

Town of Wethersfield

Criteria for the Acquisition of Open Space

The Town of Wethersfield is a highly developed town with little remaining open space and wishes to preserve, protect, enhance and acquire open space. Generally, open space is considered to be land that is free from intense development, and where the natural or cultural characteristics of the landscape are predominant. The Plan of Conservation and Development identifies the existing town-owned open space and sets forth the goals and objectives for the acquisition of additional open space. The Town of Wethersfield Code, in accordance with Section 7-131r of the Connecticut General Statutes, established a Land Acquisition Fund for the purpose of acquiring additional open space. (See section 15 of the Town Code).

Purpose of Open Space Selection Criteria

The Town wishes to establish open space selection criteria for the orderly acquisition of open space. The criteria should conform with the Town's Plan of Conservation and Development, the Connecticut Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (established pursuant to C.G.S. §§7-131d to 7-131k, inclusive), and the open space corridor (Greenways) program established pursuant to Public Act 95-335. In addition, the selection criteria should take into account The Recreation and Natural Heritage Program, as amended by Public Act 98-157. Also, the state Department of Environmental Protection established The Connecticut Outdoor Recreation Fund to provide grants to municipalities for up to 40% of their costs to acquire or protect land for recreational or conservation activities.

Existing State Criteria

The Town should conform its open space acquisition criteria to existing state criteria in order to avoid conflict with existing statutes and regulations and to enhance the approvability of potential applications for state grants available for the acquisition of open space.

The State has established the following criteria for open space:

1. protects land identified as being especially valuable for recreation, forestry, fishing, conservation of wildlife or natural resources;
2. protects land which includes or contributes to a prime natural feature of the landscape
3. protects habitat for native plant or animal species listed as threatened or endangered or of special concern;
4. protects a relatively undisturbed outstanding example of a native ecological community that is now uncommon;
5. enhances and conserves water quality
6. preserves local agricultural heritage

The State defines a greenway as open space corridor that:

1. may protect natural resources, preserve scenic landscapes and historical resources or offer opportunities for recreation or nonmotorized transportation
2. may connect existing protected areas and provide access to the outdoors
3. may be located along a defining natural feature, such as a waterway, along a man-made corridor, including an unused right-of-way, traditional trail routes or historic barge canals or
4. may be a greenspace along a highway or around a village.

Proposed Criteria for the Town of Wethersfield

Open space serves various functions and values. In light of Wethersfield's current state of advanced development, agrarian heritage and historical context, the Town must discern which of these functions have the greatest merit. These functions and values cover a broad range, from providing land for public recreational activities, to less tangible functions such as enhancing appreciation of the natural world. The Town may wish to conduct an open space site walk of certain parcels to determine their environmental functions and values.

Open space generally is less costly to the Town. Property taxes generally do not generate enough revenue to pay for costly services, especially in the case of residential properties. Thus one important benefit of preserving and acquiring open space is the avoidance of future expenses to the Town.

This document is a dynamic one, intended to suit a changing community. Not all properties are available for purchase at the same time. Thus, the opportunity for a specific acquisition could be lost. Priority must be given to specific properties that meet the criteria when they become, or are about to become, available for purchase. It is recognized that these criteria may be subject to differing interpretations depending on the nature and circumstances of various opportunities for the acquisition of open space. Any particular criterion may receive more or less weight depending on a variety of factors.

The following important open space functions and other strategic aspects should be considered in identifying high priority lands for acquisition. The five criteria below are set forth in order of their intrinsic significance relative to each other:

1. Avoidance of Town Services

Open space demands very few Town services commonly provided to developed lands. Generally, "land increases in value when it is developed - thereby adding taxable value to the town's tax base. However, the development usually requires more town services - thereby increasing the budget." See *The Effects of Development and Land Conservation on Property Taxes in Connecticut Towns* (Ad Hoc Associates, May 1995). In many cases, especially in the case of residential properties, the cost of required Town services exceeds the revenue generated through taxes. *Id.*

2. Natural Resource Protection

Open space functions to preserve the various habitats within the Town of Wethersfield as well as provide a natural tool to maintain or improve the quality of surface waters and ground water. Many of the open space areas in town also provide flood control.

