3.4 Develop an Open Space Plan

5 – 55 Points

Action Updates

This action has been revised for the **current certification cycle**. A version of this action from the prior program year is available for comparison. Edits are highlighted in yellow. (Last updated 2020)

Objective

Plan for and protect land for open space preservation and for the economic vitality of working lands.

Complementary Action:

- Create a Natural Resource and Wildlife Inventory

What to Do

1. Complete an open space inventory. Please complete the attached inventory template (see the background document for additional information). **(10 points)**

   The inventory should include:

   - Protected agricultural lands. You may choose to include PA-490 properties, but they should not be considered legally protected;
   - Open space protected by conservation easements;
   - Open space property owned by local, state or federal governments;
   - Water company owned open space and protected drinking water watershed lands;
   - Land trust owned or protected open space; and
   - Unprotected or perceived open spaces can be included in the inventory, but they must be identified as unprotected.

   Submit: A copy of your completed inventory. You may also submit a map layer with the attached template included as an attribute table. You may also use the geodatabase created for Sustainable CT to depict your map layer. You may receive this geodatabase by emailing info@sustainablect.org.

   Timeframe for Credit: Eligible for new action credit and rolling credit. This action falls under the action type "Websites, Maps, Inventories, Checklists, Assessments, Plans, Ordinances, Policies, Regulations and Resolutions" (see "Timeframe for Credit" Guidance Document for submission requirements).

2. Prioritize resources for protection. Resources might include locally-important agricultural soils, farmland, forests, wetlands, recreation, riparian protection, habitat corridors, or other. You are not required to include specific properties in your town. **(5 points)**

   Submit: A completed worksheet 1.

   Timeframe for Credit: Eligible for new action credit and rolling credit. This action falls under the action type "Websites, Maps, Inventories, Checklists, Assessments, Plans, Ordinances, Policies, Regulations and Resolutions" (see "Timeframe for Credit" Guidance Document for submission requirements).

3. Develop an open space plan that will prioritize acquisitions, enhance your local ecosystem, connect open space parcels, offer recreational benefits, and ensure long-term viability of your open space (including management policies). **(10 points)**

   Submit: A copy of your open space preservation plan formally adopted by your governing body (inclusion in your Plan of Conservation and Development is acceptable) and a completed worksheet 2. Include how your plan will prioritize future acquisitions, enhance your local ecosystem, connect open space parcels, offer recreational benefits, and ensure long-term viability of your open space.

   Timeframe for Credit: Eligible for new action credit and rolling credit. This action falls under the action type "Websites, Maps, Inventories, Checklists, Assessments, Plans, Ordinances, Policies, Regulations and Resolutions" (see "Timeframe for Credit" Guidance Document for submission requirements).

4. Protect open space.

   The more you do, the more points you earn.

   a. Legally protect municipally owned open space. **(10 points)**

   - If not completed in your inventory, perform a legal review for municipally owned properties to ensure that they are protected in perpetuity.
   - Ensure that municipally owned properties are legally protected.

   Submit: If not in your inventory, include the legal review. Ensure that all listed municipally owned properties are legally protected, if a property cannot be protected please indicate why.

   Timeframe for Credit: Eligible for new action credit and rolling credit. This action falls under the action type "Websites, Maps, Inventories, Checklists, Assessments, Plans, Ordinances, Policies, Regulations and Resolutions" (see "Timeframe for Credit" Guidance Document for submission requirements).

   b. Increase preserved open space in your community. **(5 points)**

   Submit: Documentation of open space acquisition (you may work with partners). Documentation might include a list of property acquisitions/dates purchased, meeting minutes, etc.

   Timeframe for Credit: Eligible for new action credit and rolling credit. This action falls under the action type "Outreach, Education, Programs, Campaigns, Recognition/Designation in External Program, and Funding" (see "Timeframe for Credit" Guidance Document for submission requirements).

   c. Improve open space parcels (i.e., improving habitat, improving access, etc.). ***Note:*** Remediating invasives will not count for points under this action, and improvements must be outside of routine maintenance. **(5 points)**

   Submit: Documentation demonstrating continuous improvement, citing specific projects.

   Timeframe for Credit: Eligible for new action credit and rolling credit. This action falls under the action type "Outreach, Education, Programs, Campaigns, Recognition/Designation in External Program, and Funding" (see "Timeframe for Credit" Guidance Document for submission requirements).

   d. Establish an open space acquisition fund. **(10 points)**

   Submit: Documentation establishing the fund, noting the dollar amount available in fund and the date on which it was established.

   Timeframe for Credit: Eligible for new action credit and rolling credit. This action falls under the action type "Outreach, Education, Programs, Campaigns, Recognition/Designation in External Program, and Funding" (see "Timeframe for Credit" Guidance Document for submission requirements).

Timeframe for Credit

Actions can either be “New” or considered for “Rolling Credit.”

New Action Credit. Any action completed within the past three years (from January 1 of the year seeking certification) is eligible for potential certification points. If you are applying for recertification in your year of expiration, you may not claim New Action Credit for items that previously received credit.

Rolling Credit. For any action older than three years (from January 1 of the year seeking certification), you must demonstrate ongoing, currently relevant, and meaningful impact in your community to be considered for certification points. If you are applying for recertification in your year of expiration, you must apply for Rolling Credit for any item that previously received credit, even if it was completed within the past three years.

