

# 2014 OPEN SPACE & RECREATION PLAN WESTMINSTER, MASSACHUSETTS



**JOINTLY PREPARED BY THE WESTMINSTER  
OPEN SPACE AND MASTER PLAN COMMITTEES**

# TOWN OF WESTMINSTER

## 2014 OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION PLAN

June 27, 2014

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## SECTION 1 – PLAN SUMMARY

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The Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) is a comprehensive planning document that assesses the adequacy of existing open lands and recreation facilities, determines where and what types of land and facilities are needed, and establishes an action plan for land acquisition, land management, and recreation programming to guide Town agencies for the next five years. The overall goal of the OSRP is to retain the character of Westminster by establishing a diverse system of interconnected open space areas and to provide quality recreation programs for all residents of Westminster to enjoy, keeping pace with a rapidly growing community. The OSRP recognizes that Westminster is a desirable community primarily because of its scenic, natural, and historic resources. These are the characteristics that the OSRP strives to protect. The primary sections of the OSRP are as follows:

- Section 2 describes the planning process used to prepare this document.
- Section 3 contains information on the community setting including: regional context, historic data, demographics, and development patterns.
- Section 4 contains details on the environmental characteristics of the Town.
- Section 5 presents an inventory of all conservation and Town-owned land
- Section 6 presents the overall community vision and where open space and recreation fits into the larger picture.
- Section 7 presents an analysis of needs derived from the Master Plan citizen survey of 2012 questionnaire, several public workshops held for the preparation of this plan, demographic data, and state and federal recreation standards.
- Section 8 presents the Town's specific goals and objectives for open space and recreation.
- Lastly, Section 9 presents the Town's seven-year action plan that lists specific projects relating to open space and recreation, and lists the municipal entities responsible for implementation.

Westminster's population has grown significantly over the last fifty years, and more growth is on the way. According to the Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Build-Out Analysis prepared by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) in 2001, Westminster's population could increase by as many as 15,000 new residents if the Town were to be fully built out using today's zoning standards. Clearly, if the citizens of Westminster cherish the rural quality and character of

their Town, they have choices to make. How much open space do they want to purchase to maintain the feeling of openness? What are the costs of such purchases? Is acquisition the only option?

There are several tools that can be used to protect land. Informing large land owners of Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B, preferential taxation for open land, may protect land on a temporary basis, however, such designations are not permanent. Other options for keeping land open are Conservation Restrictions and Agricultural Preservation Restrictions. Educating land owners about the tax advantages of these programs is an important component of the town's open space planning strategy.

Another alternative to outright acquisition is partial development. Some owners might want to sell open land. In this case, they may be willing to subdivide a few lots for development while preserving the remainder of the parcel by deeding it to a land trust or the Conservation Commission.

A third option for keeping land open is through regulations. The Town has adopted a residential cluster development bylaw. Through this bylaw, houses can be built on smaller lots in order to preserve contiguous common open land. Westminster has had several proposals under this bylaw provision. Such a development does not increase the overall density, but it allows houses to be put on the land in a different way. Protecting the natural resources of Westminster goes hand in hand with the retention of Town character and the "feeling" of openness. The loss of resources is directly proportionate to the increase in developed land. Land consumption in Westminster has been dramatic over the past 40 years, where the population has increased by 70% since 1970. Much of this increase in population has come primarily from new single-family homes on previously undeveloped land. This development has put pressure on the natural resources and will continue to do so as more open land is converted.

The Town realizes that it does not have the financial resources to purchase all of the privately owned undeveloped land. The purpose of this Plan is to identify the most important parcels of land to preserve; and to use land acquisition in concert with other land preservation techniques to meet the Town's open space goals. The primary open space goals for the next seven years are to use traditional and innovative techniques for protecting additional open space, keeping pace with development as follows:

- Protect, conserve and enhance "working landscapes".
- Protect and preserve the Town's cultural resources.
- Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups.
- Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.
- Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.
- Increase communication and coordination between the Town and its residents.

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## SECTION 2 - INTRODUCTION

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### A. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The first iteration of an Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) for the Town of Westminster was prepared by Charles Caron and Susan Brown entitled: “Town of Westminster, Massachusetts – Open Space and Recreation Plan 1999-2004.” The Town updated its OSRP again in 2007 and then added two years to Action Plan in 2009, extending the OSRP’s validity with the State into early 2014.

Since the Town’s last complete update of its OSRP in 2007, the Town has added several key open space parcels to its inventory. Using several methods including purchase, conservation easements, gifts, the Forest Legacy Program, and land protected through the Town’s cluster development bylaw, the Town has been able to permanently protect approximately 150 acres of land since 2007. These efforts have resulted in protecting the majority of the shoreline for Muddy Pond and the historic Shenk Farm through the State’s Agricultural Preservation Program (APR). The Board of Selectmen has also acquired five parcels through tax title, some of which may be transferred to the Conservation Commission at a later date.

Additionally, the Town established a conservation fund for future open space purchases, and has been depositing \$1,000 annually into this account for the past ten years. In terms of new recreation facilities, the Conservation Commission transferred land to the Hager Park Commission for the creation of the Wachusett Rambler Recreation Area, a hilltop area that overlooks the hiking trails within Hager Park.

*Table 1 – Open Space Acquisitions 2007-2013*

MAP	LOT	ADDRESS	OWNER	AREA
27	1	Muddy Pond	CONSERVATION	37.00
78	3 + 5	Howard Road Rear	CONSERVATION	21.80
90	12	Bathrick Road	CONSERVATION	38.20
78	2	Howard Road	APR Land - Private	46.60
70	15	Oakmont Drive	CONSERVATION	4.20
		TOTAL		147.80

The North County Land Trust is a private/non-profit conservation organization that serves as an advisor to the Westminster Open Space Committee. The Land Trust has worked on several conservation projects on the Town’s behalf, including the Forest Legacy Program and the Midstate Trail Project.

## B. PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The Open Space and Recreation Plan is considered to be part of the Town's Master Plan, serving as two of the chapters required by MGL Chapter 41, Section 81D: the Natural & Cultural Resources Chapter and the Open Space & Recreation Chapter. A full draft of the Master Plan is now complete and contains chapters on such topics as transportation, town government, housing, economic development, land use and zoning.

The Town held several public forums regarding the Master Plan including a kick-off forum held on February 9, 2012 where open space and recreation were topics of conversation, and two forums specific to open space and recreation, the first was held on May 7, 2013, and the second was held on March 4, 2014. For all of the public forums, the following means of advertising were employed:

### Direct Mailing

- Flyer sent to all Westminster civic organizations

### Websites

- Town website: front page, Master Plan Committee & Open Space Committee pages
- Community Vine Facebook page & Facebook event

### Community Bulletin Boards

- Town Hall
- Library

### Television

- Local cable station – text notice to run intermittently

### Announcements

- Board of Selectmen meetings (televised)

### Other

- Word of mouth
- Flyer distributed to Town Center businesses

Lastly, a Master Plan citizen survey was sent to every household in Westminster (approximately 2,630 households) in January of 2012. The survey included twenty-one questions covering such topics as land use, zoning, housing, economic development, open space, recreation, and municipal services. There were 1,222 responses received for a total response rate of 46.5%. The survey results have informed the Master Plan Committee's deliberations as they prepare a set of goals, objectives and recommendations for each chapter.

The preparation of this OSRP is a joint effort between the Town's Open Space Committee (established in 2005 with members appointed by the Selectmen) and the Master Plan Committee (established in 2011 for the duration of the master planning effort, with members appointed by the Selectmen).

A draft of this Open Space and Recreation Plan has been distributed to the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board, the Conservation Commission, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Hager Park Commission, the Master Plan Committee, the Open Space Committee, the Historical Commission, the Zoning Board of Appeals, the Board of Health, and MRPC, the regional planning agency. The final draft will incorporate the comments from the above entities.

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## SECTION 3 - COMMUNITY SETTING

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### A. REGIONAL CONTEXT

Westminster is located in the Montachusett Region of north central Massachusetts, 6 miles west of Fitchburg, 24 miles north of Worcester, 53 miles northwest of Boston and 198 miles from New York City. (See Regional Context Map) The total area of the Town is 37.3 square miles (35.51 square miles in land area). Westminster is bordered by Ashburnham to the north, Fitchburg and Leominster to the east, Princeton and Hubbardston to the south, and Gardner to the west.

Major highways that traverse Westminster include state Route 2 (a major east/west corridor) and state Route 140. Other state numbered routes that pass through Westminster include Route 12, Route 2A and Route 31. The Pan Am Railway line (freight rail) parallels Route 2 and provides access to the network of intermodal facilities servicing central and eastern Massachusetts.

The Town shares several public resources with its neighbors. Montachusett Technical High School (known locally as “Monty Tech”) is shared with several other communities in the region, but its recreational fields are located in Westminster. Ashburnham and Westminster have joined together as the Ashburnham-Westminster Regional School District for all grades (K-12). The Oakmont Regional High School and Overlook Middle School are located in Ashburnham, while Westminster maintains its own elementary school in the Town Center. Portions of Westminster receive municipal sewer and water service from the City of Fitchburg, and both Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Pond in Westminster serve as water supply sources for the Fitchburg municipal water system.

Westminster plays host to several regional recreational facilities: Wachusett Mountain State Reservation and Leominster State Forest. The Reservation is shared by the Towns of Westminster and Princeton. Wachusett Mountain contains a total of approximately 2,250 acres of which 605 acres lies in Westminster. The Ski Area actually leases a large chunk of land (450 acres) from the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). The Ski Area has six lifts, 20 trails, and a base lodge (located solely in Westminster). Mount Wachusett contains approximately 300 acres of Administrative Old Growth Forest (defined as those forests that have not been logged within the last 150 years), which is situated in the Town of Westminster and neighboring Town of Princeton

Wachusett Mountain is also a popular location for hiking trails, some of which originate in Westminster. The trails are used for various nature education programs; bird watching, including hawk watching in September; cycling; and horseback riding. The Wachusett Mountain Ski Area also plays host to a number of community events, such as: charity

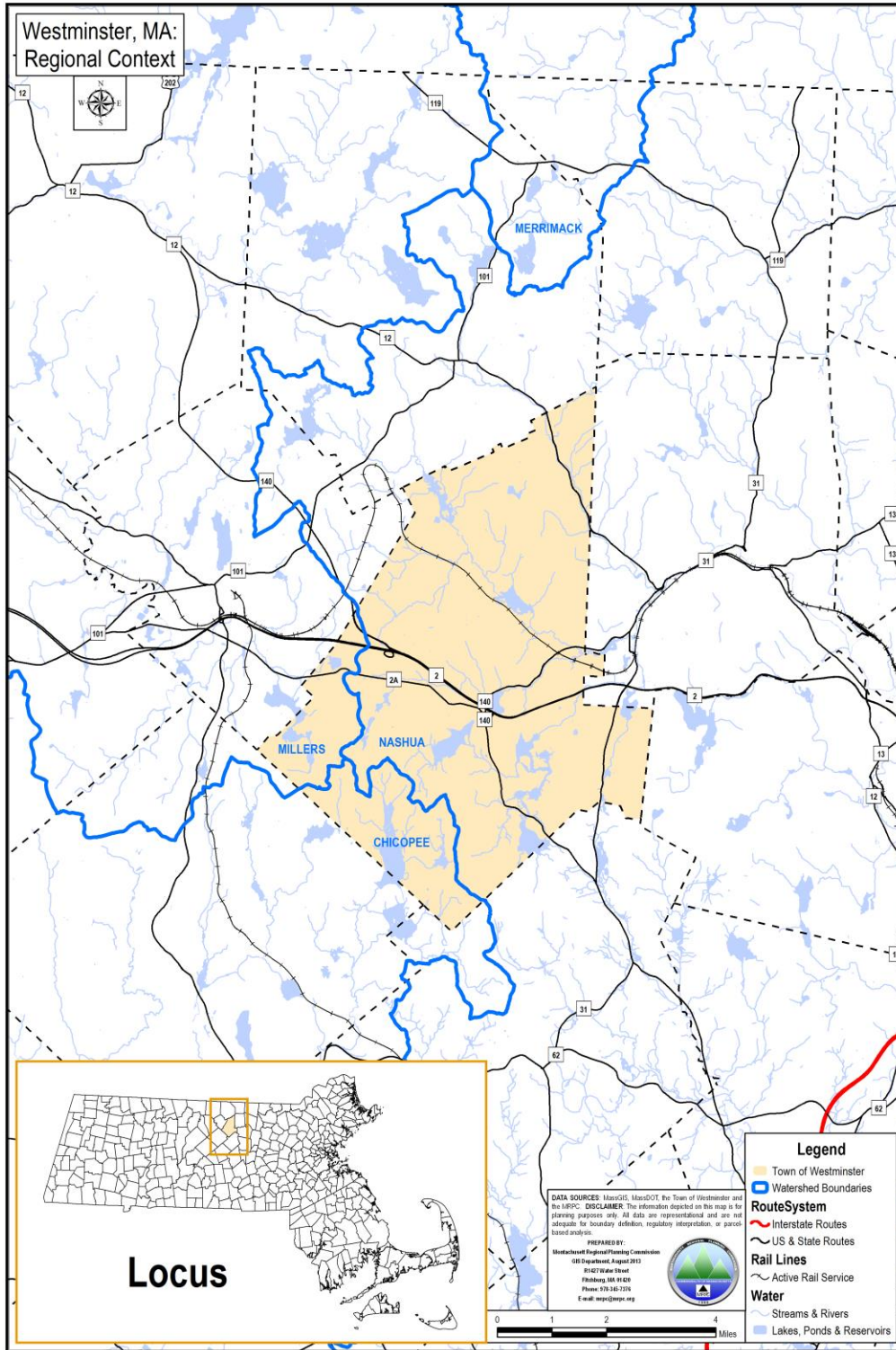


road races, music concerts, auto and food festivals, sky-rides and other similar activities. In the past several years, over two million people have visited Wachusett Mountain State Reservation.

Leominster State Forest can be accessed from and is partially within the boundaries of Westminister. Its 4,300 acres, 1,237 of which are located in Westminister, provides miles of hiking, bicycling and equestrian trails, as well as rock climbing cliffs and numerous fishing sources. Leominster State Forest Headquarters is located within Westminister. Near its western perimeter on Route 31 the Department of Conservation and Recreation has developed a 150' sandy swimming beach, a 2-acre picnic grove, a parking area, an information kiosk, and sanitary facilities. Leominster State Forest is also popular for cross country skiing and snowshoeing.

The Midstate Trail, a 92-mile regional hiking trail extending from Rhode Island through central Massachusetts and connecting to the Wapack Trail in New Hampshire, runs through Westminister. The trail connects Mount Wachusett in Westminister and Mount Watatic in Ashburnham.

Westminister is part of the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC), which serves 22 communities in Northern Worcester County. MRPC meets monthly to discuss issues of common interest. MRPC provides a forum for discussing regional open space issues and opportunities and has recently rendered assistance in the formation of a regional trails coalition for the Montachusett Region. This updated OSRP is consistent with the regional open space plan prepared by MRPC, which advocates preserving: "a network of open space including critical environmental areas, unique landscape features, rights-of-way with scenic or recreational potential and areas required to fill regional open space and recreational needs."



## B. HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

In pre-colonization times the area of Westminster was the seasonal home to a branch of Native Americans known as the Nipmucks. This central upland area lured the native people as well as the English settlers with its bountiful resources, natural beauty and strategic location.

The area was designated as “Narragansett No. 2” and granted as payment in 1676 to families of soldiers who fought in the King Phillip’s War. In 1737, Captain Fairbanks Moore built the town’s first permanent structure on the shores of Meetinghouse Pond. By 1759, nearly sixty families had settled within the boundaries of the newly incorporated district of Westminster.

Westminster was incorporated as a town in 1759, but the community was not accepted as a town until 1770. With the completion of the Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike, then Route 2 in 1779, and the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad in 1848, Westminster had the prerequisites to become a thriving farming and industrial community.

Industries and their surrounding villages grew up around the lakes and rivers where water supplied power to mills. Early industries in Westminster included grist mills, chair manufacturing, paper and textile mills, brick making, cabinet making, coopering and the baking of bread and crackers.

Because of the Town Center’s elevation (nearly 1,000 feet above sea level) the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad decided to route the tracks to the north of town away from the established business district. Westminster Center continued to be the government and trade center. In its early stage of settlement private wells and springs provided adequate water supply for the townspeople and businesses.

The population decreased from its peak in 1850 so that there were only about 1,500 residents in 1915. In the 20th century the industry all over Town declined. Yet despite the decline and, with the exception of the Westminster Cracker Company which continued to 1970, the population continued to increase. During this time, residences were constructed along the existing roadways and along the shores of Wyman Pond in lakeside cottages. The population soared to over 5,000 in 1980. In the 1980’s a number of new residential subdivisions were created, adding to the housing boom. Development also continued along existing public ways. The 2010 Census counted 7,277 residents for Westminster.

## C. POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

It is essential to understand the size and composition of the population to plan for the Town’s open space and recreation needs. Between 2000 and 2010, Westminster added

370 residents, growing from 6,907 residents in 2000 to 7,277 residents in 2010, an increase of 5.4%. This is a much slower rate of growth from the previous decade (1990 to 2000), where the population increased by 11.6 %, or 716 people. Thus, Westminster's growth rate appears to be slowing its rate of increase. Whether the slowdown can be attributed to the Great Recession or the lack of suitable land for new home construction cannot be determined without further analysis. With a total land area of 35.5 square miles, the Town has a population density of 208 people per square mile.

*Table 2 - Population of Westminster 1960 – 2010*

							<b>Projected</b>	<b>1990-2000 %</b>	<b>2000-2010 %</b>
<b>Community</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>Change</b>	<b>Change</b>
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>4,022</b>	<b>4,273</b>	<b>5,139</b>	<b>6,191</b>	<b>6,907</b>	<b>7,277</b>	<b>7,953</b>	<b>11.6%</b>	<b>5.4%</b>

Source: US Census 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 and Projections from MISER.

*Table 3 - Household Income*

<b>Political Subdivision</b>	<b>Median Household Income (2000)</b>	<b>Median Household Income (2010)</b>	<b>Percent Change: 2000-2010</b>
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>\$57,755</b>	<b>\$78,632</b>	<b>36.1%</b>
Worcester County Average	\$47,874	\$65,772	37.4%
State Average	\$50,502	\$65,981	30.7%
National Average	\$41,994	\$50,406	20.0%

Source: 2010 US Census.

*Table 4 - Family Income*

<b>Community</b>	<b>Median Family Income (2000)</b>	<b>Median Family Income (2010)</b>	<b>Percent Change: 2000 to 2010</b>
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>\$61,835</b>	<b>\$82,596</b>	<b>33.6%</b>
Worcester County Average	\$58,394	\$81,342	39.3%
State Average	\$61,664	\$83,371	35.2%
National Average	\$50,046	\$64,400	28.7%

Source: 2010 US Census.

The two tables above indicate that Westminster and Worcester County fared much better than the State and the Nation in terms of household and family income between 2000 and 2010.

*Table 5 - Poverty Information*

<b>Community</b>	<b>Population Counts 2000</b>	<b>Number Below Poverty</b>	<b>Percent Below Poverty</b>	<b>Population Counts 2010</b>	<b>Number Below Poverty</b>	<b>Percent Below Poverty</b>	<b>Percent Change 2000 to 2010</b>
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>6907</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>7,277</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>3.8%</b>	<b>30.2%</b>
Worcester County Ave.	750,963	67,136	9.20%	798,552	79,056	9.9%	17.8%
State Average	6,349,097	573,421	9.30%	6,547,629	700,596	10.7%	22.2%
National Average	281,421,906	33,899,812	12.40%	308,745,538	49,090,539	15.9%	44.8%

Source: 2010 US Census.

