A Plan for the Protection of Open Space

Town of Swanzey, New Hampshire



August 2004

A Plan for the Protection of Open Space
Town of Swanzey, New Hampshire
Adopted August 2004

INTRODUCTION

Open space protection can be an effective tool for preserving community character, protecting the environment, and enhancing quality of life. Consensus about the role of open space protection in community planning is critical. A Municipal Open Space Plan is the information and policy basis for setting priorities and action plans for land protection, in concert with other community goals.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In 2003, New Hampshire remained the fastest-growing state in the Northeastern United States. Along with the many positive aspects of this growth come challenges and stresses on the environment. Among the most serious concerns is the permanent conversion of open spaces – natural areas, forests, farms, riparian zones, and water supply protection lands. Statewide, it is estimated that 15,000 acres of open land are developed every year.

Many communities have found that conversion of these lands for development can result in lost opportunities for recreation, degraded waters supplies, undermining of traditional economic uses such as forestry and agriculture, disruption of habitat, and diminishment of quality of life. In some regions, especially the Merrimack Valley and Southeastern New Hampshire, towns are going to great lengths to save the remaining undeveloped land, in some cases spending large sums of public money.

Swanzey is feeling the pressures of this growth. During the 1990s, the town grew nearly twice as fast in population and new housing units as Cheshire County as a whole. In response, the 2003 Master Plan emphasized the need to preserve the "rural character" of the community. As listed below, the Master Plan called for action to identify and protect high priority open spaces in town.

PURPOSES

This Plan supports or partially fulfills many Objectives, Strategies, and Recommendations of the "Swanzey Master Plan Update 2003." Principally these include several appearing under the section, Overall Goal for Land Use: "…to develop and preserve a pleasant, attractive, healthy, safe, affordable and convenient environment for living, working, shopping and recreation." They are:

> "Objective 4. Provide for the conservation and management of the Town's natural resources and the protection of sensitive areas …"
>
> "Objective 6. Protect natural resources, preserve the Town's rural areas, and minimize sprawl by directing higher density development to occur within the existing villages and to parcels accessible to public water and sewer systems."

"Strategy 4. Support any public and/or private efforts to preserve and protect open land in Swanzey – insofar as these efforts do not economically penalize the landowner."

"Strategy 5. … develop a comprehensive plan to identify, establish and maintain greenways to protect wildlife corridors and to provide undeveloped areas for recreation and for aesthetics."

This Plan sets forth criteria, goals, and recommendations for implementing an Open Space Protection Plan, and establishes a role for Town government in land conservation as a matter of public policy. That policy acknowledges that preventing development of certain properties will protect or enhance a set of "resource values" described here under "Findings," and that it is fitting for Town government to facilitate the conservation of certain lands that exhibit these values. At a minimum, this Plan directs the Town of Swanzey to promote land conservation and to be vigilant for opportunities for land conservation. The role of Town government in this area may also be to educate landowners about the topic, network among landowners and land trusts, and acquire land or conservation easements.

APPROACH AND PROCESS

This planning process was facilitated by staff from the Monadnock Conservancy and Southwest Region Planning Commission, with support by a grant from the John F. and Dorothy H. McCabe Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. Swanzey was selected from among seven municipalities that submitted proposals for the assistance.

The Town of Swanzey convened an Open Space Advisory Committee (see appendix) to identify how and where land conservation could best serve the public interest as established in the Master Plan and further articulated here. During monthly meetings between May 2003 and November 2003, the Committee reviewed information and maps regarding land use patterns, distribution of natural resources (e.g. aquifers and wetlands), and threats to Swanzey's natural resources. To solicit public input, the Committee conducted a public survey that asked residents to define what places or kinds of places in Town define Swanzey's "rural character." They created and distributed a high quality lapel button promoting the effort. In September, approximately 40 citizens attended a public meeting to review and comment on the Committee's initial findings.

The Committee reached consensus on a set of *Resource Values* that can be protected by conserving open space; *Land Conservation Priority Areas* where those resources are most prevalent; and *Specific Place*s as examples of properties worthy of consideration for protection. In all cases, the values and places were determined to be essential to community well-being in some basic way, or are part of how residents define Swanzey's community character. Ultimately, all are basic to environmental quality and quality of life.

