

Town of Athol

Open Space and Recreation Plan

2008

April 24, 2008

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- [Appendix E](#): Soils and Geologic Features Map
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Preface

The Open Space and Recreation Committee wishes to thank and congratulate the people of Athol for their participation in producing the content of this report. Every response was vital to accurately represent our Town. We also wish to thank the Athol Daily News for being proactive in covering local, environmental and recreational events.

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1. Plan Summary

This Athol Open Space and Recreation Plan Update aims to meet the economic and social needs of the town without compromising critical natural resources and community character. The plan has been designed to:

- Identify and promote the distinctive features that help define the community
- Preserve the character of the community by encouraging the principles of smart growth development
- Protect critical water resources
- Enhance the community's recreational resources through maintenance and upgrades of existing facilities, greenway connections, and diversification
- Guide commercial and industrial development to protect open space while complimenting local and regional economic growth
- Empower the community to take a proactive role in shaping Athol's future
- Develop a five-year action strategy that pinpoints specific actions to satisfy open space and recreation goals and objectives

2. Introduction

2.1 Statement of Purpose

Formal long-range planning for Athol's open spaces began more than 25 years ago, when the Conservation Commission drafted the "Comprehensive Report on the Natural Resources Plan for the Town of Athol, Massachusetts." Information comprised in that document formed the backbone of the town's first Open Space and Recreation Plan, formally adopted in 1981. Through the coordinated efforts of several town boards and volunteers, many of the plan's recommendations and those of three subsequent revisions in 1986, 1991 and 2000 met fruition.

The list of accomplishments is long and impressive but much remains to be done. While public utilization of open spaces has increased, some recreational facilities have fallen into disrepair due to a lack of funding and personnel. Nonetheless, Athol continues to make progress by securing land for conservation and recreation. Town committees, public/private partnerships and volunteers are improving regulations, developing parks and protecting land through zoning and educating the public.

Nearly 26 years after the original plan was drafted, this Open Space and Recreation Plan update reflects Athol's changing needs. Yet the overall purpose of this update remains largely the same as the original. Meant to act as both a planning and educational tool, this document attempts to direct development to appropriate areas while protecting environmentally sensitive resources, preserving the beauty of the landscape and maintaining lands for recreational purposes. This plan also attempts to broaden public awareness of growth issues that could affect the environmental quality of the town, require tax increases and highlight how residents can play an active role in determining the future of their community.

2.2 Planning Process and Public Participation

The Town of Athol's Open Space & Recreation Committee first assembled on September 28, 2005 and began by familiarizing themselves with Athol's 2000 Open Space & Recreation Survey. It was deduced that using similar questions would give the most accurate trend indicators.

Minor additions were added to existing questions and by December, four additional questions were added including Open Space Residential Design, Transportation, methods for preserving open space, and desire to serve on the committee. The original topics looked at Athol's perceived character, interests in future growth, historical significance, demographics for recreational desires and the housing choices of all ages and family constitutions. A comment section was included.

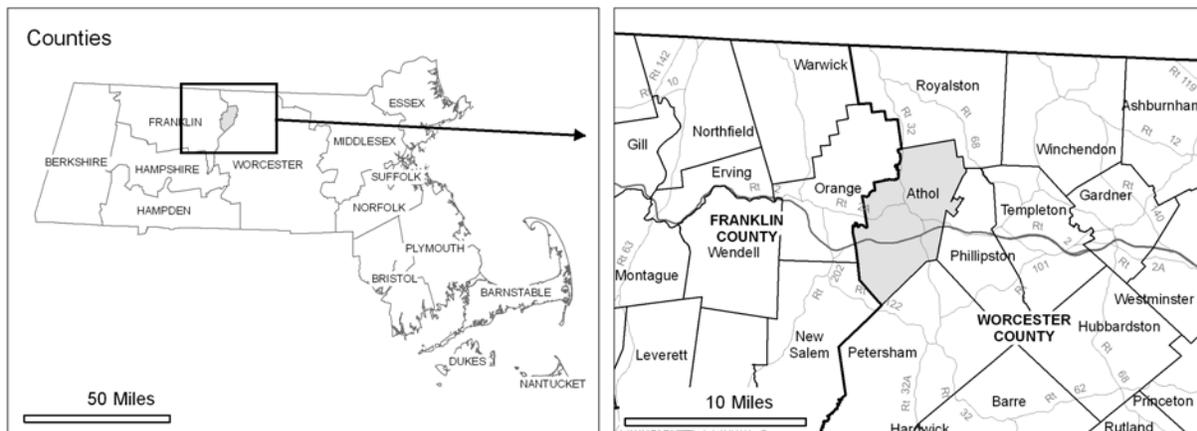
On January 10, 2006 surveys were mailed (one per household) to registered voters. Copies were made available at the town clerk's office. The entire Senior Class at the Athol Royalston Regional High School was polled during school hours. Local press and local radio were utilized as well as a sign in front of Town Hall to create awareness of this survey.

The response of 602 residents (11+ %) was impressive, especially the sincere and in depth thoughts of the comments. Much gratitude to the residents of Athol for making the process a success. The results were compiled by committee members and are expressed in section 6.2 which reflect the trends and resources that determine Athol's overall open space and recreation goals.

3. Community Setting

3.1 Regional Context

The Town of Athol, a historic manufacturing town, is situated in the North Quabbin Region of central Massachusetts, approximately 25 miles west of Fitchburg, 38 miles northwest of Worcester and 72 miles west of Boston. Located within the picturesque Millers River Valley,



Athol offers a unique blend of urban and rural characteristics. The traditional downtown district boasts a variety of shops, restaurants and manufacturers, while the largely undeveloped outer rim offers spectacular views and outstanding recreation opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts. Encompassing a geographic area of 33.4 miles, the community is bordered by New Salem and Orange to the west, Royalston to the north, Phillipston to the east and Petersham to the southeast.

State Route 2, or the Old Mohawk Trail, is Athol's principal highway. One of the oldest designated tourist and scenic routes in the country, the Mohawk Trail extends 66 miles from the Massachusetts / New York line to Millers Falls. Beyond that point, Route 2 connects to northeastern Massachusetts, ultimately linking Albany and Boston. Originating in New Hampshire, Route 202 merges with Route 2 in Phillipston and Athol before continuing on a southwesterly route to the City of Holyoke. Route 32 follows a north-south trajectory, providing access to Royalston and New Hampshire to the north and Petersham to the south. Local roads usher people to and from towns that are not linked via a state highway.

Bus service is provided through G-Link, a cooperative service that connects Greenfield, Orange, Athol, Winchendon, and Gardner. The Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) supplies the western part of the G-Link service and the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) supplies the eastern part. Those living in outlying areas or unable to access regular bus stops may use the Dial-a-Ride transportation service provided by Community Transit Services. Through this service, transportation to work, medical appointments, shopping, and other locations is available. G-Link and Dial-A-Ride utilize the central location and resources of the former Union Rail Station. Athol's closest airport is the Orange Municipal Airport, a General Aviation (GA) facility.

3.2 History of the Community

The European settlement of Athol began in 1735, when Richard Morton, Samuel Morton, Ephraim Smith, John Smeed, and Joseph Lord arrived with their families from Hatfield. Originally called Pequogig after the Native Americans who fished, hunted and cultivated the land, the settlement was renamed soon after John Murray, a major landholder, suggested that the area reminded him of his birthplace in Blair Castle, Atholl, Scotland. The name Athol appeared on the town's charter when legally incorporated in 1762. Land transfers during the early 1800's altered the size and shape of the original 36 square mile township, but Athol's present boundaries have remained constant since 1840.

Originally an agrarian community, an ideal combination of plentiful water and a considerable drop in elevation, helped transform Athol into a manufacturing center during the Industrial Revolution. By 1773, Athol was home to four gristmills, six sawmills, one fulling mill, and one shop with a trip-hammer, all operated by waterpower. These mills serviced the local population, supplying food, building materials, tools, and clothing. Cotton cloth manufacturing was one of the first Athol industries to serve a broader market. The Bennett and Van Valkenburg Cotton Factory, on the present-day site of the L.S. Starrett Company, manufactured cotton cloth and yarn. A scythe factory opened its doors in 1800, and a shop for the manufacture of shoe pegs was built in 1825. Charles M. Lee made shoes here, eventually amassing a considerable fortune. The L.S. Starrett Company was acclaimed in a post-1908 advertising postcard as "the largest plant in the world devoted exclusively to the production of small tools for mechanics." Other

products manufactured in Athol included satinets and blankets, kegs and half-barrels, cribs, cradles, and towel racks. By the middle of the 1800s, Athol's landscape was characterized by factories and mills along rivers, houses and businesses along roads, and most of the uplands cleared for pasture, hayfields, and cultivated fields- approximately 20% of the town remained in scattered woodlands. As agriculture declined in Athol (and all of New England) due to opening of fertile lands in the Midwest and the availability of jobs in factories, former agricultural fields quickly re-grew into young forests.

Athol's manufacturing sector continued to expand well into the 20th Century, resulting in the conversion of large tracts of former forests and farmland to industrial, commercial and residential uses. The factory owners supplied housing close to the factories and the growing population supported a number of businesses that lined the streets of downtown. By 1930, Athol looked much the same as it does today- a highly developed urban center encircled by forests.