The previous table indicates that while Westminster's poverty rate grew faster than the County and State average, the Town's percentage of people living below the poverty line is still at a much lower percentage than the County, State and National averages.

An assessment of age characteristics is necessary to appreciate the policy implications of population changes over time. For example, how large is the school-aged population in the town and how is it expected to change? How many seniors are living in the community now and in the future? What are the recreation policy implications based on age characteristics?

The demographic profile shows that the "soon to be seniors" population (ages 45 – 64) as the fastest growing segment of Westminster's population during the last decade. Such folks are typically still active, with many participating in such activities as biking, hiking and water sports. The Town's senior population (65 years and over) has risen steadily during the last 40 years and the Town is actively trying to serve the recreation needs of this constituency by building a new community-senior center at 69 West Main Street, about half a mile from the Town Center. While the Town's school age population (ages 5 – 19) has declined slightly during the last decade, the Town's Parks & Recreation Committee continues to list new athletic fields as one of its most pressing needs.

*Table - 6 Westminster Age Distributions*

<b>Age Group Category</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>% Change 2000 - 2010</b>
Under 5 years of age	415	319	- 23.1%
5 – 19 years of age	1,601	1,583	-1.1%
20 – 34 years of age	958	962	+0.1
35 – 44 years of age	1,292	1,036	-19.8%
45 – 54 years of age	1,308	1,372	+4.9%
55 – 64 years of age	580	1,170	+102.0%
65 – 74 years of age	402	468	+16.4%
75 and over years of age	235	367	+56.2%
Median Age	38.6	42.8	

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010.

Table 7 - Median Age 1980 – 2010

	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Community</b>	<b>Median Age</b>	<b>Median Age</b>	<b>Median Age</b>	<b>Median Age</b>
<b>Westminster</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>35.1</b>	<b>38.6</b>	<b>42.8</b>
Worcester County Average	29.8	32.9	37.4	39.2
State Average	31.1	33.5	36.5	40.3

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010.

## D. GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

### GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

The vast majority of new homes built over the past decade have been along existing public ways through the Approval Not Required (ANR) process. New subdivision activity dropped off significantly since the onset of the Great Recession (late 2007). However, there were several large subdivisions approved in the early part of the last decade that are built out, partially built out or just getting underway (see table below).

Table 8 - Subdivision Activity in Westminster 2000-present

<b>Subdivision Name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Number of Lots</b>	<b>Date approved</b>	<b>Status</b>
Brookside Farms	Bean Porridge Hill Road	137	34	April 2010	Just getting started
Harrington Heights	Harrington Road & Sawin Drive	64	16	Oct. 2006	Mostly built
Crocker Pond Estates	South Ashburnham Rd.	86	19	June 2003	Built
Village at Old Mill	Route 2A	112	53	June 2002	Mostly built
Rebanna Road	Off Woodland Dr.	75	22	Aug. 2004	Mostly built
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>432</b>	<b>144</b>		

There are several large housing projects that were approved during the last decade, but never built:

- Deer Run (40B affordable housing project, 41 lots off Livermore Hill and Ellis Roads).
- Kingsbury Arms (40B affordable housing project, 48 lots off of Livermore Hill and State Road West).
- Mountainview Estates (40B affordable housing project, 136 lots off of Gatehouse and East Roads).
- Pheasant Ridge (60 lots off of Livermore Hill and Ellis Roads).
- The Woods at Westminster (141 lots off of Bean Porridge Hill Road).

The Planning Board expects that these developments will be revived in one form or another during the next decade.

Other significant development trends over the past decade are as follows:

- Between the years 2000 and 2010 Westminster's population increased from 6,907 to 7,277. Currently, the population is 7,532 representing a 5.4% increase. In 2001, the MA Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs funded build-out studies for all municipalities in the Commonwealth. A build-out study attempts to determine what the community would look like if all of its vacant developable land were built out according to current zoning standards. Westminster's build-out study predicted the Town would have over 22,000 residents at full build-out.
- At the same time the population increased by 370 residents during the last decade, the number of housing units increased from 2,694 to 2,812, an increase of 118 units.
- Westminster's population grew faster than at least 16 out of 22 communities in the Montachusett region in both the 1980's and 1990's, but the growth rate slowed considerably during the first decade of the millennium.
- Between 1971 and 1999 (the most recent State-wide land use mapping effort), the Town saw 1,423 acres of forest land and 118 acres of pastureland converted to predominantly residential uses, and to a lesser extent, commercial and industrial uses. Unfortunately, the conversion of forest and farmland into residences has been a region-wide phenomenon.
- Since 2000, over 432 acres and 144 lots have been approved for residential subdivision development.

#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

Westminster's economic development trends are highlighted below:

- The Town Center is a "hub" of commercial activity servicing many of the needs of residents and attracting visitors to the community who frequent Wachusett Mountain Ski Area and other recreation and historic amenities in the community and region. Since the last iteration of this Plan, two new commercial developments have recently been built along Main Street – a retail/office plaza behind Vincent's grocery store containing 12,400 square feet and a 15,500 square foot commercial building that has the IC Credit Union as its principal tenant.

- The importance of the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area to the local economy is high. While this recreational site offers employment to residents from the community and region, other businesses in the region, such as restaurants, hotels and gas stations, benefit from its presence.
- There are several large employers that have good access to State Route 2. These are Tyco, TRW Automotive, Aubuchon Headquarters and Distribution Center and Ranor. All told, these four employers account for 1,222 jobs, or 45% of the total number of jobs in Westminister.
- Simplex-Grinnell (a division of Tyco) is the largest employer in the Town with approximately 700 employees. This facility was formerly owned by Simplex and Digital Equipment Corporation prior to ownership and occupation by Simplex-Grinnell. This employment site has seen periods of both increases and decreases in employment, unfortunately the recent trend has been a reduction of jobs at the site, dropping from 1,508 jobs in 2002 to just over 700 jobs today. However, it should be noted that national companies often shift jobs around from one region to another and this is particularly true in the case of Simplex-Grinnell.
- The Town has two large swaths of industrially-zoned land that have a considerable amount of vacant and developable land. The first is the Westminister Business Park off of Depot Road. The Park contains 249 acres of land and is fully permitted for 1.57 million square feet of new floor space. While the first phase of the Park is complete, the second and larger phase is still under construction and may take as many as ten more years to complete. The Park also has 7,000 linear feet of frontage along the Boston & Maine railroad line (owned by Pan Am Southern) with three Business Park lots having the potential to be used for the shipping and receiving of freight. The second large industrial area is Simplex Drive. This site consists of 95 acres in a lush wooded setting. There is an existing building on the other side of the road that contains 658,017 square feet of floor space, two thirds of which is still available for lease. This building was once fully owner-occupied by its builder, Digital Equipment Corporation, and is currently 2/3 vacant and being marketed for light industrial/office reuse. Beyond the existing building, this site has enough vacant developable land to accommodate an additional one million square feet of new floor space.
- The “gateway” along State Route 2A along the Westminister-Gardner municipal boundary (where Simplex Drive is located) has been the subject of much debate amongst Westminister policy makers. In 2007, Westminister commissioned Dr. John Mullin of Mullin Associates Inc. to prepare a report on behalf of the Town’s Economic Development Study Committee, which was tasked with evaluating the potential of the commercial districts along Route 2. The report, entitled: Final



Report of the Economic Development Study Committee: Westminster's Future Economic Development Opportunities, set forth the following findings:

- The Route 2 Corridor represents Westminster's primary gateway to distant points and reflects Westminster's historic, cultural and rural values.
- The Corridor has tremendous potential for industrial development and low- density commercial development.
- The Corridor, in terms of industrial growth, will grow very slowly: large-scale growth will be largely blocked by Devens while infill development is most likely to occur in nearby Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner.
- There is demand for large-scale commercial development.
- It was the consensus of the Committee that large-scale commercial development would change the character of the corridor.
- Based on a fiscal impact analysis, the Corridor has the potential to replace the lost revenue from the Landfill's eventual closure.
- While the Corridor has the potential to be developed, it is essential that its assets be marketed.
- While the Corridor's zoning does currently protect the Town from large-scale commercial development, it does not in itself ensure that other forms of development will match the Town's character.

The report concluded with the following recommendations:

- The present zoning bylaw, including the limitation of retail operations to no more than 25,000 square feet of floor space, should remain in place at this time.
- The Town should explore means and methods to ensure tighter performance standards and site design requirements that reflect the Town's character.
- The Town, working through its partners at the State and Regional level, should begin to market the Corridor.
- The Town should explore designating its two industrial parks as Priority Development sites through the State's streamlined permitting legislation (MGL 43D).
- The Town should explore the creation of a mixed use overlay district for at least part of the Corridor.
- The Town should determine if it is adequately covered in terms of fiber-optic connectivity.
- The Town, through use of the Fiscal Impact Assessment Model (described in detail within the report), should carefully monitor the financial impacts of growth and report the findings on an annual basis.
- The Town should continue the activities of the Economic Development Study Committee.

While the Economic Development Study Committee ceased its activities in early 2011 after an exhaustive review of a lifestyle mall proposed by a private developer for the Simplex Drive area (never built), the Town has gone forward and implemented several of the recommendations from the Mullins report, including: designating three industrial districts as Priority Development sites through MGL 43D.

Many of the Economic Development Study Committee's activities are now being carried out by the newly formed Economic Development Committee (EDC). Created by the Board of Selectmen during the summer of 2012, the EDC's charge is to take a broader town-wide view of economic development, and look for ways to promote the Town to the outside world for the purpose of encouraging new economic activity and the tax revenues it could generate.

The next table presents the number of employed/unemployed Westminster residents dating back to 2000. The table also allows for a comparison of Westminster's unemployment rate with the Worcester County and State unemployment rates.

*Table 9*  
*Employment Status of Westminster Residents*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Westminster Labor Force</b>	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>Westminster Unemployment Rate</b>	<b>Worcester County Unemployment Rate</b>	<b>State Rate</b>
2000	3,757	3,649	108	2.9%	2.8%	2.6%
2001	3,780	3,638	142	3.8%	3.9%	3.7%
2002	3,869	3,636	233	6.0%	5.6%	5.3%
2003	3,895	3,645	250	6.4%	6.2%	5.8%
2004	3,871	3,641	230	5.9%	5.6%	5.2%
2005	3,857	3,635	222	5.8%	5.2%	4.8%
2006	3,911	3,693	218	5.6%	5.1%	5.0%
2007	3,887	3,691	196	5.0%	4.9%	4.5%
2008	3,868	3,642	226	5.8%	5.8%	5.1%
2009	3,819	3,473	346	9.1%	9.0%	8.2%
2010	3,799	3,451	348	9.2%	9.1%	8.3%
2011	3,738	3,425	305	8.2%	8.1%	7.4%

Source: Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development.

#### Where Westminster Residents Work:

At one time, the US Census Bureau compiled workplace origin/destination statistics for every community as part of once-a-decade national census effort. Although such information was not collected for the 2010 US Census, the 2000 Census data does provide some insight, albeit dated, as to where Westminster residents work.

In Westminster:	648 (18.9% of workforce)
Fitchburg:	521 (15.2%)
Leominster:	422 (12.3%)
Gardner:	329 (9.6%)
Worcester:	271 (7.9%)
Boston:	97 (2.8%)

It is interesting to note that only 2.8% of the Town's workforce travels to Boston for work, especially when one considers that a new MBTA commuter rail station (Wachusett Station) is being built in Fitchburg very close to the Westminster borderline.

#### Getting to Work:

Using data from the 2000 and 2010 iterations of the US Census Survey, a comparison can be made as to how Westminster's workforce gets to work and how its commuting patterns have changed during the past decade.

	<u>2000</u>	<u>2010</u>
Drove Alone	94.8%	78.5%
Car-Pooled	7.2%	8.7%
Walk/Bike	0.8%	1.2%
Public Transit	0.1%	1.3%
Worked at Home	3.5%	10.3%

Reviewing the figures above, it is interesting to note that the "driving to work alone" category was the only one to decline over the past decade, while the others (car-pool, walking/biking, public transit and working at home) all increased. Clearly, the trend is moving towards alternative means to get to work other than driving alone. It will be interesting to see how much the presence of the new Wachusett Station impacts the "public transit" figure during the next decennial census in 2020.

#### The Number and Types of Jobs in Westminster:

The next set of numbers is also from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development and chronicles the number of jobs residing in Westminster (in-town jobs) as of 2011. A few things to note for Table 10: they are annual averages and not seasonally adjusted, the numbers are real jobs reported by the employer themselves, they count *all* jobs whether full-time or part-time, they do not count the self-employed and those businesses that consist solely of members from a single family (like a family-owned farm). Also note that the industry categories are based on the North American Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system.

Table 10

*2011 Average In-Town Employment and Wages  
by Industry All Ownership*

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Establish- ments</b>	<b>Total Wages</b>	<b>Average Employment</b>	<b>Average Weekly Wage</b>
<b>Total, All Industries</b>	206	\$128,720,839	2,533	\$977
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting	4	\$330,386	13	\$489
Construction	37	\$5,202,374	123	\$813
Manufacturing	15	\$35,948,298	600	\$1,152
Wholesale Trade	13	\$3,878,419	73	\$1,022
Retail Trade	15	\$2,549,842	98	\$500
Transportation and Warehousing	8	\$1,160,515	28	\$797
Finance and Insurance	5	\$504,091	12	\$808
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	5	\$181,141	17	\$205
Professional and Technical Services	10	\$759,040	24	\$608
Administrative and Waste Services	12	\$1,787,212	52	\$661
Health Care and Social Assistance	15	\$4,493,505	108	\$800
Accommodation and Food Services	16	\$4,044,811	263	\$296
Other Services, Ex. Public Admin	31	\$1,180,246	72	\$315

Source: MA Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD).

For Table 10, please note that Westminster's total in-town jobs figure is listed under the "Total, All Industries" heading, and then the table presents job counts for the major employment categories, but not all employment categories. Thus, the job numbers in the employment categories will not add up to Westminster's total number of in-town jobs.

The previous table indicates there were 2,533 jobs in Westminster as of 2011. While, this represents a 30% decrease since 2000 when there were 3,640 jobs existing in Westminster, these numbers are a bit misleading. Just because the numbers technically show that Westminster "lost" jobs in the past decade, this does not necessarily mean that these jobs simply disappeared and went away. Westminster is home to several companies that have a national presence: Aubuchon Hardware, TRW Automotive, and Tyco. National companies often shift jobs around from one region to another and this partially explains Westminster's job "losses" of the last decade. This is particularly true in the case of Tyco. According to the company's annual report to the Town as part of its Tax Increment Financing (TIF) agreement, Tyco hosted 1,508 jobs at its Westminster location in 2002, but the number of jobs dropped to 722 jobs by 2011. Thus, the bulk of the Town's job "losses" can be tied to this one employer. Again, these jobs didn't just

disappear, but were moved to other Tyco locations throughout the country. It should be noted that the State rescinded the Company's TIF agreement in 2011 because it did not meet its hiring targets.

Another factor partly responsible for Westminster's job "losses" is that the number of Westminster residents who worked from home jumped from 3.5% in 2000 to 10.3% in 2010. The State would not count those people working from home in Table 10. Because of the way that the State counts in-town jobs and the increase in the number of work-at-home jobs during the last decade, Westminster has approximately 230 in-town jobs that the State isn't counting.

Westminster has always welcomed those businesses and industries that offer living wage jobs and has so far resisted siren song of big box retailers and chain restaurants (the downtown Subway and Dunkin Donuts not withstanding). On two occasions during the last decade, Town Meeting voters have said "no" to large-scale retail operations that were proposed to be located in close proximity to Route 2. In terms of retail development, the results of the Master Plan citizen survey indicate that Westminster residents prefer locally owned businesses located in the Town Center.

While the Town may have technically "lost" some of its manufacturing jobs, other manufacturers in Town continue to grow and expand, such as Ranor Inc., a manufacturer of industrial-scale chambers and vessels. The Townspeople are very aware they have two large industrial districts (Simplex Drive and the Westminster Business Park) that are ripe for industrial development which pays much better wages than retail development. There are still 114 acres of vacant developable land off of Simplex Drive and 249 acres in the Westminster Business Park. The Park is currently under construction and may require another 20 years to complete. The Park owners are essentially turning a gravel pit into a pad-ready industrial park with full infrastructure. Once complete, the Park is permitted to host approximately 1.5 million square feet of new floor space which, if used for industrial purposes, could host over 700 new jobs.

The table on the following page allows for a comparison of the types and number of in-town jobs for Westminster and its neighbors as of 2011.

*Table 11*  
*Number of In-Town Jobs by Employment Major Category - Year 2011 Comparison*

	<b>Westminster</b>	Ashburnham	Hubbardston	Princeton	Gardner	Leominster	Fitchburg
Agri/Forest/Fish	13	0	0	0	0	0	0
Construction	123	36	43	21	112	610	413
Manufacturing	600	29	49	14	1,053	2,580	1,676
Wholesale/Retail	171	129	39	14	1,193	4,602	1,992
Transpo/Warehouse	28	0	0	19	172	319	562
Finance/Real Estate	29	14	0	23	362	970	573
Professional/Admin.	76	25	22	8	275	1,343	737
Health Care/Social/ Education	108	69	59	47	3,230	3,059	3,960
Food/Lodging	263	106	26	93	785	2,216	1,295
Other Services	72	44	30	52	850	942	974
Total # of Establishments	206	124	75	81	525	1,270	1,031
Total In-Town Jobs	2,533	984	500	863	8,053	17,621	12,430
Total Annual Wages Paid	\$128.7 million	\$39.0 million	\$15.3 million	\$19.6 million	\$317.7 million	\$657.0 million	\$492.6 million

Source: MA Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD).

Please note that as with Table 10, Table 11 does not list every employment category in existence, just the major employment categories. Further, the major employment categories do not capture every single job in each town. For instance, Table 10 doesn't list any jobs for Westminster's neighbors in the agriculture/forestry/fishing category; however, such jobs most certainly do exist in these communities. Tables 10 and 11 represents the State's best estimate as to the number of in-town jobs for Westminster and its neighbors. Again, Table 10 does not include the self-employed or family-owned businesses where all employees are members of the family.

The previous table indicates that Westminster has more in-town jobs, establishments and a larger average payroll than its three rural neighbors, but less than its three urban neighbors. The MIT study documents that Westminster is one of the few towns in the region where average weekly wages nearly double between 2000 and 2007, whereas the average weekly wages actually declined during this time in the region's three major employment centers: Fitchburg, Gardner and Leominster. This indicates that Westminster has a healthy number of businesses and industries for a small rural community and has been meeting its stated goal of hosting living wage jobs.

#### In-Town Job Projections:

MRPC's most recent Regional Transportation Plan (2012) uses the MassHighway Traffic Demand Model to forecast the number of residents and in-town jobs for each of their 22 member communities up to the year 2035.

According to the most recent forecast, Westminster can expect to have 7,480 residents and 2,490 in-town jobs by the year 2020, and 7,850 residents and 2,580 in-town jobs by 2035. These forecasts indicate that current trend of having Westminster's population grow faster than the number of in-town jobs will continue into the foreseeable future unless the Town undertakes an aggressive economic development strategy.

