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Open Space Preservation Plan for Roxbury

Roxbury's Open Space Mission Statement

To protect, manage, and maintain within the Town of Roxbury sufficient open space for preserving the natural, historic, cultural, and aesthetic characteristics of the landscape; for providing recreational and spiritual refreshment; for preserving natural diversity and environmental quality, and for sustaining property values and the overall quality of life of the community.

The Challenge and the Opportunity

The Town of Roxbury faces significant challenges over the next decade, most arising from a rapid rate of growth in residential development. The population of Roxbury rose 24% during the 1980s, 17% during the 1990s, and 14% during the first half-dozen years of the 21st century. According to the Connecticut Economic Resource Center, Roxbury had 2,398 people living in 1,098 housing units at the end of 2007. The projected population increase from 2007 to 2012 of 1.4% annually compares with 0.7% for Litchfield County and 0.5% for Connecticut as a whole. This continuing rate of growth puts ever greater pressure on the town to find ways of achieving the two principal goals of the 1999 Plan of Conservation and Development: 1) to preserve the rural character of Roxbury, and 2) to preserve important community features, including

natural, historical, and cultural attributes. Protection of open space is a key element in achieving both of these goals.

Open space is of value economically as well as aesthetically and environmentally. Roxbury has benefited fiscally in the past from new construction, especially of large houses on large lots by part-time and older residents, whose children generally are beyond school age or who attend private schools. But Roxbury's case is unusual. Numerous studies have shown that new housing developments produce less in tax revenues than they cost in terms of municipal services and schooling for additional children. In time, this pattern may prevail in Roxbury. As the town becomes more accessible (through widening of Route 7, for example, or restoration of rail service to New Milford), developers may find it more economical to construct smaller houses for younger families and to build multiple dwellings on large tracts of land. Another spur to development is posed by Connecticut's affordable housing law. It allows builders to override local zoning regulations by including low-income units in large housing projects when towns such as Roxbury do not meet the state-mandated guideline of having 10% low-income housing. This threat is exemplified in Trumbull, which was required by a court in 1992 to allow construction of a 340-unit rental complex on 38 acres because the project included 68 low-income apartments.

The challenge for Roxbury is not to halt growth, which will continue inevitably for some decades to come, but to guide it so as to preserve the town's special character. The change in 2008 from 3-acre to 4-acre zoning was a response to this challenge, approved despite fears expressed by some citizens that it would contribute to changing local demographics by preventing younger families from moving to Roxbury while

forcing older residents to leave town when they wished to move to smaller houses. This zoning change may have only a marginal effect on growth, however; the requirement that residential lots have 250 feet of road frontage, along with restrictions on interior lots and common driveways, also are critical inhibitors of development.

Fulfillment of the Roxbury's Open Space Preservation Plan in cooperation with the Roxbury Land Trust and private landowners would result in a wider, more permanent limitation on growth. The plan, endorsed by the Board of Selectmen in 2002, calls for Roxbury to take advantage of opportunities to acquire parcels of land and conservation easements, especially near the center of town and at its gateways, that will contribute to preserving the rural ambience of Roxbury. In addition, the town should enact regulations to assure that subdivision designs are based on conservation principles and that meaningful set-asides of open space within new subdivisions are consistent with the town's overall open-space goals.

Roxbury's Open Space as of 2008

Of the Town of Roxbury's land area of 16,779 acres (approximately 26 square miles), about 2,980 acres (17.76%) constituted open space that was protected by land trusts or the Town of Roxbury as of April 2008. (This represents an increase of about 750 acres from 2002, when protected open space amounted to 2,229 acres, or 13.4% of the town's land area.) The Roxbury Land Trust accounted for most of the protected open space in the spring of 2008: it either owned or had conservation easements on a total of 2743 acres, thus protecting 16.35% of the town's land area. The Bridgewater Land Trust and the Weantinog Heritage Land Trust together owned about 188 acres in Roxbury

(1.12% of the total), while easements to the Town of Roxbury accounted for about 49 acres (.29%). Approximately 5,000 acres (30%) were devoted to residential use. Meanwhile, other parcels, aggregating 181.71 acres (about 1% of the total), were owned by the Town, the Regional School District, the Roxbury Cemetery Association, local churches, the library, and the senior housing trust. This means that slightly over half the town's land area (about 8,617 acres, or 51.4%) has not yet been committed to a specific use.

Of the 8,600+ acres not yet committed to a specific use, about 5200 (31% of the town's area) are covered under the Public Act 490 program, which provides for reduced tax assessments for farm (1,239 acres), forest (2,574 acres), and open-space (1,394 acres) parcels. This 490-land is perceived as open space but is not actually protected from development. This also is true of parcels aggregating about 191 acres that are owned by utility companies and the State of Connecticut.

The Open Space Preservation Zone

The 1999 Plan of Conservation and Development based a plan for desirable open space on these four principles:

- To create and take advantage to the greatest extent possible of linkages between parcels of open space that are already protected
- To create protective buffers for the important watercourses of Roxbury: The Shepaug River, Jacks Brook, Battleswamp Brook, and Moosehorn Brook
- To protect ridgetops, which generally run north-south through the center and along the eastern border of Roxbury

- To preserve the remaining farms of Roxbury.

Utilizing these principles, the Plan of Conservation and Development envisions a ring of protected open space surrounding the more densely developed center of Roxbury. The larger tracts of land within this proposed ring are relatively undeveloped at present. Most are in the PA 490 tax abatement program and thus are potentially subject to development unless they are protected. To create this green ring, it is necessary to:

- Identify open-space priorities.
- Encourage private landowners to consider dedicating property to open space.
- Cooperate with the Roxbury Land Trust and other interested partners on open space protection.
- Identify and seek funding for open space.
- Maintain a dedicated open space fund for acquisition.
- Consider suitable large tracts of forest for State Forest acquisition.
- Consider open-space issues in subdivision design and reviews.
- Promote greenways.

