

SECTION 7: ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

A. Summary of Resource Area Protection Needs

According to the survey, residents are also most active in passive recreation opportunities such as walking, bicycling, fishing, hiking, and sledding. Such activities require access to open space and natural resources such as lakes and fields, and are enhanced when there are large continuous tracts of land available. In addition, wildlife and ecosystems also benefit from protection from fragmentation by development, preserving the interdependencies inherent among species and natural resources.

Regional Resources

The environmental issues that were included were also given a favorable response. More detailed environmental issues were presented at the public meetings; issues such as ground water protection, greenways and wildlife corridors were also given a favorable response.

To date, Palmer does not have a contiguous riparian wildlife corridor with adjacent Towns, but this gap is slowly closing as the town acquires additional conservation lands especially in the northeast quadrant where much of the land is under the stewardship of the Conservation Commission and Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game. This area also has the largest presence of core habitat species of conservation concern and critical natural landscape (as identified by the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, NHESP) as well as several clusters of NHESP certified vernal pools and estimated habitat of rare wetlands wildlife. Preservation of additional tracts of land along the eastern edge of the town line above Warren Street, and particularly to the west of the Department of Fish and Game parcel in the far northeast portion of town, would help protect the most critical natural habitat and landscape.

Land in the area of town known as the “Shaw District” (east of Ware Road in the north part of town), which was historically farmed, also contains several tracts of farmland. Agricultural preservation restrictions would help preserve this farmland for future production. West of Ware Road is the Ware River and several potential vernal pools. Conservation restrictions or other means of protection would help preserve the critical natural landscape along the river and the vernal pools.

Water Resources

The Kings Brook Watershed is on the eastern edge of town, below Warren Street. Conservation Commission and state-owned land lines some segments of Kings Brook, but does not connect to the other protected lands north of Warren Street. There are many parcels along King’s Brook which are still in private hands and if developed could seriously impair water and habitat quality. Palmer and other land conservation organizations must continue to acquire and protect contiguous parcels in this resource area through Conservation restrictions or other protection mechanisms in order to create a viable greenway/wildlife corridor in the Kings Brook watershed.

Likewise, on the western side of town, land protection should be sought (as feasible) on the north side of the Ware River opposite municipal-owned land in order to protect the critical habitat and landscape identified by NHESP from development and fragmentation. The existing river walk along the Ware River is also in need of extension, as the Ware River traverses a central portion of town with rich opportunity for access and enjoyment by more residents. Extending the trail along the Ware River to Wilbraham in the west also creates the opportunity for a regional trail.

Greenways and ground water protection are still of vital concerns and needs to be addressed especially with the high concentration of industry that lines our river corridors and the high amount of road salt that is repeatedly applied each year. The Town of Palmer has reduced the salt concentration on its roadways but the State has not; therefore, the threat remains to our wells and ground water alike.

Because Palmer is made up of four distinct villages it is important that each area be considered when planning recreational improvements so that no one village is favored over another. Two of the villages, Three Rivers and Bondsville, each have their own Chamber of Commerce, while Depot Village shares in a regional plan. All three Chambers of Commerce has been very supportive of the recreational needs in each respective community and has worked with the appropriate town departments whenever the need arose.

According to the inventory of protected lands, there are virtually no lands protected by land trusts in Palmer. There are also only four (4) conservation restrictions and agricultural preservation restrictions being utilized to protect land. Relationships with the state and local land trusts should be built so that these very useful preservation tools are better employed in Palmer.

In addition to land protection opportunities, illegal dumping and ATV use is a problem on protected lands. A monitoring and ticketing system is needed to help enforce anti-dumping laws and restrict motor vehicle use that is destructive to sensitive lands in order to prevent against erosion and habitat destruction.

B. Summary of Community Needs

As outlined in Section 3, the greatest increases in population are predicted to be among those aged 20-29 and 60-84, with population losses predicted for other cohorts. According to the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan of 2012 (SCORP) adults in the older age groups are most interested in hiking/walking trails, while younger age groups are most interested in playgrounds, athletic fields, water facilities, and skate parks.