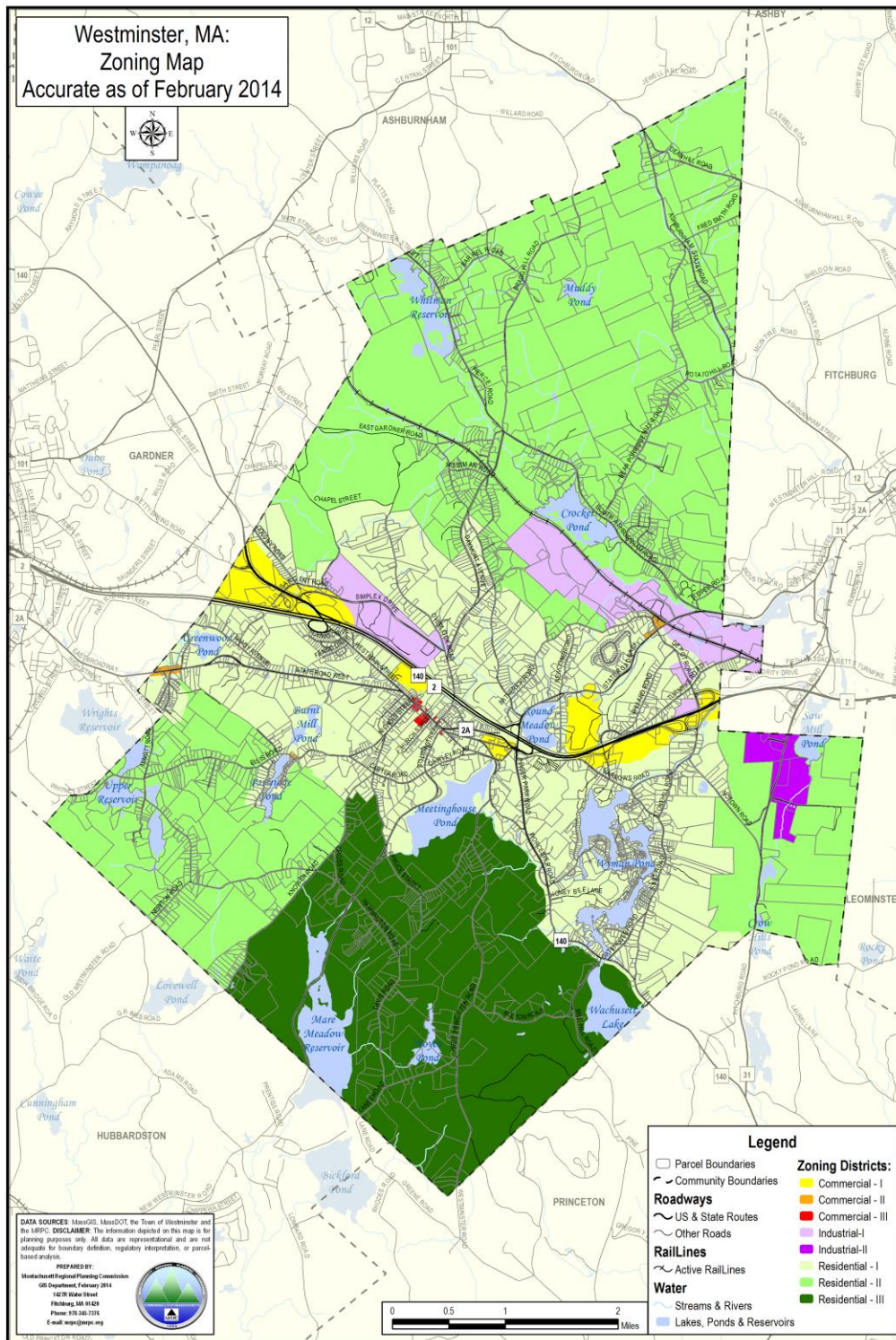
## EOEA BULDOUT SCENARIO

Starting in 1999 the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) performed a build-out analysis for all communities in Massachusetts. Essentially, a build-out analysis starts by subtracting all developed land, all permanently protected land, and all land that cannot be built on due to environmental constraints (wetlands, steep slopes, etc.). The land that remains (the vacant developable land) is then divided by the dimensional requirements of the current Zoning Bylaw (required lot sizes and frontage). The end result is the number of new house lots and commercial/industrial floor space that could result at full build-out. Westminster's build-out analysis was prepared in 2000 by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) and the results are shown below.

*Table 12 – Build-Out Analysis*

<b>Buildout Impact for Westminster</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Additional Impact</b>	<b>Future Total</b>
Population	6,907	15,251	22,158
Students	1,331	2,941	4,272
Households/dwelling Units	2,627	5,801	8,428
Residential Developable Land Area (sq. ft.)		500,512,722	
Residential Developable Land Area (acres)		11,490	
Commercial/Industrial Buildable Floor Area (sq. ft.)		15,941,102	
Potential Employment		44,930	
Water Demand (gallons per day)	216,000	2,339,408	2,554,729
<i>Residential Water Use (gallons/day)</i>		1,143,825	
<i>Comm./Ind. Water Use (gallons/day)</i>		1,195,583	
Municipal Solid Waste (tons/year)		7,824	
<i>Non-Recycled Solid Waste (tons/year)</i>		5,563	
<i>Recyclable Solid Waste (tons/year)</i>		2,260	
Road Miles	110	107	217

Although the build-out analysis is somewhat outdated, the numbers are staggering. The Town of Westminster would need to make significant public service expenditures to accommodate such a population. However, it should be noted that the build-out analysis makes no attempt to determine *when* the Town will achieve full build-out.





## TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Route 2 is the most important roadway to the Town and the region, running east west through the entire region. This limited access roadway provides the area with a direct link to Boston and to the western half of the state. Route 2 connects Westminster to all the region's major urban communities including Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner.

Other arterial roads that pass through Westminster are Route 140, Route 12, Route 31 and Route 2A. Collector roads in Westminster include: South Ashburnham Road, Oakmont Avenue/Bacon Street, West Main Street, Minott Road, and South Street.

In terms of public transportation, there is no fixed route bus service provided in Westminster. The Montachusett Area Regional Transit Authority (MART) organizes services that provide para-transit service for the elderly, disabled or disadvantaged population. MART contracts with social and human service agencies for para-transit service. The Town and MART provide service in Westminster through the Council on Aging that employs a paid coordinator funded jointly.

There is one intercity operator that travels through the Montachusett Region, Peter Pan Bus Lines that stops at Bickford's Family Restaurant at the junction of State Route 2 and Route 12 in Leominster. Peter Pan has one bus, which leaves daily from the Bickford's Family Restaurant and connects the cities of Leominster, Worcester, Boston, Springfield, Hartford, CT and New York City. The bus leaves the restaurant at 7:35 a.m. daily and return from Worcester at 5:45 p.m.; Traveling north leaving Bickford's Family Restaurant stop at 6:15 p.m. daily to Concord NH via the cities of Lowell, Nashua NH and Manchester NH.

Commuter rail service previously existed from Gardner to Boston. The trains passed through Westminster, but did not stop. The service to Gardner was drastically cut back late in 1983 and discontinued on January 1, 1987. Today, service along the Fitchburg line to North Station in Boston terminates at the MBTA Fitchburg Commuter Rail Station. However, it should be noted that the new MBTA Wachusett Station is currently under construction just over the border in Fitchburg, in the vicinity of Route 2. The layover station (where trains will be parked at night) will actually be located within Westminster in the Westminster Business Park.

There are no formal bicycle lanes in Westminster, however mountain biking is a popular recreation activity on those Town-owned conservation properties that allow it. In terms of walking, there is a network of sidewalks within the Town Center and the Town's Subdivision Regulations do give the Planning Board the authority to require sidewalks for new subdivisions where appropriate.

## ZONING

The table below provides the acres for each zoning district in Westminster along with its percentage of the Town's total land area.

*Table 13: Westminster Zoning Districts*

<b>District</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Area Acres</b>	<b>Percent of Town</b>
R-I	Residential One	6,225	27.4%
R-II	Residential Two	10,497	46.2%
R-III	Residential Three	4,317	19.0%
C – I	Highway Business	568	2.5%
C – II	Neighborhood Business	22	0.1%
C – III	Downtown Business	13	0.05%
I – I	Industrial One	818	3.6%
I – II	Industrial Two	190	0.8%

Source: MRPC Zoning Layer, dated 2008

### ZONING ISSUES:

Westminster enacted its first Zoning Bylaw at a Town Meeting held on January 22, 1974. While the Planning Board has made numerous revisions over the years, the Zoning Bylaw still largely resembles that of a small town circa the 1970s. The Bylaw is antiquated, poorly organized, confusing to read, presents limited options for all types of development and does not contain many of the Smart Growth techniques and tools being promoted by the State and the national planning community. Towns should expect to get what they zone for, and a poorly conceived zoning scheme usually results in an inefficient land use pattern that further results in a myriad of problems that the community will need to spend a great deal of money, time and human capital to sort out and correct.

The primary flaws of the Zoning Bylaw include:

- Dimensional standards for new lots are scattered throughout the Bylaw.
- The site plan provisions are not clear and are subject to individual interpretation.
- No provisions or requirements for affordable housing.
- No provisions for “building green”.
- The sign bylaw is antiquated and confusing and does not require New England village style signage for the Town Center.
- No design standards for the Town Center.
- Zoning in Town Center does not allow for a mixture of land uses; either you’re zoned commercial (C-III) or residential (R-I).
- Parking standards require too much land to be used for parking and are inconsistently applied from district to district.
- Existing set of definitions is limited, poorly worded and antiquated.
- Limited and antiquated economic development options.
- Lack of site plan development standards for commercial and industrial uses.

Although there are numerous issues with the Zoning Bylaw, the spatial layout of Westminster’s various zoning districts is actually very well thought out: commercial districts are located in close proximity to Route 2 and Route 140, industrial districts are located close to Route 2 and the railroad, denser residential development in the Town Center and on either side of Route 2, and then rural residential development as one moves further away from the Town Center. Thus, while the Zoning Bylaw has numerous flaws that need correction, there is no need to rezone any areas of Town at the present time, with the exception of the Town Center, which would benefit from having its various zoning districts consolidated into a single Village Center zoning district that would allow for a mixture of land uses (residential, commercial and institutional).

## WASTE DISPOSAL

The Fitchburg Municipal Landfill, operated by Waste Management Inc. is located on Route 31 in Westminster and adjacent to the Leominster State Forest. The landfill serves the greater Fitchburg region. The expanded landfill area (nearly double in size from the original landfill) was opened in 2004.

## MUNICIPAL WATER

The Town currently obtains water supply from the City of Fitchburg through an inter-municipal agreement (IMA). A copy of the Water IMA can be found here: <http://www.westminster-ma.gov/pages/mp/water.pdf> . The current IMA will expire upon the Regional Water Filtration Facility reaching the end of its useful life. The IMA was created to allow for the construction of the Regional Water Filtration Facility on Hager Park Road that went online in 2001. The treated water from the treatment plant is for distribution for both the City of Fitchburg and the Town of Westminster.

Prior to building the Regional Water Filtration Treatment Facility, the Town withdrew water from Meetinghouse Pond and provided limited chlorination and fluoridation treatment at the South Street Pump Station. The South Street Pump Station is currently an emergency backup source. The IMA allows the Town to obtain a maximum daily flow of 870,000 gallons per day (gpd) with the right to a maximum daily flow of up to 1,500,000 gpd. The costs to the Town for water supply include portions of the treatment facility capital costs as well as operations and management costs at the Facility. In 1951, Acts of Legislature were approved to allow the Town to use up to 100 million gallons of water per year from Meetinghouse Pond at no cost. The Acts of 1951 also required Westminster and Fitchburg to enter into an agreement as to the price to be paid by Westminster to Fitchburg for water used by Westminster in excess of the 100 million gallons per year. In 1971, an agreement with the City of Fitchburg requires Westminster to pay \$60.00 per million gallons used in excess over the 100 million gallons permitted by the Acts of 1951.

The total amount of water purchased annually from Fitchburg has increased by 77% from 2000 to 2011, from 79,235,700 gallons to 140,425,825 gallons. In 2011, the average daily demand was 384,728 gpd and the maximum daily demand was 770,839 gpd, both well below the maximum allowed by the IMA, meaning that capacity is not an issue regarding the municipal water system. On a per capita basis, Westminster residential water customers use an average of 49 gallons of water per person per day.

The water supply is derived solely from surface water reservoirs owned and maintained by the City of Fitchburg, Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Reservoir in Westminster and Bickford Pond in Hubbardston. The City of Fitchburg currently owns 1,557 acres of land around Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Reservoir for the purpose of water supply protection. Meetinghouse Pond has a safe yield of 1.03 million gallons per day (mgd) and Mare Meadow Reservoir has a safe yield of 2.50 mgd.

Treated water is delivered to the Hager Park Pump Station adjacent to the Water Treatment Facility. The Hager Park Pump Station delivers water to the Westminster distribution system. The Westminster Water Department operates and maintains the system which consists of approximately thirty-five linear miles of water pipes, four pressure reducing valves and two water storage tanks. The distribution system was

constructed in 1955, with additional extensions in the 1960's and 1970's, and small additions since then. There are approximately 1,170 customers connected to the system. The Department also provides water to two small water districts in Town, Leino Park and Holmes Park. Water lines extend through the Town covering portions of Route 2A, Hager Park Road, Route 140, Village Inn Road, Carter Road, Dawley Road, Overlook Road, Simplex Drive, North Common Road, Ellis Road, South Street, Main Street, West Main Street and the Town Center area. Each Westminster water customer has their use metered and billing is done by the Westminster Water Division.

One water supply concern is the 23 miles of concrete/asbestos pipes that are part of the municipal water system. Corrosives in the soil will eventually cause some of these pipes to fail, causing disruption to the system. The Water Division is planning to start replacing the majority of these pipes and this will be a multi-year effort. In 2012, the Water Division conducted a leak detection survey and found no leaks, but the threat remains because of the materials used to make the pipes and their tendency to corrode over time.

## MUNICIPAL SEWER

Municipal sewage collection is a relatively new phenomenon in Westminster. In 1971 the MA Water Resources Commission determined that Round Meadow Pond was being polluted by development in the Town Center area through wastewater discharges to storm drains that discharged to the pond. To address this issue, the Town hired SEA Consultants in 1975 and they prepared a Report on Wastewater Collection and Disposal Facilities. This report proposed a phased sewer line installation program with the priority areas being the Town Center and around Wyman Pond. However, the report concluded that it was not economically feasible at the time to provide sewers to Wyman Pond and it was also noted that the Nashua River Basin Plan prohibited new discharges into the Whitman River, regardless of quality, which effectively eliminated in town sewage treatment as an option. A subsequent study prepared by DuFresne-Henry in 1982 (Facilities Planning Report for Wastewater Collection and Treatment Facilities) concluded that transporting wastewater from the Town Center area to the West Fitchburg Treatment Plant was the optimal solution.

In 1983 the Town entered into an inter-municipal agreement (IMA) with the City of Fitchburg to send wastewater collected by the Town wastewater collection system to Fitchburg for treatment and disposal. The IMA was amended in 1991, 1995 and 1998 to increase the allowable amount of flow discharged to Fitchburg and to add an additional connection to the Fitchburg sewer system. Copies of the 1983 IMA and subsequent iterations can be found here: <http://www.westminster-ma.gov/pages/mp/sewerIMA.pdf>.

The current IMA allows the Town to discharge up to 320,000 gallons per day (gpd) to Fitchburg. There are two sewer discharge points to Fitchburg, one on Route 2A/State Road East and the other on Route 31/Fitchburg Road. The Town is allowed to discharge

250,000 gpd at the Route 2A/State Road East discharge point and 70,000 gpd at the Route 31/Fitchburg Road discharge point, for a total sewer discharge capacity of 320,000 gpd. All wastewater in Town is treated and disposed of at Fitchburg's East Treatment Plant. The total amount of sewer discharged annually to Fitchburg has increased by 46% from 2000 to 2011, from 41,562,680 gallons to 60,721,768 gallons. On average, the Town currently sends approximately 168,000 gpd to the City of Fitchburg, although the daily flow can be as much as 280,000 gpd, which is getting close to the system's total discharge capacity of 320,000. The IMA is valid until the year 2020. An extension may be negotiated one year prior to termination. On a per capita basis, Westminster sewer customers generate an average of 63 gallons of wastewater per person per day.

The original sewer system in Westminster was constructed in 1982 by the Wachusett Mountain Ski Area which was expanding and in need of service. The ski area connected to the Fitchburg sewer system and installed sewer pipes along Route 2A, Depot Road, Narrows Road, Stone Hill Road, East Road, Gatehouse Road and Mile Hill Road. The Whitman River Pump Station was installed to convey wastewater over the Whitman River and into Fitchburg. The Narrows Road Pump Station was also installed to convey wastewater over Route 2.

In 1984 the Town extended the recently built interceptor sewer along Route 2A/State Road East to provide service to the Town Center area and a limited amount of sewer lines were constructed along the eastern side of Wyman Pond. Between 1989 and 1998 several small extensions were constructed by various users including Simplex-Grinnell along Simplex Drive and Pinetree Power along Route 31/Fitchburg Road. Since then, sewer lines have been expanded further along Route 2 in the Town Center area as well as the Wyman Pond area, Ellis Road, Frog Hollow Road, Scenic Drive and Main Street.

The sewer collection system consists of approximately 17 miles of sewer pipes and includes seven pumping stations, gravity lines, and force mains. The system serves 730 customers. There are two distinct service areas in Westminster: the Whitman River area is the larger of the two and covers the Town Center area, and the Route 31 area is the smaller. Wastewater from Westminster is sent to the Fitchburg East sewage treatment plant that discharges treated wastewater to the Nashua River.

Since 2003, the system has been under a sewer connection moratorium due to the Whitman River Pumping Station exceeding its capacity during peak flow events. The moratorium prevents newly created lots from connecting to sewer as well as sewer extensions. Since 2009, the Department has been investigating infiltration/inflow (I/I) in the sewer system. The system's rate of I/I currently stands at approximately 40% and this represents a serious problem. Inflow is caused by direct connections to the sewer system from roof drains, sump pumps and any other water source directly discharging into a sewer line without the Department's knowledge. Infiltration is essentially groundwater infiltrating into the sewer pipes or manholes. We suspect a majority of the I/I is from

inflow sources. I/I in the sewer system is using up capacity at the Whitman River Pumping Station. This increases operational costs at the pumping station as well as costs to send this non-sewer flow to the City of Fitchburg for treatment. This in turn prohibits the sewer system from allowing new service connections.

A Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan (CWMP) was completed for the Town in 2007 by SEA Consultants Inc. The CWMP recommended extending the sewer collection system to several areas in Town, including Leino Park, Lakewood Park, Dawley Road, Lake Drive East, Edro Isle, Bakers Grove, East Wyman, Bacon Street and the State Road East Industrial Area. To accommodate the increase in wastewater flows, the Whitman River Pumping Station would have to be upgraded as well as sewer piping within the City of Fitchburg. Once the various extensions and upgrades are completed, the sewer areas will represent the Town's definitive municipal sewer service area.

