

OPEN SPACE PLANNING AND THE MASSACHUSETTS COMMUNITY PRESERVATION ACT

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Abstract: Open space protection is a primary concern for recreation planners. As the Northeast grows in population and the threat of urban sprawl accelerates, open space protection and creation needs attention. This paper summarizes the findings of a survey administered to the citizens of Southwick Massachusetts for the preparation of a Community Open Space and Recreation Plan. Southwick is a “bedroom” community within commuting distance to Springfield, Massachusetts to the east and Hartford, Connecticut to the south. And as such, the rural fabric of the region is threatened by urban sprawl. Citizens were asked in the Fall 2002 elections if they wished to participate in the Community Preservation Act (CPA) passed by the Massachusetts State Legislature. This act helps communities plan for controlled growth and development. Question 4 passed, and illustrates the citizen’s acceptance of a 3% property tax surcharge to fund the CPA. The election results mirror the findings in our survey. Additional findings to be discussed include the public’s acceptance of alternative funding opportunities for open space acquisition, strategies for controlling urban sprawl, an assessment of quality of life factors, visitation patterns at the local park resources and identification of future parks and recreation needs. Keywords: Open Space Plans, Quality of Life, Massachusetts.

Introduction

The Massachusetts Community Preservation Act (CPA) was signed on 14 September 2000. The Act allows communities to establish a funding mechanism dedicated to open space, historic

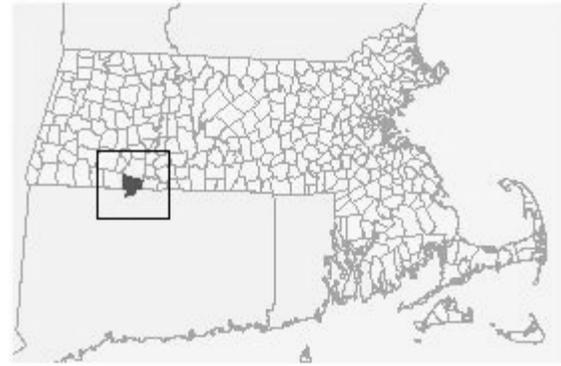


Figure 1. Location of Southwick Massachusetts (Source: Massachusetts Community Preservation Act WebPages).

preservation and affordable housing. While the vast majority of permanently protected open space is found in Western Massachusetts, pockets of growing residential communities still exist. Thus planned growth and the protection of recreation lands are essential to preserve the rural character and sustain a high quality of life. One community that has seen recent growth in population is Southwick, the town that juts into Connecticut seen on state maps (Figure 1). Having a population of nearly 9,000 in 2000, should the community “buildout” to the maximum permitted by current zoning, one might find almost 29,000 in the town! Thus, this town is at a good stage to explore the potential advantages of open space protection.

The Town of Southwick, Massachusetts voted to implement the CPA on 5 November 2002 by a slim margin (Union News 2002). Question 4 asked the citizens to support a 3% property tax surcharge to fund the CPA. In preparation of the vote, the Conservation Committee contacted the project leader for assistance in the preparation of the Open Space and Recreation Plan. Westfield State College would assist the community by administering and analyzing the user demand survey. The survey was designed to solicit community opinions on the preservation, planning and use of open space and recreation areas in Southwick.

A team of 18 students conducted telephone interviews in early November 2001. Over eight evenings, the students obtained 251 completed surveys out of a total of 892 calls yielding a decent 30% response rate; fine for telephone surveys.

The authors next tabulated the results and conducted statistical analysis for the report (Bristow et. al 2002). In the next two sections, the reader will find information on the Community Preservation Act and the sampling and data collection scheme. Next the reader will note the results of the analysis. Lastly, a discussion of some of the more insightful findings will take place. An estimated 160 hours was devoted to this project.

