

New Paltz Open Space Plan

A Framework for Conservation



For the Town and Village of New Paltz, New York

May 2006

Prepared by Behan Planning Associates, LLC

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FOREWORD

Why plan for conservation in New Paltz?

The New Paltz community is fortunate to possess many wonderful open spaces - its farms, scenic views, and streams, to name a few - that are widely recognized as important for food production, tourism, and their environmental and economic values. To date, approximately 2,800 acres of this network can be considered permanently protected. The New Paltz Open Space Plan (“the plan”) is a framework and premier opportunity to ensure that the other locally-valued open space is identified clearly and comprehensively, with a plan of action for aiding in its conservation.

The plan is a call to action, and such action is urgently needed if New Paltz is to retain the open space character that makes it special. Open space is part of the community’s environmental, economic and cultural fabric, as evidenced by the tourists who flock to the community throughout the year, and by the pride that local residents of all persuasions take in their landscape. But development pressures have increased so much in the past few years that this landscape, and the values it bolsters, are threatened. Taking steps to conserve these resources now will benefit New Paltz in many ways, including economically. Conservation of open space will guide new development to the best locations so that it does not result in drastically increased municipal costs, for roads, sewer, water, school, police and fire services.

The plan includes an action-oriented set of recommendations that include the following:

- Creating and implementing a local land conservation program that works with willing landowners to conserve valued open space.
- Developing conservation financing, to enable the community to purchase open space and conservation easements from willing landowners.
- Planning for development in New Paltz that respects and conserves open space, by working with developers and landowners through the site planning process when development proposals are put forward.

Open Space Conservation is Cost Effective

Planning for conservation takes as much time, effort and investment as planning for development – but the good news is that planning and investment in the community’s open space resources offers significant benefits to the fiscal health of the community. Many communities have found that conserving land is an investment in the future and can reduce future tax burdens.

- A study by the New Jersey Office of State Planning found that communities would save \$1.3 billion in infrastructure costs over 20 years by limiting unplanned sprawl type of development.
- Without the option of the Town’s investment of \$9 million in open space and farmland protection, a study for the Town of Warwick, Orange County, NY estimated that continued development would cost taxpayers an estimated \$4 to \$5 million per year in additional school taxes.
- When the Town of Pittsford, in Monroe County, NY reviewed the fiscal impact of their \$9.9 million dollar open space bond, it was determined that the approximate \$64 per year

cost to the average household would be far less than doing nothing about open space, as the cost of community services to serve that additional development would impact the average household about \$250 per year in new taxes for schools, road maintenance, and other community services.

- In Webster, Monroe County, NY, the 2002 fiscal model prepared for the Town and school district showed that for every dollar invested in open space conservation, Town residents would save an equal dollar in avoided costs associated with growth. Hence, in that community, there was no net cost of investing in open space land acquisitions. Open space protection can balance and reduce the future costs of growth. Webster voters approved a \$5.9 million bond program in 2004, and subsequently have secured matching federal, New York State, and Monroe County grants to leverage local dollars to meet their program budget of close to \$7.9 million.

Open Space is Important to Citizens—Locally and Nationally

Respondents to a community survey conducted by the New Paltz Open Space Committee indicated support for investing in open space conservation. More than 67% of the respondents to the 2003 mailed survey indicated their household would be willing to pay some level of tax increase to support open space protection. Of those who would accept a tax increase for open space, about two of three respondents supported a range between \$10 to \$100 per year, with another third supporting a range from \$100 to \$300.

New Paltz's interest is not an isolated one. Americans recognize the value in investing in conservation. Across the nation, voters are willing to put their money where conservation interests are, according to the Trust for Public Land (TPL), the national organization that tracks these conservation finance ballot measures. In 2005, voters in 22 states approved 106 of 134 ballot measures: a 79 percent passage rate. The 2005 measures will generate over \$1.7 billion in new conservation funding. Previously, from 1993 to 2004, communities generated \$29 billion through conservation finance ballot measures. According to TPL, a full 77 percent of these land conservation ballot measures were approved.