Athol remained an important manufacturer until the local economy suffered a series of setbacks beginning in the 1960's and continuing to the present day. Three significant closures or layoffs during the past ten years have dealt a severe blow to the economic and social fabric of the community. Eastern Furniture and Woodland Products closed their doors in 1990, resulting in the combined loss of 110 jobs, and L.S. Starrett Tools laid off 100 workers in 1992. The decline of manufacturing has affected other sectors of the economy as well. The commercial vacancy rate steadily rose from 12% in 1995 to 18% in 1998, surpassing both regional and statewide averages. In 1995, Stuarts Department Store closed resulting in the loss of 20 jobs. In an effort to reverse this trend by attracting new industrial and commercial enterprises, Athol launched a downtown revitalization program. It has also taken advantage of the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program. The TIF program has resulted in both expansion of existing business and development of new business. Recently Athol changed zoning to develop a business park and is currently working with developers. The established Economic and Industrial Corp (EDIC) helps to promote development. The Zoning Bylaw Review Committee is reviewing the zoning to promote smart growth initiatives for both commercial and residential growth. In 2005 the Town received grants to begin its implementation of the Urban Rivers Vision. This vision includes revitalization of the downtown area through efforts to improve upon the Millers River access in the downtown. Recent grants have allowed the Town to engineer and construct (construction to be done by June 30, 2006) an Environmental Park. The park will provide car-top canoe and kayak access to the river as well as providing access to 15 acres of open space. It is located near Fish Park and the Environmental Center. Future plans are to use these assets as the starting point of a greenway (bike trail) that will traverse 6.2 miles from Athol to Orange.

Athol has changed its form of government to a chartered form. This includes a town manager form of government providing day-to-day oversight. The Charter also resulted in the creation of the Board of Planning and Community Development. This Board works with other boards and committees to help implement master plan and open space plan recommendations. Athol is actively pursuing upgrading its infrastructure and facilities through an aggressive capital plan process.

3.3 Population Characteristics

3.3.1 Population

Population growth and density can have important implications for open space and recreation planning. As the community's population and density increases, Athol must meet the recreation needs of that swelling population. In addition, Athol should identify and protect key natural and cultural resources that help define the community before they are overrun by future residential, commercial and industrial development.

Athol was home to (11,229) residents at the time of the 2000 Census (See Table 1). Like other older industrial centers in the region, population growth over the past twenty years has been slow. After experiencing a steady population decline of 8.6% between 1960 and 1980, the town's population grew by 817 persons or 7.7% between 1980 and 1990. This trend was reflected in other cities and older industrial towns throughout the Montachusett Region. Every urban area in the region except Ayer experienced some growth during the 1980s, in contrast to the previous decade when Athol, Ayer, Clinton, Fitchburg, and Gardner declined in population (See Table 1). There are 22 municipalities in the Montachusett Region. Between 1990 and 2000, in this region, the 2000 Census data reveals that only Athol and Fitchburg experiences decreases in population, while other industrial towns in the region have experienced some moderate growth.

Table 1: Population in Montachusett Urban Communities by Decade: 1970-2000

Community	1970	1980	1990	2000	'70 – '80 % +/-	'80 – '90 % +/-	'90 – 00 % +/-
Athol	11,185	10,634	11,451	11,299	-4.9	7.7	-1.3
Ayer	7,393	6,993	6,871	7,287	-5.4	-1.7	16.6
Clinton	13,383	12,771	13,222	13,435	-4.6	3.5	1.6
Fitchburg	43,343	39,580	41,194	39,102	-8.7	4.1	-5.1
Gardner	19,748	17,900	20,125	20,770	-9.4	12.4	3.2
Leominster	32,939	34,508	38,145	41,303	4.8	10.5	8.3
Winchendon	6,635	7,019	8,805	9,611	5.7	25.4	9.2

Source: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 1970-2000

According to the Community Development Plan 2004, prepared by Athol and Dufresne – Henry, Athol's population is projected to grow 1.66% between the years 2000 and 2020. The town's population density of (346.9) people per square mile is high compared to the rest of the Montachusett Region, which is largely owing to Athol's historic development pattern.

3.3.2 Age

An analysis of Athol's age distribution (See Table 2) displays additional planning impacts. Different age groups present different demands and offer distinct possibilities that impact the open space and recreation needs of a community. For example, senior citizens (over 65 years of age) typically require access to public transportation, delivery services and health care. Elderly individuals often prefer passive recreational facilities such as senior centers, community gardens, parks, walking paths, and fishing areas that are relatively close to home. Yet members of this age group rely on small fixed incomes that limit their ability to afford property tax increases. In 2000, (1,940) people or (17.2%) of the population were considered senior citizens (over 65 years

of age). Currently, the elderly population is steadily growing in Athol as the census shows. While the population of Athol itself has decreased, the 65 and over population has increased 2.38% between 1990 and 2000.

Another group that significantly impacts community planning is children. The size of the school age population determines how much money a town must allot to education, usually the largest proportion of a small community's budget. A significant increase in the number of school age children can lead to economic strain; school over-crowding and can change the direction of open space and recreation planning. While adults may be satisfied with passive recreational activities, youth often demand more expensive facilities and recreational programming including playgrounds, skateboard parks, youth centers, summer camps, swimming areas, skating rinks, running tracks, tennis courts, playing fields, and sports programs. The Census reported that 2,875 Athol residents (25.4% of the total population) were under age 18 in 2000. By 2010, population projections predict that the percentage of youth living in Athol will remain constant, at approximately 28%.

Table 2: Athol Population Breakdown by Age 1970-2000

	2000	1990	1980	1970
Under 5	648	946	735	859
5-9 years	761	930	762	1044
10-14 years	928	836	862	1090
15-19 years	825	709	933	904
20-24 years	601	676	814	667
25-34 years	1276	1998	1434	1045
35-44 years	1881	1530	985	1080
45-54 years	1487	953	1042	1457
55-59 years	535	476	632	726
60-64 years	417	502	627	631
65-74 years	848	1002	1052	950
75-84 years	757	665	560	602
85 years +	335	228	198	130

Source: US Census 1970 through 2000

Twenty-eight percent of Athol's 2000 population was between age twenty-five and forty-five. This age group is important to community planning since members are typically employed.

3.3.3 Employment

Athol's residents participate in a wide array of jobs (See Table 3). In 1990, most of the community's 5,346 residents who worked were employed in technical, sales and administrative support, manufacturing, and managerial and professional specialties. Only 3 residents were employed as farmers.

From 1990 to 2000, the percentage of occupations decreased. Manufacturing jobs in Athol declined by (-1.1%), agriculture (-1.2%), construction (-0.7) TCU (-1.4), and wholesale & retail (-4.9%). The only two occupations that had any increase where Finance and Insurance services (1.0%) and Services and Public Administrative (8.1%).

Table 3: Athol Employment by SIC 1990 - 2000

	1990	%	2000	%	Increase/ Decline %
Agriculture	64	1.3%	8	0.2%	-1.2%
Mining	0	0.0%	0	0%	0%
Construction	252	5.2%	230	4.6%	-0.7%
Manufacturing	1609	33.5%	1626	32.4%	-1.1%
TCU	222	4.6%	164	3.3%	-1.4%
Whlse & Retail	906	18.9	702	14%	-4.9%
FIRE	187	3.9%	246	4.9%	1.0%
Services	1561	32.5%	2037	40.6%	8.1%
Total	4801	N/A	5013	N/A	N/A

Source: US Census 1990 & 2000

The Massachusetts Division of Employment and Training sited 253 establishments, employing 3,339 workers, in Athol in 2004. The establishments' total annual payroll was \$100,124,993. Significant levels of commercial and industrial activity are important to a town since income derived from these sources shifts the burden of costly public services away from residents who are less able to afford stiff rates.

Journey to work data from the 2000 Census revealed that (91%) of Athol's working residents drove or carpoled to work. From 1990 the journey to work commute has increased. More than half of Athol's residents who did not work at home commuted less than 15 minutes in 1990, now that figure has increased to (24.6) minutes, indicating that many may be seeking work out of town.

According to the Massachusetts Division of Employment and Training, Athol's unemployment rate was 9.6% in 1990 (See Table 4). The following year, the unemployment rate peaked at 14.9%, but declined steadily over the next several years to a low of 3.1% in 2000 but peaked again at a high of 7.1% in 2003. The rate stood at 6.1% in 2005. These highs and lows mirrored the regional, state and national declines and recoveries from economic declines and recession. It is important to note, however, that Athol's unemployment rate is consistently higher than the statewide average.

Table 4: Athol's Labor Force, Employment & Unemployment Figures

Year	Labor Force	Employment	Unemployment	Unemployment Rate	Statewide Rate
1990	5,258	4,751	507	9.6%	6.0%
1991	5,186	4,412	774	14.9%	9.1%
1992	5,099	4,405	694	13.6%	8.6%
1993	5,128	4,617	511	10.0%	6.9%
1994	4,960	4,533	427	8.6%	6.0%
1995	4,641	4,281	360	7.8%	5.4%
1996	4,506	4,204	302	6.7%	4.3%
1997	4,642	4,322	320	6.9%	4.0%
1998	4,503	4,247	256	5.7%	3.3%
1999	4,452	4,213	239	5.4%	3.2%

2000	5,406	5,237	169	3.1%	2.7%
2001	5,391	5,143	248	4.6%	3.7%
2002	5,491	5,159	332	6.0%	5.3%
2003	5,515	5,123	392	7.1%	5.8%
2004	5,407	5,049	358	6.6%	5.2%
2005	5,300	4,978	322	6.1%	4.8%

Source: Massachusetts Division of Employment and Training

Despite improvement in the unemployment rate, underemployment is a serious issue for Athol residents. A look at resident income levels exhibits lower median household income levels in Athol than in both the Montachusett Region and the Commonwealth. In 2000, Athol's median household income averaged \$33,475, a figure that is significantly less than both Montachusett (\$54,576) and statewide averages (\$50,502). Within the region, the contrast between urban areas and wealthier small communities near the Route 495 beltway is exemplified by high median household incomes in Groton (\$82,869) and Sterling (\$67,188) and low median household incomes in Athol, Ayer (\$46,619), Fitchburg (\$37,004), and Gardner (\$37,334). Not surprisingly, the percentage of Athol households below the poverty line was 9.4% in 2000. Compared to other towns in the Montachusett Region, Athol's poverty rate was rather high, the first being Fitchburg at (15%). The Montachusett Region's average poverty rate is 7%. Athol officials should be mindful of resident income levels when trying to obtain funds for developing and maintaining the town's active and passive recreation facilities. Thankfully, funding sources that do not place a heavy burden on the town's residents are available through miscellaneous state programs.