Background

The Community Preservation Act enables a community, through a ballot referendum, to create a fund dedicated to historic preservation, affordable housing and open space. Revenue for the fund is to be generated by a surcharge of up to 3% on the local property tax. As a further incentive, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts will match up to 100% of the locally raised money (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2003a). For open space, lands can be purchased for active and passive recreational uses. This might include community gardens, trails, youth and adult sport areas. For example, CPA funds have been used to create a skate park (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2003b). Typically, this surcharge is expected to be a modest increase for most homeowners. For Southwick, the surcharge will average about \$16 a year for a \$200,000 home and about \$32 a year for a \$300,000 home (Community Preservation Coalition 2003).

Data

During the early part of the Fall 2001 Semester, the project leader met with members of the Southwick Open Space Committee to prepare a survey instrument that could be administered via the telephone. The survey instrument was modeled after questionnaires used in previous community open space and recreation surveys and tailored to meet the needs of Southwick. The instrument solicited information about household characteristics (length of residency, number in family and age), preferences for strategies to protect open space and recreation resources in the community, visitation patterns for local resources and information about needed expansion and/or provision of recreation opportunities. A copy of the survey instrument is found in Appendix A.

A random telephone survey was utilized for this project for several reasons. First, it generally

Table 1. — Dates and Totals of Phone Surveys

Day	Date	Total Calls Made	Total Surveys Completed	% Response
Sun	11/04/01	66	24	36.4%
Mon	11/05/01	98	26	26.5%
Tues	11/06/01	110	30	27.3%
Wed	11/07/01	110	31	28.2%
Sun	11/11/01	77	27	35.1%
Mon	11/12/01	73	27	37.0%
Tues	11/13/01	249	57	22.9%
Wed	11/14/01	109	29	26.6%
GRAND TOTALS		892	251	30.0%

provides a fast and efficient way to gather information. Second, other than staffing expenses, it is inexpensive; the Westfield State College Foundation provided the telephones and the College paid for the telephone access. Thirdly, a two-way exchange of information can take place, should the household need an explanation of a question. The disadvantage with telephone surveys is that households without telephones or with unlisted numbers are excluded from the survey. Thus, one could call this survey a stratified (by listed residential telephone numbers) random sample.

The Southwick Open Space Committee and WSC notified the press of the impending survey to alert the public of the project. All in all, nearly 900 phone calls were made with 251 surveys completed. This yields a respectable 30.0% response rate. See Table 1 for the sampling dates and number of completed surveys.

Given the population of Southwick is 8,835 residents and 3,318 households, (2000 Census: <http://www.census.gov>) the 892 total calls made represent a 26.8% attempt rate of contacting the residents of Southwick. Further the sample size of 251 represents an overall sample of 7.6% of the population. Generally samples in excess of 3% have been found to be representative of urban populations.

Results

In this section of the report a summary of key responses, question by question will be found. Again, the reader is directed to the survey instrument found in Appendix A for the wording of the questions.

Residency

The first question on the survey asked the respondent how long they have lived in Southwick. The minimum amount of time any given participant lived in Southwick was one month, while the longest amount of time being 75 years. The mean was 18.7 years.

Importance of Land Use Strategies

In the second question, households were asked to rank the importance of four land use strategies on a 1 to 5 scale. The four strategies are 1.) preserving farmland, 2.) preserving places of historical value, 3.) conserving land, natural and open spaces, and 4.) creating new or expanding current recreational areas.

Preserving farmland yielded a 'most important' response from 125 households (49.8%). In the preserving historical places strategy, 120 households (47.8%) specified that this is most important. For conserving land, natural and open space areas, 154 households (61.4%) showed that this is most important. The last strategy, creating new or expanding current recreational areas, 65 households (25.9%) felt that this is most important. Thus conserving land, natural and open space is the most important factor land use strategy for the community.

Growth

The next question examined the type of growth desired by the people of Southwick. The participants were asked to indicate their preference (yes or no) about five types of growth: residential, conservation and open space acquisition, business/commercial, industrial/manufacturing, and no growth at all.

