

## **SECTION 7: ANALYSIS OF NEEDS**

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### **A. Summary of Resource Area Protection Needs**

Resource protection is based upon the need to preserve existing natural and cultural resources that are finite and cannot easily be replaced if damaged or lost. These resources include wetlands, rivers, streams, aquifers, farmland, historical resources and scenic views. According to the survey, Palmer residents are most active in passive recreation opportunities such as walking, hiking, bicycling, boating and fishing. Survey respondents also indicated that some of the recreation improvements they would most like to see are additional hiking trails, river walks, and nature walks. Such activities require access to open space and natural resources such as lakes, rivers, trails 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**

Survey respondents felt strongly that conservation of drinking water and surface water resources was very important, as well as conservation of farmland, wildlife habitat, and open space and conservation areas. The importance of protecting these resources was also expressed by participants at the Public Visioning Session.

Palmer is making progress on forming a contiguous riparian wildlife corridor with adjacent Towns 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.

Preserving land in the areas of Town known as the Shaw and Pattaquatic Districts (east of Ware Road in the north part of town) is a high priority. This area, 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**

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. The Town of Palmer and 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 along river corridors and ground water protection remain high priorities. Water quality of both rivers and groundwater is a vital concern and needs to be addressed, especially given 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.

According to the inventory of protected lands, there are virtually no lands protected by land trusts in Palmer. There are also only three (3) conservation restrictions and one (1) 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. Both practices lead to habitat destruction, and motor vehicle use like ATVs causes erosion of sensitive 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.

## **B. Summary of Community Needs**

As shown in Figure 3.2 in Section 3, the age groups in Palmer that make up significant percentages of the population fall generally into the 50-64 age group, the 25-39 age group, and the 5-19 age group. The greatest increases in population through 2040 are predicted to be among those aged 35-39 and 60-84, with slight population losses predicted for other cohorts. Because of this varied age distribution, it will be important to

provide for the recreation needs of the older population as well as younger adults who are often parents of young children, and school-age and pre-school children.

Opportunities and facilities for passive recreation activities such as walking, hiking, biking, swimming and canoeing/kayaking were very important to survey respondents. The most popular recreational activity survey respondents engage in is walking, at almost 80%. This is a particularly popular activity among older respondents. Hiking is also a popular activity, and more and improved hiking trails, river walks and nature walks were top responses to the question asking what improvements or additions to recreational facilities residents would like to see.

Public swimming access, particularly at rivers and lakes, was the top need indicated in the survey question about additional recreational activities respondents would like to see in Palmer. There was also significant interest expressed in more bike trails and canoe/kayak blue trails, as well as better services at trails and open spaces (restrooms and waste disposal). In addition to public access at natural swimming areas, many survey respondents also expressed a need for public use of the pool at Palmer High School.

There were many comments on the survey and at the visioning session about the need for improved facilities and better maintenance at recreation areas. This includes both playgrounds and athletic facilities. Burleigh and Forest Parks in particular were repeatedly identified as in need of improvement, as were the athletic fields and bathrooms at Laviolette Park, and the track at Duke Field. There was general satisfaction with the number of playgrounds in Palmer, although a need was expressed for more updated and modern playgrounds. There is also a need for maintenance of the many walking and hiking trails in Palmer. For example, areas in the northeast section of town offer good hiking, but there are limited facilities to direct or accommodate hikers (signs, trash barrels, etc.). Regarding possible new recreational facilities, there was interest among survey respondents for a dog park, disc golf course and possible skate park for teens.

While there are many hiking trails in Palmer, the trail network could be expanded. One priority for the Town is developing the Palmer section of the Mass Central Rail Trail and connecting it with other sections in neighboring towns. This would address the strong need for both walking and biking paths, as well as contribute to the development of a regional recreational resource and attraction for tourists.

A theme voiced at the visioning session was the need for increased awareness among Palmer residents of many of the open space and recreational opportunities already available to them. Visioning session participants felt that more, and more accessible, information on existing trails, events, and conservation areas would help promote increased usage. The Town should put together a brochure listing all trails and facilities with their locations. In addition, although there is information on open space and recreation on the Town website, it is not all centrally located or easy to find. The Town should work on centralizing this information and make it easier to access on the website.

