

# BERKSHIRE PLANNING TOOLS



*One in a series of "toolbox" items to accompany the Regional Plan for the Berkshires*

**June 2001**

## Open space and recreation plans

### What is an OSRP?

An Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is a town-specific community planning document which defines a town's goals toward protecting and preserving important natural resources and lands for conservation, and maintaining adequate outdoor recreation opportunities. It articulates a local government's vision and should establish a philosophical and practical justification for the protection and preservation of open space and recreation opportunities.

Most importantly, an OSRP provides a framework for implementation. Through the process of crafting an OSRP, communities identify and examine important open space and recreation resources and lay out ways to protect and enjoy them.



The Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services, a state agency under the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, reviews and approves Open Space and Recreation Plans for

five-year intervals. Once approved, towns are eligible to receive grant funds under the Commonwealth's Self-Help and Urban Self-Help Programs as well as the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.

### Why is it important to plan for open space and recreation?

Without planning, the appearance of a community and the quality of life of its residents can be dramatically altered in a short period of time due to random changes in land use. We all know of areas that have undergone suburbanization and its associated impacts.

Few want to live in a community that does not have parks or recreation areas. Yet to provide these for residents, a local government must plan for them. Open space and recreation should be considered as part of the public infrastructure, just like roads, schools and utilities. No community would build a road without establishing the need for it and planning where it should go. The same is true for open space and recreation.

### The OSRP Preparation Process

Open space and recreation planning employs a broad brush approach that touches on many topics such as land use, natural resources, finances, and demographics affecting many local boards and the residents. It is vital that whichever way your community chooses to

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develop and implement an OSRP, be sure there is a multi-discipline focus involving all of the important community stakeholders.

Decisions about how a community prepares an OSRP are made at the local level. Typically, the conservation commission leads the charge, but it could also be the planning board. Conservation commissions are empowered by statute to conduct many of the activities needed for preparing an OSRP such as developing an open space inventory and researching the use of open lands in your community.

Here are some other common approaches:

*Consultant:* A consultant can be hired to direct the planning process from start to finish. BRPC can furnish names of qualified consultants, and can also act as one.

*Town Boards Task Force:* A number of community boards join as equals to carry out specific planning tasks.

*Citizen Advisory Committee:* A committee structured outside of local government, though possibly including officials among its members and possibly receiving financial and staff assistance from the local government.

### **Diving In**

Those spearheading the planning process should seek out the involvement of individuals, agencies and organizations in the community who have responsibility for, or an interest in, the current and future provision of recreation opportunities and the protection of open space and natural resources. A good committee should be made up of the following: officials having responsibility for decisions affecting open space and recreation in the community; officials having responsibility for education, public works and water supply with which coordination is needed for effective operation of a local open space and recreation program; representatives of conservation groups,

historical societies, private recreation providers and recreation users, among others.

Most importantly, public participation must be a component of the planning process. After all, the OSRP is supposed to say what are the open space and recreation needs of local residents. How will you know what these needs are if you do not ask the residents? Public participation should be sought in both the preparation and implementation of the OSRP. Many communities have found that preparing and mailing a survey to all households is a good way to solicit opinions. The methods for encouraging citizen participation, while left to the choice of the community, should insure that all segments of the population are provided opportunities to present their views on open space and recreation concerns.

### **Planning Locally, Thinking Regionally**

The planning process should include a regional approach where appropriate. Since the natural resources that form the basis of an open space system transcend political boundaries, it is important to look beyond town borders. Rivers, forests and mountains are rarely the domain of one local government. Coordinating your OSRP with neighboring local governments, where possible, can assist in accomplishing your goals and be more cost effective. For this reason, the OSRP should seek consistency with the appropriate open space and recreation policies of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission as outlined in the 2000 *Regional Plan for the Berkshires*. This Plan contains numerous open space and recreation policies that pertain to local governments.

