

Open Space and Farmland Preservation

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this section of the *Plan* is to encourage and support the preservation of open space areas and farmland of local and regional significance. While the preservation of open space and farmland is one of the highest priorities of this *Plan*, the Capitol Region Council of Governments understands the increasing value of undeveloped land from an economic stand-point, and the struggles that municipalities have in securing adequate resources to protect all high priority open space, even when it has been designated as such on future land use plans. Therefore, this *Plan* recognizes that the pressure to grow and expand may sometimes cause existing or proposed open space parcels to become developed. However, this *Plan* strongly advocates for and

supports municipalities' efforts to preserve as much high priority open space as possible not only through acquisition but also through innovative planning techniques such as transfer of development rights, cluster subdivisions and higher density zoning in appropriate municipal locations. Where development must occur, this *Plan* strongly encourages the use of sustainable development practices such as green building and neighborhood design, low impact development techniques and green infrastructure. This *Plan* also encourages communities to come together to envision the future of the town with regard to conservation and development through planning exercises such as community visioning charrettes. Community visioning and sustainable development, along with increased financial support

from sources such as the State, private land trusts and federal grants, will help provide consensus and a clear plan to balance the need to grow with the equally important need to preserve. Open space is understood here as land that is preserved or restricted in some way for park, recreational or conservation use. This definition includes both public and private lands, but does not include undeveloped land that is still available for future development.

Open space serves many purposes for urban, suburban, and rural communities in the region. These include:

- Enhancing regional character and quality of life,
 - Providing active and passive recreational opportunities,
 - Protecting important natural resources, and
 - Providing important economic benefits and shaping growth patterns.
- Furthermore, preservation of undeveloped land in floodplains is critical to protecting life and property from the dangers of flooding.

In addition, the preservation of farmland preserves the region's cultural heritage in agriculture, as well as providing local produce and educational opportunities for the region's population. Working farms also constitute a valuable component of a diversified economy and help maintain skill and knowledge necessary for food production, as well as contributing to the rural character important to the region's tourism revenues. Over the period from 1985 to 2006 Connecticut lost agricultural fields (the typical Connecticut farm is only 40 percent field while the remainder consists of woodland, wetlands, and stream corridors) at a rate of 1,883 acres per year¹⁴. More must be done if we are to preserve our agricultural heritage.

Current Conditions

Open Space

The Capitol Region is made up of a checkerboard of State, privately and municipally owned open space sites and properties. Uses range from golf courses to schoolyards, local parks, and state forests.

The State and Capitol Region municipalities have made significant strides in the past decade toward preserving more of the region's key open space parcels. Connecticut's current open space initiative has set a challenging, long-range goal of protecting 21 percent of the state's land as open space by 2023 and about half of the region's towns have developed an official open space plan.

Considering that the Capitol Region is more densely populated than many other regions in the state, it is not unexpected that the more than 19 percent regional open space average (which also includes preserved farmland) falls below the 21 percent statewide goal, though it is not far off. Several Capitol Region towns have large tracts of agricultural land that could be preserved as farmland or open space but nearly all of this land is zoned for residential development. Without continued energetic efforts to protect much of this land, it is still vulnerable to future development.

¹⁴ Working Lands Alliance Website, Facts About Farmland and Farmland Loss March, 2009, <http://bit.ly/1pliEgJ>

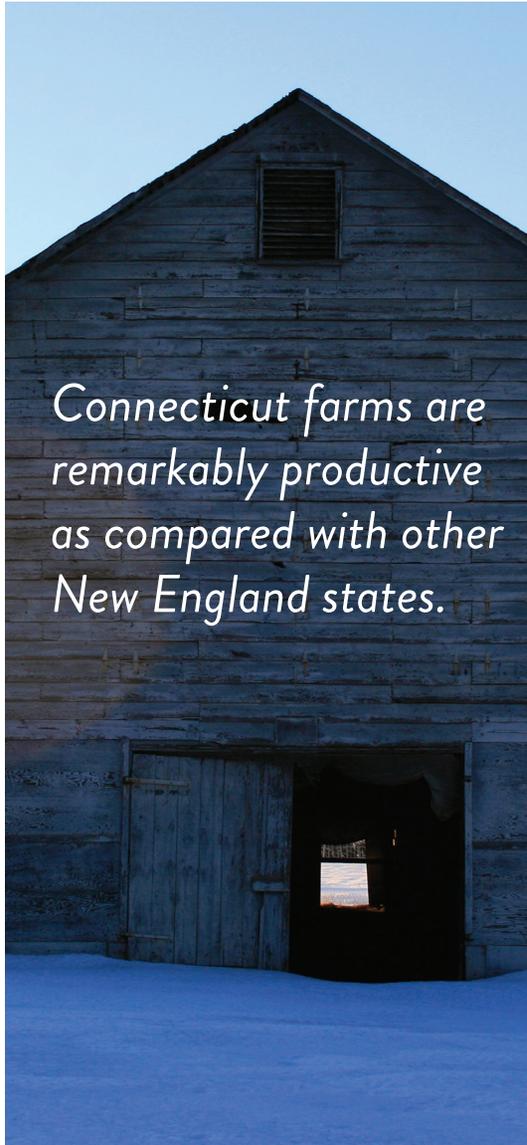
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Table 5.1 Capitol Region Open Space and Preserved Farmland Resources

