



Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor

City of Newton, Massachusetts

Department of Planning and Development

1000 Commonwealth Avenue Newton, Massachusetts 02459

Telephone
(617) 796-1120
Telefax
(617) 796-1142
TDD/TTY
(617) 796-1089
www.newtonma.gov

Barney S. Heath
Director

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 19, 2020

TO: Councilor Albright, Chair of the Zoning and Planning Committee
Members of the Zoning and Planning Committee

FROM: Barney Heath, Director of Planning and Development
Jennifer Steel, Chief Environmental Planner

RE: **#178-20 Adoption of the Open Space and Recreation Plan Update**
DIRECTOR OF PLANNING requesting discussion of the 2020-2027 Open Space and Recreation Plan, a letter stating that the Zoning and Planning Committee reviewed the Plan, and adoption of the plan as an amendment to the 2007 Comprehensive Plan.

MEETING DATE: March 23, 2020

CC: Planning Board
Luis Perez-Demorizi, Open Space Coordinator
Nicole Banks, Commissioner of Parks, Recreation, and Culture
Jonathan Yeo, Chief Operating Officer

Summary

The Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is an important municipal planning document and required for state grant eligibility. It provides an inventory of all existing areas of recreational use and open space (City owned and privately owned) and a list of goals and priorities for municipal actions regarding land acquisitions, recreational facility and open space improvements, and accessibility improvements. Each OSRP must be reviewed and approved by the state Department of Conservation Services, a part of the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, and is valid for 7 years once approved.

Background

The City's current OSRP is valid from 2014-2020 and has an expiration date of May 31, 2020.

The current OSRP has not been a very valuable tool for the Conservation Office or the Parks, Recreation, and Culture Department. The “priorities” are general and do not outline clear actions for the City to undertake. The Plan lacks information on trail systems, aquatic resources, and athletic fields in Newton. The parcel inventory has been the current OSRP’s primary value.

The priorities for this update of the OSRP are filling in gaps in the inventory of Newton’s open space resources and establishing realistic priority action items that align with the overall community’s needs.

2020 - 2027 Update

For this OSRP update the City hired a team of graduate students from the Conway School for Landscape Design as the consultant to manage the bulk of the OSRP update process. The Conway School was highly recommended by several peer communities and it has brought a fresh perspective to the City’s open space planning processes. City staff instructed the Conway School students to develop an OSRP that meets all state requirements, is concise and readable, and outlines a clear set of goals and priorities, and a realistic list of priority actions that will support the budget process and grant applications.

To kick off the update process, an OSRP Update Committee was assembled. This Committee included representation from City staff, Board and Commission members, and representatives of relevant community organizations. The charge for each Committee member was to reach out to their constituency and serve as a conduit for input and insight. See the list of the full Committee below.

Luis Perez Demorizi	Parks, Recreation, and Culture Dept.
Carol Schein	Parks, Recreation, and Culture Dept.
Al Cecchinelli	Parks, Recreation, and Culture Commission
Justin Traxler	Newton Girls Soccer
Richard Dinjian	Newton Little League
Claire Rundelli	Conservation Office
Jennifer Steel	Conservation Office
Susan Lunin	Conservation Commission/Community Preservation Commission
Gabriel Holbrow	Community Engagement Planning
Jini Farley	Commission on Disability
Jayne Colino	Council on Aging
Quinn Etchie	Youth Commission
Beth Wilkinson	Newton Conservators/Tree Conservancy/Urban Tree Commission
Daniel Brody	Newton Conservators/Trails

Nicole Freedman	Complete Streets/Transportation Planning/BikePed Connectivity
Mike Halle	Safe Routes to School/Complete Streets/BikePed Connectivity
Jeff Zabel	Agricultural Commission/Conservation Commission
Jonathan Yeo	Mayor's Office
Barney Heath	Planning Department

The team of graduate students from the Conway School of Landscape Design includes Rowan Cignoni, Cara Montague, and Samantha Peikes. They worked to review the current OSRP and research many aspects of Newton's history in order to develop a better understanding of the existing open space and recreation infrastructure in the City. City staff from the Conservation Office and Parks, Recreation, and Culture Department assisted with a comprehensive update of the inventory from the current OSRP.

Community Engagement

The Conway team has worked diligently to collect information on Newton's current interests and needs with a robust community engagement process. This started with an online survey available to all residents and a separate survey to Newton's youth. The surveys featured a variety of questions designed to do three things: (1) gather demographic information regarding family size, relative ages, and which village they resided in; (2) gauge current use of open space and recreational resources and what they feel is lacking from those resources; and (3) provide open ended feedback about what improvement projects they would like and what priorities they give to various types of open space and recreational improvements. The surveys garnered over 1,200 responses in the weeks that they were open.

The City and Conway School team then hosted the first public OSRP update meeting on February 6th, 2020 at City Hall in the War Memorial. This served as a way for the Conway School students to get direct input from residents. The meeting involved small group discussions about pros and cons regarding specific open space and recreational resources. This meeting was very well attended with roughly 50 participants providing input. Some of the main feedback points from this meeting were:

- Concerns about the deteriorating quality of Newton's athletic fields and the pressing need for improved maintenance and upgrades where feasible and/or necessary.
- Concerns about the deteriorating quality of Newton's nature trails (like Cold Spring Park and the Cove).
- Concerns about the spread of non-native invasive plant species in natural areas (like Cold Spring Park).
- Concerns about the lack of safe, pedestrian and cyclist-friendly transportation infrastructure connecting open spaces to each other, to schools, and to village and population centers.
- A growing interest in stronger park/open space protections, specifically in the form of Conservation Restrictions.
- A need to expand universal accessibility to and within parks, playgrounds, and natural open space amenities.

From this information the Conway School team identified three focus categories for action: (1) Stewardship (maintaining and preserving existing open space and recreational resources), (2)

Connectivity (creating safe and accessible connections to all of Newton's resources including open space and recreation), and (3) Protection/Acquisition (increasing legal protection on open space and acquiring/creating more equitably distributed open space).

These focus categories were presented at the second public meeting, which was held on March 4th, 2020 at the Price Center in Upper Falls. This meeting focused on eliciting from participants potential priority actions within each focus category. This was a very valuable meeting with roughly 25 participants providing detailed input. The feedback received at this meeting is being condensed and integrated into a first draft of the full OSRP.

Going Forward

We anticipate receiving the first draft from the Conway School on March 23rd (a slight delay because of the COVID-19 situation). As soon as the draft is received, it will be forwarded to all members of the OSRP Update Committee who, in a 72-hour turnaround time, will meet and provide "big picture" feedback and specific comments to the Conway School students. This first draft will also be presented to the Mayor and the Zoning and Planning Committee (ZAP) of the City Council for their review.

City staff will continue to work with the Conway team to develop their final draft (due April 30) and will add the ADA Inventory Appendix and the Public Comment section to that final draft. The full OSRP will then go through ZAP's public hearing process for it to be adopted as an amendment to the 2007 Comprehensive Plan.

Once the full OSRP has been approved by the City Council, staff will submit a preliminary copy to the Department of Conservation Services (DCS) to begin their review, and to other required reviewers (i.e., MAPC). The plan will be valid once conditional approval from DCS is received. Should DCS require any changes, City staff will work to make required edits and resubmit to receive full state approval.