Comments collected in the survey and at the visioning session somewhat reflected those potential future needs. One of the most common amenities residents would like to see included more biking trails. Residents also commonly mentioned the need for better and more playgrounds throughout Palmer. This does not correspond with the typical needs of the 20-29 age group, but upgrading the parks where playgrounds would be located was

also a commonly identified need that would benefit future residents in their 20s. Burleigh and Forest Parks in particular were repeatedly identified as in need of improvement.

Another need voiced at the visioning session was for increased awareness among Palmer residents of many of the open space and recreational opportunities already available to them. Visioning session participants felt residents may feel unconnected to their town and the outdoors, and suggested that more information on existing trails, events, and conservation areas would help promote increased usage. For example, areas in the northeast section of town offer good hiking, but there are no facilities to direct or accommodate hikers (signs, trash barrels, etc.). Boy Scouts are active in Palmer and can be considered to help improve trail networks with signage and maps. Schools are also an opportunity to educate residents about existing outdoor and recreational resources and their proper use.

Recreational facilities other than for team sports seem to be the upper most need according to the public's response. Hiking and bike trails, bridle paths and an out-door swimming pool seemed to be of prime interest. Many of these needs, especially hiking trails and bridle paths have recently been laid out but their presence has not been properly promoted. A number of residents have called for a large new park, similar to Grenville Park in Ware. More canoe access and better access to existing trails are also needed. By increasing usage of existing outdoor/recreational opportunities in Palmer, residents may be willing to consider adoption of the Community Preservation Act so that there is future funding to maintain the resources they enjoy.

In regards to the needs of the elderly, survey results showed a request for more accessible recreation areas, especially for mobility impaired. A need for quiet recreation areas like with flat walking & bird watching areas were requested. In addition, more park benches especially along hiking and walking trails was desired. One resident expressed a need for handicapped access to overlooks and water resources as well.

A major need across the board was places accessible for disabled people and peoples with limited mobility. Currently, the Town of Palmer's recreation and conservation areas are not up to the ADA standards. The ADA requirement goals are stated in the Seven Year Action Plan. An overview of the modifications needed is outlined in Appendix D: ADA Self-Assessment. One resident commented on "the need for recreation areas for children with physical disabilities. Currently the playground equipment in town is not fit to support them". Another common concern was increasing the amount of forested space that is easily maneuvered for wheel chairs or folks with limited mobility. All of Palmer Conservation Lands restrict motor vehicle access, and people with disabilities, especially handicapped vets in the area, would like access with their motorized transportation.

There was an overwhelming response to having equal access to open space & recreation, especially with people with economic challenges and teens. Public transportation to forested conservation lands is unavailable, and several survey responders inquired about extending the bus route to conservation lands. An overwhelming number of residents stated they wanted to see a dog park, and possible

skate park for teens. One resident stated “The young people have no real hang-out that is theirs. Palmer does NOT have enough places for families with young children.”

Another common need addressed was to increase efforts to helping and encouraging needy families, and families on public assistance participate in community agriculture and local food production efforts. In 2010, Strzemienski's Farm was awarded a grant from the Pepsi Corporation to create a Community Farm but in order to get a plot one must apply, thereby making the community farm restrictive. Additionally, access to the location is not on any public transportation route. Some residents thought it would be good to develop programs through the schools to bring children to the community farm for either afterschool activities or day field trips.

C. Management Needs, Potential Change of Use

In the survey, Palmer residents commonly identified the most noteworthy characteristics of Palmer as rivers, the railroads and old Depot (now Steaming Tender Restaurant), Forest Lake, and Burleigh Park. Likewise, residents desired to have more access to the Rivers and a park to view the trains.

Palmer’s heritage is reflected in its epithet “The Town of Seven Railroads”. At the height of the Industrial Revolution, Palmer was a transportation hub moving passengers and goods daily via rail and trolley. The historic H.H. Richardson Depot, today known as the Steaming Tender restaurant was the bustling center, and although the rail activity has lessened to three active freight lines shared with non-stop Amtrak, this location remains the prime location for train viewing. Train enthusiasts, young and old, and armature to aficionado alike, are known to spend an afternoon watching the trains pass, with particular interest, to the unique diamond rail alignment just west of the former depot. A plan to develop a Park there, tentatively know as Olmsted Park was an expressed desire of the community.