3.4 Growth and Development Patterns

3.4.1 Patterns and Trends

During the first 150 years since Athol's incorporation, the town's pattern of development was strongly influenced by its rivers and the railroad. The early days of European settlement saw farms scattered along flat-topped ridges running north and south from the town's center, but the need for hydroelectric power transformed Athol into a thriving manufacturing center during the Industrial Revolution. The advent of the railroad in the mid-1800's contributed to Athol's success, ushering in a period of prosperity by providing for the regional and interregional movement of people and goods. Athol's small downtown quickly grew into an urban center where factories monopolized the rail corridor and the banks of Mill Brook and the Millers River. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the railroad station was a focal point for activities and visitors. In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt addressed Athol residents from a platform erected at the railroad station. By 1894, a trolley line linked Athol to Orange, providing more frequent and direct transportation between the town centers.

For most of the twentieth century, Athol's appearance did not change very much. While the advent of the automobile made it possible to develop former woodlots and farmlands on the outskirts of town, innumerable hillsides and the constant threat of flooding limited growth in many areas. According to MacConnell Land Use data, only 10% of Athol's land area was occupied by residential, commercial and industrial development in 1985. However, new technology, the attraction of Athol's comparatively inexpensive housing stock and the

willingness of people to commute longer distances to enjoy “country living” caused a substantial increase in residential growth during the past several years, with the majority of new construction in areas outside the town’s center. Between 2000 and 2006, 255 new construction residential building permits were issued (See Table 5) (See [Appendix A Land Use and Landcover 1999 Map](#)) .

Table 5: Building Permits Issued for New Construction (1990-2006)

Fiscal Year	Number of Permits
1990-91	34
1991-92	24
1992-93	22
1993-94	22
1994-95	21
1995-96	9
1996-97	17
1997-98	15
1998-99	28
1999-00	22
2000-01	33
2001-02	37
2002-03	62
2003-04	41
2004-05	44
2005-06	38
TOTAL:	469

Source: Athol Annual Reports, 1990-2006

The recent housing boom has more than doubled the median sale price of single-family homes in Athol since 2000 when the median sale price was \$75,000. In 2005, the median sale price of single-family homes was \$173,750, a 131% increase. The housing bust of 2006 reduced the median sale price of single-family homes by 9.1% to \$158,000. (Source: The Warren Group)

Athol’s home prices remain more affordable then those of surrounding towns. The median sale price of single-family homes for 2006 in Athol were 3.2% less that those in Orange, 19.6% less than Phillipston, 23.4% less than Gardner, and 69.2% less than Petersham. Only in Royalston were the median sale prices of single-family homes less than in Athol, by 7.2%.

3.4.2 Infrastructure

Athol’s road system is complex because the Town developed as twin villages, divided by the Millers River. The network of roads emanated from the center of town, where business and residential activity were situated. Over the course of the 20th century, the road network gradually expanded to accommodate new residential growth in outlying areas. Today, Athol has slightly more than 100 miles of roadway. The Department of Public Works anticipates that future new road construction will be limited to local (minor) roadways, created as part of residential subdivisions. Using funds from various state chapters, the Highway Division is in the process of

resurfacing roadways. All costs associated with road resurfacing will be reimbursed through various Chapter 90 funds. A large problem is the great number of deteriorating bridges and culvert included in the roadway network. Recently, the Town replaced the bridge on White Pond that spans Ellinwood Brook on White Pond Road

The public water distribution system follows major roadways, supplying approximately 3,595 residences and businesses with water. On May 1, 2000, the Tully Well Field Treatment and Distribution System went on-line. This new facility replaces the Newton Reservoir and the Phillipston Reservoir as Athol's primary source, significantly increasing the Town's capacity and abolishing the need to invest \$4,000,000 in updating Athol's antiquated filter plant. The South Street Well, with a safe yield of 1.4 million gallons per day (mgd) and permitted withdrawal of 1.08 mgd, will serve as Athol's reserve supply. Three water storage facilities augment Athol's supplies: the Garfield Road, High Knob and Main Storage Tank with reported capacities of 0.25, 0.75 and 2.0 million gallons, respectively.

The Tully Wells have the potential to expand available water by more than 2.0 million gallons per day and eliminate the need for the Newton and Phillipston Reservoirs, which previously served as reserve supplies. The Department of Public Works plans to transfer management of the approximately 700-acre Newton Reservoir property to the Conservation Commission, who hopes to use the site for recreational purposes. The Town has not yet determined what to do with the Phillipston Reservoir. With a safe yield of 3.3 mgd, the new Tully Well is more than sufficient to meet the needs of current and future residents.

Throughout the 1990's, the Water Division launched efforts to improve Athol's water distribution system. Storage tanks had to be repaired or replaced and many water lines were worn or rusted to the point that they required replacement. Recent upgrades to the system include the renovation of Main Storage and the High Knob Tank has been cleaned and painted, inside and out. The Garfield Road storage tank was replaced in 2006.

Athol's wastewater collection system is situated along major roadways in the central part of town. Approximately 70% of Athol's housing units are linked to the system. The Town charges user fees based on water usage, which finance the operation and maintenance costs of the system. Athol's sewerage treatment plant, completed in 1971, is located off South Athol Road and discharges treated effluent into the Millers River. The plant is scheduled for a complete upgrade as this plan is being rewritten. This upgrade will address new environmental limits imposed by our discharge permit and also replace many deteriorated pieces of equipment with new efficient technology. The plant's capacity is 1.75 mgd for primary and secondary treatment. Since the plant's normal daily flows average .8 to 1.2 mgd, that capacity appears adequate to meet the Town's needs. However, the Town has a large problem with inflow and infiltration of storm water. During a major storm event and periods of high ground water, flows through the system can exceed 3.5 mgd. This causes the plant to become overwhelmed and poses the threat of violating our discharge permit that could lead to large monetary penalties. One early effort towards correcting the problem involved relining the Cass Meadow Sewer. This eliminated more than 250,000 gallons per day of infiltration when the river is high. A large section of sewer main along Sanders Street has also been replaced. Several other deteriorated sections are scheduled for repair or replacement. A major cause of inflow is direct, illegal connections of

sewer pumps and roof drains into the sewer system. The Town is in the process of implementing a comprehensive inflow and infiltration plan to address this problem.

3.4.3 Long-term Development Patterns

The town of Athol established the Zoning Bylaw Review Committee (ZBRC) in March 2005, with the goal of updating the town's bylaws to address the changes in development and housing needs since the bylaws were first adopted in 1965 (See [Appendix B Unofficial Zoning Map](#)). The committee obtained a grant through the state's Smart Growth Initiative, which permitted them to hire a professional consultant to assist them in this effort.

The Committee presented at the October 2006 town meeting several warrants related to zoning bylaws. Three of the warrants provided new options for residential development. They were Open Space Residential Design (OSRD), Flag Lots, and Accessory Dwelling Units.

OSRD encourages the permanent preservation of open space, agricultural land, forestry land, wildlife habitat, vistas, and other natural resources including aquifers, water bodies and wetlands, and historical and archaeological resources. Flag lots permit 5 acre and larger parcels with less than the minimum street frontage to build one principal building on the lot rather than subdividing the parcel into several housing lots. The Accessory Dwelling Units bylaw permits homeowners to build accessory dwelling units within a single-family home in all residential districts and accessory dwelling units as part of an attached or detach building in the residential C district.

A fourth warrant updated the Groundwater Protection District bylaw to better protect the town's water supplies and assist downtown development.

All the warrants relating to the zoning bylaws were approved at the October 2006 town meeting; reflecting the community's commitment to preserving open space and encouraging smart growth. This commitment was affirmed during the October 2007 town meeting with the approval of a warrant increasing the minimum amount of square footage required for each additional dwelling unit in the Residential C district feet from 10,000 square feet to 44,000 square feet.

The Zoning Bylaw Review Committee will continue to address the town's zoning bylaws. In addition to the ongoing audit of current zoning bylaws consistent with the Master Plan, the ZBRC will propose that the community redefine existing zoning district boundaries to create a larger downtown business district. The committee will also investigate and propose non-regulatory opportunities to encourage future infill development and adaptive reuse of sites in the downtown business district through the writing and implementation of a Strategic Plan for Downtown Revitalization. It is hoped that these changes will attract business to downtown Athol, providing jobs and an increased tax base while at the same time, conserving undeveloped land outside the downtown area. These recommendations will be assembled within a District Improvement Plan, which will include setting forth criteria for Tax Incentive Financing and District Improvement Financing. Future bylaw consideration will also include Ridge Line Protection, Right to Farm, and Transfer of Development Rights.

4. Environmental Inventory & Analysis

4.1 Geology, Soils and Topography

Athol's surficial geology is largely the result of the glacial activity of the Pleistocene era, 11,000 to 1,800,000 million years ago. Great ice sheets estimated up to two miles thick scraped and wore deep grooves to form Athol's landscape. The materials scraped from the underlying bedrock were carried south. As temperatures warmed, the retreating ice sheets left sediments and melt-waters. Glacial tills, consisting of unconsolidated sand, gravel, silt and clay, are today's remnants of that era. Today Athol is gifted with the resultant rivers and streams. Athol's soil is rough and stony on the eastern part of town. Moist soil of good texture blankets the southern and western portions of town, in deposits of large layers of sand, silt and gravel measuring two hundred feet thick and extending over thirteen square miles. Sand and gravel operations have flourished mining these resources. Gneiss, feldspar and mica were mined historically.

