

VI. Open Space and Recreation

A. Overview

Belchertown contains the largest number of forested acres within any of the area's municipalities. Belchertown's 20,000 acres of forest land and over 7,000 acres of agricultural land represent an economic, environmental, and aesthetic resource for a region becoming increasingly suburbanized.

Belchertown has experienced the highest population growth in the Pioneer Valley. This growth was 22.6% from 1990 to 2000 with an additional 27% increase from 1980 to 1990. Projections indicate similar growth in the '00s. 50% of the current residents have lived in town less than ten years: 25% of the current residents have lived in town less than five years. This rate of development has placed stress on natural resources. Protected open space is needed to protect these resources as well as provide active and passive recreation, and maintain a rural character.

This section represents a summary of the 2007 Open Space and Recreation Plan Update, to show how the Conservation Commission's plan fits the Community Plan. For this section, "Open Space" means land that is state and municipally-owned land, wetland, owned by private sport club, or is a private parcel held under Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B. This does not mean that this land may not be developed, as Chapter 61 lands may be developed at any time.

B. Goals and Policies

The following policies were developed to work toward the three overall goals for the town determined during the community vision phase of the community plan project.

Goal 1: To maintain Belchertown's rural New England look and feel.

Policies related to open space and recreation for Goal 1:

- Identify and protect open spaces, scenic, cultural and natural features of special significance to the community
- Preserve Belchertown's visual character, with a focus on town center and open space
- Establish economic incentives and strategies to promote open space conservation
- Identify, prioritize, and work to conserve key landscape views
- Avoid degradation of natural resources
- Develop programs for acquiring conservation and recreation areas through donation, purchase, or other appropriate means
- Preserve and protect all water bodies, ensuring their purity, cleanliness, and accessibility
- Develop programs to enhance public use of town-owned lands
- Manage and promote appropriate use of public lands
- Develop and manage recreation resources for all residents of Belchertown.
- Maintain the town common and its immediate surroundings as the heart of town.
- Publicize public open space and recreation facilities
- Promotion of active recreation
- Promotion of passive recreational opportunities for all user groups

Goal 2: Manage residential construction to increase benefits to the community while lessening potential negative effects.

Policies related to open space and recreation for Goal 2:

- Guide residential development to retain open space and incorporate recreational features
- Protect natural resources and rural character through growth management strategies
- Encourage planned residential development that incorporates open space preservation and other amenities
- The design of proposed developments should protect both historic and archaeological sites, and unique natural and cultural features and resources
- Encourage recreational facilities in different areas of town

Goal 3: Evaluate and achieve business development that contributes to town life and mitigate potential negative effects.

Policies related to open space and recreation for Goal 3:

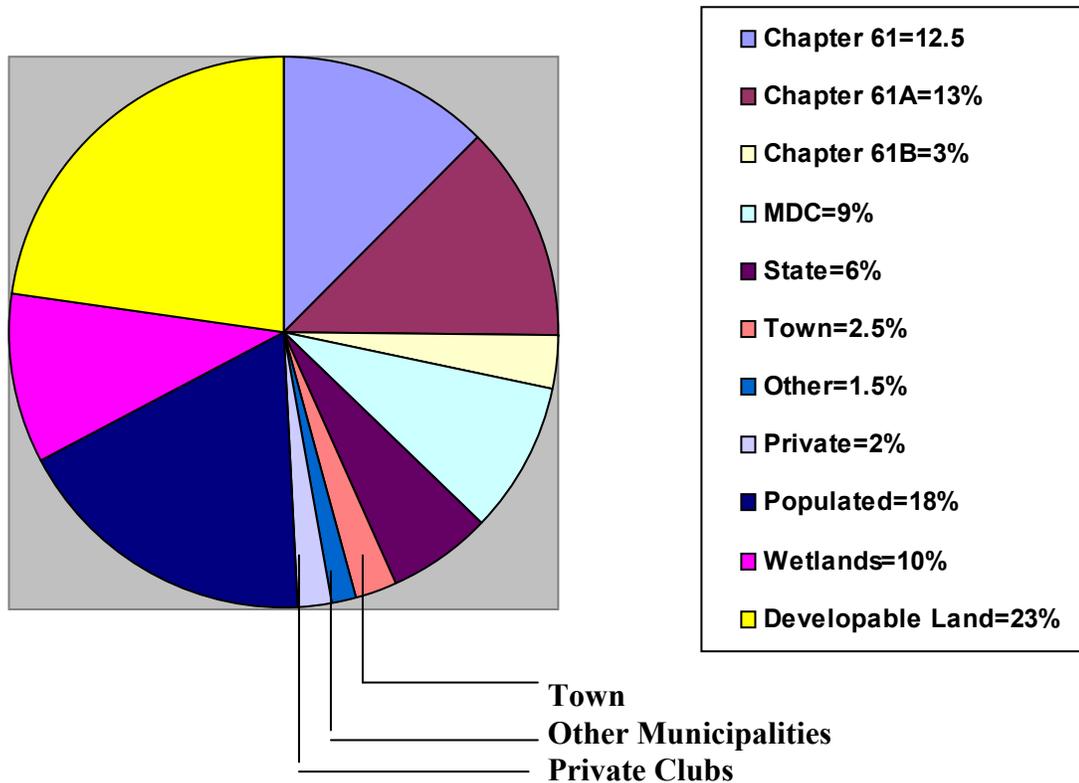
- Identify recreational businesses that support the maintenance of open space, examples are fishing, hunting, horse riding, and cross-country sports, including skiing, snowmobiling, and cycling
- Support agriculture and forestry industries
- Support research businesses that result in preserved open space, such as horticultural research
- Encourage open space retention in business site plans and subdivisions