Southwick Citizens were most receptive to growth in the area of Conservation and Open Space Lands (90.8%), and Business and Commercial development (58.3%). The least interest in growth was found in the categories of Residential (39%), Industry/Manufacturing (38.3%) and No Growth (32.4%). Note also, that the residents uniformly supported the preference for Growth in Conservation and Open Space; a standard deviation of 0.29 indicates this wide support. The remaining growth strategies yield higher standard deviations (e.g., 0.46+) indicating greater variation in the responses.

Table 2. — Annual Visitation Patterns to Southwick's Resources

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Public Schools	243	0	365	39.35	73.013
Congamond Lakes	245	0	365	34.70	93.502
Southwick Rec. Center	244	0	700	17.36	66.440
Boys & Girls Club	244	0	255	6.79	30.793
Golf Courses	245	0	200	4.96	17.519
Granville Gorge	245	0	365	4.93	27.825
New Town Beach	245	0	365	2.86	23.686
Old Town Beach	244	0	12	.52	1.836

To Preserve Open Space

The fourth question asked households what they would do in order to preserve the open space in Southwick. Six statements were presented in which the respondent would answer yes or no.

A majority of residents support the notion of Strengthening Zoning Laws in the Community. Next, citizens favor land acquisition as a mean to preserve open spaces. The four remaining strategies were equally approved and each received an approximate 50 percent approval. For the details, while 206 households (82.1%) are in favor of strengthening zoning/development restrictions on wetlands and floodplains and 179 households (71.3%) supported land acquisitions, only 122 households (48.6%) would sell and/or donate land to the town. Donating money or increasing taxes to preserve open spaces were options favored by only 51.8% and 37.5%, respective. The last statement refers to the creation of real estates sales tax to establish a land bank. The results indicated that 132 households (52.6%) are in favor of the creation of this type of real estate sales tax. Coincidentally, the acceptance of the real estate tax in our survey mirrors the election results (51.9%).

Public or Private Recreational Facilities

This particular question addressed how many times each participant and their families have attended the given recreational areas within the last year. Out of all the possible choices, public schools had the most visitors, with a mean of 39.35 visits per

Southwick's Open Space

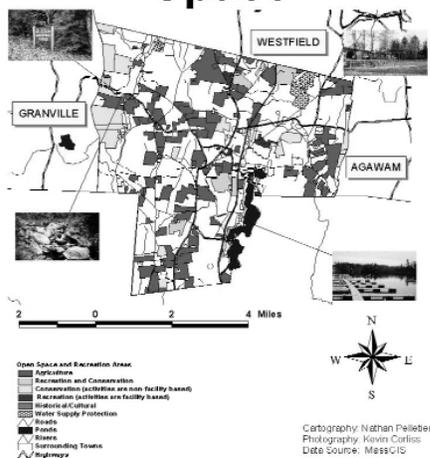


Figure 2. Southwick's Open Space.

year, whereas the Old Town Beach received the least visitors, with a mean of .52 visits per year. Table 2 summarizes the visitation patterns. A map of the protected open space lands in Southwick is found in Figure 2.

Quality of Life

In question number six respondents were asked to rate eight specified Quality of Life conditions as good, fair or poor. On average, Southwick citizens ranked the living conditions as fair or better. To get a sense of how citizens favor conditions, the majority (mode) replies are listed below.

One hundred and eleven households (44.2%) rated housing costs as fair. In the case of housing conditions, 142 households (56.6%) rated the condition as good. A majority of households (146 or 58.2%) rated the conditions of parks/playgrounds as good. And the vast majority of households (213 or 84.9%) rated the police service as good. Regarding the question of condition of streets, 115 households (45.8%) rated the condition as good. Public Schools had 147 households (58.6%) that rated the schools as good. For fire protection, 198 households (78.9%) rated the protection as good. Lastly, the category of shopping facilities had 98 households (39.0%) who rated the facilities as good and 99 households (39.4%) who rated the shopping opportunities as fair. As one will see, the majority of citizens feel the services are good in the Town, while for housing costs and shopping opportunities, the citizens rank them as only fair. Given the steadily

increasing costs of homes in the region, no further exploration in this area is warranted.

