- Support for obtaining agricultural preservation restrictions
- Acquisition of the Rittenhouse Property and creation of the Waushacum Overlook there.
- Creation of the Sterling Spur Extension of the Mass Central Rail Trail
- Establishment of an Agricultural Commission and Town Forest Committee
- Inventory of forests on Conservation Commission properties
- Advocacy for the purchase of a Conservation Restriction for the Wekepeke Watershed lands from the Town of Clinton by the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife

The Town is an active participant in a plan for development of the Central Massachusetts Rail Trail. Opportunities also exist to create linkages to protected natural resources in the towns bordering Sterling. Future efforts will include activities encouraging landowners to place conservation restrictions on their property and even purchase, hold and manage threatened parcels pending transfer to the Town.

The primary motive for preserving open space is to retain the rural character of Sterling in light of escalating regional growth and development. Another purpose is to keep some land available for future unanticipated uses. The planning process aims to identify critical resources in need of protection and direct growth to areas that are most appropriate for it. Hopefully, this plan will inspire residents to play an active role in determining an appropriate path for Sterling's future.

B. PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Development of this Open Space and Recreation Plan was built upon the combined efforts of previous Open Space oriented committees. For this Plan Update, a public survey in September of 2007 was distributed through the Sterling Meetinghouse News, publicized in the Holden Landmark newspaper and interviews of Sterling residents were conducted at the Sterling Fair. For this Plan Update, a public survey conducted in September of 2007 was distributed through the Sterling Meetinghouse News and publicized in the Holden Landmark newspaper, and interviews of Sterling residents were conducted at the Sterling Fair. A public meeting was held in late 2007 focusing on the results of the 2007 public survey.

Goals in this 2009 plan were derived from analysis of growth trends, the natural resources, maps of the town, an assessment of compliance with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and public perspectives gathered from the survey and the public forum. In the 2007 surveys, the respondents expressed strong interest in protecting open space for a variety of reasons, including water resources and wetlands habitat protection. They strongly supported state and town efforts to purchase land to protect the rural character of the Town, and the lakes, ponds and wetlands against pollution. Respondents were split on the need for acquiring land for a soccer field.

Strong support currently exists for establishment of a watershed protection district for East Lake Waushacum that would restrict permitted land uses and apply performance standards to limit contaminant flow. Sterling residents also expressed strong interest in safe pedestrian environments particularly to and from the Town Center and at locations deemed appropriate for trail crossings of existing roads. (See Appendix C, Survey Findings)

From 2007-2009, members of the Open Space Implementation Committee also spoke with various town officials to gather some of the data needed for the update. Members attended meetings with the Conservation Commission and the Planning Board to learn about environmental challenges facing those entities. Discussions were also held with the Recreation Department, Water and DPW and the Historical Society. Members from the Building Needs and Use Committee expressed interest in the concerns of accessibility to buildings and recreation facilities. Goals in the plan were derived from analysis of growth trends, the natural resources, maps of the town, an assessment of compliance with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and public perspectives gathered from the surveys and conversations with town officials.

Finally in the fall of 2009 a draft Update Plan was submitted both to the state Division of Conservation Services which gave the Plan 5 year conditional approval. DCS provided comments pointing out Plan deficiencies that needed addressing before final approval could be made. In addition, the Update Draft Plan was posted on the town's website, advertised in both local newspapers and abridged versions of the Update Draft Plan were distributed to most of the Town Departments, Boards and Commissions at an All-Boards meeting for comments and letters of endorsement. Comments and endorsements were provided by several town boards and committees as well as the Sterling Land Trust, Montachusett Regional Planning Council, and the Dept. of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Watershed Supply Protection.