C. Inventory

Present Land Use in Belchertown

Unbuilt land in Belchertown occupies approximately three quarters of the total land area of the town. 53.5%, (18,048 acres) of Belchertown's land area that could be developed at any time.

Figure 35: Present Land Use in Belchertown



Source: 2002 Open Space and Recreation Plan Update; L. Connolly, Belchertown Conservation Administrator

INVENTORY OF TOWN-OWNED CONSERVATION LANDS AND RECREATION LANDS:

CONSERVATION AREAS

1. Cold Spring School

Cold Spring Conservation Area, situated behind the Cold Spring School on South Main Street, is home to a two-acre nature loop trail. The trail's small size and wide array of plant species affords educators a unique classroom and provides a variety of passive to active recreational opportunities.

Handicapped accessibility to, and parking for, the area is limited because there is a low area adjacent to the only potential car drop-off area. Although it would be possible to fill and level off the area, it would require extensive construction and installation of a railing and ramp. However, because of its central location and relatively flat trails, it is a priority for the town, particularly for senior citizen use.

2. Arcadia Bog

The Arcadia Spruce Bog Conservation Area, accessible via Town Beach Road, is one of the finest examples of a glacial kettle bog in Western Massachusetts. Noted for its uncommon and unusual botanical and zoological resources, human activity is restricted. Because this area's main value is as a unique vegetative community and habitat, no plans are proposed to provide public access to this area.

3. Jabish Brook Conservation Area

Jabish Brook Conservation Area is entirely forested. It is centered on upper Jabish Brook, a pristine stream that proceeds through the length of Belchertown to meet the Swift River. The land slopes up

eastward toward Quabbin Reservoir. There is a well-developed set of trails and a footbridge crossing the brook. The area exhibits a unique variety of wildflower habitats.

Jabish Brook has potential for handicapped accessibility to an overlook area near the entrance for picnicking and visual amenity. Also, an area is possible for handicapped-accessible parking. The steep slope leading to the stream limits access to the rest of the property.

4. Wentworth Property

The Wentworth property was also purchased by the town with Aquifer Land Acquisition funding and is located off Route 9 across from Holland Glen. A portion of the Metacomet/Monadnock Trail traverses this property. An alternative access is located on Federal Street.

Access from Route 9 exhibits a flat area near the road - where a possible pullover could be located. However, this entrance is very noisy and access to the M/M trail is very steep. At another location, there is a 100 foot long wooded road, which includes a possible turn-around, descending gradually to the brook. This area is very quiet and deserves priority status for handicap accessibility improvements. Access to this area from Federal Street is swampy around the entrance, but there may be possible access from the other side of the brook.

5. Warner Brook Conservation Area

This is a large, unimproved parcel with no improved public access. Near the Quabbin Reservation, this area is largely forested wetland with a stream running through it. This area is a low priority for town expenditures to provide accessibility to disabled persons.

