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South County Greenspace Protection Strategy

Executive Summary

In recent years, a great amount of attention and effort has focused on the search for new ways to protect the remarkable community character and abundant natural resources that give Washington (South) County its unique “quality of place.” In July 2001, the Washington County Regional Planning Council published *A Shared Future: Washington County in 2020* that called for the creation of a regional plan for preserving and connecting greenspaces. The *South County Greenspace Project* set out to meet this need and to unite the diverse goals of local, state and federal players into a set of physical plans and action strategies for protecting the landscape and quality of life of South County. [A broad partnership, which was funded by the US Forest Service, was formed between DEM, the Washington County Regional Planning Council, the Rural Lands Coalition, four South County Watershed Organizations, Statewide Planning, the Nature Conservancy, URI, local land trusts, the South County Planners and the residents from the nine South County Communities.](#)— To ensure a balanced approach to the way communities plan for growth, the *Greenspace Project* worked closely with the *South County Sustainable Economy Project* and shared information in order to identify suitable locations of future growth that do not impact the region’s valued natural, cultural and recreational resources.

The South County Greenspace Project was designed to bring the process by which open space resources are prioritized into a single system, allowing parties with many different perspectives to work together toward a common goal. To do so, it was consciously designed to avoid the sort of “single-issue ”open space planning that can happen when plans are prepared by a town board or state agency concerned with only one type of resource. This can lead, for example, to open space plans that do a good job of protecting

wildlife habitat while ignoring scenic views. To avoid these problems, the process evaluated three distinct resource types: **natural resources**, such as wetlands, aquifers and wildlife habitat; **cultural resources**, such as historic sites, scenic vistas and rural landscapes; and **recreational resources**, like hiking trails, bike touring routes and water trails. Protection priorities for each of the three resource themes were mapped first, and then overlaid with each other to identify landscapes that are key to South County's visual character and quality of life.

The result of this effort was a set of local and regional maps that identify priorities for each of the three principal themes. Together, these provide the information necessary for state agencies, towns, and non-profit conservation groups to make coordinated decisions about open space protection and management. In some cases, the plan determines specific areas that should be protected (e.g. aquifers and riparian corridors) but, it also is meant to clearly show the networks of natural and cultural resources that exist, and to promote a vision of how they could be united into a permanent network of greenways and greenspaces.

Project Objectives

The *South County Greenspace Project* set out to achieve six overall objectives that would engage local, state, and federal participants in a comprehensive greenspace protection effort:

1. To assist communities to inventory and prioritize natural, cultural and recreational resources.
2. To demonstrate how local greenspace priorities can be linked throughout each town and the region to form continuous corridors of open space that protect resources that cross town boundaries.
3. To explain how each town can more effectively employ land use techniques to protect meaningful open space as land is developed.
4. To demonstrate the multiple values of forestland for recreation, water quality protection, and habitat protection.

5. Identify areas with multiple resource values and promote conservation of landscape character.
6. Clarify priorities of key stakeholders and foster partnerships to achieve shared goals.

Major Findings

The *South County Greenspace Project* demonstrated how local, state and federal partners could work together to promote sustainable growth while helping to save the environment and the quality of life of Rhode Islanders. The project made several important discoveries:

1. Forested river and stream corridors and large blocks of forest adjacent to surface waters were identified as critical to protect biodiversity and water quality.
2. Eleven areas of South County were identified in a “Landscape Preservation Plan” that targets protection efforts on limited areas that contain a rich combination of natural, cultural, and recreational resources. These areas are representative of the traditional landscapes of South County that create its unique “quality of place.”
3. Protection of important natural, cultural, and recreational resources cannot be attained through acquisition alone. The application of creative land use techniques must be employed through the local planning process.
4. The study showed that in every town there are areas that are significant, not because of any one resource, but as a result of a unique combination of natural beauty, historic and cultural value, and recreational opportunities.
5. Within the larger context of the Northeastern United States, South County contains an unusual richness of biodiversity that is important to protect. For example, The Nature Conservancy has identified the 200-square-mile forested area straddling the Rhode Island/Connecticut border as the “Pawcatuck Borderlands.” It is one of the largest blocks of woodlands remaining on the Northeastern Seaboard. Similarly, the Rhode Island Audubon Society focuses its conservation efforts on the Queen River Watershed because of this areas biological wealth. Along the coast, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working

- to expand a network of five significant refuges that protect the watersheds of the fresh and saltwater ponds from Burlingame to the Narrow River.
6. South County contains the largest contiguous areas of farmland in Rhode Island.
 7. With the exception of the coastal plain south and east of Route 1, virtually all of South County has been designated a sole-source aquifer by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Over 90% of the region's population relies on these high-quality groundwater sources for drinking water.
 8. Protection of drinking water is the most important natural resource protection target for the South County communities. The South County Greenspace Project workgroups quickly reached consensus that it is a priority to protect the region's water supplies.
 9. South County is graced with numerous historic sites, scenic resources, and areas of special interest. These "places of the heart" are significant because people connect with them when they characterize where they live. The analysis of cultural resources illustrated how few of these important cultural resources have been preserved.
 10. Existing and potential hiking, biking, and water trails make South County an exciting destination for outdoor recreation. While most of the existing trails are on public conservation land or water bodies, filling the gaps of a regional trail network would greatly increase the recreational value of the region.

