

SECTION 2: INTRODUCTION

A. Statement of Purpose

The Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan is an important component of the town's initiative to preserve and protect valuable open space lands and recreational resources. The plan provides a framework for making informed decisions concerning present and future open space and recreational land preservation efforts. The goals and objectives in the plan reflect the major land preservation priorities expressed by the citizens of Palmer.

The purpose of this plan is to update Palmer's 2014 Open Space and Recreation Plan and to provide some realistic goals for the next seven years. Many of the goals and objectives from the 2014 plan have been accomplished, others are still relevant today, and new issues need to be addressed. Since the 2021 Palmer Open Space and Recreation plan is officially an update of the 2014 plan there were sections that did not require updating (i.e. Geology, Topography, History of the Community, etc.) and are excerpted directly from the 2014 plan.

Overall, this plan will assist the residents of Palmer as they determine the future use of the town's natural resources. This document contains information and resources. It is designed to be used as a guide; to aid residents in creating a clean and healthy environment and lay the foundation for funding opportunities to accomplish this and protect Palmer's natural resources for the use of residents. Balancing the pressures of commercial, industrial and residential development with open space protection is difficult. This document serves to assist that purpose.

Since Palmer's first Open Space Plan was developed in 1970, many of the recommendations made in that report and in the revised reports of 1973, 1995, 2006 and 2014 have been implemented. These include:

- Wetlands Protection Ordinance adopted in 1988, Amended in 2013 & Supporting Wetlands Regulations in 2015
- Passage of Zoning Bylaw in 2000
- Transfer of Development Rights in 2007
- Open Space Residential Development in 2007
- Passage of a Stormwater Ordinance in 2008 & 2009
- Large-scale Solar Ordinance adopted in 2011, Amended in 2019

However, in some areas we have lost ground. In the last 20 years, there has been rapid industrial and residential expansion, which has resulted in the loss of numerous parcels of open space land. This OSRP serves to identify remaining valuable parcels and actions Palmer plans to take to protect them, as well as promoting the existing open space and recreational opportunities. The major goals established in the 1970 Open Space and

Recreation Plan are as relevant today as they were in 1970. This is especially true of the goal of preserving the town's natural areas and protecting Palmer's rural identity.

The 2021 Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan is designed to build upon the goals and successes of past plans. In addition, the 2021 plan includes goals and objectives based on new priorities that have emerged since the development of the previous plan.

The 2021 Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan also provides a comprehensive inventory of the Town's natural, historic, scenic, and water resources. This inventory is essential for analyzing Palmer's future open space and recreation needs and establishing a set of goals and objectives based on the priorities of Town residents. The final section of the plan establishes a seven-year action plan designed to guide future land preservation and recreation initiatives.

The intent of the Open Space and Recreation Plan is to protect, preserve and enhance the Town's open and recreational spaces. The Plan also establishes a framework for guiding Town expenditures for open space acquisitions and improvements to recreational areas over the next seven years, and identifying potential funding sources for such activities. With an up-to-date Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Town is eligible to apply for grant money to acquire important open space parcels through the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), Division of Conservation Services, as well as the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. EOEA grants include the Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity grant (LAND) and the Parkland Acquisitions and Renovation for Communities grant (PARC)] The Open Space and Recreation Plan can guide Palmer's future policy makers to preserve, protect and enhance the Town's valued open space, recreational and natural resource assets.

B. Planning Process and Public Participation

The 2021 Open Space and Recreation Plan Advisory Committee is committed to the Open Space and Recreation Plan becoming the "Town's plan" rather than just the viewpoints of a few individuals. A variety of viewpoints were collected through the use of surveys, public visioning sessions and meeting and reviewing other Town documents and plans. There was community support during the plan's development, and it is hoped that implementation of the future actions outlined in the plan will receive the same broad support from the community.

Development of an Open Space Committee

The process of developing the 2021 Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan began with the formation of the Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan Advisory Committee. Members of the Conservation Commission, Land Management Subcommittee, Town Council, Planning Board, Recreation Department, Trails Association and Opacum Land Trust prepared the 2021 update, assisted by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC). Membership was also open to any Palmer resident interested in serving on the Committee.

The primary objective of the Committee was to work closely with staff from PVPC to create the 2021 Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan. Committee members agreed to

volunteer their time to locate and provide necessary data and contact information to develop the plan, attend progress meetings, assist in the organizing and publicizing of public forums, and to review and comment on drafts of the plan. In its final form, the Committee consisted of Palmer residents and was officially approved by the Palmer Town Council in June 2021. Committee meetings were held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic but remained open to the public and Palmer residents were encouraged to attend.

The Committee has changed over time, but has included representatives from Town boards and committees including Conservation, Recreation, Planning, Community Development and Trail Committee.