Figure 36:

STATE-OWNED LAND	DESCRIPTION
Quabbin Reservoir	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3000 forested acres-largest tract • Eastern border of town protecting drinking water for greater Boston area • Hiking allowed • Controlled by Mass. Dept. of Conservation and Recreation
Swift River Wildlife Management Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 916 acres, mostly forested • Contiguous to Quabbin Reservoir land • Hiking & fishing allowed
McLaughlin Fish Hatchery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 acres • Operated by the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Wildlife
University of Massachusetts Horticultural Research Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 127 acres, nearly all orchard • Contiguous to Swift River Wildlife Management Area • Owned by UMass

Cadwell Memorial Forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 acres-smallest parcel • Is part of a much larger property that is otherwise in Pelham • Owned by UMass
Holyoke Range State Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35 acres • Is a small part of this state park, which is otherwise in Granby, Amherst, Hadley, and South Hadley • Hiking allowed; M&M trail • Department of Environmental Management
New England Small Farm Institute - lessee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 400 acres • Demonstration farm • Central area of town • Long term lease w/approx 20 yrs remaining with a process for renewal. • Owned by Mass Dept of Food and Ag

6. Topping Farm Conservation Area

This 277-acre property is located in the northwest section of the town. It was purchased primarily because of its significance as aquifer protection land, benefiting the towns of Amherst, Pelham, and Belchertown. Hop Brook and its adjacent wetland bisect a major portion of the property. They recharge a major aquifer that underlies Lawrence Swamp and serves as a public water source for Belchertown and Amherst. A small parking lot is located on Goodell Street for public access and old logging roads traverse the property.

7. Reed Conservation Area

This is a 93-acre property in the far north of town contiguous to City of Springfield watershed, including Knight's Pond, the source of Jabish Brook. It is near Cadwell Memorial Forest and Quabbin. Handicapped access is a priority for this area. There are some wood roads on the property.

8. Scarborough Brook Conservation Area

This is the most recent acquisition for conservation, purchased in 2007. This site is the headwaters of Scarborough Brook. It contains It is the site of a former shooting and fishing club, the Pelham Country Club. It was purchased via the town's exercise of a Chapter 61B assignment. There are two ponds and several fields. The rest of the land is wooded with many large oaks, beech, and pines. This is a critical parcel in connecting the Holyoke Range to Quabbin.

9. Old Apple Orchard Conservation Area

This is a 53-acre property at the eastern end of the Holyoke Range. This was a gift to the town from the developer of Emily Lane, Partyka Partners, LP. This conservation area has a substantial beaver bog and hiking trails linking to the Holyoke Range. There is public parking at the end of Emily Lane.

RECREATION AREAS:

1. Old Town Hall

This building along the common is available for basketball and volleyball. The basketball area is not standard, but is an adequate space for informal games and youth leagues. Handicapped accessibility has been improved with the addition of a ramp.

2. Town Beach

The Town Beach is open in July and August. It is on Town Beach Road, on Lake Arcadia.

3. Parsons Field

Parsons Field is a grassy playing field and play area located on Jabish Street within the center of town. A drop off area and handicapped parking spaces can be constructed along Jensen Street. Play equipment is traditional. For accessibility, play equipment must be located elsewhere in the field and additional play equipment is needed.

4. Chestnut Hill Central Recreation Complex

Area 1. This is a large recreational area located at the Chestnut Hill School and includes four tennis courts, two basketball courts, two baseball or softball fields, and one soccer or football field. One handicapped space located within 200 feet of an accessible entrance is designated but it is not van accessible. The surface meets requirements for accessibility. Improvements to telephones, signage, bathrooms, and water fountains are necessary to meet accessibility guidelines.

Area 2. This is the playground area and includes wooden playground equipment. There are no handicapped parking spots, though a drop-off area could easily be constructed as well as an accessible path (though a rail and bridge may be needed). Portions of the playground were specifically designed for persons who are physically challenged.

5. Austin-Gaughan Field

Located near the center of town off George Hannum Road, this area is one of the frequently used playing fields by the town Recreation Department. Presently, 15 parking spaces exist. At least two of these should be designated as handicapped parking. Because the area is at the same level as the parking, there is no need for a ramp and railing. Located adjacent to the town common in the center of town, the town places a high priority on improving this facility to make it accessible to persons with physical disability. Ten parking spots presently exist; two must be made handicapped accessible in order to comply with guidelines, and a ramp has been provided for access at the entrance.

6. Constantino Field

This is off Sargent Street. It is 18 acres; enough area for one baseball diamond, and one soccer field.

