

Dear City Manager and members of the City Council:

In the fall of 2015, Jim Gailey, City Manager, and Tom Blake, Mayor (then, City Councilor), asked the Conservation Commission to review an Excel spreadsheet of City-owned or –controlled properties (the “Master List”) to determine whether any of those listed parcels might have conservation potential. The Commission agreed to do a preliminary screening of the Master List and to volunteer Commission members to an ad hoc committee that might be established with the objective of conducting a more rigorous review in an effort to further reduce the number of surplus properties across the City.

During the fall of 2015 through the early winter of 2016, the Commission created an Open Space Strategic Plan achieving this very objective. The framework and purpose of the Open Space Strategic Plan began with the Commission identifying parcels of City-owned open spaces that were of particular conservation and/or ecological resource value and which could therefore be preserved through one of the following methods:

1. Conservation easement(s);
2. Deed restriction; or,
3. Open space zoning district

The Commission screened the 231 City-owned properties contained in the Master List and first targeted unimproved parcels or areas of land or water, the preservation of which might accomplish any of the following ecosystem enhancement objectives:

1. Conserve and enhance natural or scenic resources
2. Protect water quality
3. Promote conservation of soils, wetlands, beaches, or tidal marshes
4. Enhance the value to the public of abutting or neighboring parks, trails, forests, or nature preserves
5. Enhance passive recreation opportunities

As an initial point of reference, the Commission reviewed the City’s Open Space Strategic Plan (2001) to identify evaluation criteria which could be helpful in screening and prioritizing properties, including:

1. **Quality of Life/Neighborhood Need** – Degree to which there are opportunities for improved physical and psychological health and for related social and community services. Degree to which the neighborhood in question already has protected open space.
2. **Natural System** – Degree to which the site provides for ground water recharge and storage, climate moderation, flood control and storm damage prevention, air and water pollution abatement, etc.
3. **Wildlife Habitat** – Degree to which the parcel provides feeding, breeding, migratory corridors, and wintering places for game and non-game animal species.
4. **Scenic/Aesthetic** – Degree to which the site contributes to the beauty and character of the landscape making the area a more pleasant and desirable place to live; an essential element of urban design.

5. **Recreation** – Degree to which there are recreational opportunities ranging from fishing, bow-hunting, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, and boating to more passive activities such as walking, reading, and nature observation.
6. **Open Space Connections** – Degree to which the parcel provides a link in an existing or potential chain of parks, walkways, or open spaces.
7. **Buffer** – Degree to which the open space would provide a buffer between residential neighborhoods, parks, or other sensitive areas and such more intensive land uses as commercial and industrial areas, major roadways, rail yards, and airports in terms of views, noise, and other objectionable emissions or impacts.
8. **Historic/Cultural** – Degree to which the open space fosters a sense of place and community due to its historic significance or traditional role in the community.
9. **Regional** – Degree to which the open space would provide benefits to more than one community.
10. **Educational** – Degree to which the site provides opportunities for learning about nature, history, and local interests.
11. **Production** – Degree to which natural resources are provided that are important to the local economy such as timberland, farmland, pastureland, and fisheries (including shellfish and lobster production).

The first step in the Commission’s process involved eliminating parcels from further consideration for obvious reasons. We noted that many of the properties on the Master List were either (a) already being conserved, protected, maintained, or deed-restricted by the City or (b) were too small or too large for the Commission’s assigned project scope. Properties falling within one of these two groupings were removed from the list of potential parcels on a preliminary basis. Our research at this phase was completed either via on-site visits, Google Maps/Earth, and/or the City’s GIS/Accessor’s Database.

Upon removing all City-owned spaces that (a) did not fit the Commission’s project scope, (b) were of no conservational value, and (c) were recorded as having zero acreage (presumably a boundary line), the Master List shrunk from 231 to 89 potential open space properties worth further consideration. The remaining 89 properties fell into six general categories:

1. 2001 Strategic Plan Parcels
2. Buffer Parcels
3. Tax-Acquired Lands
4. Trails, Walkways, & Greenways
5. Undeveloped Park Parcels
6. Water Sources and Access Right of Ways

Following the Commission’s categorization of “eliminated” or “retained” parcels, it recommended that the City consider the open space parcels or areas of land or water as a preliminary screening, which might be streamlined further if an ad hoc committee reduced the number of open spaces under consideration by establishing additional guidelines.

Taking this instruction, Josh Reny, Assistant City Manager, met with David Critchfield, Chairman of the Conservation Commission, Chad MacLeod, Secretary of the Commission, and Steve Jocher, President of the SP Land Trust, over the winter of 2016 to identify next steps in this open space strategic process. The

result of those meetings was, as the Commission had suggested, the creation of an ad hoc committee consisting of citizen volunteers, Commission and Land Trust members, and City personnel. The group was created under the leadership of Mr. Reny and first met on May 26, with their second, and most recent meeting, held on June 15. A third meeting is scheduled later this month (July), TBD.

