

SECTION 2: INTRODUCTION

A. Statement of Purpose

North Brookfield, like many other small towns in Central Massachusetts, has experienced a slow but steady decline in open space. Fortunately, we have not experienced the levels of development pressure our more suburban neighbors have. Much of North Brookfield retains its rural character and large parcels of open space still exist. This "rural character" holds great value to the residents of Town. The future value stems from the preservation of ecologically sensitive natural resources and environments, protection of scenic and cultural resources, and opportunities for recreation. These can be found in lands preserved as farmland, as natural areas such as woodlands, meadows, wetlands, and as planned recreation areas, which can range from expansive parklands to the smallest pockets of downtown greenery. Paradoxically, the perceived value of this asset is the biggest threat to its own existence: the desirability of owning a home in a rural setting will continue the trend of development of open space, and diminish the "rural character" residents of North Brookfield value so highly.

The old philosophy that uncontrolled growth is good for the community has proven false. One common claim made is that residential development increases the local tax base, thereby lowering property taxes. In actuality, residential development costs more than the income it produces. On average, residential land use requires \$1.15 in town services for each \$1.00 in tax revenue; these services include education and social programs, public health and safety, public works, and even local government. Conversely, farm and forestland requires only \$0.34 in services for each \$1.00 of revenue, leaving \$0.66 to offset other municipal expenses. At first glance, industrial/ commercial land use appears to create a similar surplus (requiring \$0.42 in services for each \$1.00 of revenue). However, if a local workforce, with the necessary skills to fill newly created jobs is not available, new residential development (with associated costs) may be required to house new residents that are attracted by employment opportunities.

By understanding the *net* impact of our various land uses, we can reevaluate the notion that natural resources *must* be converted to other land uses to ensure economic stability, and that residential development leads to lower taxes. In reality, supporting and preserving our valuable open space is simply a sound community investment, especially in a town, which values its "rural character" so highly.

This document is designed as a tool to help guide North Brookfield's future by assessing its needs, so as to achieve a balance between the benefits of economic development and environmental protection. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts requires that each municipality file an Open Space and Recreation Plan, current within five years and approved by the Division of Conservation Services, to be eligible for State or federal funds offered through the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. This document is intended to meet that requirement.

B. Planning Process and Public Participation

This plan represents the collected effort of various stakeholders throughout North Brookfield who came together to identify our needs, establish goals and develop strategies to meet North Brookfield's recreation, conservation, open space and historic preservation needs, to ensure that residents of North Brookfield have the highest possible quality of life.

The Master Plan Committee employed several methods to solicit public participation throughout the planning process. Two community-wide public forums were held, highlighting the work done during a series of regularly scheduled Committee meetings, to gather public input from the citizens of the community and incorporate the comments and suggestions into the final Plan.

Beginning in January 2007 and continuing into the summer, the Committee held a series of regularly scheduled public meetings. These meetings were all advertised public meetings that were open for any and all concerned citizens to attend, including those interested members of other municipal boards and commissions. Throughout the planning process Committee members made an effort to reach out to other boards and commissions by attending their meetings to discuss the purpose and intent of the Plan. The Committee has always made themselves available to respond to citizens', boards' and commissions' questions, comments and concerns regarding the formulation of the Plan and any recommendations.

In an effort to gather as much public input as possible, the Committee designed a Master Plan Survey. This survey was mailed to every North Brookfield household in February of 2006. It was also made available at the Town Clerk's Office, the Town Library and the Senior Center to allow all those interested in expressing their opinion to have the opportunity. The Committee also contacted reporters from the New Leader, a regional newspaper, to provide information about the survey prior to its mailing and to encourage reporters to attend their regular meetings. North Brookfield's planners held a public forum on the evening of 2 May 2007; to discuss the Town's open space and recreation needs with the public. This forum generated much lively discussion and brought forth many valuable ideas and suggestions for the Plan.

The survey and the public forum were useful in identifying the needs and concerns of North Brookfield residents regarding open space and recreation priorities. The results of the survey were used to develop goals, strategies and the associated Five-Year Action Plan contained herein. The Action Plan was also informed by input solicited from other municipal boards and commissions throughout the process. While recognizing the importance of soliciting input upon review of the draft Plan from the various boards and commissions in Town, the Committee firmly believed it was equally vital, if not essential, to involve those boards and commissions in the actual process of developing the Plan itself. Therefore, the Committee made a concerted effort to include all affected boards and commissions, either through the appointment of representatives to the Committee or as active participants in the planning process and development of the various components of the Plan.

The final Plan presented herein represents a culmination of town-wide efforts to bring all stakeholders having a vested interest in the Town's future into the planning process. The resulting document provides a framework for the citizens of North Brookfield to guide the destiny of the Town through future open space and recreation acquisition, projects, initiatives and plans.