FINDINGS

Resource Values to be protected or restored by land conservation:

1. Recreation and Public Access
2. Natural Beauty
3. Habitat Diversity for native species of wild plant and animal life
4. Unfragmented Habitat (large continuous undeveloped areas – regardless of natural habitat types found there)
5. Historic and Archeological Areas and Sites
6. Active Agriculture and Prime Soils
7. Community Character
8. Remoteness and Sense of Isolation
9. Water Supply and Water Quality
10. Air Quality

Land Conservation Priority Areas (preliminary list):

1. Forested Hills throughout Town: Especially visible land along ridgelines, hilltops, and summits. Specific examples cited include but are not limited to:
    - West Hill
    - Mount Huggins
    - Mount Cresson
    - Portions of Yale Forest
    - Bullard and Rattlesnake Mountains
    - Mount Caesar
    - Franklin Mountain

2. River Corridors and Wetlands: Riparian lands and buffers along the shoreline of rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds. Specific examples cited include but are not limited to:
    - Ashuelot and South Branch Rivers
    - Martin and Perry Brooks (wetlands)
    - California Brook watershed
    - Watersheds of Wilson Pond & Swanzey Lake
    - Vicinities of Covered Bridges

3. Open Fields and Farmland throughout Town. Specific examples cited include but are not limited to:
    - Fields in vicinity of Westport Rd. and Swanzey Lake Rd.
    - Bardwell Farm
    - Rabbit Hollow

The chart below exhibits how the Resource Values can be sustained by protecting the Kinds of Places identified by the process. Key: A solid bullet indicates the resource is prevalent; an open bullet indicates the resource is present but not prevalent; an "X" indicates that the resource is not present.

Resource Values	**Kinds of Places**		
	Forested Hills	River Corridors & Wetlands	Open Fields & Farm Land
Recreation / Public Access	●	◒	◒
Natural Beauty	●	●	●
Habitat Diversity	●	●	●
Unfragmented Habitat	●	●	☒
Historic Sites / Areas	◒	●	●
Active Agriculture	☒	◒	●
Community Character	●	●	●
Remoteness / Sense of Isolation	●	●	☒
Water Supply / Water Quality	●	●	●

OVERVIEW OF LAND CONSERVATION

There are two primary ways to protect land for conservation purposes: *Regulation* and *Conservation Land Transactions*. This plan will focus primarily on the latter, which involves working directly with interested landowners. The two most common Conservation Land Transactions are acquisition of land, and acquisition of development rights through conservation easements.

Conservation Land Transactions occur in two fundamental ways:

Active and strategic

This involves identifying high priority parcels and actively seeking to purchase or encourage donation of land or conservation easements. When successful, these projects have the greatest potential to achieve agreed upon goals. However, these projects may require significant investments of money if the owners are not in a position to make donations.

Vigilance and responsiveness to opportunity

Most land protection accomplishments come as the result of being ready to respond to opportunities. Having the Open Space Plan in place will help guide decisions when these opportunities arise. It will also help create opportunities through education and outreach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Planning Board should adopt the Open Space Plan as a chapter in the Town Master Plan.

2. The Town should inventory existing properties that are currently owned by the Town, other public entities, and private institutions to determine the level of protection of each parcel. Some properties – including Yale Forest and certain Town-owned land – presently may be designated as permanent conservation land on some maps, despite having no deed restrictions or other legal prohibitions against intensive development. Each of these parcels should be identified with one or more of the following designations:
    a. State-owned with conservation restrictions
    b. State-owned without conservation restrictions
    c. Town-owned with conservation restrictions
    d. Town-owned without conservation restrictions
    e. Owned by a conservation organization such as the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF)
    f. Protected by a conservation easement by a conservation organization such as the Monadnock Conservancy or SPNHF
    g. Owned by a private institution (such as Yale University) for the stated purpose of conservation, but not legally protected for those purposes
    h. Owned by other public or private entities for public purposes

3. From this inventory, the Town should determine which parcels deserve formal protection based on the Findings section of this plan. To start, the Town may choose to convey permanent conservation easements on land it owns to a qualified land trust such as the Monadnock Conservancy. The Town should open a dialogue with Yale University and other institutions to determine their willingness to consider permanent conservation agreements on its holdings.

