

The Role of Open Space Committees: Planning for the Common Good Community Connections, and Environmental Resiliency

Welcoming address given to the audience of the Mass Open Space Conference at Mount Wachusett Community College, Gardner, Massachusetts, on Saturday, April 27, 2019.

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Good Morning Everyone,

Thank you again for being with us today here in the city of Gardner on this beautiful Spring day. Before I get started, I want to give another big thank you to all of the TerraCorps, AmeriCorps members here who helped to make this event possible. Let's give them another round of applause--they worked hard to bring us all together here today.

Well, before I get started with my opening remarks, I just wanted to quickly get a sense for who is here in the room with us today.

- How many of the folks in the room sit on Open Space Committees?
- How many sit on Conservation Commissions?
- How many sit on Agricultural Commissions?
- How many are on the selectboard?
- And how many are conservation or planning professionals?

Great, thank you...

As leaders within within your town who are committed to protecting and stewarding open space, you all know first-hand how important land is to fostering a sense of connectedness within our communities. Open spaces include more than just natural resources; they are spaces that allow for a place of common ownership and communal connections. The benefits that they provide to the general public are not easily measured: They provide people with a space to recreate, allowing people to develop a personal relationship with nature; they also provide a space where people can connect in shared social activities, values, and interests. Whether it is going on a hike with your family and friends, returning to your favorite, perhaps secret, fishing hole year

after year, or enjoying that awe-inspiring scenic vista – the open spaces that we work to protect and steward create a sense of place and belonging for all of us.

Here in Gardner, we are fortunate to have had the opportunity to make great strides toward meeting many of our open space goals and objectives in the past few years. From improving accessibility of our trails to providing meaningful opportunities for nature-based community engagement and learning our open space lands have become a part of our heritage and legacy. One example of this is a wellness trail that we created in collaboration with a local Eagle Scout, Mount Grace Land Trust, and Heywood Hospital. What began as a pollinator garden and wellness path for recovering patients to enjoy a short walk in the woods as part of their rehabilitation, has blossomed into a Community Forest and wildlife garden between Heywood Hospital and the North Central Pathway Bike Trail overlooking beautiful Crystal Lake Reservoir. The area now includes wildlife habitat gardens, rain gardens, and pollinator gardens as well as interpretive educational signs focused on habitat, tree and plant ID and health and wellness. These signs, and the forest itself, provide a rich learning opportunity for people of all ages. Meanwhile, our Conservation Commission has led initiatives to engage youth groups, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and students, like those here at Mount Wachusett Community College and Gardner Public High School, in hands-on, practical volunteering and experiential learning. Partnerships such as these provide meaningful opportunities and help to contribute to the well-being of our local residents and regional community.

Over the past several years we have gathered along the Wellness Path at what has become known as the Crystal Lake Community Forest for an annual Spring clean-up on Earth Day and usually once more in the Summer and Fall to maintain the trails and tend to the gardens. However, as we have come to realize, the need for good work goes beyond the annual clearing of trails or Earth Day cleanups; In order to truly protect the environment and provide quality outdoor recreational opportunities we must plan ahead, prioritize needs, and continue to work toward our land conservation and resiliency goals every day. We must do this not only at the local level, but we must also understand the regional context within which our trees are a part of the forest.

A recent and timely report from Wildlands and Woodlands called for 70 percent of forests in New England to be conserved to ensure that we have the natural resources and habitat needed to sustain human and ecological communities alike. As you all know forests help to filter our water and air, sequester carbon, provide habitat for rare and endangered species along with a multitude of other benefits. Habitat connectivity is an important ecological concept that we must not lose sight of. Many different species and plants and animals within our region rely on connected corridors, stepping stones, and patches of habitat to move around from one territory to the next to hunt, to forage, and to reproduce.

With limited resources of time, energy, and money, we have to move away from random acts of conservation to the identification and prioritization of parcels that will ensure ecological integrity and connectivity. We must make connections.