4.2 Landscape Character

The Millers River, its several tributary streams and brooks, many ponds, scattered wetlands, rolling hills, steep ridges, forests, and remnant farmlands and meadows lie within the 33.4 square miles that comprise Athol.

Athol also has a densely populated urban center dominated by historic mills, shops, restaurants, municipal buildings, parks, and residential subdivisions. The town's large land area and sprawling open spaces have enabled the community to conserve a significant amount of undeveloped land at relatively low cost. The success of this movement indicates a continued willingness to preserve the characteristics that make Athol special.

4.3 Water Resources

4.3.1 Rivers, Streams and Ponds

Athol is rich in water resources that include a variety of rivers, streams, ponds, wetlands, and aquifers (See [Appendix C Water Resources Map](#)) Yet the community's dominant water feature is the Millers River, which meanders for nearly seven miles through Athol's northern highlands. Originating in New Hampshire, the Millers River flows westward, ultimately merging with the Connecticut River. Within Massachusetts, the Millers River drains an area of approximately 313 square miles, and includes all or a portion of seventeen municipalities.

Athol owes its early industrial development to the Millers River and its tributary streams. The W.H. Amsden Door and Sash Factory was the first local industry to utilize the main stem of the river for hydroelectric power. A variety of other factories followed suit, constructing dams and channels to control the flow of water.

Although many of these factories disappeared long ago, their legacy remains. Several Athol ponds owe their existence to the Town's industrial past. Athol contains eight warm water ponds or lakes, ranging in size from 8-acre Ward Pond to 70-acre Sportsman Pond. Six of these ponds are man-made. Through a series of dams erected along its length, Mill Brook, which once powered nine of Athol's industrial enterprises, formed Morse's Pond, Match Pond, Lord Pond and an unnamed pool used by J. Wesley Goodman & Sons Billiard and Pool Table Factory.

Eventually drained, Lord Pond is now the site of the Lord Pond Plaza strip mall. The dam near the intersection of Hapgood and Chestnut Streets reminds residents about the important role rivers played in the town's historic development.

In addition to a myriad of economic and social impacts, industrialism left a deep imprint on the quality of Athol's rivers and streams. A century of industrial activity and widespread dumping took its toll on the Millers River, degrading the river's quality and character. During the 1930's and 1940's, the Millers River was among the best-stocked water corridors in Massachusetts, but, by the 1950's, pollution from industrial and domestic sources destroyed fish stocks and the recreation potential of the river. The Millers River Watershed Council orchestrated cleanup efforts beginning in the 1970's. Their perseverance paid off and, by 1983, the river was clean enough to resume stocking.

Several wastewater treatment facilities constructed throughout the watershed now effectively control major pollution discharges. The land under the water contains pollution from PCB's, chlorination, heavy metals, erosion, landfill leachate, storm water runoff and acid rain. However the river has cleaned itself to the point that it is quickly reclaiming its status of one of the best fishing rivers in the nation. The local chapters of Trout Unlimited, Massachusetts Fish & Wildlife and private interests have combined to create a very active stocking program. This coupled with catch and release areas have helped to make catching 2 to 5 pound trout a common occurrence. Fly-fishing has shown a dramatic increase over the last five years.

4.3.2 Thousand Acre Reservoir Dam

During October 1996, at a meeting of North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership, attendees from Phillipston, Athol and the Massachusetts Department of Fisheries and Wildlife met to brainstorm mutually beneficial projects. A Phillipston resident expressed the desire to protect the Thousand Acre Swamp. This tract includes property in Athol as well as Phillipston. An attempt to protect this area had lost momentum some years ago. The area is contiguous with large protected tracts in Phillipston and Athol. Contiguous to these tracts are large protected tracts in Northfield, Warwick, Royalston, and Winchendon. The North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership has included the Thousand Acre Brook Watershed as an area of conservation interest.

During a meeting of Athol's Board of Planning and Community Development, Doug Walsh, Athol's DPW superintendent, expressed his desire to have the Thousand Acre Reservoir Dam removed. The dam originally created a small reservoir that has long been abandoned. Aspects of this antiquated dam create hazards resulting in liability risks to the town.

Below the dam the Thousand Acre Brook cascades downhill to the Millers River. This remote and wild area offers anglers excellent Brook Trout fishing. If the dam is removed, the natural flow of the brook will be restored allowing Brook Trout, macro invertebrates and other organisms to travel to the swamp.

Massachusetts Department of Fish & Game Riverways Program (MRP) Dam Removal Project was contacted to assess the feasibility of removing Thousand Acre Reservoir Dam. MRP staff and an engineer from Fuss & O'Neill conducted a site visit accompanied by Dana Cooley of

Athol's DPW and a report was formally submitted ([See Appendix D Thousand Acre Pond Dam Report](#)) to MRP in June 2007.

Upstream, the Phillipston Reservoir, owned by Athol and located in Phillipston was decommissioned as a reservoir in 2000. With dangerously compromised dikes, the water was completely drawn down by July 7, 2007 and released into the Thousand Acre System. A final decision on the future of the Reservoir is pending. Removal of Thousand Acre Reservoir Dam will support restoration of the entire Thousand Acre wetlands system.

4.3.3 Wetlands and Floodplains

Many wetlands types, from vernal pools and forested wetlands to floodplains, exist along Athol's rivers, streams and ponds. These hot spots of biological diversity are nature's way of ensuring good water quality. Both inland wetlands and floodplains perform crucial functions including flood storage/control and pollution filtration. Wetlands are home to an abundance of wildlife including rare and endangered species. Since they are also common recharge zones for groundwater sources, it is important that Athol identify and protect its wetlands and floodplains.

Athol's major resources include:

- The banks and vegetated wetlands associated with Newton Reservoir, Lake Ellis, Lake Rohunta, Davenport Pond, Ward Pond, White Pond, Paige Pond, Secret Lake, Reservoir #1, Sportsman's Pond, and Riceville Pond.
- The bordering vegetated wetlands, forested wetlands, and floodplains associated with the Millers River, Tully River and various brooks such as Rich Brook, East Branch – Tully River, Gulf Brook, Thousand Acre Brook, Mill Brook, Thrower Brook, West Brook, and Riceville Brook.
- Paine Swamp, Silver Lake.
- Several certified vernal pools.
- Newton Reservoir, which retains legal status as a drinking water supply.

There are presently State and federal regulations that assist in the maintenance of clean waters. Athol should consider improving local wetland bylaws to preserve and enhance water quality. Adoption of "Smart Growth" principles should ensure healthy aquatic ecologies.

4.3.4 Aquifers

Four aquifers are known to underlie the Town of Athol. Aquifers are important water resources that exist underground. When it rains, a large percentage of water infiltrates the soil, slowly migrating down to the saturated zone. The area between the saturated zone and the unsaturated zone is known as the water table of the aquifer. When more rain enters the aquifer than is taken out, the water table rises. An aquifer underlies the Tully River- a site first identified as a potential source in 1959. This aquifer now supports Athol's new Tully Well field. The second aquifer underlies the Millers River and supports the South Street Well. Because of its highly permeable soils, a third aquifer, which lies beneath the White Pond-South Athol Pond complex, may be considered as a future public groundwater resource.

One potential high yield aquifer underlies Lake Ellis. The Department of Public Works (DPW) identified Third Island as a primary drilling location. After investigation, it was determined that

three wells on the island could yield as much as 0.72 mgd. Although no plans exist to utilize this aquifer in the near future, it could play an important role later.

The recharge areas of Athol's aquifers have been identified and mapped ([Appendix C Water Resources Map](#)). The determination and protection of recharge zones has been incorporated into zoning.

4.4 Vegetation

Athol boasts a variety of plant life including coniferous and deciduous forests, grasslands, wetlands, and riparian vegetation (See [Appendix E Soils and Geologic Features Map](#)). Soil type, elevation and climate largely determine the type of vegetation that exists. According to the 1999 MacConnell (RMP) land use data, forestland, including forested wetlands, occupies 16,220 acres in Athol, which equals 76 percent of the Town's total land area. The Bearsden Conservation Area, and stretches of the Millers and Tully Rivers are natural areas where hikers, campers, naturalists, cross-country skiers, canoeists, and anglers recreate. These areas also contribute to species diversity by providing nesting areas, sustenance and protection to area wildlife.

Athol is located within the North Central Hardwoods-Hemlock-White Pine zone. Eighteen commercial species, representing a mixture of northern hardwood, upland central hardwood and white pine forests, have been observed in the Bearsden Conservation Area, Athol's largest protected forest. The most common species, comprising 85% of the forest cover, are white pine, red oak, red maple, and black birch. Other observed species include white birch, white ash, sugar maple, yellow birch, beech, hickory, black cherry, white oak, aspen gray birch, cedar, hop hornbeam, and pitch pine. It should be noted that an increasingly rare hickory hop hornbeam hilltop habitat is maintained within the Bearsden Conservation Area.

The Department of Public Works and the Conservation Commission have launched timber management programs on lands under their jurisdiction. Timber harvests periodically generate revenue for town coffers. If managed thoughtfully, timber cuts can bring both financial and ecological rewards by helping to create resilient, resistant stands.

