

## SECTION 2: INTRODUCTION

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### 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 2006 Open Space and Recreation Plan and to provide some realistic goals for the next seven years. While a few of the goals and objectives from the old plan have been accomplished, others are still relevant today, and new issues need to be addressed. Since the 2014 Palmer Open Space and Recreation plan is officially an update of the 2006 plan there were sections that did not require updating (i.e. Geology, Topography, History of the Community, etc.) and are excerpted directly from the 2006 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 and 2006 have been implemented. These include:

- Floodplain/Wetland bylaw adopted in 1988, Amended in 2013
- Passage of Zoning Bylaw in 2000
- Establishment of a Conservation Commission GIS system in 2004
- Transfer of Development Rights in 2007
- Open Space Residential Development in 2007
- Passage of a Stormwater Ordinance in 2008 & 2009

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 2014 Palmer Open Space and Recreation Plan is designed to build upon the goals and successes of past plans. In addition, the 2014 plan includes goals and objectives based on new priorities that have emerged since the development of the previous plan.

The 2014 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 Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA), Division of Conservation Services, as well as the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. EEA 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 2014 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 2014 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, Planning Board, Community Development, Town Council, Recreation Department, Trails Association and Historic Commission prepared the 2014 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 2014 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 March 2014. Committee meetings were 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 2014 Open Space and Recreation Committee:***

- Angela Panaccione, Conservation Agent
- Linda Leduc, Town Planner
- Michael Marciniec, Chair of Planning Board
- Alice Davey, Community Development Director
- David Cotter, Trail Committee
- Bonnie Weeks, Building Inspector/ADA Coordinator
- Donald Blais, Jr, Town Council Representative
- Jim Ostrout, Recreation Director
- Robert Ring, Historical Commission and Chair of the Conservation Commission
- Tharyn Nein-Large, Conservation Commission
- Sean O'Donnell, Conservation Commission

On February 18, 2014, the Palmer Open Space and Recreation Committee convened its first meeting to review the Open Space and Recreation Plan requirements outlined by the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA). During this meeting, a course of action to create the new plan was discussed. At the Committee's second meeting on March 11, 2014 staff reviewed past goals and objectives, and drafted new ones to address major concerns and priorities of Palmer residents. The Committee also finalized the Community Survey to begin distribution at the end of March. Preparations for a public community visioning forum were discussed at the meeting held on May 13, 2014.

**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 two designated Environmental Justice areas, to ensure word of the update process was spread. Flyers

advertising the survey and public meetings were hung in at least ten (10) separate locations in designated EJ areas, including the Palmer Public Library, Yellow House, local restaurants and convince stores. Additionally, hard copies of the survey along with a drop off box were available at the Palmer Public Library and the Yellow House. Advertisement for the survey and meetings was also conducted using media coverage via the regional and local newspaper, local cable television, and the Open Space Committee website and Facebook page. Additionally, a flyer was sent home with students from Old Mill Pond, Converse Middle School and Palmer High School informing students and parent of the various survey locations and public meeting dates. Furthermore, volunteers hand distributed hard copies of the surveys weekly at the local farmers markets, during sport events at Burleigh Park and at the Annual Town Election, held June 10, 2014.

The main focus of the public community visioning forum was to identify the major open space and recreation priorities of Palmer residents. The public community visioning workshop was held on May 20, 2014 at 6pm at the Palmer Library. The workshop was advertised in the *Palmer Journal and the Republican*, on the town website, posted at Town Hall and a flyer was sent home with students from both Converse Middle School and Palmer High School. Due to the beautiful evening and other event in Town, 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 visioning session workshop is also provided in Section 6 Community Vision.

On June 17, 2014, the committee convened to review and discuss the results of the public community visioning forum. Information gathered at the community 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 PVPC staff began creating a draft of the 2014 plan based on the goals and objectives developed by the Committee.

A final draft of the plan was completed on August 12, 2014 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. On September 2, 2014, The Committee held a public hearing to give community member the opportunity to review the Draft Open Space and Recreation Plan and voice their final thoughts and feedback. This was 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 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 survey had a low response rate, with only 224 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 and hard copies with drop off boxes were distributed to various locations across town including the 4 local post offices, the Palmer Public Library, Palmer Senior Center, and the Yellow House. The Open Space Committee website and Facebook page were also used for survey advertisement and awareness. Additionally, volunteers hand distributed surveys at the local farmers markets, during sport events at Burleigh Park and at the Annual Town Election, held June 10, 2014. Furthermore, a flyer was sent home with students from Old Mill Pond, Converse Middle School and Palmer High School informing students and parent of the survey and where to go to complete it.

The overall outcome of the survey showed strong public support for maintaining existing parks and playgrounds and preserving water and agricultural resources. 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 2014 Open Space and Recreation Plan. These surveys analyzed the major open space sites in Town and were completed by both town staff and community volunteers. The surveys indicated what accessibility improvements are needed at these locations. ADA improvements were vaguely listed as action items in the 2006 plan. Over the past eight (8) years, Palmer has completed a more in depth study of the ADA requirements in the parks and conservation areas. The necessary improvements needed have been specifically highlighted in the 2006 and continue to be addressed in the 2014 Action Items.