According to the survey, rivers were the most used recreational “facility” in Palmer, and there is much interest in expanding their use. There was a strong need expressed for more access to the rivers for fishing, canoeing/kayaking, swimming, and walking. Although there was not a large interest from survey respondents in more hiking trails in general in Palmer, there was significant interest in hiking or walking trails along the rivers. There was also a need expressed on the survey for restroom facilities and more parking areas on the rivers. One area that could be used for a boat launch is off First Street in Bondsville. The Town should also look into partnering with the Chicopee River Watershed Council and with the State to get funding to improve river access.

It was mentioned at the visioning session that there are excellent fly-fishing opportunities on the rivers, particularly on the Swift River, which has the best water quality. This is promoted by word of mouth, but if there were better access for fishing the Town could publicize and promote this, thus increasing tourism and economic development.

## **Summary of Needs for Special Groups**

### Disabled Residents

There is a major need in the Town for more accessible recreation opportunities for disabled people and peoples with limited mobility, as many of the Town’s open space and recreation areas are not up to the ADA standards. Survey results showed a request for more accessible recreation areas, especially for the elderly and mobility impaired; 9-percent of survey respondents indicated that there aren’t sufficient recreational opportunities for disabled residents. This should include quiet recreation areas with flat walking paths, as well as more park benches along hiking and walking trails, rivers and ponds. ADA accessible boat launches and fishing docks at recreational waters are also a high priority. The Town is currently working with the Massachusetts Department of Fish & Game, Office of Boating and Fishing Access, on a universally accessible boat launch and parking area at the Forest Lake Wildlife Management Area, which should be completed during 2022. There has been improvement as the Town recently added two new ADA accessible loop trails at Laviolette Field and Swift River Greenbelt Conservation Area. The Town also plans to collaborate with the Office of Boating and Fishing Access on a universally accessible fly-fishing pier at the Swift River Greenbelt Conservation Area, which should be constructed in 2023. The Town’s goals for improving ADA accessibility are stated in the Seven Year Action Plan and an overview of the modifications needed is outlined in Appendix D – ADA Self-Assessment. All of Palmer Conservation Lands restrict motor vehicle access, and although it would be challenging to bring many of these lands up to ADA standards, people with disabilities, especially handicapped vets in the area, would benefit from access to other open space and recreation areas with their motorized transportation.

### Youth (Preschoolers, Grade School Children, Teens)

There is also a major need in the Town to provide more recreational opportunities for youth such as preschoolers, grade school children, and teens. Over half of the survey

respondents indicated that there were not enough recreational opportunities for preschoolers (51%) or grade school children (57%). Additionally, 88-percent of survey respondents did not believe there were enough recreational opportunities for teens. Possible options to provide more recreational opportunities for youth, as indicated by survey respondents include Burleigh Park improvements (59%) and the creation of a day camp (29%), working with Palmer High School to create pool hours for open swimming (49%), and the creation of a skate park (18%).

### Economically Disadvantaged Residents

There is also a significant need in Palmer for equal access to open space and recreation, especially for people with economic challenges. Public transportation to forested conservation lands is unavailable, and extending the bus route to conservation lands should be a priority. The Park Access Report below describes in detail the level of access that residents in Palmer have to open space and recreation areas, and provides recommendations for improving that access.

Conserving working farms and farmland was a priority for survey respondents. The Town needs to continue discussions with landowners about preserving their land as open space through Conservation Restrictions or Agricultural Preservation Restrictions. There has also been a longstanding interest in developing a community garden in Palmer, which would offer residents the opportunity to interact with nature, while also growing their own food in a community setting. A few possible locations are being considered, although there are some challenges for each location as well as for long term management. There are not enough staffing resources currently in Town to manage a community garden.

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.

Lack of funding is an issue for developing and maintaining recreation areas, as well as for land conservation. Adoption of the Community Preservation Act would provide an additional revenue stream that the Town could utilize for its many open space and recreation needs.

### **Access to Parks and Open Space for a Healthy Community**

Where one lives and how that location affects an individual's ability to access health care, wellness programs, healthy food, employment, and places to exercise can play a large role in an individual's overall health and longevity. Palmer has participated in the Mass in Motion program, funded by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health,

since 2016. The purpose of this program is to promote opportunities for access to recreation, active transportation, and healthy food, particularly for people at higher risk of poor health outcomes. The program funded the development of a chapter on Public Health and a Health Addendum to the 2021 Palmer Master Plan, highlighting the importance of considering health in all policies, and the program also overlaps with the goals and objectives of the OSRP.