Recreation Space and Facilities Tables

Below is a list of space and facilities currently overseen by the Belchertown Recreation Department or available for use by the Belchertown Recreation Department (All are handicapped accessible):

Figure 37:

OUTDOOR FACILITIES

NAME	DESCRIPTION	
Hulmes-Warner Field ("Mini-Fenway")	On state property next to Chestnut Hill.	Land not owned by the Town of Belchertown. Use Agreement with state.

		Belchertown Little League.
Chestnut Hill Fields	All fields, tennis court and basketball courts (2)	Managed by Recreation Dept.
Austin-Gaughan Field	Softball diamond	Managed by Recreation Dept.
Parsons Field	One softball and one baseball diamond	Managed by Recreation Dept.
Constantino Field	18.06 acres-mostly wetlands, 1 diamond, 1 soccer field	Managed by Recreation Dept.
Swift River Elementary	Lower small soccer fields	Managed by Recreation Dept.
Belchertown Middle School (old high school)	Soccer field and baseball diamond	Limited availability. Managed by School Dept.
Protected Park Land	Land next to middle school to replace land from construction of Swift River School.	
Belchertown High School	Baseball, softball, tennis, soccer, football, track.	Terms for public use to be negotiated with the School Department.
Town Beach	Located on Lake Arcadia	Managed by Recreation Dept.

INDOOR FACILITIES

NAME	DESCRIPTION	AVAILABILITY
CHCS Pool	Indoor pool located in Chestnut Hill Community School	Managed by Recreation Dept.
CHCS Gym	Indoor gym located in Chestnut Hill Community School	Managed by Recreation Dept after school, weekends and school vacation times
Old Town Hall	Small indoor gym	Managed by Recreation Dept
Jabish Brook Middle School (old high school)	Indoor gym	Very limited availability. Managed by School Dept.
Belchertown High School	Includes gym, training rooms, walking track, locker room.	Managed by School Dept. Public use to be negotiated with the Recreation Department.
Recreation Office	Conference room and staff offices, storage areas	Managed by Recreation Dept.
Teen Center	Game room, sitting room, kitchen, office, study & computer rooms	Managed by Recreation Dept.

Memo: from Robert Opalenik, Recreation Director (1/31/02), other sources.

Figure 38:

PRIVATELY OWNED SPORTS CLUBS

NAME	DESCRIPTION	PRIMARY USE
Fairview Fish and Game Club	20 acres on west border.	Shooting range.
Swift River Sports Club	Southern part of town, one mile stretches on Swift River. Contiguous to state-owned Wildlife Management Area.	Shooting range, club house.
Mill Valley Country Club	38 acres located centrally. Bordered on three sides by government-owned land.	18 hole golf course and clubhouse.

D. Analysis

The following data are taken from the Belchertown Master Plan Survey results of 2000, as it pertains to Open Space and Recreation in Belchertown.

- The average number of years respondent lived in Belchertown was 17.3
- The top three areas for protecting open space were the town common, town lakes, and rivers and streams

- The top three types of recreational facilities were Quabbin Reservoir access, town parks, and town playgrounds
- The top three reasons to live in Belchertown were low crime rate, privacy, and rural small town atmosphere. (60.3% of the respondents described Belchertown as a suburb/bedroom community, although respondents were equally split on the character they would like to see for Belchertown 15 years from now -- 42.1% said small rural town, while 42.4% said suburb/bedroom community.)
- The top three issues of importance in order were protecting its natural environment, protect its environmental quality, and preserve the rural elements of the town
- 71.6% of the respondents were married and more than 50% had children living at home, which has implications for recreation demand

The following section will attempt to address these issues as prioritized by the members in the community who responded. (*Implications for action are italicized*)

Belchertown has a high number of families with children. They may have moved to the community because of its rural look and feel, but this creates a high demand for facilities. Although respondents describe the town as a bedroom community, they hope to retain as much of its rural character as possible. In planning for this, we need to keep in mind the most important reason people found to live in Belchertown, which is the low crime rate, followed closely by privacy. Both of these go hand in hand with small town atmosphere. These issues can be addressed in the type of growth we encourage, and the use of Smart Growth techniques when planning for both residential and business development.