In November 2005, voters in the Town of Beekman, Dutchess County, supported a \$3 million open space bond by a 2.5 to 1 margin. "Preserving open space is such an important thing," stated one of the Town council members, "not only for community character but the economic impact it has in the long term. It's such a great investment." (Poughkeepsie Journal, November 9, 2005).

In Red Hook, Dutchess County, voters approved a \$3.5 million open space bond by an approximately 80 percent margin in 2003 to purchase the development rights from interested Town farmers. The Town's investment was leveraged with dollars from a Dutchess County matching grant program, and follows significant investment by Scenic Hudson, a regional conservation organization as well. As of the date of this report, Red Hook has protected two farms through a purchase of development rights program, was working on additional farm protection projects, had adopted cluster zoning, and was working on additional initiatives to address the changing nature of agriculture and continuing growth pressures.

Another regional example, the citizens in Warwick, Orange County voted in favor of a bond for about \$9 million for the purchase of development rights on farmland in 2000. The local goal is to protect approximately 3,000 acres of the Town's farmland and open space.

Open Space Conservation Makes a Community More Economically Competitive

Open space conservation is sound economic development policy. In the Sierra Nevada region of California, for example, the Sierra Business Council, "...explicitly rejects the notion that Sierra communities must choose between economic and environmental health. On the contrary, we view environmental quality as key to the Sierra Nevada's economic prosperity, and natural resource conservation as essential to building regional wealth. What defines our region, more than any fact or figure, is the dramatic beauty, ecological uniqueness, and natural bounty of the landscape."

Placer County, a fast-growing county in the Sierra Nevada region cites quality of life as the top reason companies like Oracle, NEC, and Hewlett Packard are moving to the county (Placer County Department of Economic Development, September, 2004). Marketing this quality of life includes a major focus on open space and recreation. The county has established the Placer Legacy project, an open space program to, "...maintain the county's high quality of life."

At home, Ulster County Development Corporation's website highlights the county's environment. "Our communities are adopting land-use and environment strategies that will benefit economic development and the environment for the long-term." Clearly, open space amenities provide quality of life benefits and contribute to the economic attractiveness of the town and county.

Retaining Farms Does Not Reduce the Property Tax Base

The Trust for Public Land conducted a study of Ulster County to explore strategies for the financing of the protection of lands such as parks and open space. To ensure that local taxpayers have the capacity to invest in open space along with other municipal needs, the 2005 draft report acknowledges that financing open space will require a multi-part strategy and contributions from many funding sources. The report identifies federal, State of New York, Ulster County, local county municipalities, and non-profit conservation partners. The New Paltz Open Space Committee has also identified the importance of New Paltz landowners, as current stewards of the land, as having an important role to play.

Much of the land identified in this plan as important for conservation in New Paltz is already receiving some type of tax abatement, e.g., as a working forest or as part of an agricultural operation. Should the Town purchase a conservation easement on a working farm, there would be no effect on the taxable value of the farm, as most farms receive an assessment set by state law, which is based on the agricultural productivity of the soils. For other open lands, the value of the land is taxed as vacant property. The vast majority of the Town's tax base comes from developed property, not vacant land. And, as noted above, increasing development can actually cause taxes to rise in order to provide community services.

Communities recognize that agricultural land uses generate value and support maintaining these types of land uses as an overall fiscally positive land use policy. A nearby example of this support is the Town of Montgomery, in Orange County, NY, which has protected about 1,200 acres through a purchase of development rights program with funding support from outside sources including the Open Space Institute.

Conserving Open Space Enhances Property Values

Open space resources fill an important role—in particular in a community like New Paltz, where these resources are so much a part of the landscape and life of residents and visitors. New Paltz citizens have long recognized the benefits of open space: social, cultural, environmental and economic.