*Table 14 - Existing and Future Wastewater Flow*

Peak Hourly Wastewater Flow with I/I (Existing)	654,000 gpd
Peak Hourly Wastewater Flow with I/I (Future)	592,589 gpd
<b>Total Peak Hourly Wastewater Flow</b>	<b>1,246,589 gpd</b>
<b>Flow converted to Gallons per Minute</b>	<b>866 gpm</b>
<b>Pump Station Capacity</b>	<b>500 gpm</b>

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## SECTION 4 - ENVIRONMENTAL INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

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### A. GEOLOGY, SOILS AND TOPOGRAPHY

Westminster is rich in scenic qualities, unique features and historic value. From the prominent peak of Wachusett Mountain to historic Academy Hill to archaeological sites, hilltop vistas, rolling farmland, and beautiful waterways, Westminster is a portrait of typical New England. Along with this bounty comes the opportunity and responsibility to preserve and protect what is uniquely Westminster. Efforts have begun. With strong, broad-based support and unified planning, Westminster has the prospect of retaining these elements that determine its sense of place and quality of life.

The general terrain of Westminster is gently to steeply sloping, with few level areas. Elevations range from 648 feet at Sawmill Pond on the Fitchburg line to 1706 feet on the slope of Wachusett Mountain. Wachusett Mountain's peak is located in Princeton, just outside of Westminster and has an elevation of 2006 feet, the highest point in Massachusetts east of the Connecticut River. The general elevation in Westminster ranges from 900 feet to 1150 feet. Two unnamed hills, located near Church Rock between Davis and West Princeton Roads, exceed 1300 feet in elevation. There are nine other peaks exceeding 1200 feet in elevation, all located south of Route 2.

The soils in Westminster are primarily glacial tills. Most of the glacial till areas have only been mapped to the association level. Soil associations are groups of soils which occur adjacent to each other, often in an intermingled manner. These soils often have widely varying characteristics, which makes drawing conclusions based upon the soil mapping difficult in many areas.

Glacial outwash (sand and gravel) deposits occur in the Whitman River valley, between Willard Road and Route 2A, areas around Wyman Pond, areas around Partridge Pond, and areas around Upper Reservoir. Smaller, more scattered, outwash areas occur near the eastern base of Crow Hill and adjacent to the wetlands in the southwest portion of town, and along Ashburnham State Road.

Organic soils, peats and mucks occur in scattered locations throughout the Town. They are most extensive and numerous in the southwestern portion of Westminster, west of Knowler Road and south of Route 2. Organic soils occur only in well-developed wetlands. There are several large areas mapped with soils having shallow or exposed bedrock. These areas are most common on the ridge of hills between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12, and from the slope of Wachusett Mountain north to Meetinghouse Pond. These areas are typically unsuitable for development due to the lack of soil for septic systems, high groundwater levels and expensive construction costs.



There are areas of glacial till with slopes greater than 25% at scattered locations throughout Town. Mapping of slope in the Open Space and Recreation Plan is based on the slopes shown on the US Geological Survey (USGS) quad maps as most of these areas occur on the soil maps as associations, where slope classification is not provided. Due to their steep slopes and soil textures, these areas have a significant erosion potential if vegetation and topsoil are removed. All told, Westminster has approximately 1,382 acres of land (or 6% of the Town's total land area) having slopes of 25% or greater.

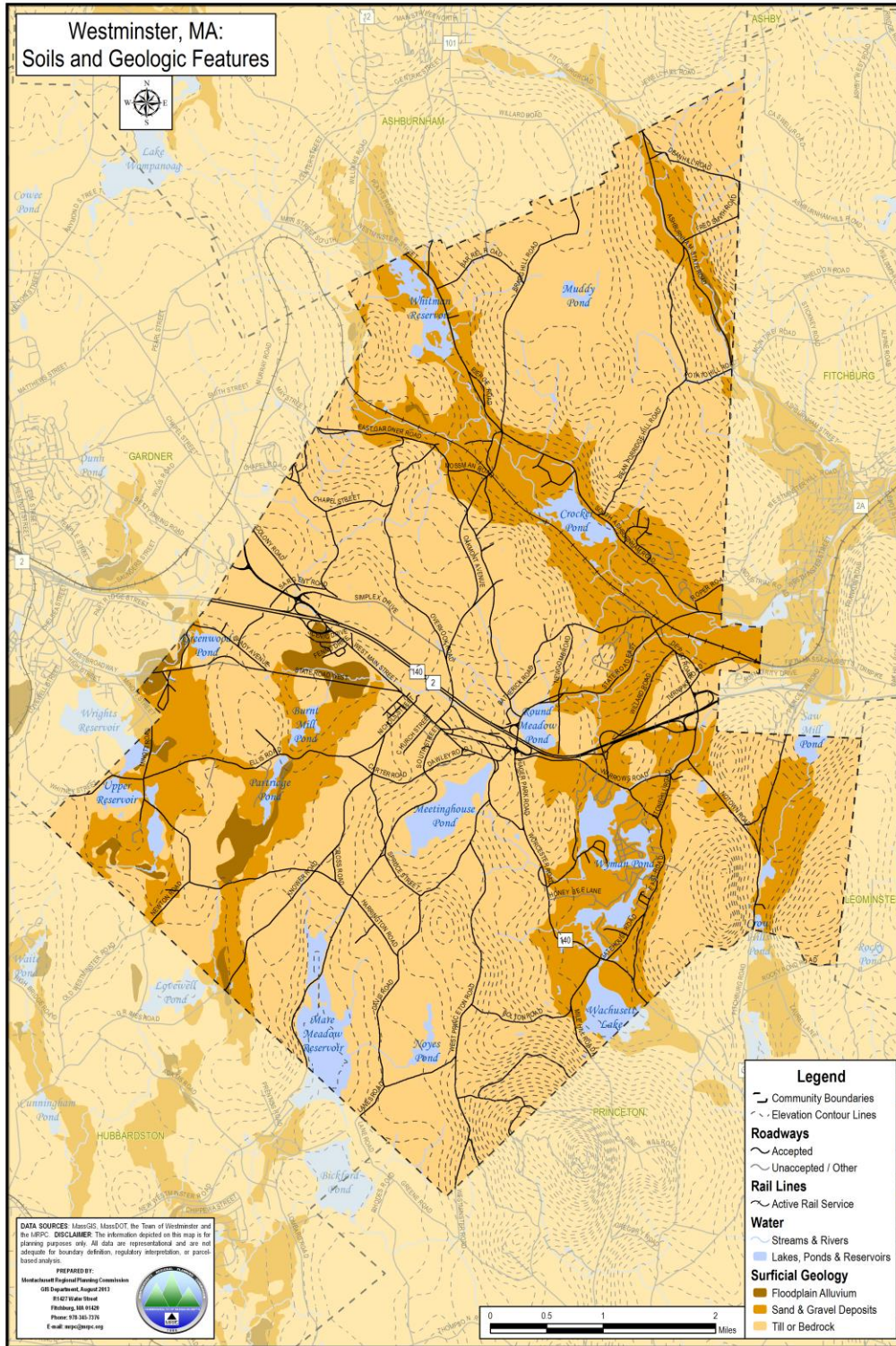
Prime agricultural soils are not extensive in Westminster and occur in a few widely scattered areas. This is possibly one of the reasons for the early abandonment of agriculture in Town. These soils may be somewhat more commonplace than mapped, as the prime agricultural soils types occur in some of the associations. The soils types in Westminster that are considered prime agricultural soils are Sudbury Sandy Loam 0% to 3% slopes, Peru Fine Sandy Loam, Skerry Fine Sandy Loam, Marlow Fine Sandy Loam 3% to 8% slopes, and Becket Fine Sandy Loam 3% to 8% slopes. The attached Soils and Geologic Features Map shows the locations of floodplain soils, sand and gravel deposits, and till/bedrock locations in Westminster. For a graphic depiction of land suitable for farming in Westminster, please review the Active Farms and Farmland Soils Map.

## **B. LANDSCAPE CHARACTERISTICS**

Westminster contains 22,720 acres of land, or 35.5 square miles. The most definitive features of Westminster's landscape include: Wachusett Mountain, various hills, large forested areas, scenic lakes, and scenic vistas. The best vistas are from the ski slopes on Wachusett Mountain, the large fields at the High Ridge Wildlife Management Area, and Crow Hill ledges. Most of the significant landscape features such as Wachusett Mountain and most of the large lakes are currently in public ownership. The primary exceptions to this are portions of the Whitmanville Reservoir.

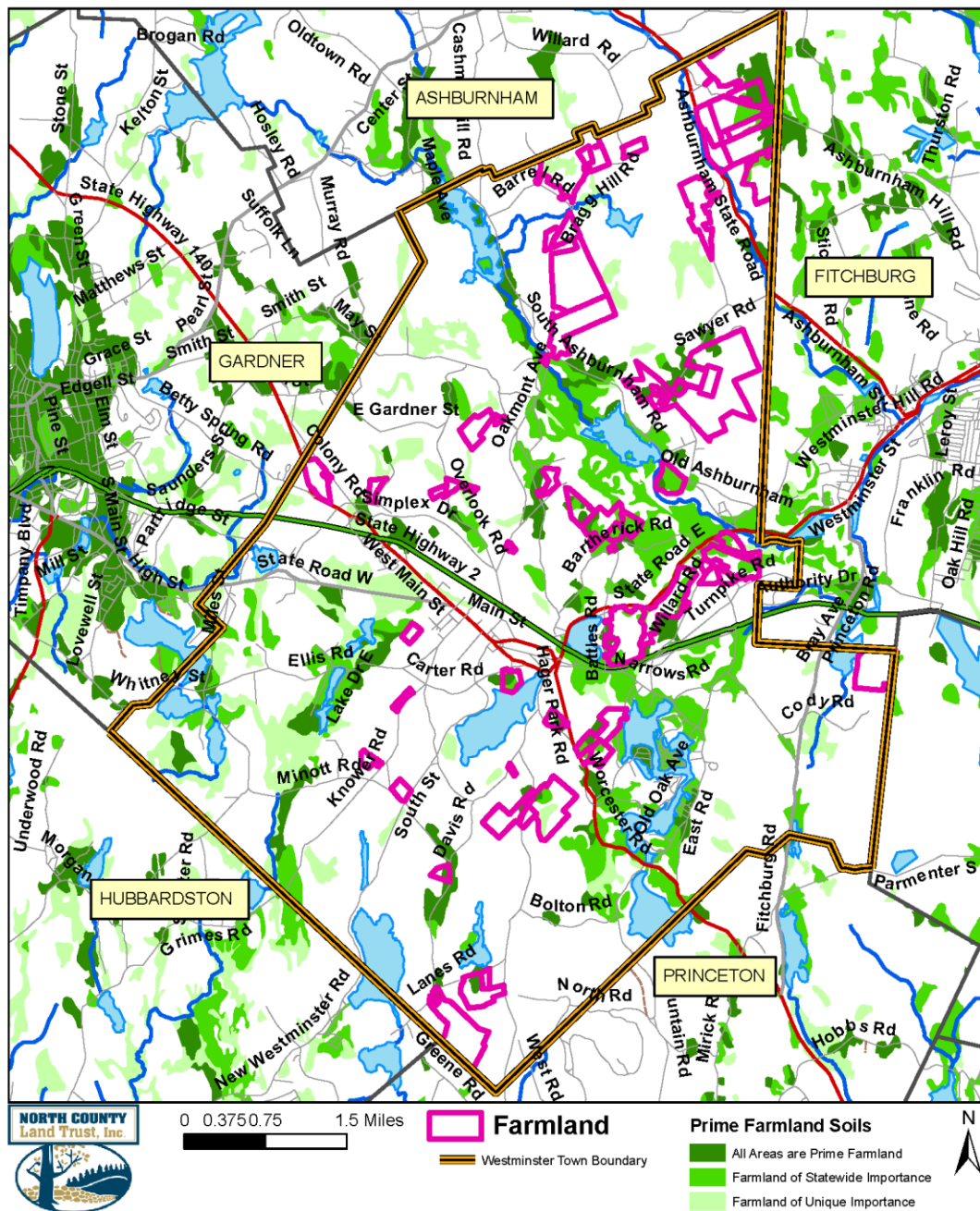
## **C. WATER RESOURCES**

There are many large lakes and ponds in Westminster that provide much of the Town's rural character. All told, there are 1,324 acres of open water in Westminster. The greatest concentration of waterbodies can be found south of Route 2. Most of the Town's lakes and ponds are either man-made or have been greatly enlarged due to damming. Whitmanville Reservoir and Crocker Pond are two large waterbodies that were once owned by paper companies to provide a clean source of water for the mills in Fitchburg, but no longer serve this purpose.





# Westminster Active Farmland Use Map



Only four waterbodies, Muddy Pond, Meetinghouse Pond, Wachusett Lake, and Wyman Pond are classified by the State as “great ponds” (at least 75 acres in size). Wyman Pond was dammed in 1893 but incorporates a great pond, known as Grassy Pond.

The largest waterbodies in Westminister are Mare Meadow Reservoir, Meetinghouse Pond and Wachusett Lake which is a natural glacial lake. All three of these are surface water supplies for Fitchburg and Westminister. The City of Fitchburg owns much of the surrounding land around these waterbodies.

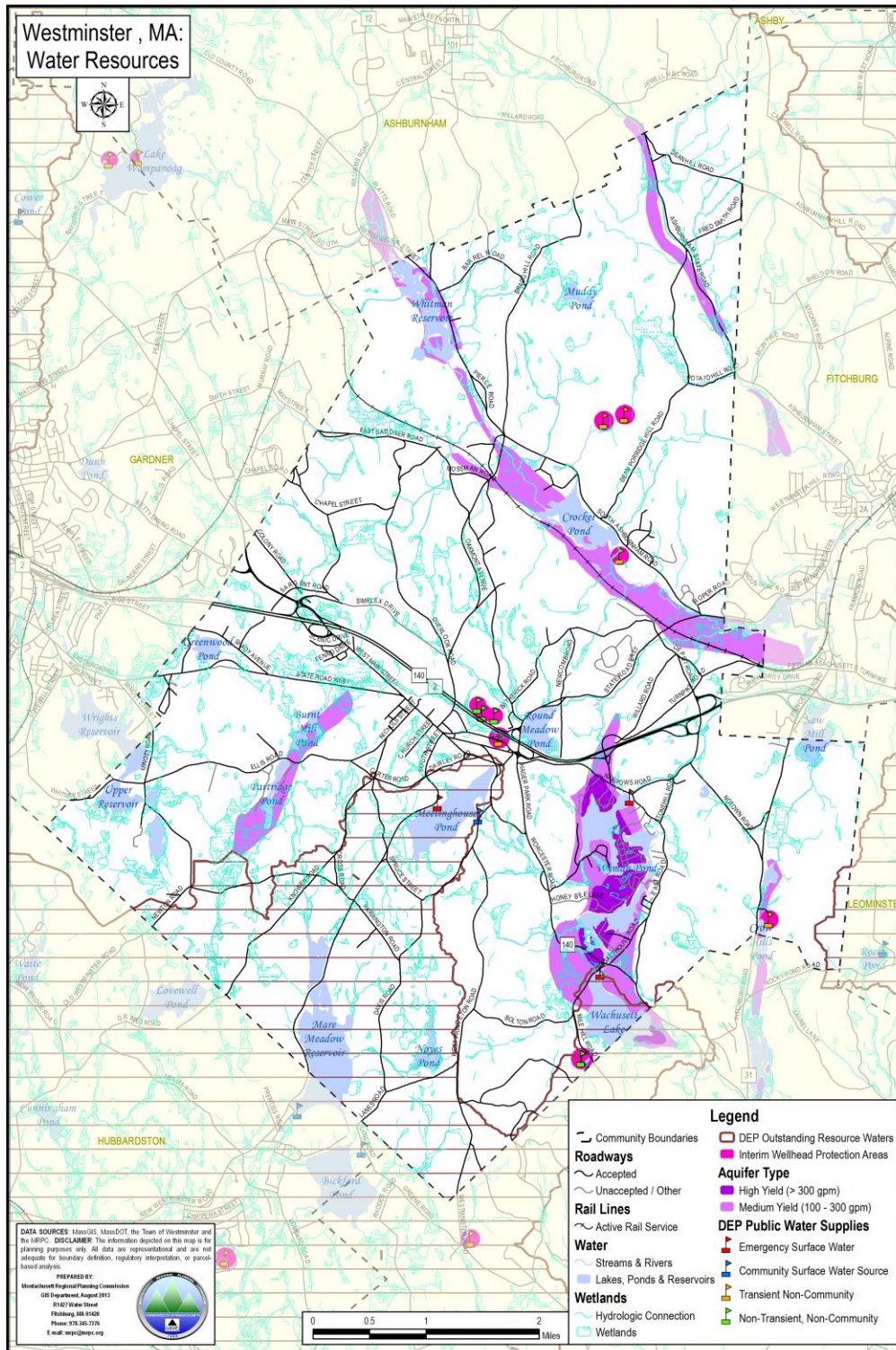
There are several smaller ponds in the southwestern part of Westminister, including Minot Pond, along Minott Road; Partridge Pond and Upper Reservoir, along Ellis Road; and Greenwood Pond and Burnt Mill Pond, along State Road West. These ponds provide a wide range of aquatic habitat and occur in an area with wetlands having many boreal characteristics (natural features found in northern regions). Wyman Pond and Round Meadow Pond are two waterbodies that show evidence of extensive development, mostly small cottages, many of which have been converted to year-round residences. There is little open space remaining around these two ponds.

There are several large streams in Westminister. The most significant streams are the Whitman River and Phillips Brook, both of which are tributaries to the Nashua River. Other significant streams in the Nashua River watershed include Flag Brook, Wyman Brook, Round Meadow Pond Brook and Beech Hill Brook.

## WATERSHEDS

Westminister’s land area falls within three major watersheds, as depicted on the Regional Context Map. The vast majority of Westminister’s land (81%) falls within the Nashua River Watershed, followed by the Chicopee River Watershed (11.5%), and lastly the Millers River Watershed (7.5%).

The 1995 to 2020 Vision for the Nashua River Watershed was developed by the Nashua River Watershed Association (NRWA) for the purpose of restoring and protecting water quality, conserving open spaces and encouraging well-planned development. This comprehensive plan listed numerous strategies to address growth, water quality issues, and land protection. The plan recommended actions to ensure that existing and potential drinking water resources were protected from contamination and policies to ensure that water supply withdrawals are balanced with water flows and aquifer capacity, so as not to deplete the resources. The plan also recommended strategies to clean up waters already polluted, through education and advocacy, best management practices for wastewater treatment, solid waste management, septic system management, and control of storm water runoff. Recommendations for land and water stewardship, conservation, and acquisition were also included in the plan.





In 2003, the Nashua River Watershed Association released the [Nashua River Watershed Five Year Action Plan 2003-2007](#). The plan was prepared by the the former Massachusetts Watershed Initiative Nashua Team, a collaboration of watershed interests consisting of state and federal environmental agencies, municipal agencies, non-profit organizations, citizens, and other interested parties. The plan contains recommendations for the 32 watershed communities, covering such topics as stormwater management, improving water quality, open space preservation, growth management, education and recreation. The Westminster recommendations are primarily geared towards open space preservation, recreation and improvement of water quality. Unfortunately, this plan has not been updated since its publication.

## WATER QUALITY ASSESSMENTS

Under the Federal Clean Water Act (305b), the MA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is mandated to monitor, analyze, and report on the quality of statewide water resources to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the US Congress, and the public every two years. Waterbodies are rated into several categories based upon the federal goals and state determined standards of water quality. Under Section 303(d) of the Federal Clean Water Act, the State must submit a list of waters that are not meeting their water quality standards to EPA for review and approval every two years.

