

SECTION 1: PLAN SUMMARY

This plan presents the Town of Palmer's goals and objectives toward preserving and improving the open space and recreational resources of the Town. A Seven-Year Action Plan (see section 9) clearly outlines the specific steps that the Town needs to take in order to actualize the stated goals and objectives.

Palmer has had a rich and varied history, based primarily on its location and transportation systems. The four (4) rivers supported grist, wool, and sawmills beginning in the 18th century, and Palmer sits at the confluence of two major rail lines that stimulated growth from the early 20th century onward. The four separate and distinct villages that make up the Town of Palmer contribute to its economic vitality. Palmer remains proud of its rich heritage and small town character.

The 2021 Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan is an important component of the Town's initiative to preserve and protect its open space lands and recreational resources. The plan provides both an inventory of the Town's open space and recreation lands and a set of recommendations to preserve and enhance these valuable natural assets. The goals and objectives in the plan reflect the major land preservation priorities expressed by the citizens of Palmer.

Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, the regional planning agency, Palmer Conservation Commission and the Open Space Advisory Committee talked with many town residents, analyzed information from a 2021 survey designed to help establish goals and objectives for the 2021 Open Space and Recreation Plan, and considered the community's natural, historic and recreational resources to determine Palmer's critical open space and recreation needs and the actions required to meet those needs. The community seeks to balance sustainable development patterns with the protection of open spaces and to provide an array of recreational opportunities for all its citizens. The Town believes it is important to preserve both its agricultural and historic resources and to look toward the future through development that contributes to, rather than impacts, community and environmental quality and town open space goals. It is important that both the public and private sectors work together to make this vision a reality.

The following are the important community needs identified in the Plan:

- Protecting Palmer's rivers by promoting their appropriate use; and increasing access to the rivers;
- To better manage conservation lands and recreation areas in Palmer through routine maintenance and renovations;
- Improving park and recreation opportunities for all age groups; especially for low income and Environmental Justice populations, and for kids, teens, and the elderly
- Providing more hiking and walking opportunities through trail development and land acquisition projects; and,
- To better educate citizens on all the Open Space and Recreation areas throughout Palmer.

The primary feedback received from the community through the survey results and public visioning comments is that the community wants the existing parks and playgrounds improved before the Town pursues new locations for new recreational uses. Top priorities include gaining access to Palmer's four (4) rivers, renovating Burleigh Park and increasing access to information on all Open Space and Recreation areas in Palmer. Community members also expressed concerns about the maintenance and improvement of existing parks and open space areas, such as Laviolette Field and Legion Field. Maintenance concerns included a greater need for trash pick-up, more trash receptacles/dog waste stations, and trail maintenance. Improvement concerns centered primarily on facilities, such as renovating or providing access to restrooms and picnic areas. People expressed interest in community engagement to support maintenance and improvement projects. These community needs included as a priority while developing the Seven-Year Action Plan items.

Other goals the community expressed need for in the survey were developing community gardens (especially in low-income and federally designated Environmental Justice areas), enhancing athletic fields, developing public access to the four (4) rivers for hikers and boaters, expanding community trail networks to connect to regional trail systems such as the Mass Central and Grand Trunk Rail Trails, and increasing educational opportunities for residents. The town will continue pursuing these goals and creating realistic timeframes for completion.

The survey results also showed that there is increased support for the Community Preservation Act (CPA). In 2021, 48.33% of respondents stated that they would be willing to support Palmer in the adoption of a CPA fee. Since lack of funding is a critical issue for maintaining the existing parks and open space areas, the Town should continue to explore the CPA because of the financial benefits it can bring. Over the next seven years, the Town of Palmer will continue exploring the possibilities of CPA.

There are many challenges the Open Space Committee, along with other Town policy makers, will need to overcome in order to meet the stated plan's action items. Fiscal constraints placed on the Town's budget have made it difficult to make improvements, or, in some cases, to maintain existing protected open space and recreational resources. There are not enough municipal resources to accomplish the goals and objectives. It is important for the Town of Palmer to continuously set priorities and goals, find new resources, pursue partnerships, leverage other funds, and rely on volunteers to make these goals a reality. Residents' demands for quality recreation opportunities and protection of the environment continue to grow as they increase their understanding of the importance of these resources.