Municipality	Area (AC)	Existing Open Space	Percent of Area in Open Space	Preserved Farmland	Percent of Total Area in Preserved Farmland
Andover	10,056	2,752.0	27.4%	301.4	3.0%
Avon	14,989	3,248.0	21.7%	0.0	0.0%
Bloomfield	16,872	3,593.7	21.3%	0.0	0.0%
Bolton	9,432	1,388.7	14.7%	0.0	0.0%
Canton	16,018	4,208.4	26.3%	0.0	0.0%
East Granby	11,217	2,845.7	25.4%	470.5	4.2%
East Hartford	12,045	1,934.1	16.1%	0.0	0.0%
East Windsor	17,108	1,025.9	6.0%	435.5	2.5%
Ellington	22,140	2,377.0	10.7%	730.2	3.3%
Enfield	21,893	1,577.6	7.2%	975.5	4.5%
Farmington	18,384	6,282.6	34.2%	0.0	0.0%
Glastonbury	33,413	5,978.9	17.9%	152.6	0.5%
Granby	26,300	8,813.0	33.5%	150.3	0.6%
Hartford	11,553	1,636.2	14.2%	0.0	0.0%
Hebron	23,938	7,870.8	32.9%	942	3.9%
Manchester	17,704	3,216.8	18.2%	11.1	0.1%
Marlborough	15,032	3,911.6	26.0%	0.0	0.0%
Newington	8,394	731.1	8.7%	0.0	0.0%
Rocky Hill	8,835	638.2	7.2%	0.0	0.0%
Simsbury	21,969	5,820.9	26.5%	0.0	0.0%
Somers	18,318	3,245.4	17.7%	1,786.2	9.8%
South Windsor	18,368	1,976.8	10.8%	87.5	0.5%
Stafford	27,537	10,147.4	36.9%	0.0	0.0%
Suffield	37,567	1,407.9	3.7%	1,747.0	4.7%
Tolland	25,740	5,121.2	19.9%	0.0	0.0%
Vernon	11,601	1,255.6	10.8%	0.0	0.0%
West Hartford	14,336	1,938.9	13.5%	0.0	0.0%
Wethersfield	8,430	1,436.2	17.0%	0.0	0.0%
Windsor	19,868	2,010.1	10.1%	0.0	0.0%
Windsor Locks	5,977	304.8	5.1%	0.0	0.0%
Capitol Region	525,032	98,695.5	18.8%	7,789.8	1.5%

Sources

Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection GIS Data (2012) and Municipal GIS Databases. Farmland Preservation data from Connecticut Department of Agriculture (Nov. 2012). Town of Hebron (April 2004).



Connecticut farms are remarkably productive as compared with other New England states.

A number of open space categories appear in Table 5.1. “Existing Open Space” includes all Federal, State and municipal open space reported to date by the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) as well as additional open space reported by municipalities including preserved farmland, land trust properties and other lands identified by the municipalities as significant to their open space systems.

Due to the state-mandated deregulation of utility-owned property, a great deal of prime open space land may be for sale in the upcoming years. Thanks to an agreement with Northeast Utilities (NU), the DEEP, municipalities, and land trusts will have the chance to select and purchase those parcels that they deem most important. These groups are given the right of first refusal, so that all available parcels will first be reviewed by these government and land trust groups before they become available to the general public. Deregulated utility lands are detailed in Table 5.2. This list is not a comprehensive inventory of NU’s properties, but only includes those parcels which are eligible for purchase for open space. To be eligible, the parcel must be over three acres in size, without an existing substation or other building on it. If a parcel under three acres is to be considered, it must be contiguous with other existing open or preserved space, be adjacent to a water body, or have some other significant natural feature worthy of protection.