Development and sprawl is still a real threat to our natural landscapes that could cause further fragmentation if we don't take the necessary steps to protect it. The environmental problems that we face today go beyond the capacity of any one person, group, organization, or municipality to solve on their own. If we are to have lasting solutions in which the needs of the present are realized without compromising the needs of the future, we must adopt a landscape and watershed approach towards land conservation. We need to scale up our land conservation projects so that we can coordinate our actions between our towns and throughout our regions to realize our shared goals for land conservation. As our climate changes, so will our landscapes, and as such, we must adapt and adopt strategic planning and actions capable of addressing such drastic changes.

One such strategy for Open Space Committees is to begin to think and collaborate regionally when developing a new plan. Consider not only the natural resources and landscapes of our own town, but those of towns with which we share borders, those who share our streams, and those who share our woodlands and forests. It may also be wise of us to familiarize ourselves with, and perhaps even communicate and coordinate with existing regional conservation partnerships which may already be working on a regional or watershed scale. If you are not already familiar with regional conservation partnerships, they are informal networks of people often consisting of community leaders, land trusts, state and federal agencies, academic institutions, and others with a shared regional conservation goal or objective. Here in New England we have some of the oldest regional conservation partnerships in the country; Partnerships that have served as an innovative model for collaborative land conservation that is enduring, locally grounded, and regionally effective.

I could discuss ideas and strategies all day but in the interest of time and staying on point, I would like to circle back to my opening remarks and the theme of the day...

As members of municipal committees, commissions, and boards, and as leaders of the community, you play a critical role in influencing the success of open space planning and decision making. The Open Space and Recreation Plans that Open Space Committees work so diligently to create, provide a comprehensive, living document that identifies, delineates, and records critical natural landscapes which may otherwise remain unknown or unappreciated. Without that work these lands may be lost, forgotten, or ultimately, misused. As a result, the public benefits which they could have provided will have been lost forever. Now that's not to sound like a sensationalist, but, the fact of the matter is, with today's development pressures, especially in this densely populated and ever growing state of limited size, we really only get one chance to conserve land.

Your hard work creates the vision and goals that will provide our elected and appointed officials with the knowledge and guidance they need to make well-informed decisions toward protecting our open spaces. Be sure to include those decision makers such as the members of your town's select board, city councilors, town managers or mayors as part of your Open Space

Committee when it comes time to update or revise your next plan. Their involvement in the process will allow them to fully understand the importance of the need for the protection and sustainable use of Open Spaces and will allow them to make good decisions and act swiftly the next time an opportunity to protect or acquire a priority parcel or unique landscape feature suddenly or unexpectedly arises.

Now, take a moment to look around at the people in the room today. These are your partners. This is our landscape, our ecosystem, our watershed, our city or town. These are the folks we will travel down to path with and ford the stream together to meet the Open Space and Recreation needs of our Commonwealth. This is our Conservation Community. If we work together, like nature, like an ecosystem, each of us playing our part, we can reach that balance and continue to ensure that Massachusetts is a national leader in land protection and open space and recreation opportunity and accessibility. Partnerships and collaboration are in our human nature and the key to achieving those successes. Open Space Planning is a collaborative process... continue to work together and continue to do good work.

In closing, I would like to thank you all for being here today. Remember, the land is the foundation for our well-being; I encourage you all to continue to do your part to promote well-being throughout our communities and to strive to devise sound strategies and plans for making our shared goals a reality.

As a final word, I would like to share with all of you a quote and a timeless saying that I think will resonate with each of us and set the tone for the rest of our activities here today.

The first, a quote from Laurence S. Rockefeller:

“Concern for the environment and access to parks and open space is not frivolous or peripheral; rather, it is central to the welfare of people -- body, mind, and spirit.”
--Laurence S. Rockefeller

The second one is simple: A goal without a plan is just a wish.

With that being said... enjoy the day!

Thank you.

~Jeffrey Legros