The first meeting (May 28) was the initial meet-and-greet phase of the project. Members introduced themselves and a chairman was selected – Chad MacLeod, Secretary of the Conservation Commission. Mr. MacLeod considered the project evolving through four main phases, which he presented to the committee:

1. **Research** – What have other cities and municipalities in the state of Maine and across the country done in their attempts to manage, maintain, and implement their open space planning efforts? What has the City of South Portland done in past and in recent attempts to tackle this effort (e.g., Open Space Plan of 2001, Conservation Commission open space preliminary research)?
2. **Evaluate** – Of the 230+ "open space" properties listed on the City's master list, which should our committee eliminate from our efforts and which should we retain and examine in greater detail? In other words, which are truly valuable "open space" properties? This will entail taking input from our research and determining a clear and concise methodology that aligns with outsiders' efforts, our City's previous efforts, and innovative strategies and goals via our group-think exercises. Whittling the list will, in part, be determined by our committee's commitment and interest in the length and extent of this project – whether that be a one-and-done, modular, or all-or-nothing approach, that will be decided.
3. **Prioritize** – Once we've narrowed our list of truly "open space" properties down to a manageable, palatable list, perhaps organized by type of space (e.g., school, tax-acquired parcel, established park, greenbelt path, etc.), we should further prioritize those parcels by assigning them some type of value or ranking so that we have a view of which properties need action most immediately.
4. **Act** – Once we tread through the tough part of determining which parcels are of most interest to our committee, we will next need to identify and determine what we intend to do with them. This will perhaps be the lengthiest, most difficult part of this entire process.

The Committee's homework assignment following this initial meeting was to start with the first task: Research. However, in looking through a number of resources, including researching what the City has done in the past, it became clear from committee members' emails – questions, concerns, thoughts, ideas – that there were still a number of questions yet to be answered which should have been clustered as part of precursor to the research phase. Furthermore, each of these committee members, many seeing the Master List and familiarizing themselves with open space plans for the first time, came to the table with unique mindsets, different from earlier strategic iterations, which needed to be considered carefully and thoroughly.

With those various components left unkempt, the process could easily have become (a) unmanageable, (b) futile, (c) despairing, or (d) all of the above if not thoroughly prepared and formulated with the appropriate groundwork.

While the general framework above was still applicable to our processes, it became clear that not only did each of those tasks (i.e., research, evaluate, prioritize, act) contain a number of sub-tasks worthy of our consideration, but also that there was a huge step preceding this four-step plan paramount to our

understanding, interest, and overall success. That precursor was a solid goal-setting/project expectation exercise – articulating clear statements about what we/the community seeks to achieve with this project.

For the committee's second meeting (June 15), members present discussed logistics and expectations of the group, taking a step back to design and identify an approach. Questions examined included, among others:

1. Why did each of us sign up for the committee?
2. What are each of our expectations for this project? What do each of us want to get out of the open space planning process?
3. What do we think the broader community would hope to get out of the open space planning process?

A consistent outcome of these conversations led committee members to question the resources available to them throughout their project's duration, based on previous attempts unable to realize open space strategies. For example, what sort of funds does the subcommittee have to implement our plan – City funding, grant funding, partnership funding, volunteership? Are other City organizations available to partner with the committee to help realize our objectives? Should the committee look for non-City department partnerships or will key City personnel be available to help the committee along the way? What kind of interest and support does the committee have from the City Council? What are the City Council's expectations and motivations of the process? And what procedures will be entailed within City Council in realizing the committee's expected objectives?

Additionally, it was asked of Steve Puleo, Planning Department, to construct a GIS overlay of the City-owned parcels to help the committee members visualize the parcels, their placial and spatial characteristics. It was agreed that doing so would inform next steps. A presentation of this mapping is anticipated at the committee's next meeting, TBD.

Looking ahead, the committee will continue to make concrete its thoughts and intentions in regards to what it hopes to achieve with the open space project, including how exactly it can capture and execute its plan, before moving on to the research phase defined above, as this precursor will directly inform each subsequent task.

We ask that should the City Council or other key City personnel have any input or suggestions to the committee's process, or may provide insight to any of the above areas of concerns (e.g., available resources), to please feel free to reach out to the Open Space Committee's chairman, Chad MacLeod (cmacleod039@gmail.com), at any time. We truly look forward to working with you, collaborating to design and execute this open space strategy both effectively and efficiently.

Sincerely,

Chad MacLeod
Chairman, Open Space Committee