The Open-Space Preservation Goal

While it is unrealistic to expect that all of the land identified by the open-space plan can be protected by acquisition or easement, it is feasible to preserve a meaningful portion of the town's landscape, cultural resources, and natural diversity. In conformance with the 1999 Plan of Conservation and Development, the Open Space Preservation Plan recommends a goal of approximately 35% of the town's land area, i.e., almost 5,900 of Roxbury's 16,779 acres.

Of the 5,900-acre goal, approximately 2,980 already are protected by the land trusts and the town, either through direct ownership or easements. And of the remaining 2,920 acres, a significant portion (estimated at 1,400 acres in the Plan of Conservation and Development) is unsuitable for development due to the existence of wetlands, watercourses, and flood plains. Another 800 acres (estimated in the 1999 POCD plan) can be protected through sensitive, partial development of larger parcels.

Thus, Roxbury's open-space preservation goal may be achieved protecting as little as 720 additional acres through acquisition or easements.

Objectives and Guidelines

To implement Roxbury's Open Space Preservation Plan, the principal criteria and objectives to be considered when assessing the merits of protecting particular parcels of land whether by acquisition, easement, or set-aside requirements include:

1. Retention of sufficient agricultural and forest land to sustain a variety of farming and forestry operations; particular factors for consideration include size of parcel, types of soil, drainage, and previous use.
2. Protection of wetlands, rivers, brooks, and watersheds to maintain water quality and quantity in the town's aquifer.
3. Protection of rare and significant habitats to maintain biological and botanical diversity.
4. Establishment of buffers, corridors, and other protections to mitigate and reduce the impact of development and to provide for trails and linkages between existing open spaces.

5. Enlargement of protected spaces by the addition of adjacent parcels of land.
6. Protection of significant vistas, ridgelines, and gateways to preserve Roxbury's traditional rural character.
7. Protection of key parcels of open space within the center of Roxbury.
8. Creation and enhancement of recreational areas and parklands.
9. Protection of areas of special archaeological, historical, and cultural value.
10. Realization of the green ring around the center of Roxbury, as proposed in the Plan of Conservation and Development.
11. Availability of land and the degree of threat of development.

Open-Space Protection Opportunities and Choices

Specific parcels of land may be protected in a variety of ways. They include:

- By donation to, or purchase by, the Town of Roxbury or the Roxbury Land Trust.
- By easements, either donated or purchased, by the town or the trust..
- By permanent protection of town-owned parcels.
- By open-space set-asides when subdivisions are created.
- By management agreements.
- By encouraging landowners to protect properties in other ways.

Resources for Implementing the Open-Space Preservation Plan

The Town of Roxbury – and the Conservation Commission, in particular -- will cooperate with many other individuals and entities in order to achieve the goal of

protecting 35% of the town's acreage as open space. Some steps already have been taken, including the creation of the Conservation Commission itself, the formation of an Open-Space Subcommittee, the establishment of a tax-supported land acquisition fund, the development of a comprehensive property index, and the fostering of a close working relationship with the Roxbury Land Trust. Other resources to be developed include GIS, GPS, and digital parcel mapping to support open-space planning and related activities. Another valuable tool would include overlays of the town's open-space map to show potential conservation lands on the basis of such features as wetlands, flood plains, steep slopes, aquifers, large-block woodlands, agricultural lands, significant habitats, scenic views, and cultural and historic resources.

The town and the commission will actively cooperate with:

- In addition to the Roxbury Land Trust, such other organizations as the Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Lands, and the Farmland Preservation Trust.
- The State of Connecticut, especially with regard to its open-space fund and program for acquiring agricultural development rights.
- For technical assistance, the town and the commission will draw upon a wide variety of other sources, including the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Northwestern Council of Governments, Rivers Alliance of Connecticut, federal and state Departments of Environmental Protection, the Land Trust Alliance, the University of Connecticut College of Agricultural and Natural Resources, and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services, as well individuals with expertise in such fields as agriculture, forestry, ridgeline protection, and watershed management.

Carrying Out the Open-Space Preservation Plan

The first task of the Conservation Commission is to identify specific properties that are worthy of protection as open space, based on the eleven listed Objectives and Guidelines. Once parcels are identified, the next step will be to make direct approaches to their owners, asking them to consider permanently protecting their lands as open space through easements, donations, or purchase by the town or some other entity.

The Commission also plans to:

- Cooperate with other town commissions, especially Inland Wetlands and Zoning, with a view to obtaining meaningful set-asides of open space.
- Establish relations with officials, commissions, and land trusts in neighboring towns in order to create and connect protected spaces across municipal boundaries.
- Focus on PA 490 properties within Roxbury that are at greatest risk of development.
- Continue to mount programs on preserving open space, to educate the public and build support for conservation principles and goals.
- Assist the town in developing a system for monitoring easements, including those already given to the town as well as those that may be obtained in the future, whether through assigning this function to a particular employee of the town or by creating a network of volunteer monitors similar to that used by the Steep Rock Land Trust.

OPEN SPACE TABULATION:

Land Use	acreage	percent open space
Open Space: Roxbury Land Trust, including easements within town of Roxbury	2743	16.35
Open Space: Bridgewater and Weantinoge land trusts	188	1.12
Easements to Town of Roxbury	49	.29
Subtotal	2980	17.76
estimated land in proposed greenbelt not suitable for development	1400	8.34
estimated land in greenbelt that can be protected by “sensitive development”	800	4.76
estimated land, mainly in greenbelt, to be protected by acquisition or easement	720	4.29
Subtotal	2920	17.39
Goal: total open space	5900	35.15