Over the next several years, NU will be selling off some of these properties. The DEEP, municipalities, and land trusts must be prepared with priority lists so that the most important of these lands may be protected from development.

Farmland Preservation

Quite apart from the scenic and environmental benefits that accompany most arguments for open space, preservation of agricultural lands has many other important aspects. The Capitol Region’s roughly 22,000 acres of farmland helps to contribute to over \$2 billion in revenues provided by Connecticut’s working farms. Further, the products produced on the region’s farms help to diversify our economy and increase our food security, making us less dependent on outside sources. From a fiscal perspective, farmland places less of a burden on municipal services, particularly infrastructure and education, while providing significant tax and sales revenue.

University-based studies also indicate that Connecticut farms are remarkably productive as compared with other New England states. Connecticut farms lead New England in net farm income, production of products such as tobacco, peaches and pears, numbers of horses, and nursery and greenhouse sales. When calculated on a per square mile basis, Connecticut farms lead New England in a great many more categories.

Table 5.2 Deregulated Northeast Utilities-Owned Properties in the Capitol Region

Municipality	Number of Qualified Parcels	Total Acreage
Andover	7	93.1
Avon	3	52.7
Bloomfield	33	384.5
East Granby	14	348.3
East Hartford	12	55.0
East Windsor	1	11.8
Ellington	3	30.7
Enfield	21	278.7
Glastonbury	16	133.9
Granby	3	29.6
Hartford	1	15.5
Hebron	3	137.2
Manchester	10	154.2
Newington	12	88.2
Simsbury	5	122.2
Suffield	3	34.9
Tolland	3	6.3
Wethersfield	3	12.2
Windsor	4	20.3
Total	157	2009.2

Source

Trust for Public Lands, Northeast Utilities, and Farmington River Watershed Association, 2002; Data Unchanged, 2008.

Land trusts or some other type of land conservancy organization operate in nearly all Capitol Region towns, yet at the same time, U.S. Census of Agriculture data for 2007 show that the number of small farms across Connecticut as well as Hartford and Tolland Counties is rising while the number of large farms is decreasing. These data show that while more needs to be done to protect the remaining large farms across the region and the state, the bolstering of small farms and local agriculture programs must also be a priority.

Ultimately, despite their relatively small size and continued pressure from residential developers, Capitol Region farms continue to provide value in many forms to the region and the state. Municipalities can, and do, offer some relief from development pressures to farm and forest land owners through Public Act 490. Connecticut Public Act 490 allows farm, forest, or open space land to be assessed by the municipality at its use value rather than its fair market or highest and best use value for purposes of local property taxation. Without this lower assessment, landowners may feel compelled to sell their land should they not be able to afford the property taxes.

The State of Connecticut has set forth a goal to purchase development rights and thus preserve 130,000 acres of farmland. As of 2011, state funding had allowed for the purchase of only 37,262 acres which amounts to about 283 farms. Continued funding of the Farmland Preservation program through the State Department of Agriculture is necessary to achieve this important goal. The Preserved Farmland listed in Table 5.1 summarizes the acres preserved in each Capitol Region municipality under the state's Farmland Preservation program.

GOALS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



A. Support Protection of More Open Space in the Capitol Region

As residential, commercial, and industrial development spreads across the region, open space areas are regularly threatened. Existing zoning and the lack of local and region-wide efforts to actively protect these valuable resources means that open space is routinely converted to urban uses in response to market demands. Important open space areas must be identified now and protected before they are threatened by development. It is especially important to protect and preserve floodplains and wetlands from development. These lands provide critical holding areas for flood waters and when kept undeveloped can mitigate impacts to our communities from flooding. Where development must occur, this *Plan* strongly encourages the use of innovative planning techniques and sustainable development practices to balance the need to expand with an equally important need to preserve.

Policy Recommendations

1. Encourage retention of existing open space through public and nonprofit acquisition and encourage expansion of resources at the state level for supporting towns in this effort.
2. Support the use and expansion of open space requirements for new subdivision developments.
3. Support municipal and other groups' efforts to identify and preserve important open space areas before they are threatened by development.
4. Promote the acquisition of open space land through the DEEP Open Space Grant awards,

and other funding sources and technical assistance.