The Fitchburg Water Department is permitted to withdraw up to 2.26 MGD from the Chicopee River Basin on average over the course of any year under the terms of its Water Management Act Registration (Gottlieb 1994). Their permit authorizes withdrawals from Bickford Reservoir (1994-2013) in Hubbardston and an increase (0.11 MGD) in the overall withdrawal from the Chicopee River Basin in the period 2008-2013. Over the last two calendar years (2011 – 2012) their withdrawal was 965,000,000 gallons from Mare Meadow Reservoir (1.322MGD annual average). No water was transferred from the Bickford Reservoir in 2011 or 2012. This inter-basin transfer of water from the Chicopee to the Nashua River Basin is grandfathered since it existed prior to the implementation of the Inter-Basin Transfer Act (IBT) (LeVangie 2001).

The MA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is obligated to establish total maximum daily loads (TMDL's) for parameters of concern and establish pollution control strategies to restore the waters to meet water quality standards. A TMDL is a calculation of the maximum amount of a pollutant that a waterbody can receive and still meet water quality standards, and an allocation of that amount to the pollutant's sources. This TMDL is directed at control of excessive algae and weeds, which limit most uses of the waterbody, including swimming, fishing, and boating. All of the pollutants and stressors are indicators of nutrient enriched systems, indicating eutrophication. In freshwater systems, phosphorus is the primary nutrient of concern. The TMDL reports establish a phosphorus limit for each lake and outline corrective actions to achieve that

goal. Issues addressed include Title 5 compliance, Phase II Stormwater permitting issues, sewer management, maintenance of roads, lake management issues, and compliance with the Wetlands Protection Act.

The State DEP has prepared TMDL reports for all three of Westminster's watersheds (Nashua River Watershed 2007, Chicopee River Watershed 2006, and the Millers River Watershed 2003). The Millers River TMDL report identified three impaired waterbodies in Westminster: Greenwood Pond, Minott Pond and Wright's Reservoir, the impediment for all three being noxious aquatic plants.

Additionally, DEP's most recent Water Quality Assessment Report for Massachusetts (2012) identified three Westminster waterbodies as being impaired for fish and aquatic wildlife due to the presence of non-native aquatic plants: Crocker Pond, Sawmill Pond and Wyman Pond.

## FLOODPLAINS

The Town's floodplains have been mapped by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and are depicted on the Town's Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRM), published in 1982. It should be noted that FEMA is in the process of re-mapping floodplains across the State, but this effort has not yet reached Westminster. According to the FEMA maps, Westminster has 2,411 acres of land residing in floodplains (1,770 acres in 100-year floodplains and 641 acres in 500-year floodplains), or 10.6% of the Town's total land area.

Most of the Town's floodplains are confined near streams and waterbodies by steep slopes. The extensive areas of floodplain are primarily confined within or close to large wetlands. Route 140 floods at the Gatehouse Road corner over the culvert that empties Wachusett Lake into Wyman Pond, due to inadequate flow through the culvert. According to the Town's Director of Public Works, there are no other known areas of chronic flooding in Westminster.

## WETLANDS

Wetlands are widespread and extensive in Westminster. The wetlands depicted on the Water Resources Map come from the National Wetland Inventory Map prepared by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This map shows the larger wetland areas, however, there are many more smaller wetlands scattered throughout Town.

All told, there are approximately 1,840 acres of wetlands in Westminster, or 8.1% of the Town's total land area. However, the true amount of wetlands is likely much higher, due to the fact that the National Wetlands Inventory often misses some of the smaller wetlands in Town.

There are a wide variety of wetland types occurring in Westminster. Forested wetlands dominated by red maple are the most typical. There are many forested wetlands which have boreal characteristics and are dominated by spruce, balsam fir and tamarack. These are most extensive in the southwestern portion of Town. There is also an Atlantic white cedar swamp at the southern end of the Cedar Swamp at Minott Road. This is possibly the only Atlantic white cedar swamp in northern Worcester County. There are also many large, very wet shrub swamps and bogs. The boggy areas are most numerous along the edges of ponds. Most of the bogs in Westminster are not truly bogs and would best be classified as fens.

Marshes are not abundant in Westminster. Where they do exist, they appear as small areas within other wetland types. The most significant marsh occurs within High Ridge Wildlife Management Area along East Gardner Road. In addition, the Tophet Swamp which was once heavily forested is rapidly converting to a marsh due to flooding from beavers and the improper reconstruction of Route 2A.

Aquifers occur in Westminster in a few locations. These areas are confined to deep glacial outwash deposits. The most extensive aquifers occur in the Whitman River valley, around Wyman Pond, along Phillips Brook and near Partridge Pond and Burnt Millpond. The aquifers in Town can also be seen on the Water Resources Map.

#### D. VEGETATION

Almost all of Westminster is forested. Most of the forests are typical of the Transition Hardwood zone where there is an intermingling of forest types typical of the more southern oak/hickory forests with the more northern spruce/fir and northern hardwood types.

The most common forest type within Westminster is the white pine/red oak/red maple type. Other common stand types include white pine, hemlock, white pine/hemlock, hemlock/yellow birch, red spruce/balsam fir, sugar maple/beech/yellow birch, black cherry/maple, red maple, red oak, gray birch/red maple, aspen and paper birch.

As would be anticipated the more southerly forest types dominated by oaks are best developed at the lower elevations. The more northerly forest types such as sugar maple/beech/yellow birch are most common in the northern half of Westminster. Surprisingly, the most northerly of the forest types, red spruce/balsam fir, is most common in the southwestern portion of Town, in the area from Knower Road west to Gardner. As most of Westminster is forested, the forests are almost all contiguous, broken only by narrow roads. The only significant break in the continuity of the forest is Route 2. The least populated, least divided, piece of forest land is the area between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12. A small portion of this area is publicly owned, but most is private. Much of this area is classified under Chapters 61 and 61A.



While there are only a few large-scale farms in Westminster (e.g., the Jarvenpaa farm on North Common Road, Johnson's Egg Farm on Knowler Road, and Otter Farms on Lanes Road), there are numerous small-scale operations that qualify as farming and/or agriculture. As of 2014, there were 46 small-scale active farming/agricultural operations in Westminster. For a graphic depiction of Westminster's active farms, please review the Active Farmland Map that follows Page 25.

The MA Division of Fisheries and Wildlife has mapped three Priority Habitat Areas within Westminster. Priority Habitat Areas often include habitat for rare species, but also may include exemplary habitats. The Priority Habitat Areas mapped in Westminster include Cedar Swamp between Minott and Ellis Roads, the marsh and adjacent uplands along East Gardner Road in the High Ridge Wildlife Management Area, a portion of Wachusett Mountain, and along the stream on Potato Hill Road and Ashburnham State Road.

In terms of shade trees, the Town Common at the top of Academy Hill is ringed with mature trees that provide shade for attendees of civic events held on the Common. There are very few shade trees in the Town Center; however, historic photographs indicate that street trees were once a prominent feature along either side of Main Street. No one knows exactly when the street trees were removed or who removed them. It should be noted that attendees at a recent Town Center Design Workshop identified street trees along Main Street as one of their most desired amenities for a redesigned Town Center. Lastly, the Town's Subdivision Regulations do give the Planning Board the authority to require street trees for new subdivisions.

## E. FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

Westminster supports a variety of both warm and cold water fisheries. There are many shallow ponds and lakes supporting species such as hornpout, bluegills, yellow perch and chain pickerel. The larger lakes with colder water support bass and white sucker. The larger streams support populations of both stocked and native brook trout, along with white sucker.

With large areas of forest, Westminster is inhabited by many large mammals. Moose, white-tailed deer, coyote, red and gray fox, opossum, woodchuck, beaver, muskrat, porcupine, raccoon, fisher, long-tailed weasels, ermine, skunks, river otter and bobcat are all abundant. Westminster is in an area with the highest density of fisher population anywhere in the species range. There are also occasional reports of black bear. Many smaller mammals also reside in Westminster in a variety of habitats. The most common small mammals include shrews, moles, bats, cottontails, snowshoe hares, chipmunks, bats, gray, red and flying squirrels, mice, voles and mink.

The extensive wetlands in Westminister provide significant habitat for many species of amphibians and reptiles. Red-spotted newts, spring peepers, many species of frogs, turtles, and water snakes all inhabit Westminister's lakes, pond, streams and wetlands. Terrestrial amphibians and reptiles which are common include red-backed salamanders, toads, wood turtles and a variety of snakes.

Westminister's open space supports a large and diverse bird life. The extensive forests are habitat for many species of both resident nesting and migratory birds. The many lakes and ponds provide habitat during migration for many species of waterfowl including mergansers, bufflehead, goldeneyes, scaup, grebes, cormorants and loons. Waterbodies also provide breeding sites for mallards, black ducks, and wood ducks, and many have the potential to support breeding loons. Marsh birds such as rails and bitterns are typically only found in the marsh along East Gardner Road in the High Ridge Wildlife Management Area. Birds of prey are abundant in Westminister. The large areas of forest provide habitat for owls and many species of hawks. In addition, the ridge of hills in central Massachusetts is a significant migration flyway for hawks. During the course of migration, virtually every species of hawk occurring in the eastern part of the country will be observed in Westminister. The populations of woodland birds (including many of the neo-tropical migrants supposedly in decline) have and are increasing significantly due to the historic conversion of farmland to forest. Conversely, species requiring fields and edge have undergone significant population declines.

Wildlife corridors occur on either side of the Town's major rivers and streams, particularly the Whitman River, Phillips Brook, Flag Brook, Wyman Brook, Round Meadow Pond Brook and Beech Hill Brook. A land-based wildlife corridor occurs in the north of Town between Bragg Hill Road and Bean Porridge Hill Road. This area is characterized by large swaths of undeveloped land and also takes in Muddy Pond whose shoreline is almost 90% permanently protected and the Town is currently working with the Mount Grace Conservation Trust to preserve the remaining unprotected portion of Muddy Pond's shoreline.

## BIO MAP 2

In 2012, the MA Department of Fish and Game completed an update of the State's critical habitat areas as part of its Bio Map 2 initiative. The first Bio Map initiative was completed back in 2001. The Bio Map program is administered by the Department's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. The program maps two types of habitat: Core Habitats (areas that are critical for the long-term persistence of rare species and species of conservation concern) and Critical Natural Landscapes (large contiguous blocks of land that are minimally impacted by development).

This initiative also mapped what the State considers to be its “Living Waters”, i.e. those lakes, ponds, rivers and streams that should have the highest priority for freshwater biodiversity conservation in Massachusetts. Westminster’s Core Habitats, Critical Natural Landscapes, and Living Waters can be seen on the Fisheries and Wildlife Map and Westminster’s Bio Map 2 report can be found here:

<http://maps.massgis.state.ma.us/dfg/biomap2.htm>

*Table 15 - Rare and Endangered Species Found in Westminster*

<i>Town</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Scientific Name</i>	<i>Common Name</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Most Recent Observation</i>
WESTMINSTER	Bird	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>	American Bittern	E	2007
WESTMINSTER	Reptile	<i>Glyptemys insculpta</i>	Wood Turtle	SC	2007
WESTMINSTER	Vascular Plant	<i>Ophioglossum pusillum</i>	Adder's-tongue Fern	T	2002
WESTMINSTER	Vascular Plant	<i>Potamogeton confervoides</i>	Algae-like Pondweed	T	2009
WESTMINSTER	Mussel	<i>Strophitus undulatus</i>	Creeper	SC	1999

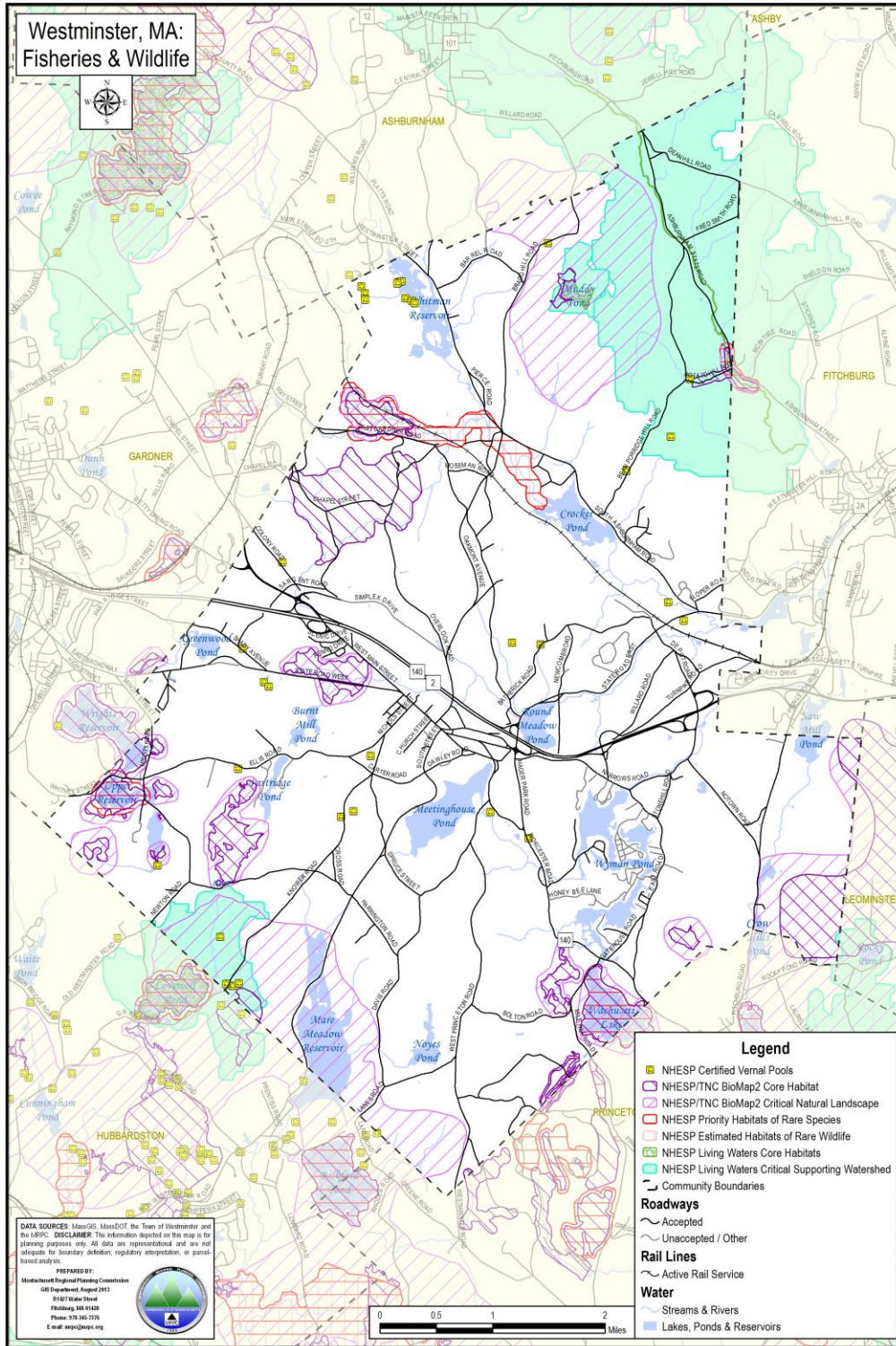
Key: T = threatened, E = endangered, SC = Special Concern.

Source: MA Department of Fish & Game.

## F. SCENIC RESOURCES & UNIQUE FEATURES

The MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) administers the State’s Heritage Landscape Inventory Program. Heritage Landscapes are those special places and spaces that help define the character of your community and reflect its past. Such landscapes are the result of human interaction with the natural resources of an area, which influence the use and development of land. These geographic areas contain both natural and cultural resources.

The Massachusetts Landscape Inventory lists the Wachusett Mountain Unit as a significant landscape feature in the Westminster area. This mountain is a prominent and beautiful landform that offers both aesthetic and recreational richness to Westminster.



Throughout the Town's history, Wachusett has been the scene of regional significance and a source of cultural identity. Three hotel facilities have graced the top of Wachusett. The last was closed shortly after World War II and after years of decay was destroyed by fire in 1970. These hotels served as summer retreats to the rich and famous of eastern Massachusetts. Today a fire lookout tower, picnic and overlook areas and a shallow, rock lined pond are all that remain.

A study by David Foster of Harvard University recognizes an old growth forest with trees in excess of 300 years old on the northwestern hillside of Mount Wachusett. This study identified approximately 300 acres as Old Growth Forest in both Westminister and Princeton. The section of Mount Wachusett from the auto road up contains the Old Growth Forest.

Wachusett or Wajuset "the great hill" was named by the Native Americans hundreds of years ago. There are many educational hikes and walks that are sponsored on Mount Wachusett including: nature hikes, Old Growth Forest identification, bird walks, hawk watching, vernal pool identification, history walks, children's story hour, junior ranger program, and other outreach programs.

## G. ENVIRONMENTAL FEATURES

There are several unique and important open space habitats in Westminister:

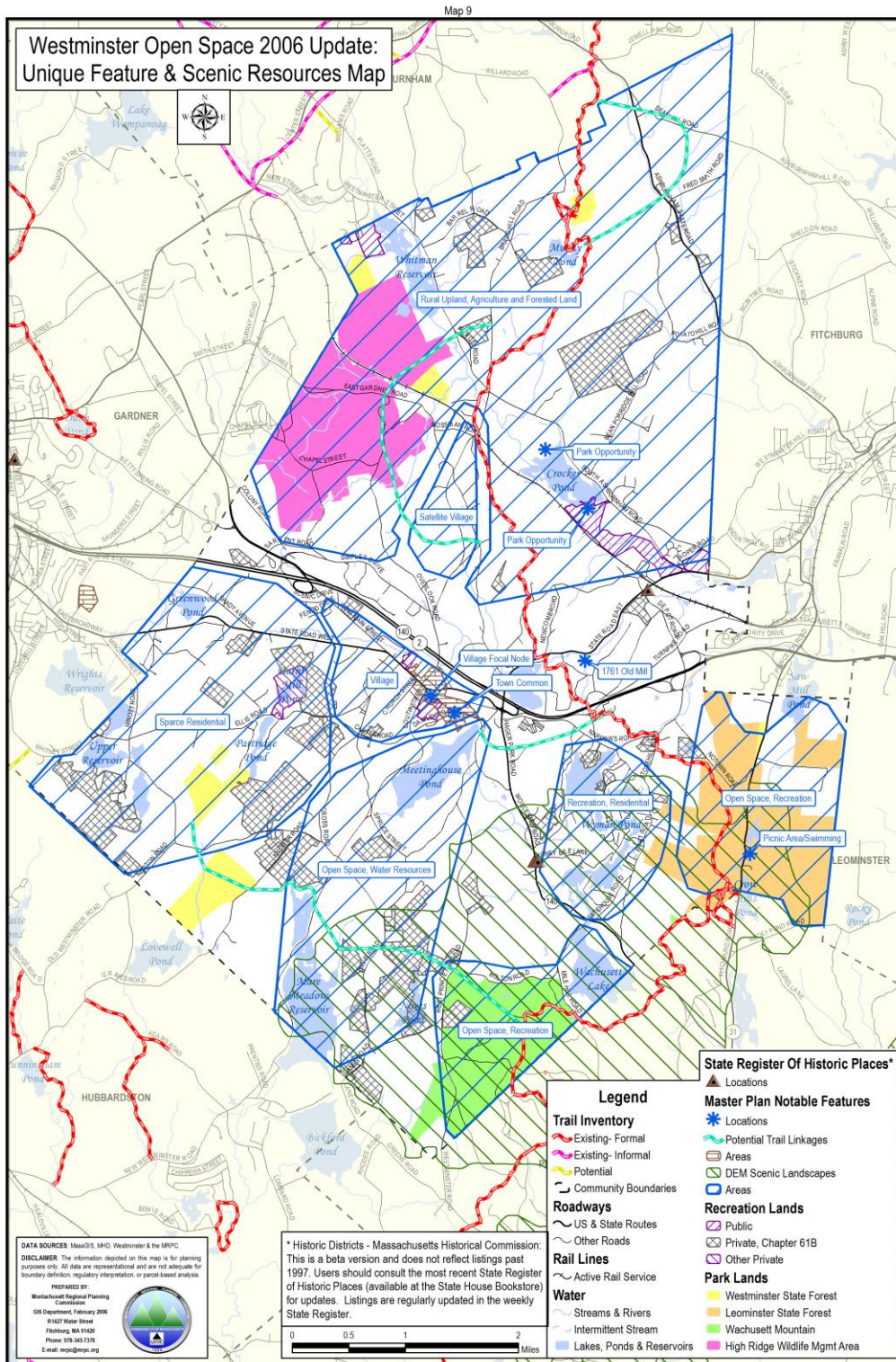
### 1. *The large forested area between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12*

This is an area about two miles wide by over three miles in length that is broken by only a couple of lightly populated roads. This area provides habitat for a wide variety of forest species and contains many wetlands including large swamps, Muddy Pond and Phillips Brook. Much of this area has soils with exposed or shallow bedrock. Portions of this forested block are owned by the Westminister Conservation Commission and the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), formerly the Department of Environmental Management (DEM), however, most of the land is privately held. A significant portion of the land is classified under either Chapters 61 or 61A, as are most of the abutting properties to the north in Ashburnham.