Looking forward, New Paltz is poised for continued growth and development. The future character of New Paltz and associated property values will be dependent, in a large part, on how well the community manages that growth.

Communities that protect their resources as they grow become noteworthy from an economic perspective. These are not esoteric values. These are real values evidenced on a daily basis in the real estate marketplace. By conserving open space; views to the mountains, working farmlands, places to observe and enjoy wildlife, recreation areas, and by creating a trail system, the community has invested in securing its real estate value. Proximity to open space is a recognized economic amenity. Lands near and adjacent to open space and recreation amenities are higher in value than those that are distant or where these amenities are unavailable. Conserving open space resources in the community will help to protect and enhance residential values.

For example, a Boulder, Colorado realtor placed this statement prominently on its website: “The City and County of Boulder together own over 100,000 acres of pristine wildlife habitat and farmland, set aside as greenbelt/open space with an extensive trail system. As a result, Boulder County has avoided the housing sprawl plaguing much of the rest of the nation’s suburban areas. These lands are safe from future development and protect a lifestyle consistently rated among the highest in the country by national publications, such as Newsweek and Money Magazine.” (<http://www.martinsugg.com/>)

Many constituencies exist for sound open space investments. A recent article from the National Association of Homebuilders highlights the benefits of a comprehensive approach to open space planning. “From the builder’s perspective, an advantage of having a well-planned program of open space acquisition is that it removes the focus from a parcel-by-parcel attempt to stop development. In contrast, in the absence of an open space acquisition program, each development proposal is seen by the community as a threat to open space, and defeat of the development proposal is seen as the only way to preserve open space.” (National Association of Homebuilders, “Using Public Funds to Acquire Open Space”, November, 2005.)

Residential real estate located near open space can be more valuable than properties that have no nearby open space. Several studies have been conducted on the economic effect of greenbelts and nature preserves on property values. As reported in *The Economic Value of Open Space* (Wilder Research, 2005), the earliest study from Boulder, Colorado (Correll, et al., 1978), found that the existence of greenbelts (linear open space features such as trails or stream corridors) showed a beneficial impact on adjacent residential property values ranging from 8 to 32 percent. In a study on the effect of proximity to forest preserves from Grand Rapids Michigan, (Thorsnes, 2002), a premium of 19 to 35 percent in the value of lots bordering the preserve was found. In Portland, Oregon, a study on single family home sales (Lutzenhiser and Netusil, 2001) found that natural area parks could add up to 20 percent to the value of nearby homes, and that the beneficial effect extended farthest from large, natural parks relative to other open spaces.

Other elements that contribute to property value, including the availability of employment opportunities, proximity to transportation systems, and the quality of the school system are also

noteworthy. A quality open space system complements these other factors and helps to maintain and enhance property values in New Paltz.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the Open Space Plan for New Paltz?

This open space plan is a community-driven response to protect New Paltz's unique character by balancing open space conservation with appropriate planning for future settlement. The culmination of an extensive public planning process starting in 2001, this plan presents the following components as a guiding framework for acting on open space conservation initiatives in New Paltz:

- An illustrated **2005 open space vision map** that synthesizes the most important resources and themes that were publicly identified as meriting some level of protection.
- **Additional resource synthesis maps** prepared in 2005 (specifically for protected lands, agricultural resources, cultural resources, natural features, and important habitats) are discussed in the report and provided in Appendix A as a reference. This digital data will be available to the Town and Village for future management, updating, and analysis. Notably, the data that was utilized to create these 2005 resource maps will need to be managed and maintained over time, and should be updated as land use, resource management, and ownership information changes.
- **Town-wide conservation goal of an additional 3,000 acres.** The plan includes acreage and resource conservation goals for the community to strive for, because setting goals inspires and motivates action, and establishes a basis for measuring success. This plan recommends the conservation of an additional 3,000 acres of open space in the Town and Village of New Paltz. Building on the 2,800 acres protected to date, this 3,000-acre milestone would provide conservation for nearly 25% of the overall Town and Village landscape. Achieving this goal would more than double the existing acres protected to date – advancing the community to a goal of protecting close to 6,000 acres out of the total of 22,848 acres combined for both the Town and Village.
- **The New Paltz open space vision utilizes a landscape approach.** The plan identifies seven defining character areas (meaning geographic areas) of the New Paltz landscape, which are illustrated on the 2005 Open Space Vision Map. The plan recommends milestones to work towards that will protect the important features of each of these seven areas. Each of the individual character areas is an important part of the balanced open space composition of New Paltz, and include:
 - The Shawangunk Ridge; with a recommended goal of conserving 500 additional acres
 - The Butternut-Canaan Foothills; with a goal of 500 additional acres
 - The Wallkill River Corridor and Flats; with a goal of 500 additional acres