4. In carrying out their responsibilities, the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, and Zoning Board of Adjustment should look for ways to actively integrate the Open Space Plan into their deliberations and plans. These might include Master Plan updates, zoning changes, subdivision regulations, subdivision reviews, site plan reviews, placement and extension of infrastructure, economic development, emergency management, and facility siting. In addition, the boards should explore the use of more innovative development concepts that incorporate open space conservation. The Open Space maps should be posted in Town Hall so they are easy to consult during board meetings.

5. The Selectmen should establish a standing Open Space Committee. Voting members of this Committee should include one designee each from the Planning Board, the Conservation Commission, and the Selectboard, and two “at-large” members. Additional non-voting members should be appointed to assist with the

work. This committee should work closely with all town boards, especially the Conservation Commission, but should report directly to the Selectboard.

6. The Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee should establish a plan for contacting and educating owners of priority lands. This could include mailings, field trips to existing protected lands, educational forums with land protection experts, etc.

7. The Town should consider expanding its Conservation Fund through regular appropriations and collection of Current Use change tax payments. This fund should be used to:
    a. acquire land or conservation easements
    b. reimburse private landowners for the direct costs of donating land or conservation easements
    c. other purposes allowed by state enabling legislation

8. The Conservation Commission and Open Space Committee should meet with the Planning Board and Selectboard annually to review and update the Plan.

ACTION STEPS

Within 6 months

1. Appoint a standing Open Space Committee that will report directly to the Board of Selectmen."
2. Adopt a Conservation Land rating system to evaluate opportunities (see draft attachment).
3. Identify all owners of parcels greater than 50 acres within the Land Conservation Priority Areas.
4. Publicize the Open Space Plan to the general public, landowners in Priority Areas, and interested groups such as sportsmen's groups, snowmobilers, and the Bike Ped Committee.
5. Meet with other Town Boards to review the Open Space Plan and actions.
6. Sponsor a landowner education workshop with the Monadnock Conservancy.

Quarterly

1. The Open Space Committee should report to the Board of Selectmen.

Annually

1. Consider what actions are needed at Town Meeting to implement the Open Space Plan. These could include expanding the Conservation Fund or acquiring specific parcels.
2. Hold a landowner education workshop on conservation options.
3. The Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee should meet with the Planning Board and Selectboard to review progress toward implementation.

Biannually

1. Review the Open Space Plan and revise, if necessary.
2. Acquire updated maps from Southwest Region Planning Commission showing conservation lands, natural resources, and other related features.

CONCLUSION

The Swanzey Master Plan of 2003 clearly calls for action to identify and protect important open space throughout Town. This Plan provides further guidance for such action. It should be the responsibility of the Open Space Committee to ensure the Plan is adopted by the Planning Board, understood by all municipal officials, and regularly updated.

Town of Swanzey Open Space Plan

2004

Conservation Priority Areas

- Forested Hills
- Ashuelot and South Branch River Corridors
- Perry and Martin Brooks Wetlands/Streams Complex
- Farm Fields of West Swanzey and Westport
- Unprotected Municipal and Institutional Land
- Covered Bridges
- Rivers and Streams
- Lakes and Ponds
- Wetland
- Town Boundary
- State, Class I and II Highways
- Town, Class V Roads
- Town, Class VI Roads

N
W E
S

0.5 0 0.5 1 Miles

Prepared by: **SWRPC**
Southwest Region Planning Commission
20 Central Square, 2nd Floor
Keene, New Hampshire 03431
tele: (603) 357-0557
fax: (603) 357-7440
http://www.swrpc.org/
email: admin@swrpc.org

Digital base information provided by the New Hampshire Geographically Referenced Analysis and Information Transfer System (GRANIT)

Town of Swanzey
Open Space Plan
2004
Protected Land
and Other Public & Institutional Lands

- Conservation Easement
- Deed Restriction
- Agricultural Restriction
- Public or Institutional Ownership - - May or May Not be Protected

A Yale University (SPNHF)
B Horatio Colony Preserve
C Yale-Toumey Forest
D Humane Society of the U.S.
E Dickinson Memorial Forest (SPNHF)
F Town of Swanzey (LCIP)
G Meadows End Timber Co. (NE Forestry Foundation)
H Honey Hill (State of NH)
I Olsen / Wolf Creek Invest.,LLC (SPNHF)
J Edgewood Civic Association
K Monadnock Conservancy
L Town of Swanzey
M Belding Farms (Monadnock Cons'y)