Town Common: 78% of the survey respondents strongly supported protecting the open space of the town common. It also supports a traditional New England character residents hope to maintain. As businesses and residential development seek to locate closer to the heart of town, more requests will be made for locations around the town common. *The town should consider reviewing the present zoning in this area to determine if preserving its open space is not in conflict with the vision decided upon for business around the common.*

The town has a significant number of recreational areas located close to the town center but almost none near town borders. With the enormous geographic region of the town, and acknowledging there are already significant residential developments near town borders, we should consider establishing recreational fields in these areas. Privately-held clubs own a significant amount of land adjacent to state-owned land on the borders of town. Presently, they provide a buffer for the potential extension of wildlife habitats. These clubs could decide to sell their land for development at any time. *It is important for the town to negotiate options on these lands to conserve open space and provide for recreation to these outlying communities.*

Belchertown has an active recreation department with 2,700 children in the sports programs. Town facilities are used to their maximum capacity, but still activities must be canceled or rescheduled for lack of space. *The next five years show a need for recreation fields totaling 13 acres of flat dry terrain. A recreation building with room for additional gym space, as well as administration space, is considered a high priority.*

Passive recreation is often conducted at Quabbin Reservoir and the town beach. The town should have other sites for passive recreation for when Quabbin is not available, for example, when security is tightened. The Piper Farm is located in the center of town and is not used, though nature trails could be easily built. There is also room for at least one playing field on this property. With a purchase or lease of an abutting property, up to three fields could be built, along with parking, picnic areas, toilets, and trails. *This property should be a priority for recreational development.*

E. Conclusion

Residents of Belchertown have had the good fortune of enjoying open space without the concerns for preservation until recently. Open space affords high quality of life for the town’s residents by providing sanctuary from human activities, privacy and quiet for homes, and by maintaining and supplying the natural resources to the community needs, such as clean air, clean water, timber, and wildlife. The existing open space of Belchertown is quickly being fragmented and lost to development without regard for the community’s needs. It is imperative that the town realize and plan for the preservation of as much open space as possible while still allowing the necessary growth to meet the economic and residential needs of the community. The town should consider designating regions for preservation and devise means for acquiring and preserving land. In addition, developing a model plan of enhancing subdivision value through conservation design may provide a working example for desired development in the future.

F. Implementation Actions

I.D.	Action	When Initiate	*Leadership [and others who should be involved]
OSR-1	Develop a review process for proposed developments adjacent to preserved conservation land to prevent adverse impact to that land and maximize the overall area of contiguous open space.		*Planning Board [Conservation Comm]
OSR-2	Establish a system of bikeways and hiking trails (separate from roadways if possible) connecting the far ends of town to recreation areas and other public facilities.		*Planning Board [DPW, BoS]
OSR-3	Develop a plan for targeting parcels, portions of parcels, development rights, and easements for acquisition.		*Planning Board [Conservation Comm, BoS]
OSR-4	Initiate a street tree survey, and establish review process for protection of trees in street tree belt.		*DPW
OSR-5	Upgrade existing recreational facilities & expand the number of new facilities to accommodate the growth in organized recreational activities. (i.e. water fountains, restroom facilities @ recreation fields.)		*DPW
OSR-6	Form a study committee to develop methods for promoting eco-tourism. Consider working with Dept of Fish & Wildlife to expand Swift River’s year round “fly fishing only-catch and release” area south to Cold Spring Road. Consider working with state & non-profit conservation groups to preserve land M & M Trail passes through		*BoS [Conservation Commission]
OSR-7	Establish a standard signage system, map, and guidebook to identify the access and uses to town and state owned land.		*Conservation Commission [Library]
OSR-8	Establish a Tree & Park Division of the DPW for the expressed maintenance of all town owned parkland,		*BoS [Finance Committee, DPW]

	conservation land, natural resource areas, and publicly owned trees.		
OSR-9	Develop educational brochures and hold seminars for landowners who want to preserve their land.		*Conservation Commission [Planning Board, Library]
OSR-10	Provide accessibility to trails for all population groups at Cold Spring, portions of Jabish Brook Conservation area, Wentworth property and Piper Farm when feasible.		*DPW [Conservation Commission]
OSR-11	Consider opening Piper Farm for passive/educational recreation		BoS, [Conservation Commission]
OSR-12	Consider negotiating for an option on lands presently held by sports clubs to conserve open space & provide for recreation in outlying areas		*Conservation Commission [BoS]
OSR-13	Appoint a study committee to examine and recommend options for meeting the projected needs for more sports field and a recreation building with needed gym space and administration space.		*Recreation [BoS]