



Ten Steps In The Development Of An Open Space Plan

Open Space Fact Sheet #2

While the Open Space planning process might initially seem complicated, those that have attempted it find it is quite simple and enlightening. It involves a lot of common sense. One does not need a Ph.D. in land use planning to develop a sensible open space plan for their community. I have found the most meaningful plans are those developed by people who know their region and care for its future.

1. SOMEONE MUST TAKE CHARGE. It may be a public agency such as the planning or conservation commission or a non-profit organization such as a land trust. It might also be a private effort such as a neighborhood group. Ideally it is a coordinated effort involving all of the above.

2. CONDUCT AN OPEN SPACE - NATURAL RESOURCE INVENTORY including:

- Committed Open Land - federal, state, municipal or land trust open space.
- Land presently open and used by the public yet no guarantee it will remain so, i.e. golf courses, rod and gun club property, camps.
- Areas experts identified as unique or worthy of preservation.
- Areas unsuitable for development because of wetlands, flood prone, or shallow depths to bedrock or hardpan ...
- Areas that might be preserved by regulation - inland wetlands, flood plain, aquifers...

3. CATEGORIZE OPEN SPACE BY FUNCTION

- Natural Resource Protection - unique or fragile animal or vegetative habitat, wildlife corridors, riparian buffer zones.
 - Outdoor Recreation
 - ◆ Active - parks, playgrounds, beaches, trails...
 - ◆ Passive - gardens, preserves, plazas, setting areas...
 - Resource Management - farmland, forest, fisheries...
 - Protection of Public Health and Safety - flood plains, wetlands, unbuildable areas, areas with limitations for development, aquifer recharge areas...
 - 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...
- 4. ORGANIZE IDENTIFIED SITES INTO CORRIDORS OR GREENWAYS** - Rivers and associated wetlands, links to significant tracts of existing open space, wildlife corridors, trails, farmland districts, unfragmented productive forests...
- 5. DEVELOP A SET OF OPEN SPACE OBJECTIVES** - The objectives should clearly state the intent, purpose and directions of the open space plan and program. For example, the objective might be to assemble corridors as opposed to scattered parcels or protect critical or threatened habitats or maintain natural drainage ways.

6. **PRIORITIZE AREAS FOR PRESERVATION -** Prioritization should be based on the objectives developed in Step 5 above. Common sense must be used here as well. For instance, if a site becomes available at a reasonable price, the municipality should move to acquire even though it might not be at the top of the prioritized list.
7. **DEVELOP A FINANCIAL PLAN BASED ON HOW THE LAND WILL BE PRESERVED -** A realistic assessment of what it will cost to carry out the plan is needed. Sources of guaranteed and potential funds should be included. Land should be categorized as to whether it will be preserved by regulation, purchase, donation, conservation easement, etc.
8. **CREATE AN INFORMATION FILE ON EACH IDENTIFIED PARCEL -** Review the local land records to find out who owns it and if there are any encumbrances on the land. Make notes of any unique features of the site.
9. **CONTACT IDENTIFIED LANDOWNERS -** It is very important to contact landowners whose property is included in the Open Space Plan to discuss the inventory and plan. It is important to talk to these landowners before the general public sees the plan. As their properties will be affected by the plan, they deserve the opportunity to discuss the plan with its authors before it is brought to a

public forum. Be careful to point out that their property has been identified as being important as a result of a comprehensive review of the entire town. Discuss, if they are willing, their needs and desires regarding future use of their property. If preservation is not something they are interested in, discuss various creative development techniques that would allow continued lifetime use or achieve a balance between development and conservation.

In communities that have developed good open space plans but failed to include affected landowners in the planning process, the result has been a series of controversial public hearings at which landowners united to oppose a plan they felt would result in an unfair taking of their property. In such an environment, rumor and hearsay runs through the town and the open space plan is soundly defeated or put on hold.

10. **CONDUCT A SERIES OF INFORMATIONAL FORUMS ON THE OPEN SPACE PLAN -** Public understanding of and involvement in the planning process is extremely important. Develop a slide or video presentation, showing various sites delineated in the plan and make presentations before service clubs, town boards, senior citizen groups, garden clubs, etc. If there is opposition to the plan, review and revise where appropriate.

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

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

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