Palmer is defined by its rivers, but many of them lack easy access for recreational use. This is particularly the case in terms of parking, which is not available along the rivers in an official capacity. With Palmer’s abundant water areas of rivers, ponds and streams, many recreational purposes can and are being fulfilled. Vandalism and trash disposal are the two most constant obstacles that discourage improvements in these areas. Hopefully, this careless and destructive phase will pass in time. In the meantime, every effort will be made to curb these violations through such programs as Adopt-A-Stream and/or Road, etc. It would also be helpful if the schools would offer further educational courses on ecology, pollution and civic pride.

Other management needs being addressed are the Conservation land in the northeast quadrant . The Conservation Commission has formulated a “Timber Management Plan” that will provide income to the Commission so that they may make “user friendly” improvements in this area, such as having an updated survey of all the conservation parcels in that area and placing identification metal disk markers along the boundary lines. The Commission has installed a gate across Tavern Road and across St. John’s to restrict motor vehicle traffic in an effort to curtail severe road ruts and the dumping of

trash in this area. The commission has also formulated Rules and Regulations for the care and use of all conservation lands.

Ains Manor, located in the Crystal Lake region of the Village of Bondsville, has submitted a proposal to build 44 housing units on 8.09-acres of land, which contains wetlands and an isolated area subject to flooding. This parcel abuts Camp Stanica, which is used about nine months of the year by various community groups. In addition, this area was designated in the Phase I Open Space Plan of 1970 as a probable impound area for the Town's ground water supply and should be protected from any major impact. Currently efforts are underway to finalize a Conservation Restriction with Mass DEP to establish beach access and protect the bordering vegetated wetlands surrounding the subdivision. It is anticipated this CR will be accepted in early 2015.

The Conservation Commission is working on restoring the meadows and grasslands on the Midura property. In the past, AmeriCorps volunteers have helped with trail maintenance projects. Currently, the Palmer Trails Association (Palmer Hikers) has taken over trail maintenance and has received a blanket Order of Conditions, from the Palmer Conservation Commission, to perform the required trail maintenance and reconstruction.

Access to the parking area along Route 67 would help connect river users with the Midura conservation area. In fact, accessibility to rivers, lakes, and most of Palmer's other recreational opportunities requires a car. These areas are owned by Mass DOT currently, but the Palmer's Trails Association (Palmer Hikers) has been in contact with DOT about adopting the rest areas. A goal would then be to work with Mass DCR to establish a river access point/canoe launch at the rest areas.

Increased trail connectivity, such as along the Ware River and in the south of the town along the Grand Trunk Railroad, would allow for increased non-motorized mobility, but greater similar linkages to town parks and the conservation areas in the northeast sections of town area are needed. If the Town accepts the Donaldson Family Trust Conservation Restriction, it will open 1800-feet of the Ware River to a publically accessible trail network. Additionally, John Sausar has been proposing an Urban Trail along the Ware River to Town Council for some time, and has identified property owners to be contacted in regards to access agreements.

An outdoor swimming pool at Burleigh Park is in the plans of the foreseeable future; additionally, improvements at the swimming areas of Forest Lake and above the dam on the Swift River are being addressed. The Swift River Dam is currently deemed very unsafe; both by the Town and DCR's Office of Dam Safety. The site will require extensive professional restructuring and additional safety measures before swimming will ever be allowed.

Two old parks are now under redevelopment in the town of Palmer, one in the Village of Bondsville and the other in Depot Village. The Bondsville facility is known as Endelson Playground and is being renovated under a Community Development Block Grant

(CDBG). Upon completion it will be a mini water park located at the intersection of Main Street and 181. This mini-park will be addressing the needs of the very young with a children's playground area, and the needs of the senior citizens and physically challenged. Eager park is also posed for upgrade to equipment from a Common Backyards Grant.

