

CHAPTER 7:

OPEN SPACE



Preserve open space to protect natural resources, enhance character and provide passive recreation opportunities

OVERVIEW

Ridgefield has made tremendous progress permanently preserving areas of town as open space. Open space preservation can serve many important purposes, including:

- protect the health of the environment,
- preserve habitats for biological diversity,
- conserve important natural and historic resources,
- preserve lands for parks and recreational uses,
- protect community character,
- provide fiscal and economic benefits, and
- shape development patterns.

Natural resource protection emerges as perhaps the most important aspect of open space protection as more of Ridgefield's land becomes developed. This Chapter provides an overview of open space in Ridgefield and strategies for the continued protection of open space.

Open Space Calculations

The open space calculations are based on the best information available at this time: a combination of data from the assessor, the Town's geographic information system (GIS), and the knowledge of local officials.

These calculations are likely an underestimate of the total protected open space in Ridgefield because not all parcels have been categorized as open space in existing databases.

Also, because the Town's GIS and assessor's databases are not integrated, not all open space could be mapped, but its acreage is included in calculations.

Acreage calculations are as follows:

Protected Open Space –
4,994 acres
(22% of Ridgefield)

Other Open Space –
763 acres
(4%)

Total Open Space –
5,757 acres
(26%)

OPEN SPACE IN RIDGEFIELD

Open space is vacant land set aside for conservation or passive recreation purposes, whether publicly or privately owned. Passive recreation includes trails for hiking and/or non-motorized access (bike paths, horse trails, etc.).

For this Plan, open space is categorized as follows:

- **Protected (or Dedicated) Open Space** is land that shall remain as open space; it may include passive recreation. This includes:
 - Town-owned conservation land deeded to be under the jurisdiction of the Conservation Commission
 - State and Federal parkland
 - Parcels owned by the Land Conservancy
 - Some homeowner association lands (only where the database indicates it is permanently protected)
 - Some multi-use parcels (if a large portion of the parcel is open space; e.g., the Recreation Center parcel, some school properties)
 - Some Town parks (if predominantly used for passive recreation)
- **Other open space** is land that currently provides open space but might not be permanently protected from development. This includes:
 - Remainder of homeowner association land (much of this land might be permanently protected, but some have active recreation facilities or might in the future)
 - Golf courses
 - Water company lands

Calculations indicate that 26% of Ridgefield is classified as open space under the above categories. Work should continue to update and integrate the assessor's database and the Town's GIS to accurately identify parcels protected as open space. As those systems improve, the percentage of open space can be more accurately calculated.

In addition to deeded open space, there are many parcels partially protected with Conservation Easements. These are difficult to quantify because they do not appear separately in Town databases. The Land Conservancy owns easements covering 140 acres and the Town owns a Conservation Easement for Brewster Farm, covering 100 acres, in addition to many smaller easements on individual properties.

Most people tend to perceive "open space" as any land that is not built upon. However, vacant land that is in private ownership may be developed in the future – all of the land in Ridgefield that is perceived as "open space" is not, in fact, preserved as open space.

OPEN SPACE PRIORITIES

Continue to Preserve Open Space

The Town has made tremendous efforts preserving open space and those efforts should continue. The objective of this Plan is to preserve at least 30 percent of the total acreage of the Town as permanently protected open space. This would mean that another 1,800 acres should be preserved as open space. With only 3,100 acres of vacant land remaining, this objective may be difficult to achieve. Because of this challenge, permanently preserving land in the “other open space” category as protected open space may be critical.

Future open space preservation efforts should be targeted towards protecting and acquiring important resources and maximizing open space benefits to the community. In particular, efforts should continue toward creating a meaningful open space system that provides for contiguous open space, protects important natural resources, and protects character.

To focus on preserving meaningful open space, it is important that the fee-in-lieu of open space provision in the subdivision regulations continues. This can help avoid the creation of random pockets of open space that exist simply because a given parcel was subdivided. Instead, the funds can be used for strategic acquisitions that meet open space goals. Additional funding options / opportunities should be explored such as setting aside a certain amount annually in the Town’s budget and seeking grants. Subdivision regulations should be amended to provide guidelines for desirable open space, consistent with guidelines in the zoning regulations for PRD subdivisions. The use of conservation easements, both donated and acquired, is an important tool in open space preservation and should be encouraged.

Preserve Greenways

Greenways can enhance the value of existing open space areas through interconnections. They can also provide wildlife habitat, provide recreational use, preserve community character, and contribute to an enhanced quality of life. Greenways can connect open spaces and destinations (such as parks, schools, and other areas). The Ives Trail is an example of a successful regional greenway.

Opportunities to create additional greenways, such as along old logging roads, driftways, and other rustic byways, should be pursued. Previous POCDs have supported the Sugar Hollow Greenway as a linear series of interconnected open space parcels between Ridgefield and Norwalk, roughly coinciding with the now-abandoned “Super 7” expressway corridor.

In 2009, representatives of the towns of Ridgefield, Redding, Wilton, Weston and Norwalk started working together to develop the Norwalk River Valley Trail within the Sugar Hollow Greenway. The trail would connect Long Island Sound in Norwalk to southern Danbury with connections to local trail systems. Funding and the level of support from the public will dictate the nature of the trail and the feasibility for multimodal transportation (for bikeways and pedestrians).