The following are members of the 2021 Open Space and Recreation Committee:

- Sarah Fortune, Interim Conservation Agent
- Donald Blais, Jr., Conservation Commission
- Nicholas Zeo, Land Management Subcommittee
- Dave Cotter, Trail Committee
- Jessica Sizer, Town Council Representative
- Kathy Burns, Planning Board Representative
- Kelly Bergeron, Recreation Department Representative
- Howard Fife, Opacum Land Trust Representative
- Mike Swiatlowski, Member at Large
- Amber Kumpulanian, Member at Large
- Lynn Greany, Member at Large

On July 15, 2021, the Palmer Open Space Advisory Committee convened its first meeting to review the Open Space and Recreation Plan requirements outlined by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. During this meeting, a course of action to create the new plan was discussed and the Committee reviewed the initial draft of Section 3 of the plan. At the Committee's second meeting on August 12, 2021 members reviewed results from the community survey and began to coordinate the Public Visioning Session. The Committee also began to review initial drafts of Sections 4 and 5 of the plan during this meeting. Final preparations for the Public Visioning Session were discussed at the meeting held on September 23, 2021.

Public Participation and Enhanced Outreach – Meetings

The Open Space and Recreation Plan Advisory Committee was committed to the public participation process and aimed to include all persons who were interested in contributing toward the development of the Plan's goals and objectives. In order for the Open Space and Recreation Plan to be effective, it must represent the desires of Palmer residents. Increased outreach was conducted in Palmer's six (6) designated Environmental Justice

areas, to ensure word of the update process was spread. Flyers for the survey and meetings were hung in at least five (5) separate locations in designated EJ areas, including the Town Hall, the Palmer Public Library, Post Offices in all of the four (4) villages, local businesses and convince stores. Advertisement for the survey and meetings was conducted using media coverage via the Town's website, the local newspaper, and local cable television. The Open Space Committee website and several Town Facebook pages were also used for survey advertisement and awareness.

The survey was available to take in both hard-copy and digital formats to allow all residents to provide their input, regardless of their access to technology. Hard-copy surveys were distributed at the Town Hall, the Palmer Public Library, the Palmer Public Library, and Post Offices in all of the four (4) villages. Volunteers also hand distributed flyers and surveys during sport events at Laviolette Field and at other community events. Additionally, the survey was distributed digitally to the local Housing Authority and to the Three Rivers Chamber of Commerce. Furthermore, the survey was distributed digitally to the Palmer School District to inform students and parents of the opportunity to provide input on open space and recreation opportunities and needs.

The main focus of the Public Visioning Session was to identify the major open space and recreation priorities of Palmer residents. The Public Visioning Session was held on September 28, 2021 at 6:30pm at the Meeting Room of the Town Hall. The workshop was advertised in the *Palmer Journal*, on the town website, on Town Facebook pages, posted at Town Hall and at several local establishments and conservation and recreation areas. Due to the beautiful evening and the COVID-19 pandemic, the event wasn't well attended. However, thoughtful comment and feedback was gathered, most of which strongly supported the survey results. A summary of the Public Visioning Session is also provided in Section 6: Community Vision.

On October 14, 2021, the Advisory Committee convened to review and discuss the results of the Public Visioning Session. Information gathered at the Public Visioning Session was used to establish the major goals and objectives of the new plan. Specific objectives for the Open Space and Recreation Plan, based on the priorities established at the public community visioning forum, were discussed at this meeting. At this point the Committee began creating a draft of the 2021 Action Plan based on the goals and objectives identified by Public Visioning Session participants.

A final draft of the plan was completed on December 28, 2021, and copies were submitted to the Town Council, the Conservation Commission, the Palmer Planning Board, and the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission for review and comment. The Committee intends to hold a public hearing in early 2022 to give community member the opportunity to review the draft Open Space and Recreation Plan and voice their final thoughts and feedback. This will also be an opportunity for the Committee to present the goals, objectives, and recommendations of the Open Space and Recreation Plan to the citizens of Palmer. Comments and feedback from citizens attending the meeting were utilized to revise objectives and recommendations for the final plan.

Open Space Surveys

The Open Space and Recreation Plan Survey that was used when the Open Space and Recreation Plan was first developed in 1995 and was once again used, with minor additions to address current needs of residents. Using the same survey, with minor additions allowed the Committee to gauge how attitudes have changed over the years regarding these issues, as well as allowed the Committee to gain a better understanding of the actual conservation and recreational needs of the community. The Committee has noted, as recommended by the Division of Conservation Services, that a completely new survey will have to be developed and distributed for the next plan update as conservation and recreational amenities have changed in the 27 years since the first survey was developed.

The survey had a low response rate, with only 200 surveys being completed. The low success rate can be attributed to the low budget available for completing the update. In the past, surveys were mailed to each household in town. This time the surveys were not delivered to individual households but were made available online, as well as distributed to various locations across town including the four (4) local post offices, the Palmer Library, Palmer Senior Center, and the Town Hall. The overall outcome of the survey showed strong public support for maintaining existing parks and playgrounds and providing more recreational programs and facilities for all residents. The survey was an excellent tool to facilitate residents' thinking about open space and recreation issues and its importance in community life.

American with Disabilities Act (ADA) Surveys

Section 504 Self-Evaluation Surveys were conducted for the 2021 Open Space and Recreation Plan. These surveys analyzed the major open space sites in Town and were completed by both town staff. The surveys indicated what accessibility improvements are needed at these locations. ADA improvements were thoroughly examined and incorporated as action items in the 2014 plan. Over the past eight (7) years, The Town of Palmer's Community Development Department has completed a more in depth study of the ADA requirements in the parks and conservation areas (Appendix D). The necessary improvements needed have been specifically highlighted in the 2021 and continue to be addressed in the 2021 Action Plan.