

January 18, 2012

To: Mansfield Town Council

From: Agriculture Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks Advisory Committee, Open Space Preservation Committee

Re: Open Space Preservation Action Plan

Since the 1970's, Mansfield's Open Space Preservation Program has achieved a number of the land conservation goals set out in the Town's Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD). As the Town grows, the need for keeping a balance between developed areas and natural areas will require continued attention. Natural resources, such as clean water and air, farmland, and forests are important to the health of the Town and its residents. Ensuring that these resources continue to be available is critical to the economic future of the Town and the quality of life for its residents.

During the past year, the committees have reviewed the Town's goals as well as new options for the Town to address these goals and to encourage private landowners to participate in conservation projects. This is a good time to be proactive. The current real estate market offers opportunities that the Town can take advantage of. New funds in state grant programs are available and would allow the Town to leverage its Open Space Fund. Note that this Action Plan builds on previous projects (beginning in 1992) to address the Town's priorities. A list of those projects can be found in the last section.

Agriculture Committee Recommendations

Purchase of development rights

Provide information to farmland owners (30 acres or more) about the Ct. Farmland Preservation Program of the Ct. Department of Agriculture (DOA). Through this program, the state purchases development rights (PDR) of farmland that qualifies. The land remains in private ownership. Ct. Farmland Trust could assist owners through the PDR process. The Town could offer to partner in the cost-sharing option.

New grant program

The DOA recently announced a Community Farms Preservation program, which will purchase development rights on farms that are too small (less than 30 acres) to qualify for their existing PDR program (see above). The Town must submit an application to qualify for this program by May 31. Applications by landowners to DOA for the first round are due by July 31. The Agriculture Committee recommends that the Town apply to participate in this program and notify farm owners about it.

Protective easements

Place agricultural conservation easements on Town-owned farmland. A second party should also hold these easements. This would permanently protect agricultural resources and prevent other uses that would adversely affect the agricultural use of these fields. In addition, the Town should add another party to the easements it already holds on farmland to ensure its protection. Ct. Farmland Trust could be asked to accept easements for the above lands.

Conservation Commission Recommendations

Focus on conservation easements rather than fee simple purchase by the Town, especially for conservation of interior forest tracts. The land would remain in private ownership. To encourage donations of conservation easements, the Town could assist with the costs of surveys, legal work, etc. If appropriate, the Town could purchase the easement.

Parks Advisory Committee Recommendations

Review in-holdings within existing Town parks. Review connection opportunities between preserved properties, including Joshua's Trust lands. Recommend contacting landowners to indicate Town interest in preserving these areas. Recommend placing protective easements on Town parks and preserves to ensure that they continue to serve the purpose for which they were acquired. A second party should also hold these easements.

Open Space Preservation Committee Recommendations

The committee supports the above recommendations as part of an Open Space Preservation Action Plan. Further recommendations:

Rivers Projects

Natchaug River Watershed: Follow-up on the Natchaug Watershed Compact with outreach to landowners along the Fenton, Mt. Hope and Natchaug Rivers Greenways. Recommend a conservation project with other towns and Joshua's Trust to provide information about land management and conservation options along riverfronts.

Willimantic River Greenway: Outreach to riverfront owners as in the Natchaug Watershed.

Interior Forest Project

The committee reviewed a map prepared by UConn's CLEAR that shows large forest tracts (250 acres to over 500 acres) with an overlay of currently protected lands. The committee recommends an interior forest conservation project in cooperation with Joshua's Trust.

Thank you for considering these recommendations. We request Council approval to begin these initiatives. Specific projects would be referred to the Council as they develop. We look forward to working with the Council to achieve these land conservation goals.

Resources for This Action Plan

1992 Open Space Project, 1993 Rivers Project, 1996 Agricultural Lands Project, 2006 Mansfield Plan of Conservation and Development (Appendices J and K), 2007 Conservation Options Workshop for Landowners, 2007 Outreach to Forest Landowners Project, 2009 “Mansfield 2020: A Unified Vision” Strategic Plan.