5. Provide guidance on the natural hazard mitigation, economic, cultural, recreational, and environmental importance of open space preservation.
6. Work to educate towns on sustainable development practices and seek municipal adoption of the Smart Growth Guidelines for Sustainable Design and Development.
7. Work to educate private landowners, particularly those with large acreage holdings, about land preservation options.

B. Encourage Preservation of Farmland in the Capitol Region

Many parts of the Capitol Region are still dominated by large, open tracts of agricultural land. Much of this land is used to grow forage crops, such as hay and silage, tobacco, vegetables, or nursery stock. Nearly all of the land in the region that is currently used for agriculture, however, is zoned for residential uses. This results in a steadily shrinking agricultural identity as subdivision developments carve up farmland. Preserving existing farms can result in visual, historic, economic, and cultural benefits for the region. Currently, the State of Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program, which provides funds to purchase the development rights on farms, is only able to protect 10 to 15 farms per year.

While this program provides permanent protection of the land, this rate is certainly not enough to slow the development of viable agricultural land.

Other programs, such as the P.A. 490 program (giving tax incentives to encourage landowners not to develop their land) and DEEP Land Acquisition grants need to be used on a more creative and widespread basis.

Policy Recommendations

1. Encourage retention of existing farmland through public and nonprofit acquisition and encourage expansion of resources at the state level for supporting towns in this effort.
2. Encourage expansion of the Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program to allow for purchase of development rights from more farms annually.
3. Aid in establishing criteria for preservation that draws on Department of Agriculture Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) standards.
4. Support inclusion of farmland preservation in local open space plans, with the stipulation that working lands can continue agricultural production.
5. Support and facilitate the use of a wide range of funding tools to acquire and preserve farmland including community supported agriculture.
6. Encourage more towns to add exclusive agriculture zones to local zoning codes.
7. Assist in the coordination of municipal and intermunicipal efforts to preserve agricultural clusters and areas with a “critical mass” of working lands to improve viability of individual farms.

C. Encourage Preservation of Declassified Water Company Land as Open Space

A large percentage of the total open space in the Capitol Region is under private ownership. Much of this land, once owned by water utility companies, is becoming increasingly available for potential development. To preserve at least a portion of these major holdings as open space, some of this land must find its way into public or land trust control.

Policy Recommendations

1. Work with local, regional, state, and private groups to preserve Class I, II and III water utility lands and other watershed land as open space or future water supply sources.
2. Assist state government and utility companies in educating municipal officials and land trusts about the open space available for acquisition.



GOALS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



D. Coordinate and Prioritize Open Space Preservation Throughout the Region

While approximately half of the region's 30 municipalities have adopted an open space plan, many others have not yet begun to organize this effort. CRCOG will encourage not only the development of these plans for all Capitol Region towns, but also bring a regional perspective to municipal open space planning. A regional open space plan would not only assess town-by-town preservation priorities and potential, but would also focus on opportunities for intermunicipal linkage of preserved areas and "greenways."

Policy Recommendations

1. Prepare a regional open space plan.
2. Provide support to Capitol Region towns in preparing local open space plans.
3. Develop procedures for identifying key open space areas and prioritizing open space preservation projects.
4. Encourage local and regional cooperation with land trusts and nonprofit groups whose mission is assisting in the transfer of open space from private to public/nonprofit control.