a. Natural Systems Preservation

Open space lands can provide important habitat for plant and animal species whose habitat areas are decreasing due possibly to conversion of land to residential, commercial or industrial use.

b. Surface Water Quality Protection

Open lands contribute greatly to maintaining the quality of surface waters in the community. The natural vegetative cover on undisturbed land shields the soil against the eroding impacts of rainfall, holding the soil in place and protecting against washing of soil into water bodies. Natural vegetative cover promotes infiltration of rain and snowmelt into the ground, providing protection against flooding and wide swings in surface water flow that disturb stream systems.

c. Flood Control

By promoting infiltration of rain and snowmelt into the ground, natural land helps protect against flooding. Flood prone lands adjacent to water bodies provide storage volume for floodwaters. The extensive placement of fill in the floodplain diminishes the water storage capacity of the floodplain, thereby exacerbating flooding.

d. Maintenance of Groundwater Systems

By encouraging infiltration of precipitation into the soil, natural land cover promotes replenishment of natural groundwater supplies. Groundwater systems in turn have an impact on surface water systems. Many wetland areas are fed by groundwater supplies. Groundwater seeps slowly from springs into the surface water system, helping maintain year-round flow to water bodies

3. Wethersfield's Heritage

As the oldest town in Connecticut, Wethersfield is known for its agrarian heritage and provides bountiful opportunities for education at well-known historical and cultural sites throughout town. Some of these sites are located in or near open spaces.

a. Farmland Preservation/Forestry Base

Wethersfield has an important agrarian heritage. While the most important function of agricultural land is its role in sustaining the human population through food production, it also contributes greatly to the visual qualities of the community. It also provides a livelihood and a lifestyle for a declining number of farm families. Americans have traditionally placed a high value on maintaining the viability of family farms and the agrarian values sustained by family farms.

b. Historic/Cultural Resource Protection

There are specific open space sites in the Town with historical or other cultural importance that merits their retention as open space.

c. Education Enrichment

Open lands provide opportunities for learning more about our natural surroundings and history.

4. Quality of Life

Open space contributes to the quality of life in Town by providing a buffer between urban and less developed areas, enhancing property values, and adding to the enjoyment of commercial or high density residential areas.

a. Aesthetic Quality Preservation

Natural lands have an inherent attractiveness and value to many people. Experiencing natural surroundings is an important activity enjoyed by many, including many residents in the Town who value living in relatively natural surroundings. Certain features of the cultural landscape are also valued by many, such as meadows, marsh, bogs, wetlands, agricultural barns, animal pastures and paddocks, and even maintained residential lawns.

b. Maintain a Buffer between Urban and Less Developed Areas

Open space provides a buffer between urban infrastructure and residential neighborhoods. Open space land can avoid the gradual loss of community identity that results from a sprawling development pattern.

c. Property Value Enhancement

Proximity to open space is an important criterion that affects the choice of residence location for many people.

d. Commercial or High Density Residential Areas

Open space adds to the character, value and aesthetic quality of commercial or high-density residential areas. Thus, areas suitable for development as pocket parks, public plazas and the like may improve quality of life provide rather than serve traditional open space functions and values.

5. Strategic Planning for Future Open Space Acquisition

Practical decision making enters into every discussion regarding the potential acquisition of open space, and these criteria recognize the value of acquiring certain parcels of open space as part of an overall strategy.

a. Proximity or Contiguity to Open Space/Strategic Value

Location of property within a Greenway Corridor or proximity or contiguity to other open space enhances the value of otherwise lower functioning open space. Likewise, open space that may have little, if any, inherent function or value, may provide access to other open space, public access areas or easements. In addition, open space with less inherent values and functions may later be sold to generate resources for the later acquisition of more valuable open space.

b. Vulnerability to Development

Some lands are subject to federal, state or local regulatory programs designed to protect wetlands, stream channels, wildlife or other environmental features, while other lands are not subject to any such regulatory protection.

6. Recreation Opportunities

Natural lands are a valuable recreational resource for such activities as hiking, cross country skiing, hunting, bicycling, bird watching, horseback riding and others. While less natural in character, parks that are improved with playground and sports fields may still retain some attractive natural features.

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