### 2. *Whitman River Valley*

The Whitman River, its two associated reservoirs, Whitman Reservoir and Crocker Pond, and the surrounding land is a unique area combining riverine, deep water lake, wetland and upland habitats. This area is further unique in that there has been little development near the water resources, yet it is privately owned. This area has the potential to provide a plethora of recreational activities, both passive and active.





### *3. Boreal wetland/upland systems in the southwest portion of Town*

The area west of Knowler Road and south of Route 2 contains many forest stands and wetlands with boreal-like characteristics. There are extensive areas of red spruce and balsam fir, large boggy wetlands, and many ponds. Some of these resources are on DCR land, but most are privately owned. Cedar Swamp, due to its high elevation, is tributary to three different watersheds; the Millers, Nashua and Ware Rivers. Cedar Swamp is mapped by the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife as a Priority Habitat Area.

### *4. Fitchburg Reservoirs*

Mare Meadow Reservoir, Meetinghouse Pond and Wachusett Lake are part of Fitchburg and Westminster's water supply system. These are deep-water lakes surrounded by forest. The waterbodies and the surrounding areas are owned by the City of Fitchburg. Due to the long history of public ownership, there has essentially been no development near these lakes. These areas provide a unique scenic resource for the Town as these areas are pristine, undisturbed lakes. The reservoirs and the surrounding areas have the potential to provide a significant amount of passive recreation such as shore fishing, hiking, birding and cross-country skiing; however, only a limited area is open to the public, and only for shore fishing. No other entry onto their lands is allowed and they vigorously enforce their no trespassing rules.

### *5. Fitchburg/Westminster Landfill*

The landfill on Route 31 is a unique, albeit unlikely, habitat. The landfill is a large open area with a plentiful food supply for wildlife, and attracts a variety of bird species. Many gulls are attracted to the landfill. In addition to the more common herring, ring-billed and great black-backed gulls, vagrant species such as Iceland, Glaucous and probably lesser black-backed gulls are often found at the landfill during the winter. These species used to be found more frequently at inland locations, however, the closure of most of the landfills has significantly reduced their occurrence. The Fitchburg/Westminster landfill is one of the few landfills in the area. Unfortunately, from a bird habitat perspective, the landfill has implemented gull control measures to keep the gull population down and to prevent contamination of nearby Notown Reservoir. As a result, the occurrence of the rarer gulls has been reduced. The landfill is also frequented by many birds of prey and scavenging turkey vultures. Hawks and owls have been observed hunting over the landfill. As portions of the landfill are closed and planted with grass, the area of open, low quality grassland is gradually increasing. This is the only location in Westminster where this habitat type is found. Grasslands with low, sparse grass are the habitat for many species which occur in no other habitat, and these species are rare and declining in the northeast. These species include grasshopper and vesper sparrows, upland sandpipers and meadowlarks. The landfill, therefore, has the long-term potential to provide habitat for these rare bird species.

#### *6. Crow Hills*

The Crow Hills are a unique scenic and recreational resource. This ridge of hills has some beautiful rock cliffs. These cliffs are utilized by rock climbers from throughout the region. Fortunately, Crow Hills are almost entirely owned by the DCR, and are well protected.

#### *7. High Ridge Wildlife Management Area*

High Ridge Wildlife Management Area is owned and managed by the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. The area contains a wide diversity of habitats including large fields, marshes and forests. This area is managed and utilized for a wide variety of uses including agriculture, silviculture, hunting, birding, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, hiking and dog trails. This area is well protected and managed by the state and no further actions are necessary.

#### *8. Wachusett Mountain*

Wachusett Mountain, owned by the DCR, is the feature which dominates the landscape. The mountain is a significant local and regional scenic and recreational resource. Wachusett Mountain is extensively utilized for many activities including skiing, biking and hiking. In addition to its summit that invites picnickers and sightseers, Wachusett Mountain offers hundreds of acres of steep terrain that is used extensively for hiking and skiing. It is mostly wooded and has abundant rock outcroppings that are used for prospects.

### ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Westminster is not unlike most communities in that a few minor environmental problems have occurred over the course of history. However, there are no known problems of great significance. Like many areas, there are scattered sites where hazardous materials have been released. These areas are typically small and do not pose a widespread threat to health or water quality.

### SOLID AND HAZARDOUS WASTE SITES

According to the DEP's most recent listing of hazard waste release sites (known commonly as "21E" sites), there are only two properties that have active use limitations due to prior contamination: 1) 100 Simplex Drive, which is the site of the old Digital Equipment manufacturing site, and 2) 78 Main Street, which is home to F&M Auto Service. Both sites are currently in the Phase IV cleanup stage, meaning that the cleanup is still in progress.

In terms of solid waste, a Solid Waste Drop-Off Center was opened in 2006 at 165 Fitchburg Road/Route 31 for the use by Town residents only. The Drop-Off Center is owned and operated by Resource Control Inc. (RCI) a.k.a. Waste Management. RCI is responsible for enforcing all waste bans on disposal and transfer of municipal solid waste



that are adopted by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. Throughout the duration of RCI's operations at the Fitchburg-Westminster Landfill, RCI will transfer from the Drop-Off Center all collected Town acceptable solid waste for disposal at no cost. Homeowners also have the option of arranging for curbside pickup for a fee through private waste disposal companies. The Town pays RCI a monthly fee to operate the Drop-Off Center. In addition, the Town is not charged for the curbside collection of recyclables from residential properties throughout the duration of RCI's landfilling operations at the Fitchburg-Westminster Landfill. The estimated date for the closure of the Fitchburg-Westminster Landfill is 2026, at which point the Drop-Off Center will be turned over to the Town.

## GROUND AND SURFACE WATER POLLUTION

Ground and surface water pollution, while likely occurring, are not widespread problems. Non-point source pollution is likely a greater problem than point source pollution. The areas around Wyman Pond and Partridge Pond are densely populated with many houses still served by septic systems. These septic systems are often quite old, were designed for seasonal and not year-round use, are in or near the water table and are located in coarse sand and gravel deposits. The majority of houses along Wyman Pond and Partridge Pond are still serviced by individual septic systems. Many properties in this area have been the subject of extensive Title 5 updates and improvements as properties have changed ownership over the last decade. The Wyman Lake Association has retained the firm Aquatic Control, Inc. to perform water quality testing and control of invasive species. Recent reports have shown that the health of Wyman's Pond continues to improve.

## EARTHWORK, SUBSURFACE DISPOSAL, AND SEPTIC SYSTEMS/WELLS

The Town's Earth Removal Bylaw was substantially revised in 2012, incorporating the filling of land as a regulated activity and moving the permitting authority from the Board of Selectmen to the Planning Board. The new Earth Removal/Placement of Fill Bylaw gives the Planning Board the authority to adopt regulations that govern how these uses operate and a draft set of regulations has been prepared, and the Planning Board adopted such regulations in September 2013.

Under Chapters 245, 254 and 255 of the Westminster code, the Board of Health grants permits for the construction of septic systems and wells. In these cases, protection of historic or prehistoric archaeological sites would be best served if the Historical Commission were to provide the Board of Health with a town planning map identifying properties and areas of historic or archaeological significance. This documentation also would illustrate areas that are likely to contain unrecorded archaeological sites. The existence of such a map would streamline the local review process and enable the Historical Commission to focus its archaeological site review and commenting activities on proposed large-scale developments in the Town.

## EROSION & FLOODING

Other than those areas of Town containing steep slopes (slopes of 25% or greater), there are no sites having significant erosion potential and no recent erosion problems have been identified. In terms of flooding, there is one site with documented flooding problems: this is Route 140 in the vicinity of Wyman's Pond where an undersized culvert has resulted in the road partially washing out during heavy rain events. The Town is currently investigating a FEMA Flood Hazard Mitigation grant that will hopefully address this problem.

## FORESTRY

Other than the need for a forest management plan for Hager Park, which is currently being prepared by the Hager Park Commission, there are no significant forestry issues in Westminster.

## ENVIRONMENTAL EQUITY

There are numerous pieces of permanently protected land scattered throughout Town, so much so that the majority of Westminster residents can find at least one open space area within a mile of their residence. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the Town's recreation resources, which are mostly clustered within the Town Center, except for the Crocker Pond Recreation Area. The Town's Parks and Recreation Commission has identified the need for additional ball-field space and, by necessity, these areas are likely to be located outside the Town Center.

## WETLANDS AND RIVERS PROTECTION

Under *M. G. L. c. 131, s. 40*, the Conservation Commission reviews Notices of Intent filed for work that will involve the removal, fill, dredging, or altering of land within or bordering resource areas as defined in more detail by the statute. The Conservation Commission makes a determination as to whether work proposed in the 100-foot wetlands buffer zone is significant to the following: the public or private water supply, the groundwater supply, flood control, stormwater drainage, prevention of pollution, protection of land containing shellfish, protection of wildlife habitat and protection of fisheries. At the Annual Town Meeting in May 2004, a local Wetlands Bylaw was approved. The Wetlands Bylaw augments the Conservation Commission's review powers established under the Wetlands Protection Act. The local bylaw, among other things, sets a 25-foot "no-disturb zone" from the 100-foot wetlands buffer zone, provides for 150% replication of destroyed wetlands, provides for more stringent protection of vernal pools, and sets penalties for wetlands violations.

In addition, under the provisions of *Chapter 258 of the Acts of 1996*, the Conservation Commission also reviews work proposed within a 200-foot-wide corridor extending on both sides of a perennial river or stream, as measured from the mean annual high-water line of the river. These riverfront areas may contain wetlands, floodplains, and upland. Projects in riverfront areas are reviewed to ensure that the riverfront is protected with regard to the eight interests outlined above. The law also establishes the policy of the state to protect the natural integrity of rivers and to encourage and establish open space along rivers.

## HISTORICAL RESOURCES

As described in the *Town of Westminster Historic Preservation Plan of 1998*, historic and cultural resources are the tangible, surviving properties and sites that resulted from the activities of people who lived and worked in the Town in the past. These resources, combined with the town's natural beauty give Westminster its unique sense of place.

In an effort to document other significant historic resources which deserve recognition and protection, the Historical Commission is now surveying all properties and sites that are at least 100 years old. This survey will be a critical resource to help determine the significance of land parcels being considered for open space. *The Town of Westminster Historic Preservation Plan of 1998* addresses these issues in detail and is a vital guide for the Historical Commission's work program and the town's planning efforts.

The Westminster Village/Academy Hill Historic Districts are listed in the State and National Register of Historic Places. Easily observed from numerous roads and/or trails are rock walls made by farmers to delineate boundaries and to clear land. Foundations of former gristmills can be found along streams as can handsomely crafted rock bridges and canals. Westminster's cemeteries, trails, and dams also represent significant aspects of the Town's character.

The Town received a grant from DCR and Freedom's Way Heritage Association (FWHA) to inventory the town's Heritage Landscapes, which resulted in the Westminster Reconnaissance Report, in June of 2006.

## OTHER OPEN SPACE RESOURCES

### Scenic Roads and Trails (including unpaved roads)

Midstate Trail

Academy Hill Road

Bean Porridge Hill Road (unpaved section vicinity Potato Hill Road)

Barrel Road (unpaved section)

Bragg Hill Road

Curtis Road

Dawley Road  
Stone Hill Road  
Notown Road  
Davis Road  
Foster Street  
West Princeton Road  
Minott Road  
Lanes Road  
Frog Hollow Road

*Scenic Views From Upper Elevations*

Academy Hill views to Northeast, South and West directions  
Bean Porridge Hill Road south/southwest  
Dean Hill Road south/southwest  
Crow Hill north to Stone Hill Road  
Bolton Road south to Mt. Wachusett  
Lafortune property, West Princeton Road, south/southeast to Mt. Wachusett  
West Princeton Road north/northwest across Meetinghouse Pond  
View of Mount Wachusett from the Common

*Historic Areas*

Whitmanville  
Academy Hill - Town Common Area  
Westminster Village - Town Center Area  
North Common - Town Farm Road Area  
State Road East Area  
Turnpike Road - Depot Road Area  
Upper Dawley Road - South Street Area  
Carter Road Area  
Westminster County Club Area  
South Westminster - Steam Valley Area  
The Narrows (Wachusett Village) Area  
Bakers Grove Area  
Lakewood Park Area  
Leino Park Area  
Merriamville Area  
Steam Valley (Spruce Road and Old Hubbardston Road – site of Merriam Chair Factory)

*Historic Archeological Sites*

South Westminster - Steam Valley Area  
General area bounded by Syd Smith Road, Bathrick Road, and railroad right-of-way,  
including colonial-period roadways now abandoned, railroad underpass, train depot, and  
historic archaeological sites

Cowee Homestead site  
Goddard Saw and Grist Mill site  
Pioneer Properties (Westminster Business Park) site  
Brooks Saw Mill site  
Lord's Barn site  
Wachusett Park (street railway amusement park) ruins  
Schoolhouse sites (2)

*Farm Complexes with Historic Buildings and Agricultural Landscapes*

Wainonen Farm, Bean Porridge Hill Road  
Heins Sunny Knoll Farm, 102 Dean Hill Road  
Brookside Farm, Ashburnham State Road  
Popplewood Farm, 394 South Ashburnham Road  
Whitmanville Farm, Pierce Road  
Whitney-Krans Homestead, 9 Syd Smith Road  
Farm complex, 95 Bathrick Road at Newcomb Road  
Stonehaven, Whitney Street at Upper Reservoir

## CRITICAL ISSUES

Critical issues are town-wide issues that are not linked to a particular place.

- Loss off Agricultural Land and Farms
- Documentation of Historic Structures
- Protection of Scenic Roads

## PRIORITY HERITAGE

Priority landscapes are those landscapes that were determined at the community meeting to be of greatest concern. They are significant, valued by the community and not permanently protected.

- Ponds: Round Meadow Pond, Crocker Pond, Town Pond, and Cedar Swamp
- Midstate Trail
- Hager Park
- Honey Bee Lane
- Undiscovered Ecosystems
- Academy Hill-Westminster Village: National Historic District
- The Narrows- Industrial Area (Wachusettville)
- Maple Heights – Howard Road
- Cowee Farm and Hill – Bean Porridge Hill Road
- Savilampi Farm – South Ashburnham Road

- Van Hazinga Farm- Ashburnham State Road (Route 12)
- Spite Wall
- Wachusett Mountain Old Growth Forests
- Wachusett Park by Wachusett Reservoir
- All ancient burial sites
- South Westminster chair-making sites (Steam Valley – Spruce Road)
- Whitmanville
- Westminster Cracker Factory
- Rambler Recreation Area
- Whitney Homestead
- Gardner State Hospital (old farm properties taken by the State)

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## **SECTION 5 – INVENTORY OF LANDS OF CONSERVATION AND RECREATION INTEREST**

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There are numerous types of land that are vital components of Westminster's open space. In addition to State and federal lands used as regional parks and forests, municipal land used as neighborhood parks and land owned by the Conservation Commission, areas such as cemeteries, private recreation and conservation land, agricultural lands and private woodlands contribute to the total open land and rural character of Westminster. For these reasons all of these land parcels are considered in this section.

The degrees of protection these parcels enjoy also vary. While some parcels are protected in perpetuity, others are protected for a limited time period and are at risk of being developed if sufficient pressure or cause is given to the owner. Still others are totally unprotected and can easily and quickly be developed. It is crucial to consider how unprotected land contributes to the way the community looks and where recreation takes place.

The following is an inventory of the parcels considered to be valuable open land in the Town of Westminster. They are divided into three categories: Protected public conservation and recreation land, unprotected public land, and unprotected private land including Chapter 61 Lands that have temporary restrictions.

The protection of open land is important for many reasons. Uncontrolled growth can result in degradation of public drinking water sources, traffic congestion, inefficient delivery of government services, destruction of wildlife habitat, destruction of unique scenic and historic resources, human stress, shoddy construction, and carpetbagger development. There are also economic costs associated with growth. Numerous cost-of-community-service studies prepared by the American Farmland Trust have proven that residential development requires more in service costs than it pays in taxes (see Appendix A to review the Farmland Trust's fact sheet on the municipal cost of various types of development).

Preservation of open space has natural, social, and psychological benefits. Open land provides visual relief from the developed landscape. Vegetation helps filter out pollutants from air, rain water, and runoff. Vegetation also mitigates temperature extremes. Trees especially help reduce air pollution through the process of transpiration. Open space provides habitat for animal and bird species, and can be used for active or passive recreation, including baseball, soccer, walking, hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, swimming, and nature study.

## A. PROTECTED PUBLIC CONSERVATION AND RECREATION LAND

The protected public recreation and conservation land in Westminster is comprised of State Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, Land Trust Properties, Conservation Areas, land owned by the cities of Fitchburg and Gardner for the purpose of protecting public water supplies, two properties protected under the State's Agricultural Protection Program (APR), several cemeteries, a Town Park, a small piece of protected land within the Westminster Business Park and a Town Common.

Taken together, Westminster has 6,987 acres of permanently protected land, or 29.2% of the Town's total land area. A spreadsheet depicting all of the Town's tax-exempt and partially tax-exempt parcels can be found in Appendix B. It should be noted that not all tax-exempt parcels are considered "permanently protected".

The table below describes the larger conservation and recreation properties in Town.