In 1997, a natural resource inventory was conducted along the stretch of the Millers River that extends from Orange Center to Athol Center. The purpose of the study was to provide information that would aid planners in making appropriate decisions about a proposed bikeway along the south side of the river, and to provide baseline data about natural resources along the river corridor. The inventory uncovered a number of interesting and unusual plant communities. Although the area contains no examples of classic floodplain forest, one small patch of silver maple dominated floodplain forest occurs north of the town well, by South Athol Road. According to a report by the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, floodplain forests are the most threatened, globally significant wetland community types in New England (Kearsley). Unfortunately many of Massachusetts' floodplain forests have been converted to residential or commercial uses due to their scenic qualities and high soil fertility.

The Cook's Cove area, which lies northwest of Daniel Shay's Highway, is a four-hectare backwater along the drainage between Lake Rohunta and the Millers River. The cove supports aquatic vegetation throughout, including native milfoil, exotic invasive plants and a wide array

of other species. Shallow areas support emergent marsh communities. Adjacent to Cook's Cove, a stand of black ash occurs within a red maple swamp. The stand covers approximately one to two hectares, which is uncommonly large in Massachusetts. Other interesting plant communities include a black cherry stand just north of the sewage treatment plant and a wet meadow community in an old meander trace, which runs between the town well and the sewerage treatment plant.

4.5 Wildlife and Fisheries

A host of wildlife abounds within Athol's borders, largely owing to the diversity of its major habitat types. Rivers, wetlands, forests, meadows, and mountain ridges provide sustenance, mating grounds, and vegetated cover to the wildlife that dwell within. Since many species rely on a variety of habitat types during different periods of their life cycle, species diversity is greatest in areas where several habitat types occur in close proximity to one another. When habitats are of high quality and ample quantity, wildlife populations thrive.

The forested areas and environs support a stable population of deer, otter, mink, muskrat, porcupine, fisher, and fox. The Conservation Commission actively manages the Bearsden Forest for wildlife- planting vegetation to attract wildlife species. The return of beaver to Athol, has led to the alteration of wetlands that provide excellent habitat for trout, horned pout, insect and migratory bird life. The eastern coyote and the black bear have returned to our forests.

The Millers River, with its tributaries, lakes and wetlands, is an important flyway, providing a safe foraging and resting area for large numbers of migrating birds. The overall improvement on water quality and the foresight to set aside large contiguous supporting parcels of wilderness has led to the return of many lost species. Periodic logging of forested areas has created the early successional habitats favored by some species.

Local surface waters support a diversity of fish species that are popular among anglers. Several ponds and lakes offer warm water fishermen the opportunity to catch large-mouth bass, pickerel, bullhead (horned pout), and panfish. While native populations of trout can be found in Thousand Acre Brook, Buckman Brook and Thrower Brook, The Division of Fisheries and Wildlife stocks brooks with various species of trout. Atlantic salmon reintroduction programs continue to release smolt throughout the length of the Millers River below the Birch Hill Dam.

Patricia C. Swain, an ecologist for Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, submitted a report for the Open Space Plan that expounds on the rare species and ecologically significant natural communities that have been documented in Athol ([See Appendix F Patricia C. Swain, PhD, Wildlife Report](#)).

4.6 Scenic Resources & Unique Environments

Athol boasts a number of scenic vistas and unique features that set it apart from surrounding communities (See [Appendix Ga Unique Features Map Town Wide Level](#) and [Appendix Gb Unique Features Map Town Center](#)). Several old mills and charming residential neighborhoods attest to Athol's history as a thriving manufacturing village in contrast to the surrounding rural landscape. Because of the town's undulating topography, interesting glimpses of church spires, roofscapes, mountains, and rivers can be seen from various locations. The observation towers

atop Round Top and Sheep Rock Mountains afford panoramic views in any direction. The view at Round Top, the focal point of the Bearsden Forest, has long been recognized as the best in the area. Visitors can observe peaks in three states including Mount Monadnock in Jaffrey, New Hampshire and Mount Equinox in Manchester, Vermont. Sheep Rock is a favorite haunt of YMCA youth groups, offering a rare view of the Millers River far below, and ledges across the valley.

Athol is rich in other unique features, as identified in the Conservation Commission's "Land and Waters" booklet and the Athol Bicentennial Commission's "Athol History Trail" booklet, both of which are available at the Athol Public Library.

The following unique features and areas lie within Athol's borders:

4.6.1 Natural Features:

- Athol's "Fault"- Extending 10 miles from Route 2 into the southern part of Royalston, this fault can be viewed in several locations where ledges are exposed and road cuts in bedrock are visible. Identification markers would be a great help to those wishing to locate this geologic feature.
- Folding- Several fine examples of folding appear along Batchelder Road, attesting to the immense pressure that helped shape Athol's topography.
- Cass Meadow – Owned for many years by the Cass Family for dairy cow grazing, several different parcels of this land were donated to The Town of Athol. Comprised of approximately 45 acres, it is part of a larger parcel of land encompassing nearly 91 acres shared by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife Division. These parcels of land, when combined together, stretch from the Millers River at the South Main St. bridge, north to the East Branch of Tully Brook at the boundary of the Town of Orange.
- As part of the Urban River Grants Program, the meadows future uses will consist of hiking trails and wildlife studies programs in conjunction with the Millers River Environmental Center. The first phase of this project was completed in June 2006, with a public park and walk-in boat launch at the southern end of the meadow near the South Main St. bridge.
- Cass Farm Property - The house was built by W.W. Fish in 1883. His son-in-law and grandson started the dairy farm in the early 1900's. By 1935 they produced more than a ton of milk per day that was delivered to five area towns. After the dairy business closed in 1962 the family kept Standardbred horses for 35 yrs.
- Through the efforts of the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust along with the Cass family, efforts are being made to preserve the farm by working with the Town of Athol to purchase the developing rights.

4.6.2 Historical and Cultural Features:

- The Athol Historical Society - Founded in 1953 has, since 1957, been housed in the 4th Meeting House at 1307 Main St. Built between 1827 and 1828, it was remodeled in 1847 for use as Athol's Town Hall until 1921. The Athol Woman's Club then occupied it until 1957.
- The society has files of Athol's first newspaper; the original list of Minutemen drawn up in 1775 just before they left for Lexington; L.S. Starrette's first invention, the hasher or meat chopper, along with numerous artifacts, photographs and archives from Athol's history.
- In 2003 – 2005 the building went through a complete historical restoration lead by today's current Historical Society President, Susannah Whipps, granddaughter of the society's first President, Howard W. Cook.
- The Athol History Trail – From 1975 through 1976 The Athol Bicentennial Commission along with many town organizations and clubs created the Athol History Trail. Through a grant program from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts the trail sites were developed. Comprised of 24 historical sites covering 16 miles in length, the trail is marked by beautiful signs and is accompanied with the Athol History Trail guidebook. The forward at the beginning of the guidebook states "Every town holds its fascinations for all who look close enough. Each has its own story of how it came to be and where it is heading. Theses signs tell some of the episodes in the story of Athol, Massachusetts. Our hometown glimpses make up the bigger picture of America."
- Native American Sites and Crossings - At least 20 documented sites are located in Athol. The Historical Commission investigated these sites and placed historical markers to identify many of them. Prominent sites include:
 - Huncus Island - the area's last known Native American campsite.
 - Haley's Meadow - campground where arrowheads and other artifacts were discovered.
 - Millers River Crossing Point I - located at Cass Meadows, off South Athol Road, by the railroad trestle.
 - Millers River Crossing Point II - located in the Bearsden Conservation Area, near where the old Lewis Bridge crossed the Millers River.
 - Indian Cornfield - located east of Round Top Mountain, in the Bearsden Conservation Area.
- Stone Walls - Hundreds of miles of stonewalls remind Athol residents about the role agriculture played in the town's early historic development. Farmers built these walls to prepare their land for planting (by removing stones and boulders left by the last Ice Age), and to contain livestock and mark boundary lines.

- Sunday Walls - These legendary walls are situated 1,500 feet southeast of the Bearsden Road extension. As the story goes, two brothers built the walls around 1770 as part of a contest to see who could lay the most wall in a single day. They gathered fieldstones by the dozens and commenced to build their own walls, starting about five feet apart and going in opposite directions. These walls, useless at the time but legendary now, were the subjects of curiosity for years. They were suitably marked on October 2, 1968.
- Oldest House in Athol- Located at 35 Moore Hill Road, the house was originally built as a two-room log cabin. It was later enlarged and a major restoration in 1969 gave the house its modern look. Yet much of the original interior remains intact.
- The Athol Railroad Depot – The original railroad depot known as the Fitchburg Railroad Depot at Athol was built between 1872 and 1873. The upper portion of the station housed a restaurant that was destroyed in a fire in 1892. A hip roof was placed on the remaining lower brick structure that stands today.
- In 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt addressed the citizens of Athol from a platform erected at the railroad station.
- Since it's closing as a railroad station in 1959 it has had many occupants. Today it houses the Community Transit Services that has received funding for the renovation of the building that began in 2007.
- The Pequoig Hotel - Built between 1894 and 1895 of brick and brownstone with granite and terra cotta trim, sits four stories high. During its long lifespan, The Pequoig both thrived and endured under a long line of proprietors, stores, fires, and renovations. Its banquet and meeting rooms drew many nationally known figures.
- Construction of the Route 2 bypass in the mid - 1950's diverted travelers from Main St., which resulted in a drastic decrease in overnight lodgers. Store occupancy also declined through the 1960's and 70's. By 1977 the bank that held the mortgage declared it must raze the building if a buyer did not come forward. In 1978, through the work of the town, state and federal officials and concerned residents, the landmark block was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- In 1982 a \$2.5 million restoration project began on the building. On October 19, 1983 the Pequoig was reopened as a senior housing facility along with a senior center that opened in March 1984. The long empty commercial bays are now also occupied by small businesses.
- Mud Hut Colony - Remains of a mud hut colony for 125 immigrant workers who came here from Italy in 1902 to dig the 18-acre reservoir lie half hidden on the west bank of the Newton Reservoir. At least 18 of these sod mounds are still visible 200 to 300 feet west of the dam.