- Rivers and Streams
- Lakes and Ponds
- Wetland
- Town Boundary
- State, Class I and II Highways
- Town, Class V Roads
- Town, Class VI Roads

Presentation prepared by:
SWRPC
20 Central Square, 2nd Floor
Keene, NH 03431
(603) 357-0557
fax: (603) 357-7440
http://www.swrpc.org/
email: admin@swrpc.org

Digital base information provided by the New Hampshire Geographically Referenced Analysis and Information Transfer System (GRANIT)

1 0.5 0 1 2 Miles

Town of Swanzey
Open Space Plan
2004
Landscape Fragmentation in Swanzey
and
Surrounding Towns

Developed Areas

State Highways
Town Roads

More-Fragmented Areas

Landscape Fragments
(larger than 100 acres)

Less-Fragmented Areas

River or Stream

Lake or Pond

Wetland

Town Boundaries

N
W E
S

1 0.5 0 1 2 Miles

Presentation prepared by:

SWRPC
20 Central Square, 2nd Floor
Keene, NH 03431
(603) 357-0557
fax: (603) 357-7440
http://www.swrpc.org/
email: admin@swrpc.org

Digital base information provided by the New Hampshire Geographically Referenced Analysis and Information Transfer System (GRANIT)

Town of Swanzey
Open Space Plan

2004

Properties in Swanzey
and Surrounding Towns
Graded by Size

Smaller Properties

Individual Properties

Larger Properties

Rivers and Streams

Lakes and Ponds

Wetland

Roads, Buildings, Parking

Agriculture / Open Fields

Other Disturbed Areas

Town Boundaries

Property line data for Troy cannot be graded by size.

No Parcel Data Available for Richmond

1 0.5 0 1 2 Miles

N
W E
S

Presentation prepared by:

SWRPC
20 Central Square, 2nd Floor
Keene, NH 03431
(603) 357-0557
fax: (603) 357-7440
http://www.swrpc.org/
email: admin@swrpc.org

Digital base information provided by the New Hampshire Geographically Referenced Analysis and Information Transfer System (GRANIT)