According to the Baystate Wing Community Health Needs Assessment (2019), primary health concerns in Palmer and the Wing service area include mental health and substance use disorders, infant and perinatal health, Alzheimer's disease, and chronic health conditions including high rates of cancer, diabetes, and asthma. Obesity is also a major concern among both children and older adults with over 40% of Palmer's children identified as either obese or overweight and 24.5% of adults diagnosed as being obese.

People who face barriers to accessing health care, healthy food, transportation, and places to recreate are more likely to experience poor health outcomes. By focusing resources on more vulnerable populations, the Town can not only increase opportunities for these populations to improve health outcomes but also improve the livability of the town as a whole. Older adults, people living in poverty (primarily single mothers with children), recent immigrants or non-English speakers, and people living with disabilities are some of the most vulnerable populations living in Palmer. According to projections by the Donahue Institute, residents over 65 are expected to outnumber children under 18 in Palmer before 2025. With age comes increased chances of having impairments to mobility, vision and hearing. In Palmer, 17% of the population has a disability, and 58% of people over the age of 75 have a disability (compared to 47% in the state). According to American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates, the Hispanic/Latinx population is estimated to have increased from being 1.5% of the population to 5.3% between 2013 and 2019. In the census tract that covers the Three Rivers neighborhood, 23.3% of residents are living in poverty. Families with female heads of households, with no spouse present and with children under 18 are the most likely to be living in Poverty in Palmer (23.2%). According to data from the Palmer Schools, 46% of students are considered Economically Disadvantaged.

### **Access to Parks and Trails**

In 2019, PVPC staff completed the Park Access Project through the Mass in Motion program which included a mapping analysis of parks in Palmer and assessment of accommodations for people with disabilities in and around public parks. The project looked at recreational facilities for people of all ages, such as benches and walking loops for older adults, playgrounds and splash pads for children, and fields and tennis or basketball courts for active recreation.

The Park Service Density map calculates the number of people within ½-mile of each park and noted houses that were more than ½-mile from a park. The Park Service Density Map also includes trails that are mapped for public use in the area to the northeast of



Palmer Depot. Although this trail network is located on both private and public property, property owners have permitted access and mapping of the trails for public use.

The map shows that there are many residential properties in Palmer that are located more than ½ mile from a park. Homes in the shaded area are within ½-mile of mapped trails but are colored red because these homes are located more than ½-mile from parks. Some areas of higher density residential development, including neighborhoods east of Depot Village, do not have access to parks or recreation facilities within ½-mile, meaning these households must drive to access recreation facilities. Reviewing walking and biking routes to parks or trails from these areas could allow people better access to recreational resources without the need for a car or transportation services.



*Figure 1. Endelson Playground includes walkways and picnic tables that are accessible for people in wheelchairs*

The analysis also showed that several parks in Palmer have been recently renovated and equipped with playground equipment, walkways and benches for people with disabilities. However, sidewalks and curbs located near the parks were not handicapped accessible or were in poor condition. These are areas that could be improved to allow better access to parks by people of all ages who live within walking or rolling distance of the parks.

