

Chapter I: A Time to Plan

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Town of Gardiner Open Space Plan

Introduction

Today, Gardiner is very open. From the Shawangunk Ridge east to the Wallkill River Valley, open spaces abound in Gardiner. There are aquifers that provide residents with water, farmlands that provide agricultural productivity, forests and wetlands that provide wildlife habitat, and open lands that help to frame the majestic Shawangunk Ridge. There are ways for people to connect to these lands – hiking on the ridge or on the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail; visiting the town’s farm stands; driving along one of the many scenic roadways; or stopping by a winery to taste the fruits of the land. And, there are people who care deeply about these resources. People who live in Gardiner because of its scenery, its rural charm, and its excellent agricultural soils.

Gardiner’s secret is out. More and more people continue to discover this scenic and alluring town. More and more people want a small piece of Gardiner’s charm. And this comes with a price – new homes on the land, new cars on the roads, and new children in the schools. These changes in the landscape can put stress on aquifer resources, result in fragmentation of important agricultural and natural resources, and alter the rural and historic character that residents love. The challenge for Gardiner’s present and future is to balance incoming interest in living here with conservation of its most valued resources. This conservation begins with a plan of action.

As this plan is being created, there are numerous subdivisions currently being reviewed by the town planning board, which when complete will have an effect on the town’s resources and character. All parties involved - landowners, developers, and town officials– recognize that these developments could be planned to better protect Gardiner’s resources and rural character, if only the resources were identified and the right tools were available. Gardiner has begun to address the need for these tools, through zoning revisions and this open space plan, to guide future development and conservation efforts.

This open space plan outlines a blueprint for action. It was created by the community, with guidance from the town’s open space committee and open space planning professionals. This plan identifies and prioritizes the building blocks of the town’s open space network - water resources, farms and wildlife habitats, as well as scenic landscapes, recreational opportunities, and historic resources.

The plan recognizes that there are many “shades of green” in Gardiner. There are lands such as the Minnewaska State Park and Mohonk Preserve, which are permanently protected and open for the public to enjoy in perpetuity. There are other lands throughout town that are permanently protected by local and regional land trusts through conservation easements.

But there are many other lands that are currently “green” – these lands may not be permanently protected but they contribute significantly to the town’s open space system. These lands include farms, working forests, large parcel “homesteads” and even vacant parcels. The owners of these lands have been long-term stewards, protecting

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the important resources on these lands without being asked or compensated – because they recognize their intrinsic value or economic contribution in the productivity of the lands.

This plan sets forth strategies for creating a future conservation network for the Town of Gardiner, one that takes into consideration the needs of wildlife and people. This network will be composed of different components. Large “hubs” of conservation lands such as the Mohonk Preserve, Minnewaska State Park, and the Awosting Reserve are the building blocks of this network. Other important hubs include the many active farms and orchards in the valley that help to maintain our water resources, serve as wildlife corridors, protect scenic viewsheds and buffer the existing protected open spaces. The “hubs” are tied together with rivers, streams and wetland corridors. These lands may not all be permanently protected, but there are ways to ensure that their open space value is not lost forever.

The goal of this plan is to establish a framework for the town to provide tools to maintain this conservation network in Gardiner. In addition to permanent conservation, this might include incentives to ensure that the economic value of farming is competitive with the value of the land for development. Or it might include thoughtful placement of new development in a way that does not fragment the town’s conservation network.

With the willing participation of landowners, and a compendium of financial resources, tools and options, we can create an interconnected conservation network in Gardiner to preserve the extraordinary landscape of this community, our home.

The Call for Conservation

Gardiner is quickly being discovered for its exceptional quality of life, scenery and solitude, among many of its other assets. The late 1980s and 1990s were an important period for growth in Gardiner, with the vast majority of suburban development occurring during this time. In the 1990s, Gardiner’s population increased by more than 20%, second in the county only to the Town of Rochester. As highlighted in the Town’s 2004 Comprehensive Plan, “more housing was built in the 1990s, than in any previous decade in the post-war era.”