- Home of W.A. “Candy” Cummings – Often cited as the inventor of the curveball, Candy Cummings' stellar pitching career bridged the eras of amateur and professional baseball. Following standout seasons with the amateur Star Club of Brooklyn, the slightly built Cummings pitched four seasons in the National Association and won 124 games, twice leading the league in shutouts, and once leading in innings pitched. He was the first major leaguer to start, complete and win both games of a doubleheader when he turned the trick on September 9, 1876. In 1906, he retired to 375 Pequog Avenue, Athol. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1939.
- The Athol Public Library – Although the library had its beginnings in 1830 it was not until 1878 that an organization was formed from which the Athol Public Library is directly related. Built on land donated to the town by L.S. Starrett. The current Library building was built in 1918 from money offered by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and approved by the town in 1916. Additional land abutting the site has been acquired for parking expansion.
- The Athol Town Hall (Memorial Hall) – Built in 1921, is also on land donated to the town by L.S. Starrett. The Town Hall not only functions as a government building, it has over its history been the hub for many cultural events. Some notable figures who have been on the stage of Memorial Hall included John Philip Sousa, 1926 & 1928, and Will Rogers, 1927. John F. Kennedy spoke downstairs in Liberty Hall in 1954 & 1958. Along with these notable figures there have been numerous local town events held in the Town Hall. During 2005 a committee was formed to raise funds for the revitalization of the building.
- The Deep Cut - In 1907, three years after Newton Reservoir was completed, an air pocket developed in a high point of the lengthy water line, near the far end of Bearsden Road. This impeded water flow, creating constant headaches for the Water Commissioners. To eliminate the problem, the town blasted the ledge, which created a narrow, man-made canyon. Quite a feat at the time, the canyon continues to draw visitors today.

4.7 Environmental Problems

4.7.1 Non-point Source Pollution

As is common in many communities, non-point source pollution, or contaminated run-off, has contributed to the degradation of Athol's surface and ground water resources. Potential contaminants include underground storage tanks, failing septic systems, salt/sand applications to roadways, fertilizer run-off from lawns and golf courses, some agricultural activities, heavy equipment dumps, landfills, and gas stations. These land uses may discharge sediments, pesticides, fertilizers, chlorides, effluent, and hazardous wastes into water bodies, which in turn harms water quality.

As previously mentioned, non-point source pollution may be affecting the water quality of the Millers River. It may also be accelerating the eutrophication process of Athol's ponds, especially Lake Ellis and the Lake Rohunta-Eagleville Pond complex.

Although part of the natural aging process, pond eutrophication can be hastened by excessive inputs of non-point source pollutants, which promote the growth of algae and aquatic vegetation. Decaying algae and rampant vegetation steal oxygen from other life forms especially fish. Because algae blooms often make the water unsightly, foul smelling and void of wildlife, the recreation potential of victim lakes and ponds is limited.

Given this reality and the fact that dredging and weed control measures will never be effective as long as pollutants continue to reach surface waters, the community may wish to draft a Non-point Source Pollution Management Plan and implementation of this plan as part of a long-term solution. The aim of this Plan should be to pinpoint the definitive causes of accelerated pond eutrophication in Athol, and recommend strategies for minimizing pollution inputs.

Athol's Department of Public Works (DPW) purchased a catch basin cleaner in 2002 but then lost three employees in the Highway division the following year. The DPW has experienced a staff reduction of 28.6% during the past six years. The town should support increase staffing within the DPW to ensure that the roadways are cleaned more frequently and that the catch basins are properly maintained. Other activities that the town may wish to consider undertaking are limiting salt/sand applications to roadways, and launching a campaign that broadens public awareness of ways residents can help abate non-point source pollution within the watershed.

4.7.2 Chronic Flooding

In addition to invasive weeds, chronic flooding plagues Lake Ellis' residents. Several years ago, the Town demolished and back-filled the dam that originally formed the Lake and controlled its water level. A stream provided a secondary outlet beneath Route 2, but has since been blocked by beaver activity. Several efforts to eradicate the beavers through trapping have proved futile since new beavers continuously colonize the site. Town and state officials have not yet reached consensus on how to alleviate the flooding, but action should be taken to ensure adequate flood control.

Voters at Town Meeting have allocated monies to restore the original drainage of Lake Ellis under Lake Ellis Road into Mill Brook, which will improve the flooding situation at the lake. The project is pending.

The Millers River is susceptible to ice jams, which have created localized flooding. The most sensitive area of the river is from Starrett's Dam to just downstream of Morton Meadows. In January 2005, an ice jam formed in the Millers River just above the confluence with the Tully River. The residents on Pequig Avenue sustained significant flooding damage and two homes and the Little League Field were flooded with four feet of water. Basement flooding occurred in multiple sites along Pequig Ave from Pinedale Avenue to Fish Street, along Shore Drive and on Terrace Avenue.

One-direction flow check valves were installed in storm drainpipes to prevent river waters from backing up into the Little League Field. Army Corp of Engineer ice researchers noted that Cass

Meadows has grown over the past 10-year period preventing the natural flood relief the river had established.

Cass Meadow was restored to its former meadow state during 2005 and this is expected to assist in acting as a buffer zone for any floodwaters that backup from ice jams in the area above the Tully River confluence. Floodwaters can pass through the meadow and back into the river below the jam site. The Athol Fire Department now closely monitors this area during extremely cold weather to provide early warning for mitigation if a jam forms. As more information is accumulated on how these ice jams form, additional prevention and mitigation actions are taken to minimize life and property loss.

4.7.3 Hazardous Wastes/Brownfields

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is responsible for investigating and enforcing cleanup of sites contaminated with toxic or hazardous wastes. As of August 2006, 68 sites were listed on the Mass DEP web site. The list includes the 45 sites reported in the 2000 Open Space and Recreation plan. The majority of the sites listed comply with Mass DEP cleanup requirements.

While a majority of these sites are small businesses, others are abandoned mills situated in the historic downtown and along riverbanks. These sites are referred to as brownfields. According to the mainstream definition, "brownfields are abandoned, idled or underused industrial and commercial properties where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by real or perceived contamination." Brownfields may pose serious environmental threats, but many communities are unable to afford the tremendous costs associated with remediation. Moreover, because developers do not know what potential cleanup costs may be, they often shy away from these properties. The result is a number of abandoned properties that continue to sit idle, contribute little to the tax base, threaten the health, safety and welfare of the community, and visually degrade the surrounding neighborhood.

Athol is actively pursuing a brownfield redevelopment grants to address these properties and return them to productive use.

4.7.4 Solid Waste Disposal

Of primary concern in Athol's previous Open Space and Recreation Plans, the Sanitary Landfill was capped and approved by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection during FY1997. To satisfy State regulations, the Department of Public Works monitors and mows the site at least once a year. No known environmental problems presently relate to this facility.

During the May 2006 Town meeting, voters approved to bond up to \$350,000 to build a transfer station/recycling center adjacent to the landfill site on Rt. 32 and to establish the center as an enterprise fund. The process now requires a site assignment hearing and permission to construct. The Town of Athol is also part of a regional solid waste cooperative, North Central Regional Solid Waste Cooperative. This cooperative includes the towns of Athol, Ashby, Ayer, Groton, Royalston, Leominster, Petersham, Lunenburg, Townsend, Harvard, and Devens. This

cooperative works in all areas of solid waste and recycling. By combining solid waste and recycling needs, the cooperative hopes to achieve economies of scale to receive better bids for services. The initial years of the cooperative were funded by a DEP grant with the Town of Athol as the host community.

5. Inventory of Lands of Conservation and Recreation Interest

Twenty-eight conservation and recreation sites, totaling approximately 3,169 acres, lie within the Town of Athol (See [Appendix H Open Space Map](#)). Eighty percent of this land is permanently protected. According to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Division of Conservation Services, land is protected if it is owned by the town's Conservation Commission or Water Department, one of the state's conservation agencies (i.e. the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management), a nonprofit land trust (i.e. the Nature Conservancy), or if the town received state or federal funds for the purchase or improvement of the property. Private land is considered protected if it has a deed restriction in perpetuity, if an Agricultural Preservation Restriction has been placed on the property, or if DEP has placed a conservation restriction on it as part of the Wetlands Conservancy Program. Land owned by other agencies (local school department, recreation commission) is not protected. Unfortunately, most of Athol's existing recreation facilities lie within this category and can easily be converted to other uses.

In addition to Athol's existing conservation and recreation areas, a few areas are of particular interest to local citizens. These are:

- Equestrian Center (Whitney Hamlet) - This 155-acre site in South Athol, purchased by the Town of Athol through grants, is being developed into the largest municipal equestrian center in New England. New England Equestrian Land Management Conservation Corporation (NELMCC) received 501(c)(3) status and has begun developing the park. A network of trails will serve equine and a variety of human activities, including cross-country skiing and hiking. The park will also develop a conservation and recreation center. It is expected that the park, when completed, will become a tremendous draw to the North Quabbin Region and will be self-sustaining through programs and fees. NELMCC has developed a large portion of Equestrian Park using volunteer services and fund raising. The park has also been approved through DEP to contain a composting facility
- Millers River Greenway - A permanent greenway is proposed along the southern bank of Millers River, extending from Athol Center to Orange Center. The benefits of this greenway are two-fold: (1) the greenway would help protect water quality and wildlife habitat, and (2) provide an important opportunity for linear pursuits along the river, such as hiking and biking. Ideally the trail would merge with the recently established Tully Trail in Orange. Athol's Greenway Committee is actively working towards making the greenway a reality by encouraging area landowners to place conservation restrictions on their property. Protection of land within the recharge area of the town's new primary

water supply, which comes from an aquifer below Millers River, should be viewed as a priority and will complement the Greenway Committee's efforts.