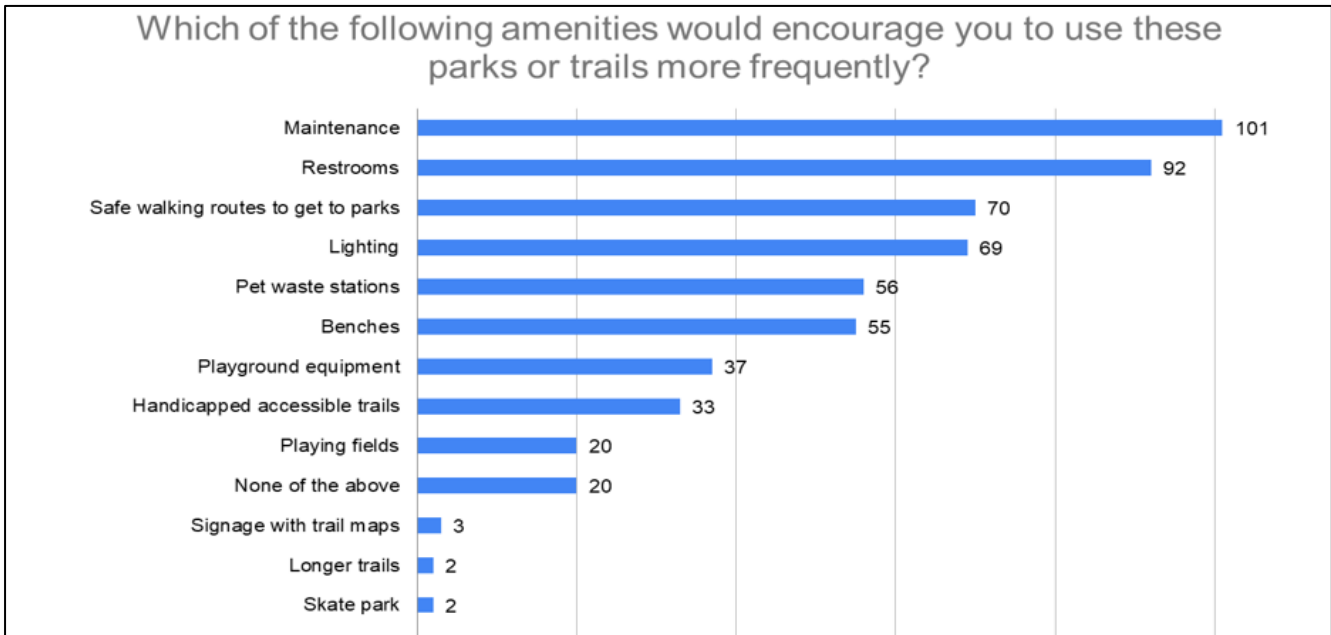
### **What Draws People to Parks?**

A study by the City Parks Alliance which observed park use and design in 174 neighborhood parks in 25 cities over a 2-year period found three major areas that increase use of neighborhood parks:

- Programming – Parks that had programming for people of all ages showed a 48% increase in park usage and a 37% increase in physical activity at those parks.
- Design – Parks with walking loops had 80% more users, twice as many seniors, 90% higher moderate to vigorous physical activity. For every playground element, use increases by 50%.
- Marketing and Outreach – Marketing that included banners, posters, signs, and/or social media saw an increase by 62% in park users, 63% in physical activity.<sup>1</sup>

Two of Palmer's parks, Laviolette Field and the Swift River Trail include walking loops that are accessible for people in wheelchairs and benches for resting. These are valuable

resources for older adults and people with disabilities and should be promoted to encourage more use by older residents.



*Figure 2 - Healthy Palmer Survey: What would encourage people to use parks and trails more frequently? (2020)*



INSERT PARK SERVICE DENSITY MAP

## **Access to Places to Grow Food**

With only one grocery store and no active farmers market, many households in Palmer do not have easy access to healthy food. Enabling people to grow their own food can improve food sovereignty and food security. Results of the Healthy Palmer Survey showed that 87% of survey respondents thought that the Town should build community gardens, and most thought community gardens should be built in Palmer Depot or Three Rivers (38% each).

Through the Mass in Motion program several locations have been analyzed as potential locations for community gardens in Palmer. Water Street and Chase Memorial Acres are two locations for which designs were developed for community gardens. However, frequent flooding at the Water Street location would make siting a community garden there subject to the threat of contamination from floodwaters, and contamination from prior uses of the land would require that raised beds be built for all community garden plots. Chase Acres is an emergency landing location for helicopters bringing cases to Baystate Wing hospital, making it a difficult garden location. Property adjacent to the Town Hall is a possible location for a community garden. Although small, it would be visible and close to a water supply. Management of community gardens has been a barrier to the Town moving forward with building them as Town staff do not currently have the capacity to manage a community garden in addition to their other responsibilities.

In designing a community garden, it is important to consider people with disabilities. A smooth, wheelchair accessible path and, raised beds that are built at a height that is accessible by people in wheelchairs would offer locations for people in wheelchairs and would be more comfortable for older adults as they would enable gardeners access while standing or sitting next to the beds.

## **C. Management Needs, Potential Change of Use**

Palmer has many wonderful open space and passive recreational resources, from the four rivers to the many conservation areas and trails. In the survey, some of the most unique landscapes or outdoor locations of Palmer most frequently mentioned by respondents included the rivers, the many hiking trails and conservation areas, Mt. Dumplin, Laviolette and Burleigh Park, and Forest Lake.

Unfortunately, vandalism and trash disposal are the two constant issues that discourage improvements and use of these areas. In order to address these issues, a priority for the Town is to increase enforcement of illegal dumping on Conservation lands and roads, and to develop a ticketing system for violators. Illegal ATV and off-road vehicle use is also a problem on Conservation lands and roads, and the Town needs to step up enforcement of this misuse of these resources as well.