As is the trend in much of the Hudson River Valley, growth is creeping upward from urban areas such as New York City. For example, 18% of home buyers in Gardiner between 2001 and 2004 were from New York City zip codes (as compared with 13% for Ulster County).

Most of the newfound interest in Gardiner is in the form of single-family homes. While one (or even several) individual homes may seem benign, the cumulative effect of single-family homes spread over the landscape can be devastating to the town’s open space resources. This pattern puts pressure on water resources and leads to fragmentation of the town’s forests, wetlands, natural habitats, wildlife corridors, and farmlands. These

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types of resources depend on large, uninterrupted blocks in order to maintain properly functioning systems. It also leads to fragmentation of the town's viewsheds. Thus, one of the major challenges for the town is to minimize to the highest degree possible the fragmentation of natural, visual and agricultural resources.

Open Space Planning Process

This open space planning process is an implementation action from the town's 2004 Comprehensive Plan. The town's Comprehensive Plan included important recommendations on open space protection including the following major headings:

- Develop local policies to improve protection of the major aquifers in town
- Improve protection of the Shawangunk Ridge
- Improve protection of the Shawangunk Kill, the Wallkill River, and other waterways in the town
- Develop and implement a formal open space preservation plan
- Improve opportunities for public access to recreation-related open space and waterways to enhance recreation opportunities and reduce trespassing on private lands
- Continue cooperative efforts with the Mohonk Preserve, the Nature Conservancy, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, and other land stewardship organizations on the Shawangunk Ridge to manage visitor impacts
- Build partnerships with the appropriate land stewardship organizations to manage protected open space in the community, particularly on the Shawangunk Ridge
- Complete an inventory of important biodiversity features in Gardiner

The Comprehensive Plan also included major recommendations related to agricultural preservation and protection of historic resources, as well as recommendations on managing future growth and development in the town. The Comprehensive Plan approaches planning for future settlement based on a more compact and conservation-oriented pattern. Examples include its recommendations to "create a system of incentives to achieve desired land use patterns," "encourage cluster development as the preferred pattern of development for major subdivisions," and "encourage village-density and attached housing in hamlet areas." There is an explicit connection between open space and resource conservation and well-planned settlement patterns that respect natural and cultural resources.

The major goal of this plan is to inventory the town's open space resources and identify priorities and strategies for their conservation. Through this process, many of the town's Comprehensive Plan goals will be addressed.

There were many partners in Gardiner's open space planning process. The town led the way by initiating, sponsoring, and financing the plan. The Gardiner Open Space

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Committee of 14 volunteer members representing all constituencies (Town Board, Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, building inspector, business, agricultural, environmental) held monthly meetings, provided guidance for the project, and helped to extend outreach to the public and Gardiner landowners. Professional open space planners, Behan Planning Associates, LLC helped the Open Space Committee identify priorities and strategies for conservation. They also helped the committee conduct public outreach upon which the plan was based. It was hoped that all Gardiner citizens would participate in this planning process. The community identified open space conservation values, and motivated the actions chosen to implement the plan. Many community members have contributed their time by participating in monthly Open Space Committee meetings, assisting with resource inventory efforts, and by talking to others about the open space plan.

The open space planning process began in the summer of 2005 with resource inventory, community participation, and data analysis. On September 19, 2005, a public workshop was held to obtain feedback on conservation values and priorities within the town. At this workshop, the community expressed a desire to see a balanced conservation of resources throughout the town, including the ridge, aquifers, wetlands, streams, working farmlands, woodlands and historic and scenic landscapes.

An additional workshop was held on November 21, 2005. This workshop's agenda was to review a list of detailed conservation priorities that evolved from the September 19, 2005 workshop, and through consultation with landowners and natural resource experts. These priorities were organized by theme: natural systems, working landscapes, and cultural and recreational resources. The results of this workshop helped to confirm the conservation values and priorities that serve as the basis for the plan recommendations (see the following section).