*Table 16 - Protected Public Recreation and Conservation Land*

<b>Land Parcel</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Manager</b>	<b>Uses</b>	<b>Zoning</b>
Leominster State Forest	State	DCR	Hiking, bicycling, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, fishing, swimming, picnicking, rock-climbing	R-II
Wachusett Mountain State Reservation	State	DCR	Hiking, cross-country skiing, fishing, swimming, picnicking	R-II
Wachusett Mountain Ski Area	State	Wachusett Mountain Association	Skiing	R-II
Westminster State Forests	State	DCR	Hiking, snowmobiling	RI - III
High Ridge Wildlife Management Area	State	DFW	Hiking, hunting, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing	R-II
Muddy Pond Conservation Area	Town	Conservation Commission	Hiking, picnicking, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, fishing hunting	R-II
Parker Hill	Town	Conservation Commission	None	R-II
Hager Park & Rambler Area	Town	Hager Park Commission	Woodlot Management, hiking	R-I
Crocker Pond	Town	Board of Selectmen	Swimming, non-motorized boating, fishing, hiking, picnicking	R-II
Fitchburg Water Supply Lands	Fitchburg	Water Dept.	Water Supply and Protection	RI-III



**Leominster State Forest** (State owned) is a regional amenity within the boundaries of Westminster, Leominster, Fitchburg, Sterling, and Princeton containing a total of 4,300 acres of land, 1,237 acres are located in Westminster. Situated in the southeastern corner of the Town, it is bisected by Route 31. Its topography is varied from gently rolling wooded land to steep cliffs which are used for rock climbing. Sawmill Brook, which is stocked with trout, and three small lakes are found within the forests' boundaries within Westminster. Many miles of trails are open to hikers, bicyclists and equestrians. A sandy swimming beach, picnic grove and sanitary facilities have also been developed with a day-use fee.

**Wachusett Mountain Reservation** (State owned) lies within the southern tip of Westminster off Route 140 and in the neighboring town of Princeton. It contains 2,250 acres (706 acres in Westminster), many of which are well developed for hiking and nature appreciation. Additional amenities on the site include a summit lookout with automobile and chairlift access, numerous picnic areas, an information center and sanitary and parking facilities. The **Wachusett Mountain Ski Area** within the Reservation offers state of the art facilities and services for skiers throughout the region.

**Westminster State Forests** (State owned) consist of seven land parcels totaling 384 acres. Locations of these sites are Knowler Road, Ellis Road, the Cedar Swamp, Old Gardner Road and off Bragg Hill Road. At present there are no designated activities in the forests, with the exception of a few unmaintained trails. Opportunities for recreational development (hiking, camping etc.) as well as educational and conservation efforts are available in these locations.

**High Ridge Wildlife Management Area** (State owned) located on the western boundary of Westminster and the eastern border of Gardner was once the site of a state hospital. The main complex has been converted into a medium security prison (the North Central Correctional Institute). The 1,504 acres of land that comprise this area contains valuable agricultural land. Some hay is still harvested under a contractual arrangement with the state. Numerous streams traverse the site and an exceptional wetland wildlife habitat is located here. Chapel, East Gardner and Overlook Roads traverse the site.

**Muddy Pond Conservation Area** (Town owned) in the northern corner of Westminster includes 430 acres that are both diverse and scenic. Hardwood and softwood forests, open and wooded wetlands, streams and a pond create a site that offers numerous opportunities. Numerous trails were blazed in the late 1970's and a campsite was established on the shore of Muddy Pond. The Mid-State Trail bisects the area adding to its value as an important regional open space parcel. Many land parcels in the Chapter 61 program abut this area and offer potential for future road frontage to be secured. The Conservation Commission maintains a parking area and routinely performs trail maintenance on this property.

**Parker Hill** (Town owned) on the Fitchburg line contains 148 acres of rolling hills covered by a mixed hardwood forest. Access is through Fitchburg only via a dirt road. Several Chapter 61 (A & B) parcels form a connection from Parker Hill to Old Ashburnham Turnpike.

**Hager Park** (Town-owned) is located off of Route 140 (known locally as Hager Park Road) just south of the intersection with Route 2A and the Route 2 East on-ramp. The park consists of approximately 57 acres on the east side of the road, which abuts Woodside Cemetery and surrounds the Water Treatment facility. There are another 18 ± acres located on the west side of Route 140. These parcels of land were part of a larger tract originally given to the town by Joseph Hager in the early 1900's. The Hager Park Commission oversees the Wachusett Rambler Recreation Area, a nine acre parcel which abuts the main part of Hager Park. The Rambler Area became part of Hager Park at the annual town meeting in 2008.

The Commission also administers the Smith Reservoir properties, which are located further to the south and on either side Route 140. These lots, which include about 70 acres, were deeded to the town by the City of Fitchburg in the 1990's. The Commission has developed a network of hiking and riding trails within the Hager Park and Rambler parcels and we hope to establish trails in the Smith Reservoir area in the future. The trails are open to the public. The trails are marked with white metal signs. For more information on Hager Park, please visit the Town's website: [http://www.westminster-ma.gov/pages/WestminsterMA\\_BComm/Hager/trailmapclean.pdf](http://www.westminster-ma.gov/pages/WestminsterMA_BComm/Hager/trailmapclean.pdf)

**Crocker Pond Recreation Area** (Town owned) is located off South Ashburnham Road through access over a bridge crossing the Whitman River. The site contains 101 acres and has a sandy swimming beach and an existing trail network. The pond can be used for swimming, fishing, picnicking, ice skating and non-motorized boating. The land can be used for hiking and cross-country skiing. Crocker Pond was formerly known as the Brooks Mill Sportsmen's Club. The club was open to the employees of the James River Paper Company in Fitchburg.

**Fitchburg Water Department Lands** include three reservoirs, Wachusett Lake Reservoir, Meetinghouse Pond and Mare Meadow Reservoir. Public use of these lands is restricted except for shore fishing at designated spots. Four of the parcels constitute watershed lands and are within the Meetinghouse Pond Watershed. Access is good but parking is limited. These parcels are important to both the quality of water and the rural character of Westminister.

All of the permanently protected conservation and recreation lands in Westminister are depicted on the Open Space Inventory Map.

## B. UNPROTECTED PUBLIC LAND

Tax-exempt and partially tax-exempt parcels that are *not* considered permanently protected include:

- Land containing municipal buildings and schools,
- Land under the jurisdiction of the Board of Selectmen,
- Properties the Town has taken by tax title,
- Land managed by the Department of Public Works,
- Church properties,
- Land owned by non-profit civic or service entities,
- Privately-owned recreation land, and
- Land managed by MassHighway.

In 2012, the Town's Planning Department evaluated all of the Town's landholdings that are under the jurisdiction of the Board of Selectmen (BOS), including all properties taken by tax title. All of the BOS-managed properties are tax exempt, but are not considered "protected". Of the BOS-managed properties, two were recommended for transfer to the Conservation Commission:

- Minott Road (32 acres along the shoreline of Minott Pond).
- Partridge Hill Road (20 acres in close proximity to other Conservation properties).

As of the writing of this Plan, the Selectmen have yet to transfer these two properties to the Conservation Commission. It should be noted that the vast majority of the properties taken by the Town through the tax title process are small strips of land that are unsuitable for conservation or recreation purposes.

The Town of Westminster owns six properties totaling 53 acres that contribute heavily to Westminster's recreation needs, but are considered "unprotected". Although these properties are presently used for recreation and open space it is not guaranteed that this use will continue.

*Table 17 - Unprotected Public Land*

<b>Land Parcel</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Manager</b>	<b>Uses</b>
Academy Hill	Town	Town	Social gatherings, concerts, farmer's market
Elementary Schools	Town	Ash-West Reg. School District	Baseball, field sports, basketball
Montachusett Regional Tech HS	Westminster-Fitchburg	Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School	Track and field, football, basketball, tennis
Oakmont and Overlook Schools	Ashburnham/Westminster	Ash-West Reg. School District	Football, basketball, tennis
Town Well Field	Town	Town Water Department	Protected unless well is decommissioned
Town Hall	Town	Parks & Recreation Commission	Basketball court outside of Town Hall

**Academy Hill** (Town owned) is the town common and is of historic significance to Westminster. It has a well-maintained lawn and a bandstand where concerts are held in the spring and summer. Academy Hill Common and the surrounding colonial style houses are included as part of Westminster's Historic District.

**Elementary Schools** Meetinghouse School (grades pre-K1) and Westminster Elementary School (grades 2-5) share a five-acre site that contains three baseball diamonds, 2 playgrounds and a wetlands area with a trail. Ball fields are used by Little League, Town residents and Oakmont Youth Soccer.

**Montachusett Regional High School** provides service to both Westminster and Fitchburg, as well as 16 other towns. The site occupies 21 acres in Westminster and additional adjacent acres in Fitchburg. Recreational amenities at the site include a running track, four tennis courts, and ten acres of playing fields for football, field hockey, baseball and soccer. These facilities are primarily for the use of students and faculty, but can be used by local residents outside of school use. The playing fields may be used by outside teams or organizations with permission from the school office.

**Oakmont Regional High School** (grades 9- 12) and the **Overlook Middle School** (grades 6 - 8) serve the communities of both Ashburnham and Westminster. They are located on the town line with 13 acres within Westminster. Recreation facilities here include two basketball courts, four tennis courts, two outdoor tracks and 11 acres of playing fields for football, baseball, field hockey and soccer. Two miles of nature trails used as an outdoor classroom is on an adjacent property.

**The Town Well Field** (pump site) overlays the Wyman Pond primary aquifer and is within easy walking distance of Westminster's second most populated area. The 14-acre area is primarily vegetated with White and Pitch Pine. Access is currently restricted. The site is located between Honeybee Lane and Parkwood Lane.

**Basketball Court at Town Hall** is managed by the Parks and Recreation Commission and is used for the youth basketball program, summer recreational programs and pick-up basketball games when available.

It should be noted that the Parks and Recreation Commission manages two recreation facilities on private property: a multi-use playing field off of Simplex Drive (owned by NIP Owner LLC), and a Travel Soccer League field off of State Road East (owned by the TRW Company).

## C. UNPROTECTED PRIVATE LAND

Unprotected private lands are the most vulnerable of all recreation and open space lands. These land parcels can easily be sold for development or otherwise be changed from their present use. This category of open space land including those classified in Chapter 61, 61A and 61B contributes greatly to Westminster's rural character. Without these preserved lands Westminster's sense of place and quality of life would suffer. Westminster's Chapter Lands can be seen on the Open Space Inventory Map.

Private open lands designated as Forest Lands (Chapter 61), Agricultural Lands (Chapter 61A), or Private Recreation (Chapter 61B) are not protected. The designation of private parcels as Chapter 61, 61A, or 61B restricts the use of land in exchange for a significant reduction in taxes. Under such a designation the land cannot be converted to residential, industrial or commercial use.

Chapter 61, 61A and 61B are programs designed to encourage the conservation and management of the Commonwealth's forests, preserve valuable farmland, promote active agricultural and horticultural land use, preserve open space and promote recreational land uses. They offer significant local tax benefits to property owners willing to preserve land for the stated uses. In addition, if the Chapter 61 lands change use or are put up for sale, the town has right of first refusal. This option provides an opportunity for towns to purchase valuable open space or recreation land thereby preserving the inherent beauty

and ecological integrity of their community. Since over 1,673 acres (or 13.6% of Westminster) is temporarily protected in these programs, they constitute an extremely valuable resource.

Chapter 61 Forest Lands require a minimum of ten contiguous acres, which can be classified by a state forester, and require a forest management plan to be developed and implemented by the property owner. Once the application has been received and approved, the classification statement functions as a lien upon the land for taxes levied under the provisions of M.G.L. Chapter 61. The landowner must re-file every ten years or the Assessor shall remove the land from classification. Similarly, Agriculture and Private Recreation land must have a minimum of five acres to qualify, and the status must be renewed every year.

Land may be taken out of Chapter 61, 61A or 61B classification by notifying the Town and paying back taxes plus a withdrawal penalty tax. However, such land may not be sold for, or converted to, residential, commercial or industrial use while taxed under the classification without written notification to the municipality in which it is located. The Town then has 120 days to exercise its right of first refusal option to purchase the land. Should this time period pass and/or the Town state in writing that it will not act on its option, the land may be developed for alternative uses, removing it from its “open” status as forest, farm, or recreation land.

When the Town is notified by a landowner that they plan to withdraw their property from the Chapter program and sell it, the Board of Selectmen circulate the request to the Open Space Commission, Conservation Commission and Planning Board for review and comment. Should any of these entities indicate a desire to acquire said property, the proposal is then evaluated by the Town’s Advisory Committee. When Chapter lands are recommended for acquisition, the Town usually seeks the help of a regional land trust, such as the North County Land Trust or the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust. Ultimately, it is the Board of Selectmen who makes the final decision on Chapter land acquisitions. This has been the Town’s practice; however, it has never been articulated as a written policy.

Regarding new open space acquisitions, it should be noted that the Town has 6,987 acres under permanent protection, or 29.2% of the Town’s total land area. This is large amount of protected land for even a rural community. A review of the Open Space Inventory Map will reveal that the majority of the Town’s critical environmental resources are already protected:

- The western shoreline of the Whitman Reservoir
- Almost all of the shoreline of Muddy Pond
- The southern shoreline of Crocker Pond
- The entire shoreline of Mare Meadow Pond
- The entire shoreline of Meetinghouse Pond
- The entire shoreline of Wachusett Lake
- The Old Growth forests on Wachusett Mountain
- Westminster's portion of the Saw Mill Pond shoreline

At this point in time, the Town is reluctant to exercise its right-of-first-refusal and purchase Chapter lands unless they achieve multiple open space/recreation goals, such as:

- Parcel is large enough and flat enough to support new athletic fields.
- Parcel would complete the Town's landholdings along shoreline of a major waterbody.
- Parcel would link to other conservation properties.
- Parcel would help create a greenway along significant rivers and/or streams.
- Parcel would provide a link to the Midstate trail system.
- Parcel would protect a large amount of soils best suited for agriculture.
- Parcel would protect a critical stream, river or tributary.
- Parcel would protect a critical wetland.
- Parcel would protect the habitat for rare and endangered species.
- Parcel falls within the State's BioMap resource areas.
- Parcel is necessary for protection of a public drinking water supply.

The more open space/recreation priorities a parcel meets, the more likely the Town will consider acquisition.

Other unprotected private lands include golf and sportsman clubs, private parks and private land that possess unique recreation or conservation resources.

*Table 18 – Unprotected Private Recreation Land*

Land Parcel	Location	Owner	Manager	Area (acres)	Uses
Westminster Country Club	Ellis Road	Westminster Golf Course, Inc.	LeBlanc	110	Golf, cross-country skiing
Woods of Westminster	Bean Porridge Hill Road	Bartkus	Barrows Prop	218	Golf
VFW Park	Main Street	VFW	VFW	6	Little League
Westminster Sportsmen's Club	Ellis Road	Westminster Sportsmen's Club Inc.	Private	55	Fishing, swimming, picnicking, snowmobiling
Westminster Rod and Gun Club	Knower Road	Tophet Fish & Game Club	Private	22	Fishing, hunting
Rice Meadow Fly Fishing Club	Notown Road	Rice Meadow Fish & Game Club Inc.	Private	19	Fishing

Two Golf Clubs are within the Town of Westminster: **Westminster Country Club** and **The Woods of Westminster**. Together these provide over 360 acres of recreation space in Westminster.

**Veterans of Foreign Wars Park** is located in the town center where Westminster's population is most concentrated. The six-acre site contains one ball field that is used by various leagues and Town residents, a picnic area, and two tennis courts.

**Westminster Sportsmen's Club** is a private sportsmen's club. The 55-acre club abuts the Westminster Country Club and Burnt Mill Pond. It provides warm water fishing and swimming, a picnic area and a departure point for snowmobiles. Much of the area consists of wetlands.

**Westminster Rod and Gun Club** is a private sportsmen's club containing 22 acres of land at 175 Knower Road.

**Rice Meadow Fly Fishing Club** is a private club containing 19 acres located at 25 Notown Road.



## NON-PROFIT OWNED AND PRIVATELY RESTRICTED LAND

The North County Land Trust (NCLT) owns four parcels of land in Westminster totaling 87 acres. The NCLT owns 48 acres on Ashburnham State Road (Map 7 Lot 1); 33 acres on West Main Street (Map 87 Lot 1); 6 acres on Fenno Drive – rear (Map 87 Lot 25); and 7,000 square feet of land in the rear of Simplex Drive.

Lastly, there are two properties along Dean Hill Road that are listed under the State's Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program, totaling 91 acres (land formerly owned by Herbert Schreiber). APR lands can continue to be farmed, but the development rights are sold to the State in perpetuity. These two properties joined the APR program in 1983.

*Table 19 - Summary of Protected Open Space*

<b>Summary of Open Space</b>	<b>Acreage</b>
<b>Permanently Protected</b>	
<b>Municipal</b>	
Cities of Fitchburg & Gardner Water Depts.	1,700.7
Town of Westminster (Conservation)	823.5
Town of Westminster (Recreation)	333.8
Town of Westminster (Cemeteries)	27.9
<b>Private</b>	
Dean Hill Road (APR)	91.0
<b>Non-Profit</b>	
North County Land Trust	87.2
<b>State</b>	
Division of Conservation & Recreation, and Fish & Wildlife	3,923.2
<b>Total Permanently Protected Land</b>	<b>6,987.3</b>
<b>Land Under Temporary Protection</b>	
Chapter 61 A Agriculture	789.7
Chapter 61 B Recreation	439.7
Chapter 61 Forest	444.2
Subtotal	<b>1,673.6</b>
<b>Total Acres of Land Having Some Level of Protection</b>	<b>8,660.9</b>
<b>Total Acres of Land in Westminster</b>	<b>22,720.0</b>
<b>% of Permanently Protected Land in Westminster</b>	<b>29.2%</b>
<b>% of Land Having Some Level of Protection in Westminster</b>	<b>38.1%</b>

## 2013 RECREATION PROGRAMS

The Town of Westminister supports many recreation programs throughout the year for all ages. Westminister Parks and Recreation Commission has five members and is appointed by the Moderator. The Recreation Commission sponsored programs are as follows:

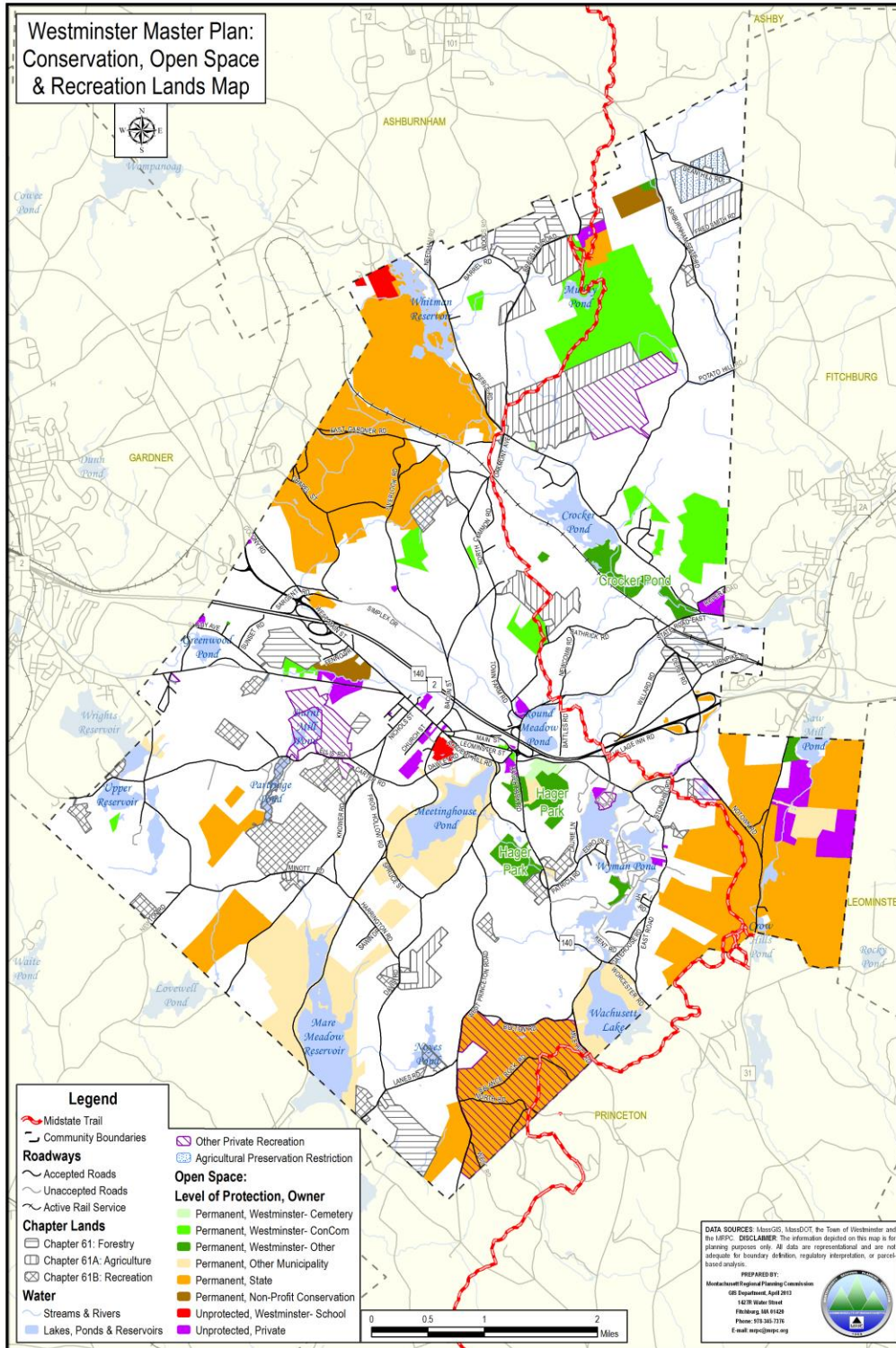
- Summer Recreation Program – 6 week program starting in July for children ages 5-12 held in the Westminister Elementary School Gymnasium Mon – Friday 9a.m. to noon. Over 260 participants in 2013. Tween Recreation Program was established in 2009 and approximately 50 kids participated in 2013.
- Learn to Swim – This program is held at Wachusett Community College Fitness and Wellness Center. Approximately 60 participants in 2003.