A recurring theme in both the survey and visioning session was that better maintenance and upkeep is needed for recreation and conservation areas in Palmer. One priority to address this need is to establish a Trails Committee. This committee could help to both build and maintain trails, and it would significantly increase the volunteer base through committee membership as well as holding workdays and other volunteer events. Boy Scouts are active in Palmer and can also be considered to help improve trail networks with signage and maps. In addition, schools are an important resource for educating residents about existing outdoor and recreational resources and their proper use. It is also a priority for the Town to hire a Recreation Director to oversee all the recreational programs and facilities in Palmer, and to ensure the quality of both.

Other management needs being addressed are focused on all Conservation lands, especially in the northeast quadrant of Palmer. Under the Town's Ordinance for the Sale of Forest and Agricultural Products, the Commission is authorized to develop management plans and conduct timber harvests on approximately 700-acres of land spread between eight (8) conservation areas and on other lands placed under the care and custody of the Commission that can be used to 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; however, the total income received from the sale of forest or agricultural products by the Commission shall not exceed \$ 10,000 in any fiscal year. In support of this Ordinance, the Commission has developed a Forest Management Policy and Guidelines to establish general goals and provide guidance for management of forests on approximately on all lands placed under the care and custody of the Commission. Additionally, The Commission has also formulated Rules and Regulations for the care and use of all conservation lands.

There have been some additional conservation restrictions added in Palmer since the last OSRP. Palmer Motorsports Park, a sports car racetrack on a large property off West Ware Road, was built in 2017. As part of the Palmer Motorsports Park development, project proponents have been working with the Town, the Department of Fish and Game, and the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) to establish a Conservation Easement/Conservation Restriction to mitigate against a take of endangered species. There are deed restrictions on portions two (2) parcels within the Palmer Motorsports Park complex; one deed restriction is 70-acres and while the other is 30-acres. The deed restriction on these 100-acres will exist in perpetuity. When finalized the CR will provide a parking lot and trail access to Old Quarry Road and Colonels Mountain.

The Conservation Commission has made progress on restoring the meadows and grasslands on the Midura property. In the past, AmeriCorps volunteers have helped with trail maintenance projects. Currently, the Conservation Commission has taken over trail maintenance and re-construction.

A parking area along Route 67, near Brimfield, 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. 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.

There is a need for the Town to continue to improve public swimming access. The State recently made some improvements at Forest Lake, including reopening the beach area and repaving the boat ramp. In order to manage the Forest Lake Beach more effectively, the Town should develop a land management agreement with the Department of Fish and Game. The Town should also consider developing a parking pass system for use of Forest Lake Public Beach, with funds generated from parking passes to be used for maintenance activities. Other public swimming options to consider include public use of the pool at the high school, as well as an outdoor swimming pool at Burleigh Park.

Two parks with playgrounds were renovated in the town of Palmer since the last OSRP, one in the Village of Bondsville and the other in Depot Village. Endelson Playground in Bondsville has two play structures, swings, a splash pad that operates in warm weather, and a basketball court. The playground has walkways and picnic tables that are wheelchair accessible. Eager Playground at Legion Field was also updated in 2016 and is partially ADA accessible.

The Walter "Beebe" Chase Memorial Park, located off Shaw Street in Depot Village, is an undeveloped open space of over twenty (20) acres. It has the potential for use as a recreation area and possibly a community garden. About nine (9) acres are on a relatively flat plain that could be easily accessible to both senior citizens and the physically impaired. 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.

## **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 2017 Massachusetts Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP).<sup>2</sup>The 2017 SCORP analyzed information such as participation rates in activities statewide and within the Connecticut River Valley.

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<sup>2</sup> The Massachusetts Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) can be accessed at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/scorp-2017/download>

The 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 OSRP focuses on the need for Palmer to maintain what it has and to improve the hiking/walking trails, public access to swimming, 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.

The 2017 SCORP performed three online surveys (one for recreation users, one for municipal recreation providers and one for land trusts), multiple public meetings, and a phone survey to inform an understanding of what people across the Commonwealth want most and what they are willing to support. The results from the online surveys found that the outdoor recreational activities people most often planned to partake in within the next year were walking or jogging on trails and greenways, hiking, and walking or jogging on streets and sidewalks. People explained that they were motivated to participate in outdoor activities for physical fitness, mental well-being and to be close to nature. The results from the phone surveys found that most people recreate in facilities that are less than five miles from their home. The most highly requested improvements to outdoor recreational facilities were for some type of trail or water-based recreation improvements. This is also similar to the priorities for Monson residents, who rank walking, hiking, and canoeing/kayaking highly as their preferred passive recreation activities.