A focus group session was held on April 17, 2006 to review draft rating criteria for biodiversity and natural systems. This focus group session brought together many parties working on biodiversity in the town, including the Green Assets Program of the Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership, staff and professional volunteers of Hudsonia, Ltd., representatives from the Biodiversity Outreach Program of the Hudson River Estuary Program (state DEC), researchers from Bard College, and many other experts in the town and region's biodiversity resources. The purpose of the meeting was to review the outcome of the rating criteria and to ensure that the criteria resulted in a diverse network of the town's most significant resources. This meeting helped to confirm the priority areas that were established through the rating criteria.

Landowners in the town are perhaps the most critical open space partner. Landowner partnership is vital to the conservation of open space and this topic will be discussed in detail in further chapters of this plan. Many town landowners have been consulted individually through this planning process. Additionally, a large-acreage landowner focus group meeting was held on August 15, 2005. The purpose of this meeting was to solicit concerns and opportunities from landowners related to open space conservation and particularly farmland protection. The message taken home from this meeting was that

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the open space plan should identify fair and equitable solutions for landowners to voluntarily participate in open space conservation, and that they should be justly compensated for the value of their land in such a process. This notion has been considered as the primary driving force behind the plan recommendations.

Priorities for Open Space Conservation

The resource priorities in this plan were identified through a variety of public outreach methods discussed in the previous section, including community workshops and focus group sessions, monthly committee meetings (open to the public), a community survey, and earlier public meetings related to the town's comprehensive planning process.

All of these public input sessions have helped to confirm the community's call for balance in resource protection, with aquifer and water resources, farmlands, and wildlife habitat protection consistently at the top of the list. Also of lesser but significant importance to the community is the protection of scenic, cultural and historic resources and the provision of recreational and trail opportunities. It should be noted that there is a great deal of overlap between all of the priority resource categories. For example, many of the priority conservation areas identified in Chapter 4 of this plan provide overlapping benefits for protection of water resources, farmlands, and wildlife habitat, while also providing scenic views.

Introduction to the Plan's Major Components and Terms

Chapter 2 provides a **resource inventory and analysis** of Gardiner's **natural systems** (rivers, streams, wetlands, and other wildlife habitats), **working landscapes** (farms, orchards and forests), and **cultural and recreational landscapes** (trails, scenic roads, and historic buildings). Associated maps are located in Appendix A.

Chapter 3 includes a **Conservation Planning Areas Map** and summary, which identifies important landscape "character areas" of the town and the resources within them. The **conservation planning areas** are geographic areas of the town that have similar landscape-level features. They provide a useful framework for envisioning open space resources at the town-wide scale. A summary of the community values, conservation goals, and recommendations for each planning area is also provided in this chapter.

Chapter 4 outlines a **Priority Conservation Network Map** for the town, which consists of **conservation hubs**, or large areas of significance for conservation (such as core farm areas or the Plattekill Gorge area) and **conservation corridors** (such as the wildlife connections between the Shawangunk Mountains and the Wallkill River). A discussion of the major resources within each priority conservation area is also provided (Chapter 4).

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Chapter 5 provides a **Strategic Plan of Action** for achieving the conservation goals of the community. The plan recommends a proactive approach to achieving the priority conservation network, partnering with interested and willing landowners (Chapter 5).

The distinction between the Conservation Planning Areas in Chapter 3 and the Priority Conservation Network in Chapter 4 is an important one. The conservation planning areas identified in Chapter 3 provide a framework for *all* future actions within the town, including planning, development and infrastructure decisions at the town-wide scale. They identify important natural and cultural resources, and those that are valued by the community, so that future actions in the town can take them into consideration. Chapter 3 should be consulted, for example, as the town reviews development proposals, as the town considers adding a new road, or as new gateways for tourism are developed. The priority conservation areas identified in Chapter 4 are strategic areas for focusing conservation actions. They are specific areas and corridors for focusing future investment and planning efforts with willing landowners and other conservation partners. These special areas merit enhanced planning protection and community investment, to support the conservation goals identified in this plan.