View the “Timeframe for Credit” Guidance Document for detailed submission requirements.

Engaging Partners

Sustainable CT encourages regional collaboration and other forms of partnership. For every action, please complete the “Partners” box in your submission, indicating the name(s) of any municipalities and/or organizations you partnered with (if any) and a brief description of your municipality’s role. If you collaborate with other municipalities, each community will receive points. For additional information, please see the "Partners Guidance Document".

Potential Municipal and Community Collaborators

Staff from the planning and zoning, parks and recreation, public works, and economic development departments could be helpful in implementing this action.

In addition, the planning and zoning and conservation commissions, as the commissions responsible for the Plan of Conservation and Development and conservation issues within the community, respectively, are the most likely lead entities for this action. Other groups that might be involved include the inland wetlands commission, agriculture commission, economic development commission, local land trust(s), water utilities, and state, regional (council of governments), and federal partners could help implement this action.

Funding

If available, below are potential funding sources specific to this Action. For a complete listing of potential funding opportunities to assist with implementing Sustainable CT Actions, please visit the Sustainable CT Grants Portal, which is searchable by Action. Please also visit the Support for Your Town page for opportunities for technical assistance and other supports.

- Municipal Grant Program (MGP)
- Urban Act Grant Program
- 2021 Sustainable CT Community Match Fund
- Restoration & Resilience COVID Recovery Fund
- Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program
- Urban Green and Community Gardens Grant Program

- CT Department of Agriculture, Farmland Preservation Program, Farmland Preservation Application, Community Farms Preservation Program Application

Resources

Toolkits, Calculators, Guidance Documents, General Information

- Connecticut Environmental Conditions Online
- CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, “Connecticut’s Comprehensive Open Space Acquisition Plan”
- American Farmland Trust & Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, Planning For Agriculture Guide for Connecticut Municipalities
- CT Department of Agriculture, “Farmland Preservation Program”
- Connecticut Farmland Trust, “Conservation Options for Connecticut Farmland”

- CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, "Connecticut Open Space Webpage"
- The Nature Conservancy, "Resilient Sites for Terrestrial Conservation in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic Region"
- Margot Burns, RiverCOG, "The Lower CT River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange Natural Resource Based Strategic Conservation Plan: A GIS Analysis"
- Gibbons, Jim, CT Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO), "Open Space Planning"
- CT Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) and CT Sea Grant, "Managing Open Space"
- The Nature Conservancy, "Greenprint Resource Hub"
- US Environmental Protection Agency, EnviroAtlas
- The Trust for Public Land, ParkServe

Organizations and Relevant Programs

- Connecticut Land Conservation Council
- Connecticut Farmland Trust
- Connect the Connecticut
- Connecticut Conservation Districts
- North Atlantic Landscape Conservation Cooperative
- National Conservation Easement Database
- The Trust for Public Land

Why This Matters

Open space is defined in Connecticut State Statutes and further interpreted by the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's Green Plan, as:

"Any area of undeveloped or relatively natural land, including forest land, land designated as wetland under section 22a-30, and not excluding farm land, the preservation or restriction of the use of which would (A) maintain and enhance the conservation of natural or scenic resources, (B) protect natural streams or water supply, (C) promote conservation of soils, wetlands, beaches or tidal marshes, (D) enhance the value to the public of abutting or neighboring parks, forests, wildlife preserves, nature reservations or sanctuaries or other open spaces, (E) enhance public recreation opportunities, or (F) preserve historic sites."

Connecticut's open spaces, including agricultural land, bring tremendous value to the state, municipalities, residents, businesses, and tourists, not to mention the ecological value to support species diversity and success. All undeveloped land may become developed, unless protected. Balancing development with preservation is a challenge, but one that your community can overcome by establishing an open space/agricultural land preservation plan. Your plan should not only consider the outright protection (via fee-simple purchase and acquisition of conservation easements) but also the improvement of economic vitality of working lands. This plan may fit part and parcel with your municipality's Plan of Conservation and Development.

Recognizing the threat of loss of environmental resources to changes in land use, the State of Connecticut set a goal of protecting 21% of the state's land by 2023 for public open space. Of this 21%, 10% is to be acquired by the State of Connecticut, to be held and managed by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. The remaining 11% is to be acquired by municipalities, private non-profit land conservation organizations, water companies, and/or the federal government. It is important to note that the statewide goal does not directly translate to guidance that each municipality should seek to protect 21% of their municipal area. It's up to you to identify your community's protection goals.

Benefits

By thoughtfully balancing open space preservation with development, you can limit suburban sprawl and design your community to retain and highlight its natural features and environmental services.

By protecting your agricultural lands and working farms, you will increase your region's food security.

By protecting open space, you:

- preserve wildlife habitat;

- reduce pollutants and improve air and water quality, which will lead to improved health and quality of life for

your neighbors, plants, animals, and beneficial insects (like native pollinators);

- support and enhance the storm buffering capacity of your natural systems (e.g. wetlands);
- sequester carbon; and
- improve and enhance aesthetics, increasing the economic vitality of open space and allowing opportunities for recreation for current and future generations to enjoy.

CT Success Stories

- Vernon - Oct 2019 Certification
- Woodbury - Oct 2019 Certification
- Bolton - Oct 2020 Certification
- Stonington - Oct 2020 Certification
- Stratford - Oct 2020 Certification