Key Recommendations

The following recommendations for action represent key ideas developed by the project volunteers working along with the consultants. These actions intend to help South County achieve the overall project goal of promoting sustainable community development while preserving community character and protecting the environment:

- ❖ ~~Protect the headwaters and tributaries of major rivers and streams by preserving forests associated with them. Areas of greatest concern based on this greenspace protection analysis include the Tomaquag Valley in Hopkinton, the lower reaches of the Wood River, the Beaver River in Richmond, and the headwaters of the~~

~~Saugatucket, Narrow and Potowomut in North Kingstown, and the upper reaches of the Queen River and its tributaries.~~

- ❖ Preserve forested riparian corridors because they act as natural corridors between the region's protected areas, farmland, forests, and key habitats. Forested riparian corridors are critical, not only as habitat for many species of animals and fish, but for protection of surface water quality and groundwater supplies. The most important of these corridors to protect are the Pawcatuck and its tributaries, particularly the Tomaquag, Wood, Beaver and Queen Rivers; as well as the Saugatucket, Narrow and Potowomut Rivers. Another important corridor connects the salt ponds along the coast.
- ❖ By protecting only a relatively small number of key corridors, we can preserve the cultural landscapes that give South County its unique visual character and quality of life. Specific cultural resource protection targets include preserving and enhancing the Village Centers of Kenyon, Shannock, Carolina, and other historic commercial centers.
- ❖ The historic village centers of the region are showpieces in what some may call the, 'Living Museum of South County' and represent existing and future growth centers of population and commerce. These historical and cultural centers require special attention in the form of thoughtful land use regulation and preservation efforts.
- ❖ Using the existing South County Bike Path as a starting point, new multi-use trails could extend north and south to connect the historic seaside communities from Westerly through Charlestown to Wakefield, and from Point Judith through Narragansett and Wickford north into East Greenwich, with a potential link to bike paths under construction in Warwick and Coventry.
- ❖ Eleven areas within the region stand out from the rest because they have high concentrations of natural, cultural, *and* recreational resources. The following places were identified as 'Landscape Preservation Focus Areas':
 1. Chapman Pond-Tomaquag-Canochet Valley
 2. Hope Valley/Arcadia
 3. West Greenwich/Nooseneck
 4. Exeter/Queen River
 5. Belleville/North Kingstown
 6. Beaver River Valley

7. Usquepaug-West Kingston
8. Charlestown/Ninigret
9. Perryville/Matunuck
10. Naarragansett/Pettaquamscutt
11. Upper Saugatucket

These areas are often overlooked by protection efforts that focus on one theme. Most however, can be largely preserved with a combination of acquisition, private management, and careful development that respects the existing character of each site and its context.

Add as additional recommendation

The South County Communities should incorporate the resource maps and land use recommendations from this project into their community comprehensive plans and applicable land use ordinances.

Community Implementation

The South County Greenspace Project succeeded in bringing together many diverse interests and fostered better communication between these groups. As a result, the project generated a high level of public engagement and response. In fact, it has already sparked community implementation before the project was entirely completed.

These actions are summarized here:

- Every town received a set of maps illustrating a comprehensive and up-to-date inventory of its natural, cultural and recreational resources in history. This inventory included a compilation of federal, state, local, and non-governmental data that was previously never assembled in a single set of maps.
- Local protection priorities were mapped and linked into a regional greenspace strategy. Every community received 10 local resource maps and 16 regional maps (shown in Part III of this report), including the underlying geographic information system (GIS) data in electronic format so that it can be easily maintained.

- The multiple values of forestland for recreation, habitat, and water quality protection were demonstrated on the greenspace maps and explained in an educational brochure called *Riparian Buffers & Healthy Watersheds*. The Wood Pawcatuck Watershed Association also produced a report on riparian buffers and river access for the watershed.
- An audit and written report were prepared for each community by Randall Arendt, a national expert, to recommend specific changes to comprehensive plans and zoning and subdivision regulations so towns may preserve meaningful open space and achieve their protection priorities as land is developed. Five communities – Charlestown, Exeter, Hopkinton, North Kingstown and Richmond – are currently working to revise their ordinances to include these recommendations following the lead of South Kingstown, which has adopted the conservation development technique.
- Towns have used the natural, cultural and recreational resource data to update their local comprehensive land use plans.
- Twelve communities have used greenspace project maps to apply for RIDEM open space money in 2002. Six communities were successful and received a total of \$1.98 million dollars to protect 495 acres.
- Local land trusts from throughout the region banded together to form the Washington County Land Trust Coalition to promote better coordination and communication across the municipal boundaries.