Conservation Land Use

The seventh question pertained to the manner in which Southwick's conservation land should be used. The respondents were requested to answer yes or no to three ways in which the land should be used: 1) keep in a natural state, 2) develop as a passive recreational area, and 3) develop as an active recreational area. The surveyors also solicited other possible uses for the conservation land.

A majority of Southwick residents or 216 households (86.1%) agreed that the land should be kept in its natural state. There are 187 households (74.5%) who believe that land should be developed as passive recreational areas. Finally, the last type of land use strategy asked if people preferred the land to be developed as active recreational areas. Only 98 households (39%) favored this type of development. It is apparent that the citizens do not favor active recreation development.

Expansion of Recreational Facilities

This particular question asked the household if they favored the expansion or development of the 15 specified recreational facilities. The top five facilities that the participants wanted to see expanded or developed are listed next. The facility of most concern is the bicycle trail. A clear majority or 199 households (79.3%) felt the town needed to expand/develop the trail. Nature trails followed with 195 households (77.7%). The third facility is one that supports art/cultural events, with 171 households (68.1%) in favor of expanding/developing this opportunity. The fourth facility that is favorable for expansion is that of parks, with 160 households (63.7%). Finally, picnic areas came in fifth, with 145 households (57.8%) wishing for expansion or development. The survey respondents were able to suggest additional facility development and recommended a public pool and roller blade/skate board opportunities in the community.

Household

Our ninth question, how many people live in your household, yielded the following results. The maximum is 24 people per household, minimum is 1 person, and the average is about 3 people per household.

Ages of Household Members

The last question of the survey sought to find out the distribution of the families by age. It is best to provide data from the 2000 Census. The Median age is 37.9, with 20.8% of the Southwick citizens in the 35-44 year bracket. Other demographics provided by the Census indicate the racial makeup (97.4% white), occupied housing units is 3,318 (93.9%), owner occupied housing 2,699 (81.3%) and the youth of Southwick (14 years and under) make up 21.6% of the population.

Discussion

In sum, one could describe the citizens of Southwick in the following manner. Citizens support a land use strategy that develops new or expanded recreation areas. Growth in this area is also supported, and seconded by some additional business and commercial growth. How recreation and open space is paid for is another matter, for citizens do not support additional taxes, but do support strengthening zoning and to have the Town acquire lands. Visitation patterns are high for the Congamond Lakes and the public school lands, so these areas demand the highest attention. The quality of life is good for the citizens, although some concern for affordable housing and shopping opportunities are evident. Citizens prefer that conservation lands be kept in a natural state, and the town should consider developing a bicycle trail, nature trails, an arts center and the general expansion of parks and picnic areas.

A final interesting statistic is considered. One might expect that citizens would value open space differently based on the longevity of residence. That is, new residents might value recreation and open space opportunities different than long time residents. A statistical test of association Chi-Square was performed on several questions in the survey and found that length of residency did not matter in valuing open space issue in the community. Therefore, one could conclude these issues are valued uniformly by all citizens in Southwick.

What is the next step? Given the recent acceptance of the CPA by the citizens of Southwick, we must wait until the taxes are collected for the second half of 2003. Once the revenue and matching funds are obtained, one will hope that this report will serve as a guideline for expenditures in Open Space and Recreation opportunities in the community. Thus, time will tell regarding the usefulness of this report. In either case, the CPA is a low cost funding opportunity to protect open space lands in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

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Contains articles presented at the 2003 Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium. Contents cover planning issues, communications and information, management presentations, service quality and outdoor recreation, recreation behavior, founders' forum, featured posters, tourism and the community, specialized recreation, recreation and the community, management issues in outdoor recreation, meanings and places, constraints, modeling, recreation users, water-based recreation, and recreation marketing.

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