- The Northern Woods and Eastern Wetlands which include the Plutarch wetlands complex; with a goal of 500 additional acres
 - The Orchards, Farms and Ridge-Views; with a goal of 1,000 additional acres
 - The Heart of New Paltz and the connections to and from the Village and Town, including trails and greenway links throughout the community
 - The Scenic Cultural Landscapes experienced along the many scenic roads in the community
- **Future conservation project selection criteria** are included in the plan for evaluating potential conservation projects for the Town and Village of New Paltz as landowner interest opportunities arise and financing opportunities are realized.
- The plan embraces a **range of landowner options for conservation**, including cooperative planning with individual landowners. The plan identifies a suite of alternatives for landowners to conserve their lands or to develop with sensitivity to the natural and cultural features of the landscape. This component of the plan recognizes that landowners need and want custom solutions and options depending on their needs and the value the community places on their lands. Whether through outright protection projects involving whole parcels, or portions of parcels, landowners and the community need help with land planning.

This plan outlines many tools and options that exist, which the community can pursue for New Paltz, such as, but not limited to the following:

- Purchase of conservation easements / development rights programs
 - Permanent and term conservation easements
 - Agricultural district benefits
 - Agricultural assessment
 - Lease of development rights
 - Right of first refusal
 - Assistance for farm business corporations
 - Resource-based or character-based conservation design guidelines
 - Town-financed conservation easement transaction costs and easement monitoring stewardship costs
 - Cooperative land conservation planning
 - Open space incentive zoning
 - Coordinated area-specific master planning
- The plan includes a summary of the **public process and landowner outreach** conducted, including the community survey.

Major Recommendations and Action Plan

Following is a summary of the plan's major recommendations for open space conservation. Section IV: Fulfilling the Community Vision, provides more detail on these recommendations.

1. Create and implement a local land conservation program

- Identify an entity or person to oversee implementation and ensure that the open space plan recommendations are acted upon.
- Conduct parcel rating using the draft resource criteria in the plan to identify future priority projects.
- Develop a local permanent conservation easement program and explore a range of conservation easement options with landowners.

2. Develop conservation financing

- Create fiscally smart investment in conservation and open space projects in a way that leverages local dollars to the fullest extent possible, and manages any tax impact burden on local citizens.
- Continue to make annual budget allocations for conservation projects and program delivery.
- Pursue a strategy for financing open space conservation projects, such as a municipal bond, within the next year.
- Pursue all relevant grants to match/implement land conservation and trails projects.

3. Conduct planning for the “settlement or development side” of land use for New Paltz

- Hire a land planning/design professional to provide conservation planning interpretation to implement the concepts and principles in the open space plan for conservation projects and to guide conservation planning and design during development projects.
- Conduct a community-wide build-out analysis to understand community capacity for growth and fiscal capacity.

Who Should Read This Plan?

The open space plan is intended for the collective community of the Town and Village of New Paltz: its residents, business owners, and landowners. Local elected officials, planning boards, zoning boards, and other boards and municipally-sponsored or appointed working committees will benefit and should read, understand and help to implement this plan as is applicable to their purview and overlapping interest. Neighboring municipalities, the State of New York and state agencies, Ulster County and county-wide agencies, regional municipal neighbors, as well as non-governmental entities, such as but not limited to the Wallkill Valley Land Trust, The Nature

Conservancy, and the Open Space Institute, are also encouraged to understand and complement the community's stated vision and goals.

