

## **2010 Sterling Open Space and Recreation Plan**

### **Executive Summary**

The 2010 Sterling Open Space and Recreation Plan describes the town's landscape character, its water resources, and the role of agriculture and patterns of land use in the development of the Town. It describes the drinking water infrastructure, the potential for growth, and the tools for growth management currently in place. The document includes an inventory of the significant natural and cultural resources in the community; and the open spaces in the town, classified by level of protection and ownership, including both the acreage and the Assessor's parcel ID as of March 2009.

The plan includes a description of the community's needs relating to recreation, natural resources and management. The Plan suggests improvements at town-owned sites to meet compliance requirements for the Americans with Disabilities Act, and conservation measures aimed at protecting several important water resources. Finally, it outlines the goals and objectives of the community for preserving open space, developing the recreational potential of the Town's resources, and providing information on the current and potential environmental and recreation challenges facing the Town. These goals and objectives are structured into a seven-year action plan, with a time table for the tasks, assessment of resources needed, and suggestions for what entities should take the lead on each task.

### **Background**

The Town owes its rich natural resources to its glacial past. As the glaciers melted, they left behind huge deposits of glacial tills and unconsolidated sand, gravel, silt and clay, which form the basis of the soils and groundwater aquifers. The soils are classified by their suitability for forestry and agriculture and mapped to serve as a tool for prioritizing land areas in town in need of protection. Descriptions of these soils include information on the management practices that should be employed to guard against erosion. At present, Sterling has considerable acreage of significant agricultural and possible primary Forest soils that perhaps should be protected.

In addition, Sterling has 2708.5 acres of land enrolled in the Chapter 61A program, which provides the landowner with tax abatement for keeping the land in agricultural use in exchange for giving the town the right of first refusal on the property should the land owner opt to sell the land out of agricultural use. A considerable percentage of the Chapter lands currently are not used for croplands, indicating that the town has a substantial resource of agriculturally suitable land that should be prioritized for protection. The largest landowner in town, the Dept. of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Watershed Supply Protection owns over 5,000 acres of protected lands, a significant percentage of Sterling's geographic area.

Sterling is rich in water resources, including the Stillwater River and Wekepeke Brook, several ponds and lakes, and numerous streams and wetlands. The role of Stillwater River as a primary source for drinking water raises concern for the potential impacts of human use; however, the river remains the focus of strong local interest passive recreational uses. Recreation choices must be balanced with the need to protect these waters. Wekepeke Brook is also an important drinking water source and a habitat for native brook trout. Development pressure has already affected these resources. Efforts should be made to minimize further impacts that could harm them further or destroy valuable wildlife habitat.

The Town faces some environmental challenges, most notably those involving water quality concerns at East Lake Waushacum and water supply concerns both in the present and in the future. There has been a concerted effort for many years to address the water quality concerns for East Lake Waushacum. Water supply concerns are an important issue as the town is currently operating with few wells, and its

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neighbors continue to develop. It has been documented that water withdrawals from the Wekepeke aquifer have already stressed the Wekepeke Brook. As growth pressure increases, decision-makers will have to balance water supply needs against environmental impacts and needs.

Despite the high percentage of protected lands open to recreation in Sterling, many citizens and visitors to the town are confused about the variety of outdoor recreation opportunities in town and the significant lack of awareness needs to be addressed. In some areas, activities are severely limited on protected properties; in others, no practical access to certain town-owned parcels exists. Signage is confusing or non-existent.

Sterling also has an extensive and diverse inventory of historic resources including farmsteads, historic town buildings, and notable New England history sites. The Town has invested considerable time and energy in cataloging these resources, yet a large number of residents are probably unaware of these resources. Protection efforts for these resources can compliment efforts to develop guided tours to enhance local and regional appreciation of their place in the fabric of both the natural history and post-Columbian history of New England.

The 2002 OSRP quantified the significant changes in land use that occurred between 1980 and 2000, showing a shift of over 1,354 acres of forestland, cropland and pasture to other uses, predominantly residential uses. Since 2000, the population of the town grew by 791 individuals, from 7,257 in 2000 to 8,048 in 2007. Changes in population by age group indicate that the population is both aging and increasing in size, indicating a need to focus on the potential needs of an expanding elderly population.