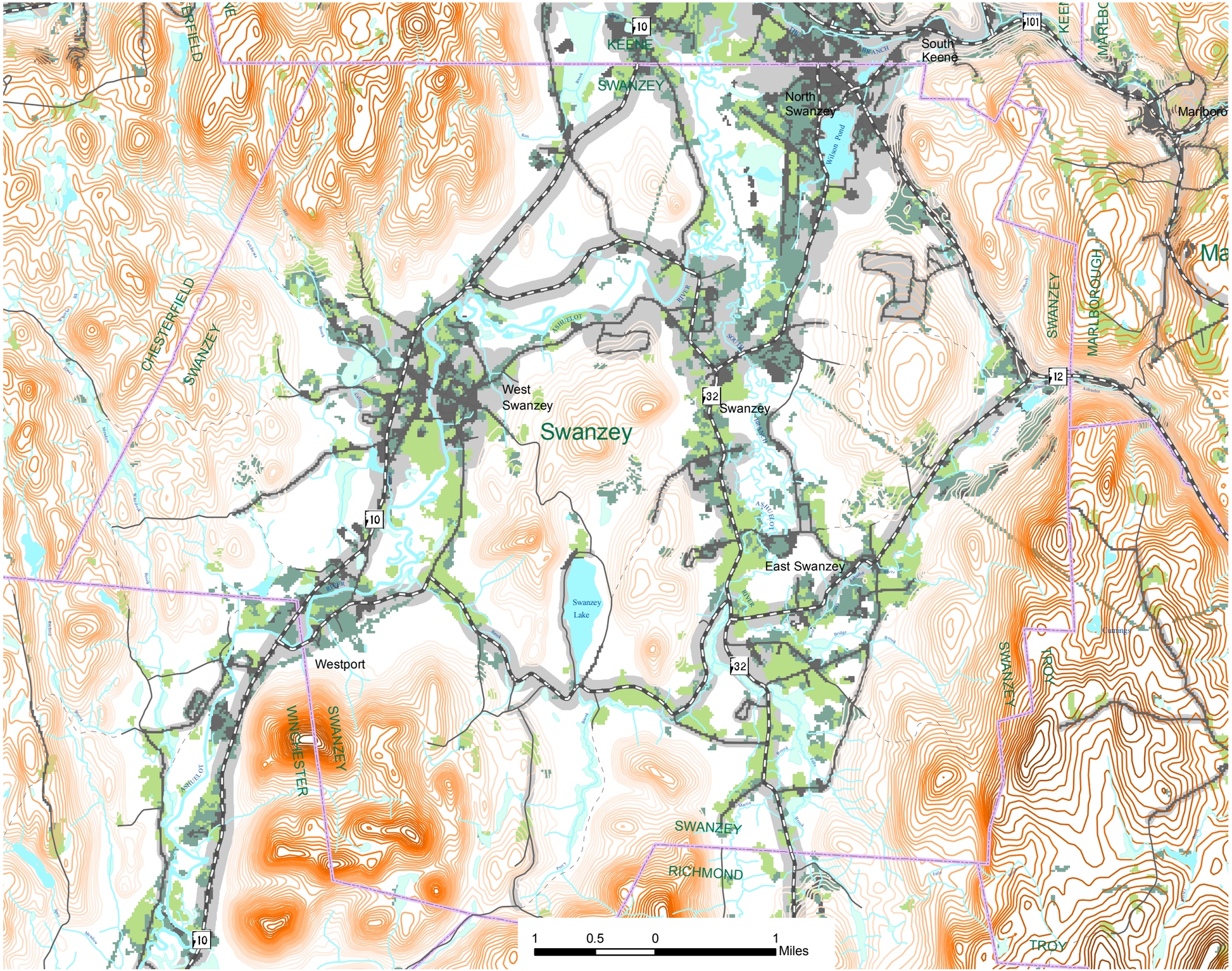
Town of Swanzey
Open Space Plan

2004

Undeveloped Forested Hills in Swanzey

and

Surrounding Towns



Higher Elevations and Hill Tops

Topographic Countours

Lower Elevations

Roads, Buildings, Parking

Agriculture / Open Fields

Other Disturbed Areas

Neighborhoods and Roadside Development

Rivers and Streams

Lakes and Ponds

Wetland

Town Boundaries

N W E S

Presentation prepared by:

SWRPC

20 Central Square, 2nd Floor
Keene, NH 03431
(603) 357-0557
fax: (603) 357-7440
http://www.swrpc.org/
email: admin@swrpc.org

Digital base information provided by the New Hampshire Geographically Referenced Analysis and Information Transfer System (GRANIT)

Town of Swanzey
Open Space Plan

2004

Land Cover in Swanzey
and Surrounding Towns
with Property Lines

- Roads, Buildings, Parking
- Agriculture / Open Fields
- Other Disturbed Areas Neighborhoods and Roadside Development
- Property Lines
- Rivers and Streams
- Lakes and Ponds
- Wetland
- Town Boundaries

N
W E
S

1 0.5 0 1 2 Miles

Presentation prepared by:

SWRPC
20 Central Square, 2nd Floor
Keene, NH 03431
(603) 357-0557
fax: (603) 357-7440
http://www.swrpc.org/
email: admin@swrpc.org

Digital base information provided by the New Hampshire Geographically Referenced Analysis and Information Transfer System (GRANIT)

APPENDIX 2.

Swanzey Open Space Plan Project Rating Sheet

Project or Parcel Name: _____ Acres: _____

Location in town: _____ Current Owner: _____

Type of Place: __ Forested Hillside __ River Corridor/Wetland __ Field / Open Space
Brief summary of project or parcel:

_____

_____

RESOURCE VALUES
Rank all values present or prevalent on property from 1 – 5, with 5 being highest

RECREATION / ACCESS	**Comments**
___ Existing Trails	_____
___ Potential for Trails	_____
___ Water Access	_____
___ Appropriate for hunting and fishing	_____
___ Remoteness / Sense of isolation	_____
___ *Total Points*	

HABITAT DIVERSITY AND INTEGRITY	
___ Natural Heritage site or rare natural community	_____
___ Diversity/quality of habitat on site is significant	_____
___ Part of corridor	_____
___ Linkage to other conservation lands	_____
___ Unfragmented habitat	_____
___ *Total Points*	