- Chapter 61, 61A and 61B Lands - The Farmland Assessment Act allows qualifying forest, farm and recreational lands to be taxed at its use value rather than full market value. If a landowner intends to sell the classified land or convert it to another use, town officials must be notified by certified mail. The town is granted the right of first refusal and a penalty in the form of either a conveyance tax or a roll back tax is assessed. Athol contains 36 lots or 1,513.81 acres in Chapter 61, 22 lots or 799.36 acres in Chapter 61A and 23 lots or 667.07 acres in 61B (See [Appendix H Open Space Map](#)). Currently undeveloped, these lands are of interest for both conservation and recreation purposes. Although land under this program can be taken out at the landowner's will, these parcels constitute a large amount of Athol's open space and, if protected, priority Chapter lands can help link existing conservation and recreation lands to form a continuous greenway network.

6. Community Goals

6.1 Description of Process

The Town of Athol's Open Space & Recreation Committee first assembled on September 28, 2005 and began by familiarizing themselves with Athol's 2000 Open Space & Recreation Survey. It was deduced that the same format would give the most accurate trend indicators.

Minor additions were added to existing questions and by December, four additional questions were added including Open Space Residential Design, Transportation, methods for preserving open space, and desire to serve on the committee. The original topics looked at Athol's perceived character, interests in future growth, historical significance, demographics for recreational desires and the housing choices of all ages and family constitutions. A comment section was included.

On January 10, 2006 surveys were mailed (one per household) to registered voters. Copies were made available at the town clerk's office. The entire Senior Class at the Athol Royalston Regional High School was polled during school hours. Local press and local radio were utilized as well as a sign in front of Town Hall to create awareness of this survey.

The response of 602 residents (11+ %) was impressive, especially the sincere and in depth thoughts of the comments. Much gratitude is due the residents of Athol for making the process a success. The results were compiled by committee members and are expressed in section 6.2 which reflect the trends and resources that determine Athol's overall open space and recreation goals.

6.2 Statement of Open Space and Recreation Goals

The very process of differentiating between open space areas that may be properly developed and those that should be kept natural or open as long as possible (with graduations in between)

makes it feasible to plan for both resource protection and development. It is not solely a question of “choosing between people and nature”; rather it is a matter of determining the “best” location for each use (including open space) and preventing the premature and needless destruction of resources. The town’s extensive natural and open areas are essential elements in the economic, social and ecological fabric of Athol. If adequately protected and thoughtfully managed, these areas can be enjoyed by future generations.

In the survey and in separate comments (See [Appendix L Survey Results](#) and [Appendix M Survey Comments](#)), Athol residents clearly expressed their open space and recreation goals. These are to:

- *Maintain and improve existing:*
 - *Recreational facilities*
 - *Roads*
 - *Sidewalks*
- *Preserve open space:*
 - *Protect water resources*
 - *Protect wildlife habitats for rare and endangered species*
 - *Retain rural character*
 - *Meet community’s recreational needs*
 - *Ensure greenway continuity*
- *Identify, cleanup and market brownfields*
- *Improve downtown area flood management*
- *Obtain permanent protection for ecologically significant landscapes*
- *Create opportunities for eco-tourism*
- *Improve transportation infrastructure*
 - *Rail service to urban areas*
 - *Expanding bus service to neighboring towns*
 - *Improve signage to identify recreational and historical sites*
 - *Complete riverfront access*
 - *Athol to Orange bike-path*
 - *Improve Americans with Disabilities Act compliance*
- *Create variety of recreational opportunities for:*
 - *Multiple age groups*
 - *People with disabilities*
 - *Music and Art events*
 - *Waterfront activities*
- *Broaden public awareness of Athol’s natural and recreational resources.*
- *Preserve historical and architecturally significant sites*

These goals are reflected in the Action Strategy, which appears in Section 9 of this Plan.

7. Analysis of Needs

7.1 Resource Protection Needs

Athol's 33.4 square miles contains several drinking water sources with varying water quality due to the mills that once supported the economy of Athol. Athol's wetlands and waterways are well filtered by the vast forests but are challenged by non-point source pollution, chronic flooding and brownfields.

Residential development has threatened the preservation of open space during the past five years. Wisser management of growth is vital and through zoning, the town has introduced Smart Growth principals to help preserve green space, which facilitates the introduction of trails and other recreational opportunities. Recent reaction to a proposed development in the Chestnut Hill area indicates popular support and need for Ridge View Protection.

The recharge zones of Athol's aquifers have not yet been mapped or identified.

Athol's diverse habitats, from ridges to wetlands, provide the sustenance and mating grounds for animal and raptor populations to thrive along with large numbers of migrating waterfowl, shore birds and passerines. Various programs through the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife subsidize Athol's wildlife and fish populations. Without the education and support system of the town's residents, Athol's scenic vistas and unique features could disappear due to indifference and ignorance.

The development of funding sources to clean up brownfields and for solid waste disposal is vital to preserving wildlife habitats and the 3,169 acres of permanently protected conservation and recreation sites.

An analysis of results from the 2006 Open Space and Recreation Survey revealed that town residents support the preservation of open space through the acceptance of conservation restrictions, recreation easements and land donations. However, by a two to one margin, residents were reluctant to have the town make additional land purchases.

7.2 Summary of Community's Needs

7.2.1 Recreation Needs

An analysis of the survey results indicated that residents view Athol as a "Town in Transition". They indicated that their primary concern was the conservation of open space and the protection of the town's water supply and they also expressed a concern for the preservation of open space for recreational purposes as well as the preservation of buildings of historical and architectural interest.

The survey results also indicated that the residents remained consistent in their desire to utilize a variety of methods to obtain various parcels of land to preserve open space. These methods include but are not limited to easements, Chapter 61, donations, and the establishment of a municipal fund.

Of concern to survey respondents was the lack of adequate recreational facilities for all ages and abilities, the maintenance of sidewalks, and the desire for trails, picnic areas and neighborhood gardens.

The top ten events of interest expressed in the survey were:

1) Concerts	13.53%
2) Youth Programs/Activities	12.09%
3) Movies in the Park	11.83%
4) Holiday Events	10.06%
5) Drama Productions	8.70%
6) River Events	8.44%
7) Nature Outings	8.40%
8) Trips and Tours	8.29%
9) Dances	7.00%
10) Road Races	5.31%

A majority of survey respondents indicated that they would rather see an improvement in the maintenance of existing recreational facilities (20.02%) and greater publication of recreational programs (17.82%) rather than the addition of new recreational facilities (13.85%).

Respondents expressed an increased desire for recreational transportation opportunities consisting of cross country trails, canoeing/kayaking, off road bicycling, and nature trails but also expressed the greater importance of the need for local bus service (9.65%), sidewalks (9.75%), and passenger train service (11.03%).

Survey respondents have lived in Athol for:

Survey respondents residency in Athol broke down as follows:

More than 20 Years	51.30%
10 to 20 Years	20.03%
5 to 10 Years	13.13%
Less than 5 Years	15.54%

The percentage of households with young children decreased by more than 7 points compared to the 2000 survey while households containing single adults and senior citizens increased slightly.

7.2.2 Special Opportunity

The decline of manufacturing in this once thriving industrial community and negative statewide media attention has taken its toll on Athol's image. While some survey respondents expressed true appreciation for this community and its attributes, others described it as "dying," "depressed", "a welfare community," and "going backwards." Respondents' frustration presents a wonderful opportunity for Athol to reinvent itself, while, at the same time, stimulating growth that is compatible with the community's resources, creates and retains jobs and leads to a more sustainable way of life.

As evidenced in previous sections, Athol boasts an array of natural resources that includes permanently protected open spaces, scenic vistas, wetlands, ponds and rivers, hunting and fishing destinations, and swimming and boating opportunities. By building on Athol's existing resources and capitalizing on the town's proximity to recreational amenities at Tully Mountain, Harvard Forest, Birch Hill Dam, Lake Dennison, and the Quabbin Reservoir, tourism can help sustain the local economy, provide increased opportunities for self-employment, and enhance Athol residents' pride in their community. According to the Outdoor Recreation Coalition of America, outdoor recreation generated approximately \$40 billion in 1996, accounting for 768,000 full-time jobs and \$13 billion in annual wages. Moreover, a poll for the President's Commission found that natural beauty and scenic views were the most important criteria for tourists seeking outdoor recreation sites (Lerner et al, 1999). Given Athol's wealth of natural resources, there is no reason to assume that the town cannot enjoy a piece of the action.

7.3 Management Needs

A major concern for the Open Space and Recreation Committee is funding projects desired by the community. The Town can appeal to local businesses, which are often willing to devote money, time and expertise, when attempting to fund community projects. Athol has had success funding projects in this manner. Grants are also available to communities displaying strong public support and a significant need for a particular project. The creation of this Open Space and Recreation Plan update entitles the town to apply for these grants. Unfortunately, resources are not currently available to research, write and manage the grants or to solicit contributions from local businesses.

Designating a responsible party such as a town planner, grant professional, or recreational commissioner to oversee implementation of an Action Strategy is required to meet the current needs and goals of the community. Monitoring the progress toward these goals is assigned to the Board of Planning and Community Development. The responsible party should have budgetary oversight for the development of a strategic plan or plans designating the current condition of all town-owned properties as well as plans to maintain these holdings and monitor all proposed changes. The creation of neighborhood and resource supporters (such as Silver Lake Users Group, Tennis Court Users Group, etc), coordinated by the responsible party, could monitor the success of such efforts.