The Walter "Beebe" Chase Memorial Park located off Shaw Street in Depot Village is a much larger facility of over twenty (20) acres, currently targeted for redeveloped. About nine (9) acres is on a relatively flat plain that can be easily accessible to both senior citizens and the physically impaired. This area currently has playing fields and is located in a designated Environmental Justice Area of town. The remaining land area of over eleven (11) acres is an upland parcel that rises from an elevation of 400 feet to that of 542 feet. This parcel has two hiking trails, which can be entered from the park area. Both have a very steep rise, which leads to a plateau at the top. This plateau has the potential of being a scenic view area with the harvesting of some of the taller trees. This plateau area can also be accessed via a more gradual rise by a 20-foot right of way from Longview Street. Several citizens have expressed interest in seeing the undeveloped sections of Chase Memorial Park be converted into either a Dog Park or a Community Garden (or potentially even both if proper funding could be secured).

SCORP Comparison

As required by MA Department of Conservation Services, another resource used to assess the community needs in the municipal Open Space and Recreation Plans was The Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan – Massachusetts Outdoors 2012 (SCORP), discusses recreational resources in the state, as well as its needs, and identifies gaps between the two. Results of the 2012SCORP show that residents across the commonwealth and in the Connecticut Valley show strong use and demand for water access and recreation trails.

The 2012 SCORP and the Palmer Open Space surveys paralleled each other in the priorities for the town and the region being hiking/walking trails, playgrounds and swimming. It is through these responses that this Open Space Plan focuses on the need for Palmer to maintain what it has and to improve the hiking/walking trails, the swim area and the existing playgrounds. One can see through the action items listed at the end of this plan that the priorities for the Town are to focus on these areas.

As outlined in Section 3, the greatest increases in population are predicted to be among those aged 20-29 and 60-84, with population losses predicted for other cohorts. This parallels the SCORP, showing an aging population in Massachusetts. According to the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan of 2012 (SCORP) adults in the older age groups are most interested in hiking/walking trails, while younger age groups are most interested in playgrounds, athletic fields, water facilities, and skate parks.

According to the 2012 SCORP (Pg. 14) "respondents said that the two most popular resources and activities for families are playgrounds and water facilities (beach, pond,

pool, etc.), for preschoolers are playgrounds and water facilities, for children are playgrounds and athletic fields, for adolescents are athletic fields and skate parks, for adults (by far) are hiking/walking trails, and for seniors are senior centers and hiking/walking trails. According to the survey respondents, none of these activities have decreased in popularity in the last five years. More importantly, survey results indicated that trails are the type of facility that has increased the most in popularity over the past five years, as well as the activity that respondents believe will increase the most in popularity over the next five years.”

Comments collected in the Palmer survey and at the visioning session somewhat reflected those needs. One of the most common amenities residents would like to see included more trails. Palmer residents with families also commonly mentioned the need for better and more playgrounds throughout Palmer. Burleigh and Forest Parks in particular were repeatedly identified as in need of improvement.

The Goal and objectives of the 2012 SCORP also directly coincide with those of Palmer outlined in Section 8. The four goals of the 2012 Massachusetts SCORP are as follows (Pg. 22-23):

1. Increase the availability of all types of trails for recreation
2. Increase the availability of water-based recreation
3. Invest in recreation and conservation areas that are close to home for short visits
4. Invest in racially, economically, and age diverse neighborhoods given their projected increase in participation in outdoor recreation

Water-based recreation came up frequently in both. Respondents cited a need for more water access, whether for swimming, boating, canoeing, kayaking, rafting or tubing. The development of more boat ramps was mentioned in both Palmer’s survey and the 2012 SCORP survey. Respondents to both also stated the need for more land to be protected along waterways so that high water quality is maintained. According to the 2012 SCORP (Pg.17) there is a concern that as more development occurs across the state, available access to water will decrease. While residents are looking for more water-based recreation options, it is important to note that the maintenance involved with spray parks, though less involved than swimming pools or water bodies, is still a concern with some respondents. Again, another major commonality between the Town of Palmer needs and the 2012 SCORP was a lack of funding for maintenance of existing recreational facilities and building of new ones.