E. Expand and Protect Open Space Along Major Rivers

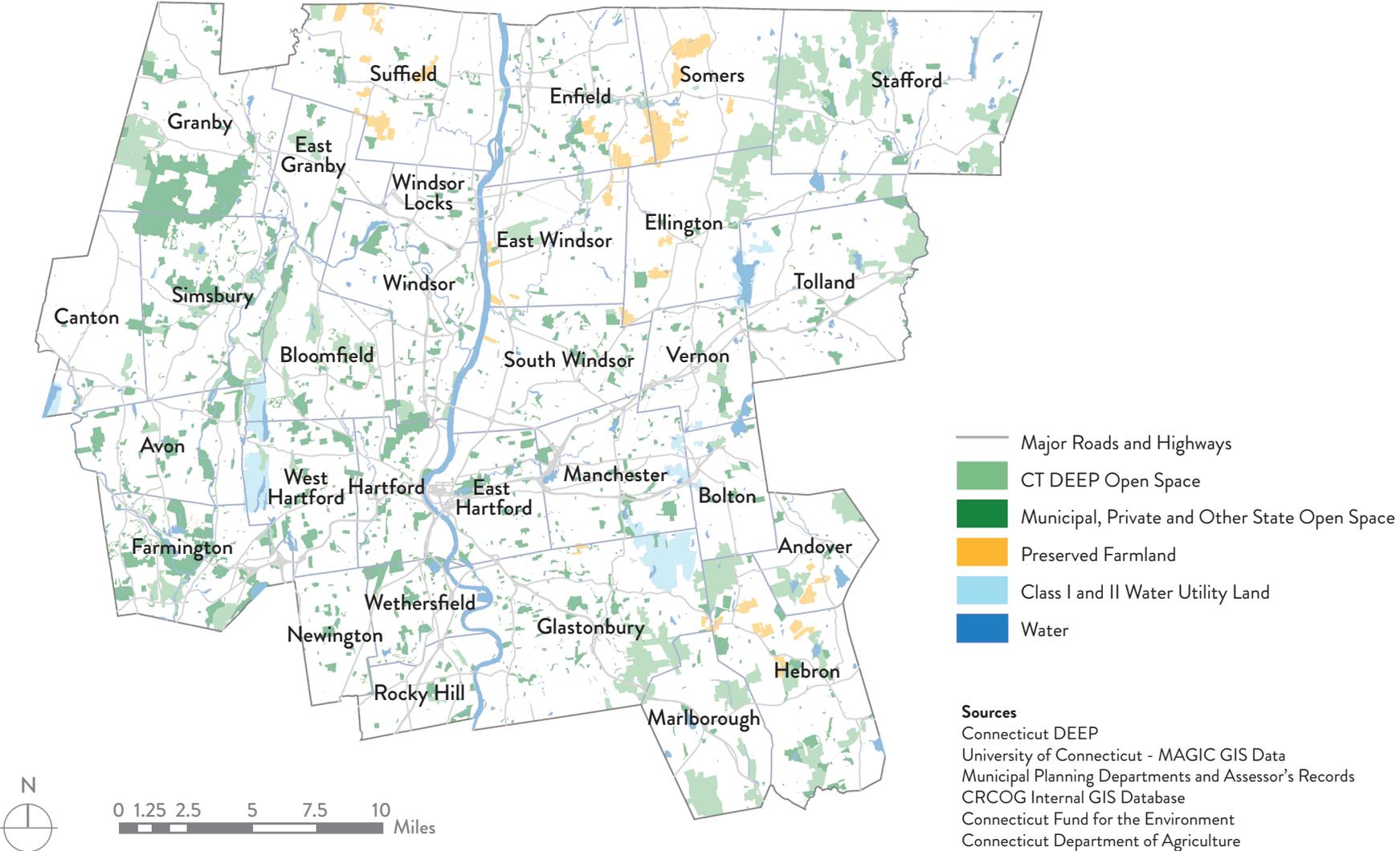
Geographically, the Capitol Region is dominated by the Connecticut River. This important natural resource, along with its large tributaries such as the Farmington and Hockanum Rivers, provides extensive active and passive recreational opportunities. The Connecticut River was recently designated as America's first National Blueway. According to the U.S. Department of the Interior,

a National Blueway includes the entire river from "source to sea" as well as the river's watershed. The designation is intended to recognize and support existing local and regional conservation, recreation, and restoration efforts, and does not establish any new protective status or regulations.

Policy Recommendations

1. Encourage linkage and the development of greenways to connect existing and proposed open space areas to riverfronts.
2. Encourage use of existing floodplain protection areas and natural resource buffers along rivers for passive recreation.
3. Support efforts to expand access to recreational opportunities on rivers.
4. Support maintenance and expansion of Riverfront Recapture's riverfront park system, including connections from Hartford and East Hartford to neighboring communities.
5. Work with other organizations and regional planning agencies to develop bi-state programs to improve the environment, water quality, recreation and public access on the Connecticut River.
6. Support recommendations in the Lower Farmington River/Salmon Brook Management Plan for managing and preserving river corridor lands.
7. Support Wild and Scenic River designation for the Lower Farmington River and Salmon Brook.

Map 5.1. Open Space and Protected Farmland



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