The Town should continue to work with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) to identify brownfield sites and organizations that can redevelop them which will take development pressures off of undeveloped, open land, and both improves and protects the environment.

8. Goals & Objectives

The purpose of the 2007 Open Space and Recreation Plan Update is to examine the various factors affecting open spaces in Athol and devise a strategy to effectively meet current and future needs. A three-step process culminated in a list of goals and objectives. First, the initial seven sections of the plan were carefully examined. To determine the public's perception of natural resource, open space and recreation needs and priorities, special attention was paid to the survey results. Second, the Open Space and Recreation goals from the previous plan were examined to

ascertain those that have been met, those that are not yet met, and those that are no longer relevant. Finally, the committee gathered information from various sources relevant to open space planning that assisted the committee in the formulation of the following goals and objectives:

Goal 1: Enhance, Protect and Promote Athol’s Unique Attributes.

Objectives:

- A. Continue to enhance and promote awareness of the value and uniqueness of Athol’s natural resources.
- B. Update the Master Plan to guide future development of Athol.
- C. Encourage the Zoning Bylaw Review Committee to continue updating zoning bylaws to encourage open space opportunities.

Goal 2: Update and Maintain Existing Recreational Areas and Facilities.

Objectives:

- A. Seek long term, sustainable financing for maintaining and upgrading public parks.
- B. Make recreational facilities and programs more accessible to the public.
- C. Establish “Friends” groups or “Champions” to adopt parks and recreational areas.
- D. Improve staffing to manage recreational activities

Goal 3: Expand Existing Recreational Areas and Facilities.

Objectives:

- A. Link scattered conservation and recreation areas through the establishment of a continuous greenway network.
- B. Define maintenance plans for proposed park additions and improvements prior to town acceptance.
- C. Define areas suitable for development of organized sport (baseball, soccer, etc.) facilities.

Goal 4: Manage Open Space to Ensure Quality Water Resources.

Objectives:

- A. Remove the dam at Thousand Acre Reservoir restoring the brook to its natural run.
- B. Control invasive aquatic weeds (Section 4.7)
- C. Support the state’s storm-water Best Management Practices (BMP) designed to limit non-point source pollution. (Section 4.7)
- D. Support development of conservation bylaws.

Goal 5: Implement the 5-Year Action Strategy.

Objective:

- A. Identify responsible parties to oversee implementation of Open Space and Recreation goals.

9. Five Year Action Strategy

The Action Strategy serves as a guide for the community in protecting critical natural resources, enhancing recreation opportunities and preserving the character of the landscape. The following five year Action Strategy expands upon the goals and objectives listed in Section 8 by specifying

actions for accomplishing those objectives, identifying the organizations, town employees, town boards and committees involved in implementing those actions over the next five years. There is not a specific order of priorities for the implementation of the objectives listed below. As opportunities arise, identified parties are encouraged to implement the objectives to achieve the goals.

Goal 1: Enhance, Protect and Promote Athol’s Unique Attributes.

Objectives:

- A. Continue to enhance and promote awareness of the value and uniqueness of Athol’s natural resources.
 - Encourage the development of a “Welcome to Athol” packet detailing open space assets to be distributed to new residents and made available to current residents.
 - Support the Chamber of Commerce effort to work with businesses and non-profit organizations in promoting the North Quabbin area, including web links.
 - Maintain relationships with media outlets.
 - Establish signage directing residents and visitors to recreational areas.
- B. Update the Master Plan to guide future development of Athol.
 - Support Board of Planning and Community Development’s effort to update the Master Plan by incorporating Smart Growth principles into the plan.
 - Encourage the Zoning Bylaw Review Committee to continue updating zoning bylaws to encourage open space opportunities.

Goal 2: Update and Maintain Existing Recreational Areas and Facilities.

Objectives:

- A. Seek long term, sustainable financing for maintaining and upgrading public parks.
 - Recommend the Town increase the DPW budget with the increase dedicated to maintenance of Town parks.
 - Recommend the Town establish a dedicated account for the maintenance and upgrading of public parks and open space.
 - Establish a grant writing position to solicit outside funds from public and private sources.
- B. Make recreational facilities and programs more accessible to the public.
 - Create informational signage at present recreational facilities.
 - Advertise recreational facilities through the Town web sites and media outlets.
- C. Encourage “Friends” groups or “Champions” to adopt Town parks and recreational areas.
 - Encourage the continuation of the establishment of these groups.
 - Develop a cadre of experienced champions to mentor fledgling groups.
- D. Staffing to manage recreational activities
 - Establish summer jobs for teenagers to help maintain Town parks.
 - Increase DPW staffing.
 - Maintain staffing of lifeguards at Town beaches.

Goal 3: Expand Existing Recreational Areas and Facilities.

Objectives:

- A. Link scattered conservation and recreation areas within Athol through the establishment of a continuous greenway network.
- Work in partnership with Mount Grace Conservation Trust, North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership, state and federal conservation agencies to protect and acquire priority parcels such as
 - Lake Rohunta area
 - Lawton State Forest/Tully Lake/Bearsden
 - Davenport Pond region
 - Implement projects to link conservation and recreation areas:
 - Bike path between Athol and Orange
 - Alan E. Rich Environmental Park to Tully and Metacomet-Monadnock trails
 - Athol Urban River Vision Plan
 - Facilitate expansion of public transportation alternatives
 - Regional: Air, train and bus service
 - Local: Bus service, sidewalks, bike routes, equestrian connectors
- B. Define plans for present and proposed park additions and improvements prior to town acceptance.
- Encourage the establishment of a position for administration of town-owned properties.
 - Establish park management plans and require them for new parks prior to town acceptance.
 - Establish maintenance plans for present and future parks.
- C. Define areas suitable for development of additional organized sport facilities (baseball, soccer, etc.).
- Assess the priority, number and type of sport facilities desired by the community.
 - Define site requirements to ensure ample space for parking and vendor support.
 - Work in partnership with real estate brokers, non-profit groups, religious organizations, clubs, and other interested parties to raise funds for proposed sport facilities.

Goal 4: Manage Open Space to Ensure Quality Water Resources.

Objectives:

- A. Remove the dam at Thousand Acre Reservoir restoring the brook to its natural run.
- Continue working with Massachusetts Riverways Program and town DPW
 - Identify funding sources
- B. Control invasive aquatic weeds (Section 4.7)
- Public education aimed at minimizing the movement of invasive aquatic weeds between water bodies.
 - Seek governmental grants for control of specific problem sites.
- C. Support the state's storm-water Best Management Practices (BMP) designed to limit non-point source pollution. (Section 4.7)
- Support DPW budget requirements for appropriate staff levels

- Support continued infrastructure upgrades to limit storm water infiltration into sanitary sewer system
 - Monitor road culverts for runoff discharges into rivers and streams
- D. Support development of conservation bylaws and/or regulations to
- Maintain and purchase properties through assessment of additional fees
 - Protect specific natural resources
 - Encourage residential, commercial and industrial growth which limits impact on the town's natural resources and water supply
 - Support efforts to create a continuous greenway network surrounding Athol's center

Goal 5: Implement the 5-Year Action Strategy.

Objective:

- A. Conservation Commission or their designee will be responsible for overseeing the implementation of the goals in cooperation with identified parties. Identified parties to oversee implementation of Open Space and Recreation goals (See [Appendix I Action Plan Map](#)):

- All Boards
- Athol Royalston Regional School District
- Assessors Office
- Athol Recreation Committee
- Board of Planning and Community Development
- Capital Program Committee
- Conservation Commission
- Council on Aging
- Department of Public Works
- Finance and Warrant Advisory Committee
- Open Space and Recreation Committee
- Planning Office
- Board of Selectmen
- School to Work Program
- Town Manager

- B. Conservation Commission or designee shall hold meetings twice a year with responsible parties listed in this Action Strategy to gage their progress and ascertain plans for accomplishing each action.
- C. Annually review and update this Action Strategy to ensure that it reflects Athol's changing goals.
- D. Four years after the approval of this plan obligate funding and begin drafting a new plan in accordance with state guidelines.

Athol's Action Plan map (see [Appendix I Action Plan Map](#)) identifies two main areas where we believe future conservation efforts should be focused. Additional land protection within these areas will connect parcels of already protected open space within Athol and the surrounding towns creating larger blocks of protected open space than we currently have. Biologists, ecologists, and watershed managers have long recognized that, in general, large blocks of open space are able to protect biological diversity, water quality, and ecosystem integrity better than similar acreages divided among a greater number of smaller blocks. The focus areas occur in the north and south parts of Athol and contain most of the areas in town identified as "most in need of protection to conserve biodiversity for generations to come" by the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program's (NHESP) BioMap and Living Waters projects. The northern area, including the Bearsden Forest, is among the top one percent of the state's largest interior forests as defined by NHESP. The southern focus area contains four of the largest forest blocks that are among the top 10 percent of the state. Protecting open space in these two focus areas is also in line with the vision expressed by the North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership, reflecting the views of over 40 public and private organizations.

10. Public Comments

The creation of this Open Space and Recreation Plan Update included input from town staff, local organizations and residents. Upon completion of the final draft of this plan, copies were circulated for review to the list of groups in [Appendix K](#) as well as the Athol Bird and Nature Club, Millers River Watershed Council, Athol Historical Society, North Quabbin Regional Landscape Partnership, Millers River Greenway Committee, Millers River Fishermen's Association, Trout Unlimited, Mount Grace Conservation Trust, North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce, and Economic Development and Industrial Corporation. Based on their suggestions, minor adjustments were made to the Plan. Letters of review from these groups are anticipated and will be included in Appendix K.

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