Current PA-490 Policy

Excerpts from Section 12-8 of the Ridgefield Subdivision Regulations:

... the following land is designated open space land for purposes of taxation under said statutes:

1. All unimproved contiguous parcels of land, excluding house lots, held in single-unit ownership which consists of at least the minimum lot size required for the zoning district within which the premises are located as designated on the latest official zoning map.
2. All validated wetlands, excluding house lots,...

The following are excluded from open space land classification:

1. Any land containing improvements such as but not limited to swimming pools, tennis courts, buildings, and septic systems,
2. Any land legally subdivided into residential lots, and
3. Any land zoned for nonresidential uses with the exception of validated wetlands.

The section of the Norwalk River Valley Trail in Ridgefield will enhance Ridgefield's greenway system and contribute many benefits, including:

- protection of several high quality stratified drift aquifers and wetland systems that supply both the Saugatuck River (public water supply watershed) and the Norwalk River,
- protection of ecologically significant habitats, rare species, and biodiversity,
- protection of historic sites such as foundation ruins, stone walls, and old roads,
- interconnection of open spaces (including Wooster Mountain State Park, the Weir Farm National Historic Site and the Wilton Town Forest), and
- protection of scenic resources such as ridges, rivers, ponds, forests, marshes, bogs, vernal pools, and waterfalls.

Recent State legislation might facilitate the sale of the expressway right-of-way lands to municipalities. Should this occur, Ridgefield should pursue purchasing these parcels. This greenway and other possible future greenways are illustrated on the Open Space Plan.

Preserve Perceived Open Space and Unprotected Open Space

The Public Act 490 program allows local assessors to reduce the assessment on land that is categorized as farm, forest, or open space. The reduced assessment diminishes the tax burden on the parcel and reduces what can be an incentive to development. This program helps to defer development and maintain the amount of "perceived" open space in Ridgefield.

While State Statutes (CGS 12-107) provide criteria for designation as farm or forest land, the POCD is an important step in the designation of open space land. This Plan recommends that the existing open space assessment policy be continued (see sidebar).

Approximately 62 acres of "perceived open space" in Ridgefield is owned by public water providers for watershed protection purposes. It is reasonable to assume that much of this land will remain undeveloped over the long term in order to protect these water supplies. However, water companies can decommission certain types of surplus land and sell it; this has occurred in a number of communities in the State. State legislation gives municipalities the right of first refusal in such instances. Ridgefield should maintain contact with water companies to be aware of watershed lands that become available. The Town should also track DEP and ConnDOT lands that may be released for purchase.

Southeast, NY

Open Space Plan

Ridgefield, CT

Danbury

Legend

- Existing Greenway
- Potential Greenways
- Dedicated Open Space
- Other Open Space
- Desirable Open Space

North Salem, NY

Redding

Lewisboro, NY

Existing Greenways

- A Sugar Hollow Greenway
- B Ives Trail
- C Ridgefield Rail Trail

Wilton

Weston

4,000

Feet

Promote the Enjoyment of Open Space for All

Use of the Town's open space by residents is important, not only for the health benefits of recreational activities, but because use can increase the appreciation of the Town's natural environment. Such appreciation can help build support for additional open space preservation. The Town should continue to provide information on parcels and trails and sponsor events on town open spaces.

Where feasible, Ridgefield should increase the accessibility of its open space for all ages and physical abilities.

Promote Stewardship of Open Space

The Conservation Commission and the Land Conservancy are the primary stewards of open space properties in Ridgefield. Donors of open space lands often request that the properties be preserved for a specific purpose. Volunteers in each of the organizations work to manage and maintain the open spaces in order to preserve the environmental, aesthetic and recreational functions of the land, for the enjoyment all residents. The Town should continue to support its open space preservation stewards, to protect and maintain the intended functions of the lands, and to respect the donors' intentions. Adjoining landowners should be encouraged to manage their properties in ways that complement the open space they adjoin.

OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION STRATEGIES

Continue to Preserve Open Space

1. Continue open space preservation and acquisition efforts.
2. Preserve 30 percent of Ridgefield as protected open space.
3. Continue allowing a fee-in-lieu of open space to provide funding for protection of meaningful open spaces.
4. Explore additional funding opportunities.

Preserve Greenways

5. Tie existing and new open space and recreational areas together into an integrated greenway system.
6. Preserve the Sugar Hollow Greenway and promote the Norwalk River Valley Trail.
7. Establish a series of trails as a key element in connecting open space and recreation areas into an integrated system.
8. Preserve old railways, trolley lines, logging roads, driftways, and other rustic byways as open space trails, where appropriate.

Preserve “Perceived” Open Space

9. Maintain the PA-490 policy as an incentive for preservation of open space.
10. Stay apprised of potential surplus land disposition by water companies and the State of Connecticut.

Promote the Enjoyment of Open Space

11. Continue to provide information on open space passive recreation opportunities.
12. Where feasible, improve accessibility for all ages and physical abilities.

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