### **Components of an OSRP**

The organization of the OSRP and level of detail given to each item are at the discretion of the local government. But, for a plan to be approved by the Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services, it must include 11 required sections, as

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well as a Section 504 evaluation of handicap accessibility at municipally owned recreational facilities. These sections are briefly described below. More detail can be found in the *Open Space Planner's Workbook*, a companion to the 1990 Open Space and Recreation Plan Requirements.

1. *Plan Summary*: This should include a brief summary of the plan's significant findings relative to recreation and open space needs and the actions it proposes.

2. *Introduction*: This section should include a statement of purpose as to why the community is undertaking and OSRP and a discussion of the planning and public participation process.

3. *Community Setting*: This section should touch on the town's regional context, its history, population characteristics, as well as recent and historic growth and development patterns.

4. *Environmental Inventory and Analysis*: This section is reserved for environmental data: geology, soils, topography, landscape character, water resources, and vegetation, as well as fisheries and wildlife, scenic resources, unique environments, and environmental problems. The plan should also provide an assessment of these resources that have potential for providing open space or recreation opportunities. The resource assessment should examine where applicable: opportunities for creation of linear recreation and open space facilities such as trails, bicycle paths, and greenways which link existing recreation and open space sites in an integrated system; opportunities for supporting conservation objectives such as water supply protection, wildlife and rare species protection, protection of rivers, streams and forest lands, farmland preservation and historic preservation; opportunities for supporting community objectives for development and land use, including open space which buffers or defines developed areas, open space which preserves scenic or distinctive landscape features, and open

space with development-limiting characteristics such as floodplains, storm-prone areas and steep slopes; opportunities for additional public access to coastal and inland waters; opportunities for the development of recreation facilities such as ball fields, playgrounds, court sports, swimming pools and golf courses.

5. *Inventory of Lands of Conservation and Recreation Interest*: The section should depict the location and configuration of all existing recreation and open space sites, both public and private, documented in the plan's inventory. The plan should document the existing public and private resources that provide recreation and open space opportunities for the community. The inventory should present a relatively complete catalog of the public and private land and water areas available for recreation or presently protected as open space and of recreation facilities.



6. *Community Goals*: Use this section to describe the planning and public participation process, summarize the community goals for open space and recreation, and review the status of previous OSRP's.

7. *Needs Analysis*: The OSRP should include an analysis of the adequacy of the current open space and recreation system, as documented in the inventory, to satisfy present and projected public recreational demands and desires for open space as established by the local government through the planning process.

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The public participation process and the analysis of inventory and assessment data, compared with the goals, will determine what the communities open space and recreation needs are. These needs must, of course, be balanced with fiscal reality.

8. *Goals and Objectives:* The local government's goals and objectives should be clearly stated and relate to the town's philosophy of open space and recreation. Goals and objectives established in the plan should clearly state the community's philosophy of open space and recreation and respond to identified needs.

9. *Five-Year Action Plan:* An action plan provides direction for the orderly and coordinated implementation of the OSRP. Actions should relate logically to the needs identified in the OSRP and should be based upon its policies. The Action Plan represents the local government's decisions for addressing OSRP needs and goals based on the abilities of the

community and fiscal constraints. The Action Plan should encompass a five-year time period and should be updated to report on progress, make adjustments and include any proposals for new actions.

### **Berkshire Towns with approved or conditionally approved 5-year Open Space and Recreation Plans**

Egremont  
Great Barrington  
Hinsdale  
Lee  
Lenox (under review as of June 2001)  
Mount Washington  
North Adams



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*This publication is one in a series of "toolbox" items to support the Regional Plan for the Berkshires. If you would like to receive additional copies of this or other toolbox items, please contact the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 33 Dunham Mall, Pittsfield, MA 01201 or call (413) 442-1521. Copies of the toolbox items are also available on the web. Visit [www.berkshireplanning.org](http://www.berkshireplanning.org)*

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