



Planning for Open Space

Confessions of a Planning Veteran

Who's Interested in Open Space?

Over 35 years of working with communities on natural resource planning issues has convinced me that most towns are in reactive mode regarding open space. They react to the latest “for sale” sign placed in the front lawn of one of the last farms in town, or to the jolting sight of a bulldozer sitting along that scenic stretch of woods that they pass every day in their car. Much time is spent trying to justify the purchase for environmental and economic reasons, while in most cases the real objective is to prevent development, period. However, few have enough guts to be so honest. So there is a lot of raw emotion associated with open space, and a number of astute politicians have capitalized on this and have adopted “open space protection” as their poster child “green” program.

What I have found is that when sufficient local will exists the money can be found to purchase open space, especially when the community partners with the state and non-profits. Many Connecticut communities have appropriated money to purchase open space and have cost-shared with the state to buy one or two open space tracts. Now, they are at the stage where they cannot go back to the taxpayer without a plan for future acquisitions. So they call me in and ask, “How do we plan for open space?”

How Do We Plan for Open Space?

Our message is that you cannot look at land conservation myopically. A community must know what natural and cultural resources it has, and then begin to reach consensus on which ones are worthy of conservation and how they should be protected. Once a community begins to develop a prioritized listing of sites, they have made their first steps into the realm of open space planning. At the same time, an economic development plan needs to be developed. The open space and economic development plans then need to be folded into the Plan of Conservation and Development, which should include an implementation section consisting of the menu of land use regulations and suggested changes in municipal policies, including land acquisition.

Even in the communities that complete the general inventory and planning process there is generally a need to go back and fine-tune the open space initiative. I spend a lot of time discussing the many types of open space, the economics of various land uses, those

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legally charged to address open space, the resources and techniques available to protect it and the different management skills required to manage acquired land. For example, Connecticut communities are beginning to understand that they are having a hard enough time managing their present land holdings, without taking on working landscapes, such as farms, that many residents are urging they acquire.

I also spend time reviewing open tracts to determine those that are already protected because of existing land use regulations, what tracts are best preserved by encouraging certain land management practices by informed landowners as well as those that might be protected to form linkages with existing preserved greenways or that fill in the windows of large preserved areas. After going through the open space planning process many officials see that lands they were thinking of buying are not really that important.

If you were to ask most local officials what they needed for open space protection, they would tell you more money to buy more land. It is a built-in, conditioned response that comes with the job. However, those who have really given the topic some thought, or have had experiences buying open space, recognize the need to first plan for open space, and to balance it with development that will generate the tax base needed to support community services.

So what is the bottom line on what's needed for open space protection? I would say support for more and better education and planning so local officials are in a better position to rationally decide the best land uses for their community's future.

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