



***Open Space:  
What Is It, How Do We Plan For It,  
And Build Consensus To Protect It?***

***Open Space Fact Sheet #1***

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**INTRODUCTION**

Major advances in land preservation tend to occur as a result of development. In periods of intense development, developers are more willing to dedicate land and negotiate design alternatives. Because time is money they more readily accept restrictive regulations in an attempt to give up a little to gain a lot. During prosperous times, public coffers are full and open space programs are well funded. Locally there is interest in forming conservation commissions and land trusts. Land is donated for tax purposes and corporate support of environmental programs that help improve their image is strong.

But when the economy slows down, all that changes. We have experienced those changes and the associated backlash to environmental regulations and preservation efforts. During such periods anything viewed as hindering economic development is fair game for attack as environmental Chihuahuas who do little more than go nipping at the heels of progress.

In both climates it is imperative that those interested in land conservation speak clearly and convincingly of their interests. They also need to establish a strong plan of action that balances their preservation desires with the need for economic development.

**WHAT IS OPEN SPACE?**

What is open space? There are as many different answers to that question as people asked. The term conjures up various images to different people. For example, a recreation director might think of supervised, improved playgrounds while a hiker might envision natural areas undisturbed by man. It is important that those concerned with open space clearly define exactly what they mean when using the words open space. This is especially true for those involved with public policy.

While serving on a planning and zoning commission, we asked a developer to set aside open space as part of a proposed subdivision. Most commissioners envisioned the dedication as a natural area. The vague dedication proposal was brought before the public and was vehemently opposed. Most people at the hearing feared that the open space would eventually become an improved park generating lights, noise, dust and beer swilling teenagers. The Commission failed to clearly define the proposed use of the open space. The public had a clearer, unfavorable vision.

How many towns do you know where the planning commission is reluctant to ask for open space dedications because they have no overall plan for these sites? Hence, these potentially valuable open areas are often viewed as

undesirable sites posing maintenance and liability problems, or as weed growing, lots scattered throughout the town.

### **OPEN SPACE - NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE VIEWS**

So open space can be viewed as a negative concept. We can't assume everyone is a strong supporter of open space preservation. Someone once referred to open space as "the nuthin between sumptin." This view treats open space as non-productive in that it does not contain development or produce tax revenue. Behind this concept is the feeling that all land should ideally be developed. This view is severely limited and has in fact been proven false. Rather than having a negative economic impact on a community's tax base, open space has proven to have quite the opposite effect.

For example, in suburban areas single family homes often do not pay enough tax revenue to cover the cost of public services they receive. Open space demands little or no service hence, costs the town very little. Studies in several New England Communities have confirmed the positive economic contribution of open space as opposed to uncontrolled single family home development. Another positive aspect is that property values of land next to open space increase, and in turn, produce increased property tax revenue. Where open space attracts visitors, tourist expenditures can significantly contribute to the local economy. Some public lands are rented generating direct income. In conclusion, open space is a positive land use that each community should seek to encourage.

### **VARIOUS TYPES OF OPEN SPACE**

There are many types of open space. The list below while by no means is complete, contains some examples of various types of open areas:

|              |             |                  |
|--------------|-------------|------------------|
| trails       | wetlands    | river corridors  |
| floodplains  | ridges      | wildlife habitat |
| parks        | vacant lots | bike paths       |
| urban plazas | tot lots    | scenic vistas    |
| farmland     | forests     | buffer strips    |
| golf courses | backyards   | preserves        |

### **FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES FOR OPEN SPACE**

Open space is categorized by the following six functional types:

- **Natural Resource Protection Areas** - includes animal and vegetative habitat as well as river corridors.
- **Outdoor Recreation**
  - ◆ Active - parks, playgrounds, beaches, and trails.
  - ◆ Passive - plazas, sitting areas, arboretums...
- **Resource Management** - forests, fisheries, farmland...
- **Protection of Public Health and Safety** - floodplains, wetlands, unbuildable areas or areas with limitations for development including steep slopes, high water table, shallow depth to bedrock...
- **Areas that Shape Community Character or Design** - buffer strips, front, back and side yards, urban plazas, greenways, open space dedications related to development...
- **Historic or Archeological Sites** - battleground, historic structures and grounds, historic districts, town greens...

It is important for those promoting open space preservation to clearly enunciate their ideas and future visions. The above list might help you organize your thoughts concerning this important topic.

### **WHY PLAN FOR OPEN SPACE?**

Few communities are controlling their destiny because they are not in the driver's seat regarding future growth. In most communities, many different people are making land use decisions without a unifying game plan. What often results is haphazard development insensitive to the area's unique sense of place and natural resources. Consequently, a homogenized blend of land use starts to make our area indistinguishable from other regions of the country.

In periods of intense development, communities tend to be in reactive rather than directive modes regarding growth. They end up reacting to development proposals without sending a clear message to developers as to what the community wants. When commissions get bogged down reviewing development proposals, little creative planning occurs. Communities end up accepting what developers offer because it complies with the regulations and the town has no alternate plan. At some point, someone steps back and

asks, "Is this the best we can do?" Many local officials would have to answer "Obviously not!" and if they were truly honest with themselves they might say, "in some cases it is little more than the worst that we can do."

To cope with change, create order out of chaos and provide well designed communities rather than manmade sprawl, the solution must be found in the comprehensive land use planning process. Land use planning enables communities to direct growth to those areas capable of supporting it and at the same time identifies and prioritizes areas worthy of conservation. It can and should be a clear

statement of how, when and where the community will grow. It provides a concise guide to local officials and developers so no one is surprised by the other's actions at the last minute.

There is a need to recognize that resources don't have to be designed as something special. They are by their very nature something special. Most importantly, if the necessary steps are taken to protect unique natural resources, then quality development, which is sensitive to those resources, will follow. As a result, a region's special character and quality of life will be enriched.

For more information, contact:

April Turner  
SC Sea Grant Extension Program  
287 Meeting Street  
Charleston, SC 29401  
Phone: (843) 727-2078  
Fax: (843) 727-2080  
Email: [april.turner@scseagrant.org](mailto:april.turner@scseagrant.org)

Written by:  
Jim Gibbons, Land Use Specialist, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Service

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