Simultaneously, the Town is faced with a trend of ever increasing house prices that are pushing home-ownership out of reach for those who have moderate incomes or who live on fixed incomes and are facing a need to change their housing to address disabilities. The recent economic downturn has resulted in a significant decline in both residential and commercial new development projects, and sales of homes have slowed.

Sterling does not yet meet the DHCD goal of ten percent affordable housing stock. The Town developed an Affordable Housing Plan to address the shortfall and outline the production of affordable housing, and the Open Space Implementation Committee recommends review of this plan to ensure compatibility with the goals of OSRP and to protect priority natural and cultural resources from potential harm as the housing production plan is implemented.

**Goals of the Plan**

The Open Space and Recreation Plan Committee developed a set of seven broad goals for this plan:

**1. Identify and seek to preserve significant open space, cultural, and recreational resources that will sustain the quality of life within 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 also be preserved as much as possible. Low-density land uses such as farming, forestry, conservation and passive recreation can offer some protection. Proper zoning and permitting regulations can also 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 awareness of and access to Sterling's water bodies should be enhanced to improve recreational opportunities in the community.

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Sterling needs to develop a set of criteria for ranking its priorities for resource protection. To this end, it is vitally important that the Town conduct a survey of the flora and fauna in town to document the occurrences of unique environments and rare species.

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

The Conservation Commission, the East Lake Waushacum Association, the DPW, and OSIC plan to explore the requirements for establishing a watershed district for the lake to manage water quality problems affecting the lake, such as nutrient enrichment, siltation control, and non-point source pollution, and to protect the upland watershed and wildlife habitats from encroachment. In support of this effort and grant funding strategies, these groups will investigate existing surveys on biodiversity, water quality, and other metrics of the lake watershed resources. Using the Waushacum Village Community Development Block Grant as a model for similar programs at the East Lake Waushacum, these groups plan to identify and pursue grant funding to address water quality issues at the lake, such as the DEP watershed protection and non-point source pollution programs and the DHCD Community Development Block Grant program.

**3. 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.

**4. Improve communication, planning, and coordination with state and regional 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 and regional 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.

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

There is a great desire to create greater awareness of recreational opportunities and to work with local and regional groups to enhance access, facilities and programming in the town. This can include providing information about trails, maps and facilities on the town website or in print. Community efforts focusing upon development of rail trails and hiking trails within the town will afford opportunities for linkages with similar trails in neighboring communities.

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

The recently appointed an ADA Coordinator and OSIC plans to encourage the Board of Selectmen to appoint new members to a committee and to clarify the status and role of ADA Coordinator. OSIC will aid

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both the ADA Review Committee and the Recreation Department in development and implementation of a Transition Plan incorporating recommendations for ADA improvements to conservation and recreation properties and programs. OSIC will also collaborate with the Recreation Department to host a regional workshop focusing on ways to make outdoor programming accessible to people with disabilities.

**7. Ensure timely updates, revisions, and implementation of the 7-year Open Space and Recreation Plan.**

To oversee implementation of its Action Plan, the committee deemed it important develop a coordinated funding strategy and seek out funding and other opportunities that support recommendations in the Action Plan and to coordinate its efforts to support the development of a Town Master Plan to guide future decisions.

**Some Key Elements of the Action Plan**

- Interact with other town boards and commissions to ensure implementation of the Action Plan.
- Develop priority criteria for ranking parcels of undeveloped land for possible acquisition or land use protection.
- Explore alternatives for water quantity and quality management and mitigation at important water resources.
- Develop or promote educational programs addressing the value and conservation of environmental and cultural resources through local school programs and other public education venues.
- Facilitate development and maintenance of a trail system linking protected lands with existing regional trails networks and proposed trails.
- Publicize the existing conservation and historic resources and hiking, biking, and skiing trail network on the Town website and through development of maps and a guide book to Sterling recreational resources.
- Support development of an ADA Transition Plan for currently inaccessible Open Space and Recreation resources in the town.
- Work with DCR-DWSP to promote appropriate recreational activities on DCR-DWSP lands in keeping with the DCR-DWSP Public Access Plan.
- Encourage the Town to annually invest in the Conservation Fund, which provides funding for future land acquisition for open space and recreation.
- Ensure that sites in town chosen to locate affordable housing to meet the State threshold are appropriate and consistent with the goals and objectives of the Action Plan.
- Encourage any effort toward the Town's development of a Master Plan.