NATURAL BEAUTY	
___ Is part of a prominent viewshed	_____
___ Protrects unique views	_____
___ Provides good views from property	_____
___ *Total Points*	

WATER QUALITY	
___ Public drinking water supply	_____
___ Lake or pond frontage	_____
___ River or stream frontage	_____
___ Wetlands	_____
__ Aquifer or Wellhead Protection	_____
___ *Total Points*	

ACTIVE AGRICULTURE	
___ Prime soils (state or local significance	_____
___ Viable farm now or potential	_____
___ *Total Points*	

COMMUNITY CHARACTER	
___ Highly scenic from public ways	_____
___ Includes historically significant resources	_____
___ *Total Points*	

CHARACTERISTICS OF PROJECT OR PARCEL

YES	NO	DON'T KNOW	
__	__	__	Meets criteria as priority area in 2003-2004 Open Space Plan
__	__	__	Included as specific example of priority area in Open Space Plan
__	__	__	Abuts, enlarges, or provides linkages to other town-owned land
__	__	__	Clear potential to stimulate future projects
__	__	__	Benefits wide range of people
__	__	__	Access for public recreational uses
__	__	__	Opportunities for environmental or other educational uses
__	__	__	Opportunities for historic or cultural activities and public uses
__	__	__	Absence of actual or potential safety hazards
__	__	__	Title is clean and unencumbered
__	__	__	Town can provide effective stewardship of property
__	__	__	Potential for private land trust to assist
__	__	__	Imminently threatened by change of use that would undermine Resource Values
__	__	__	Is affordable for Town and will advance other priorities

Other Comments:

_____

_____

APPENDIX 3.

Selected Sources of Assistance and Information

Monadnock Conservancy
PO Box 337
160 Emerald Street
Keene, NH 03431
(603) 357-0600
www.monadnockconservancy.org
Information for landowners, technical assistance, land conservation transactions

Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests / Center for Land Conservation Assistance
54 Portsmouth Street
Concord, NH 03301
(603) 224-9945
www.spnhf.org
General information on land conservation, publications on municipal funding for land conservation, technical assistance, land conservation transactions

NH Land and Community Heritage Investment Program
10 Dixon Avenue
Concord, NH 03301
(603) 224-4113
www.lchip.org
Grants available to fund land conservation projects

Land Trust Alliance
1331 H Street NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005-4734
(202) 638-4725
www.lta.org
Information, workshops, publications, updates on land conservation

Southwest Region Planning Commission
20 Central Square
Keene, NH 03431
(603) 357-0557
www.swrpc.org
Planning and technical assistance, mapping, information, education

APPENDIX 4.

Open Space Advisory Committee

Victoria Barlow, Chair
PO Box 10264
Swanzey, NH 03446
357-4736
circleofthesunnh@aol.com

Deb Crowder
48 Mill Lane
Swanzey, NH 03446
352-0644
debbacrowder@yahoo.com

Francis W. Faulkner, Jr.
824 Old Homestead Highway
Swanzey, NH 03446
352-2529
flfaulkner@webryders.net

David Krisch
PO Box 371
W. Swanzey, NH 03469
357-3803 (w)
352-4556 (h)
dkrisch@msn.com

Rick Lewis
PO Box 631
Fitzwilliam, NH 03447

Marty Risley
19 Franklin Mountain Crossing
Swanzey, NH 03446
357-8744
mrisley@chi.llp.com

James Small
PO Box 10300
Swanzey, NH 03446
357-7042
(413)549-8264
jimsmall@tiac.net

Suzanne Whittemore
695 Old Homestead Highway
Swanzey, NH 03446
petesuz@prexar.com

Wayne Young
PO Box 611
W. Swanzey, NH 03469
young@monad.net

Sara Carbonneau
Town of Swanzey
PO Box 10009
Swanzey, NH 03446
352-7411
scarbonneau@town.swanzey.nh.us

Richard Ober
Monadnock Conservancy
PO Box 337
Keene, NH 03431
357-0600
RichardOber@MonadnockConservancy.org

Jeff Porter
Southwest Region Planning Commission
20 Central Square, 2nd Floor
Keene, NH 03431
357-0557
jporter@swrpc.org