Who Prepared This Plan?

This open space plan was created by a joint committee composed of citizens from the Village of New Paltz and the Town of New Paltz as a cooperative intermunicipal effort, primarily funded through the Town. The joint committee was aided by several community planning consultants throughout the project, including Allee King Rosen & Fleming (AKRF), Inc. (for inventory services in 2003), Shingebiss Associates (for fiscal / conservation finance research services in 2004), and culminating with final assistance from Behan Planning Associates, LLC (for open space planning consulting services and plan report preparation).

Related Plans and Policies

There are a variety of federal, state, county and local plans that have been completed, or are currently underway, in the region that are directly related to the New Paltz Open Space Plan. The Shawangunk Mountains Byway Regional Open Space Plan is being initiated by the Shawangunk Mountains Regional Partnership, made up of the nine towns and two villages which encircle the northern Shawangunk Mountains. Ulster County is currently in the process of developing an open space plan which will help to set a policy and implementation framework at the county level. In addition, the neighboring Towns of Gardiner and Marbletown are currently developing their own open space plans, and the Town of Lloyd is developing a comprehensive plan. These parallel processes have helped to highlight the importance of a regional approach and intermunicipal cooperation, as many open space resources cross municipal borders.

Other plans which are relevant to the New Paltz Open Space Plan, many of which are mentioned throughout this document, include, but are not limited to: Federal wetland and biodiversity policies, the New York State Open Space Conservation Plan, the New York Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, the Hudson River greenway plans, the Ulster County Long-Range Transportation Plan, the Ulster County Priority Housing Strategies, the Shawangunk Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan, Ulster County Intermunicipal Watershed Agreements, and the Palisades Interstate Park Commission's 21st Century Plan.

CONCLUSION

This local open space plan is a comprehensive summary of resources that reflect the best of the entire landscape of the Village and Town of New Paltz. It also establishes an implementation procedure through the lens of a locally created action plan. The open space plan prepared herein helps to frame the local values that reflect the diversity, variety, and richness of open space in New Paltz – as voiced and empowered by our community of citizens and local governments – and not just from outside entities, no matter how well-meaning, on New Paltz's behalf.

Several very important resources that lie (at least partly) within the municipal boundaries of New Paltz have been identified in the 2002 New York State Open Space Plan as worthy of protection. These include the Shawangunk Ridge, Hudson Valley farmland, and the Black Creek-Plutarch Wetlands complex. Our current understanding of local open space priorities is contained within the Town of New Paltz 1995 Comprehensive Plan, the 2004 New Paltz Open Space Inventory, and in the places and values identified by citizens, citizen groups, and local land trusts. This open space plan provides the bigger picture and a framework for how individual parcels may fit into the context of our whole landscape.

Now is the time to work together, to recognize the widely-shared values that exist in New Paltz for conserving its most important open space resources. We must conduct this conservation work in a manner that respects landowners and their contributions as stewards of their lands, and fosters creative collaboration among municipalities, landowners, non-governmental entities, and outside governmental sources.

Communities like New Paltz that are widely known and treasured for their scenic, recreational, and open space resources - such as Boulder, CO and Pittsford, NY - have proactively planned and invested in their open spaces. The benefits of such planning are directly visible in the exceptional quality of life, health, and well being of residents, and in their strong local economies. New Paltz should build on the public momentum and strong interest in open space conservation, as well as landowner interest and support in creating new options for achieving mutual conservation goals.

For the New Paltz community to realize its open space goals, efficient use of fiscal resources and investments in open space, as well as continued cooperation among governments, landowners and other non-government partners is imperative. The New Paltz Open Space Plan points the way toward making this happen.