The Parks and Recreation Commission financially contribute to the following Town recreation programs:

- Youth Basketball League – The Recreation Commission sponsors a youth basketball program during the winter months.
- T-ball, Softball and Little League Baseball – Westminister Little League sponsors a T-ball and youth baseball program in the spring/summer months. There have also been two Jimmy Fund Leagues in the past two years: One for 9-10 year olds; and one for 11 year olds.
- Youth Soccer – The Town of Westminister sponsors two soccer leagues. A local league and a travel team.

Other Town-sponsored recreation programs include:

- Town Benefit Day – The Annual Town Benefit Day is held at the Common at Academy Hill in August. The day features games and activities for children and adults. Proceeds from the benefit are used to help families living in Westminister.
- Summer Band Concerts – 6 consecutive Wednesdays starting in July at Town Common on Academy Hill. 7-9 p.m. The concerts are free of charge.



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## SECTION 6 - COMMUNITY VISION

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### A. DESCRIPTION OF PROCESS

This Plan was prepared jointly by the Westminster Open Space and Master Plan Committees during the course of 2013. The community goals contained herein were derived from several sources: three community meetings held as part of the Master Plan update process, a citizen survey, and several joint meetings of the Open Space and Master Plan Committees. Below is a brief description of each effort.

- In January of 2012, the Master Plan Committee sent a 21-question survey to every household in Westminster (approximately 2,630 households). There were 1,222 responses received for a total response rate of 46.5%. When asked “what do people like about living in Westminster”, the top reply was small town character. When asked “what buildings and/or sites in Westminster do you believe are worthy of historic preservation”, the top responses were the Cracker Factory, Old Town Hall, Upton Building, Academy Hill and Library. When asked “what initiatives would you support to protect the Town’s small town character”, the top two responses were protection of open space and design guidelines. When asked “What types of recreation opportunities would you like to see more of in Westminster”, the top two responses were hiking and bicycle trails. It should be noted that recreation trails were among the top recreation needs identified through surveys for Central Massachusetts as identified in the document, **Massachusetts Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2012**, which is the State’s Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), prepared by the EOEEA, Division of Conservation Services (DCS). A copy of the SCORP can be found here: <http://www.mass.gov/eea/docs/eea/dcs/scorp-2012-final.pdf>
- On February 9, 2012, the Master Plan Committee sponsored a SWOT exercise (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) at the Middle School cafeteria. Approximately 40 people attended this session. Of the top three strengths identified by the participants, two relate directly to open space and natural resource protection: Westminster’s scenic country atmosphere; and the Town’s natural resources. Ecotourism was identified as one of the Town’s top opportunities.
- On January 23, 2013, the Master Plan Committee sponsored an Economic Summit at the Middle School cafeteria. The summit’s purpose was to derive public input for the Master Plan’s Economic Development chapter. All of the Town’s state and regional economic development partners were invited. The Committee acknowledged that ecotourism was and is an important component of

the local economy, and thus made a point of inviting a representative from the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust to speak at this event. This in turn led to the Town partnering with the Trust to protect the last piece of unprotected shoreline along Muddy Pond in the north of Town. This project is currently underway, being funded through a LAND grant.

- On May 7, 2013, the Open Space and Master Plan Committees held a forum at the Forbush Library to kick-off the update of this Plan. Approximately 30 people attended and the following tasks were performed: the Town's open space and recreation landholdings were described and shown on a map, and the goals of the 2007 Open Space & Recreation Plan were reviewed, discussed and revised.

It should also be noted that several previous planning documents were also reviewed for this effort, including the Town's 1998 Community Preservation Plan, 2004 Community Development Plan, and the 2000 Statewide Comprehensive Open Space and Recreation Plan (SCORP).

## **B. STATEMENT OF OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION GOALS**

Opportunities for protecting and preserving natural and cultural resources contributing to open space and recreational resources are abundant in the Town of Westminster. The challenge is to implement the actions of this Open Space and Recreation Plan in a fiscally responsible way.

- The retention of open space in private ownership is crucial to maintaining Westminster's rural character. Forest and agricultural lands have the potential to support economic activities, while at the same time preserving valuable open space. One of the goals of this plan is to encourage a "working landscape" for Westminster. This can be accomplished by ensuring that impediments to open space land uses such as agriculture/aquaculture, silviculture, and recreation are avoided. Further, the Town should strive to promote these land uses as a means of open space protection.

One way of encouraging these uses is to educate land owners about the State's Chapter 61, 61A and 61B taxation programs which allow for lower taxes on lands used for forestry, farming and recreation. Another option is the use of conservation and/or agricultural restrictions. Here landowners can sell the development rights so that land will be protected in perpetuity. Towards this end, the Open Space Committee works very closely with the North County Land Trust to educate landowners on their estate-planning and property preservation options.

Westminster's residential growth is a concern for its citizens. Residential growth, especially large lot development, impacts the rural character of the Town by breaking up the landscape every couple of hundred feet with a lawn, driveway and house at the end of it. In addition, residential growth increases service demands thereby increasing taxes needed to support these services. The numerous cost-of-community-service studies prepared by the American Farmland Trust (see Appendix A) have proven that residential development requires more in service costs than it pays in taxes.

- Another goal is to protect and preserve the natural and cultural resources that are vital to the Town's rural character. As can be seen from the results of the citizen survey and forums conducted on behalf of the Master Plan update project, Westminster citizens value the Town's rural character very highly. Preserving natural landscapes and cultural resources are critical components of the Town's rural character.
- A third goal is to enhance recreational opportunities in Town and to keep pace with the growing population. The Westminster Parks and Recreation Commission has identified several needs for the planning horizon of this document (7 years), including new space for athletic fields and a children's playground in the Town Center.
- With approximately 30% of the Town's total land area under permanent protection, Westminster has protected the majority of its critical environmental resources. At this point in time, the Town is reluctant to exercise its right-of-first-refusal and purchase Chapter lands unless they achieve multiple open space/recreation goals, such as those described in Section 5. The more open space/recreation priorities a parcel meets, the more likely the Town will consider acquisition. One of the goals for this Plan is that the Town continues to identify and prioritize lands for acquisition based on the "multiple goods" strategy described in Section 5.
- The Economic Development chapter of the Master Plan has identified eco-tourism as one component of the Town's future economic development strategy. Towards that end, it will be important for the Town to advertise and raise awareness of its open space and recreation resources. Thus, this is another goal of this Plan.
- The Town Government chapter of the Master Plan has identified the need for increased communication and coordination among municipal boards and Town residents. Better communication and coordination will help with the preservation and protection of the Town's open space and recreation assets thus; this is another goal of this Plan.

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## SECTION 7 - ANALYSIS OF NEED

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### A. SUMMARY OF RESOURCE PROTECTION NEEDS

There are three critical resources needing protection in Westminster: the large forested area between South Ashburnham Road and Route 12, the Whitman River valley and the North American wetland/upland systems in the southwest portion of Town. Of the unique environments in Westminster, these areas are the largest, most sensitive areas, yet they have the least protection. Preservation of these three areas is critical to maintaining Westminster's rural character.

The Whitman River valley has the potential to host water-related recreational facilities. The large waterbodies could provide such activities as swimming, boating and fishing. Further, the land abutting the waterbodies could provide passive recreational uses such as hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing and birding.

### B. SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY'S NEEDS

#### RURAL CHARACTER

A wide variety of the community's needs have surfaced as a result of the study of previous planning documents, personal interviews and resident questionnaires. The issue of preserving Westminster's rural character through housing regulation and open space preservation is perceived as the most imperative need.

Preserving land for recreation and developing recreation areas and facilities, although regarded as important, was not considered by most to be as pressing a need. Only 16% of the questionnaire respondents claimed to be dissatisfied with places for children and youth to play and recreate in Town, and 26% were dissatisfied with recreation options available for adults.

Questions concerning residential growth policy showed that while only 15% wanted no growth 65% favored regulating housing development. There was not the same consensus on how this should be done although a slight majority chose regulating housing in already developed areas. Infill options should be fully investigated and the results shared with the town residents to further their understanding of this option.

#### SIDEWALKS

With the construction of a new community center at 69 West Main Street on the edge of the Town Center, there is an opportunity to enhance access and mobility for the senior population by having a coordinated and well-maintained sidewalk network within the Town Center. The demographics indicate that seniors and soon-to-be seniors are the

fastest growing segments of Westminster's population, and walking is great exercise for senior citizens. Further, increased pedestrian activity will help create a vibrant and thriving Town Center.

## TAX BASE

The Town's tax base is an issue that affects how land gets used in Westminster. The Town's residential tax base has been growing at a faster rate than its economic tax base (i.e., businesses and industries). Thus, residential home owners have been shouldering the ever increasing cost of providing municipal services. When the 2012 Master Plan citizen survey asked the question "what do you find undesirable about living in Westminster?", the number one answer by far was "high taxes". The Master Plan suggests a two-pronged strategy for dealing with this situation: the Town should closely monitor its spending on municipal government from year to year while pursuing an aggressive economic development strategy. Westminster does not have a shortage of available commercial and industrial land; in fact, the Town's State-sponsored build-out analysis of 2001 determined that the Town's commercial and industrial zoning districts have enough total vacant developable land to accommodate approximately 15,941,102 square feet of new commercial/industrial floor space. There are still several large tracts of vacant developable land in the Simplex Drive industrial area, and the bulk of the Westminster Business Park has yet to be built. There are two large commercial districts (Route 140 on the west side of Town, and the Village Inn Road district) where large swaths of vacant developable land exist. The Town's challenge is to fill in these areas with new economic development without disrupting Westminster's small town feel.

## AGRICULTURE

Conservation of agricultural lands contributes not only to open space goals and the enhancement of rural character but also to the expanding emphasis on promoting locally grown food and other agricultural products. Much of Westminster was formerly farmland and much of the soil in our region is prime quality for upland New England farming.

By delineating lands in Town suitable for agricultural use, the Town can promote appropriate working landscape development for future agricultural use. Already, hundreds of acres in the town are involved in production of pastured beef, pork and poultry, eggs and dairy goods as well as market garden crops, perennial crops, hay and corn, honey and maple syrup etc. and more acres are being reclaimed for future agricultural use.

With the creation of the Westminster Agricultural Commission and the passage of Westminster's "Right to Farm" bylaw, the Town has taken the necessary steps to satisfy state and federal requirements for financial support of local farming projects.



The Agricultural Commission is charged with encouraging the pursuit of agriculture and agriculturally-based economic opportunities by encouraging the production and purchase of locally-grown goods, promoting agricultural awareness and sponsoring agricultural-related education opportunities. Towards that end, the Commission led the effort to have the Town adopt a “Right to Farm” bylaw. The Commission also sponsors the Farmer’s Market at Academy Hill from May through October every year. By continuing these types of efforts with the support of its residents, the Town can realize that the “working landscapes” of farm life will benefit the community as a whole.

In terms of tax dollars generated, farming and agriculture is a small component of the local economy; however, the rural landscapes necessary for farming are essential components of the Town’s rural character.

New agricultural operations are likely to be smaller than those that currently exist in Town. New farms will likely average five to fifteen acres in size and some could be as small as 2,000 square feet. In many cases, new farms will be of the micro variety, homesteading and hobby farmers. Products produced will cover the gamut of what is possible in New England, including but not limited to market gardens, small fruits, livestock, small dairy, eggs, hay, bees, firewood, wood chips and custom milling. Small or large, agricultural operations help maintain Westminster’s rural character.

## RECREATION NEEDS

When the 2012 Master Plan citizen survey asked “what types of recreation opportunities would you like to see more of?”, hiking and bicycle trails were the clear winners. The survey results dovetail nicely with the results of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), which also identified recreation trails as among the highest recreation needs for the Central Massachusetts region. In the last seven years, the Town bought land around Crocker Pond to create a recreation area for its citizens. Amenities include a swim beach and an extensive trail system that connects to the larger Midstate Trail system which runs throughout Westminster in a south-to-north direction. There is a Midstate Trail Organization that has many members from Westminster, and their charge is to maintain the Midstate Trail on an ongoing basis.

An interview with the Parks and Recreation Commission identified the need for more athletic fields and a children’s playground in the Town Center. Funding the Commission’s activities has been a longstanding struggle, and a review of its budget for the last ten years shows either reductions or level-funding. The Commission will need to increase its budget in the future, if only to keep pace with the capital equipment needs of the Town’s existing facilities. The Commission needs bleachers, a storage shed and supplies for the new lacrosse field at Simplex Drive, which will open in the spring of 2014. The Commission would also like to investigate the possibility of building an indoor multi-use sports complex somewhere in Town.

## WATER ACCESS

The lack of public access to waterbodies in Westminster is ironic in light of the abundance of this resource. While the ownership of the majority of this resource by Fitchburg Water Company presently offers it protection from development, it also severely restricts its recreation potential. A dialogue with the city of Fitchburg along with a study of other municipalities' water resources could result in learning how to maintain water quality and simultaneously allow some recreation activities within these resources. Further, the Town may wish to take a closer look at its shoreline landholdings to see if there are any areas suitable for a small-scale boat launch (i.e. canoes and other non-motorized boats).

## SPECIAL POPULATIONS

The Town has identified the recreation needs of its special populations: 1) there is a need for a children's playground, preferably in The vicinity of Town Center, 2) there is a need for new athletic fields for those children and teenager who participate in team sports, 3) there is a need for an improved and expanded sidewalk system in the Town Center that would encourage senior citizens to walk to/from the new Senior Center and the Town Center; and 4) the handicapped would benefit from improved access to the 24 properties under jurisdiction of the Conservation Commission.

## C. MANAGEMENT NEEDS

The last iteration of this Plan (2007) identified the management of Crocker Pond and surrounding land as a top priority. Since then, the Town has established a five-member Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee to manage this resource. The recreation area contains parking, a playground, a swim beach and an extensive trail network that eventually links to the Midstate Trail. The Committee has yet to prepare a management plan, but this remains a priority for them.

In terms of the management of Town-owned properties, the Town's Planning Department evaluated all of the Town's landholdings in 2012, with an eye towards making sure each property was being managed by the appropriate municipal entity. Of the properties managed by the Board of Selectmen, two were recommended for transfer to the Conservation Commission:

- Minott Road (32 acres along the shoreline of Minott Pond).
- Partridge Hill Road (20 acres in close proximity to other Conservation properties).

As of the writing of this Plan, the Selectmen have yet to transfer these two properties to the Conservation Commission. It should be noted that the vast majority of the properties taken by the Town through the tax title process are small strips of land that are unsuitable for conservation or recreation purposes.

In terms of preserving “working landscapes”, the Town’s regulatory system is a constant concern. There is a growing tendency in development regulations and laws to lump all land uses together. These regulations and laws often impose restrictions on agriculture, silviculture and recreation. These laws and regulations often prohibit certain open space uses, make it more costly to manage open space or create aggravation for landowners attempting to manage their land as open space. While most of these laws and regulations individually might not cause the loss of open space, cumulatively they can reduce the economic viability and/or increase the level of aggravation in managing open space to levels which cause landowners to give up working the land. The result is almost always the conversion of the land to residential development.

The Town’s Open Space Committee and Agricultural Commission should work jointly with the Planning Board to review existing Town bylaws and regulations to search for impediments to a “working landscape” and promote a more sensitive development of land that preserves open space. If any problems are discovered, changes should be proposed.

To promote economic activity and to generate income for open space management, the Town’s Open Space Committee and Agricultural Commission should work jointly to investigate the possibility of leasing Town-owned open space lands for forestry, farming and agriculture. Management plans should be developed for forest land which will promote multiple-uses. Forests can almost always be managed to provide recreation, protect water resources, and to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat, while at the same time producing forest products.

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## SECTION 8 - GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

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**Goal One:** Protect, conserve and enhance Westminster’s farmlands and forestlands as “working landscapes” which are vital to the Town’s rural character.

**Objectives:**

1.a. Inform the public about the protection possibilities for their land such as land trusts, conservation restrictions or fee simple acquisition.

1.b. Inform the public about incentives for keeping their land as open space, especially through Chapter 61 (Recreation) Chapter 61A (Agriculture) and Chapter 61 B (Recreation).

1.c. Protect those properties the Town has identified for preservation through Agricultural Preservation Restrictions and Conservation Restrictions.

1.d. Review Town bylaws and regulations to ensure that they do not discourage open space land uses.

1.e. Educate landowners about economically viable open space uses.

1.f. Develop “working landscapes” (land used for agriculture, forestry or recreation) on town-owned lands.

1.g. Promote residential, commercial and industrial infill within existing developed areas to limit development in other areas thereby protecting rural character.

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**Goal Two:** Protect and preserve the cultural resources that are vital to the town’s rural character.

**Objectives:**

2.a. Identify and preserve culturally significant buildings and sites through public education and participation.

2.b. Investigate the Town’s options for protecting the scenic qualities of Westminster’s rural roads.

2.c. Develop a plan for the protection of the Westminster Village – Academy Hill Historic District.

2.d. Adopt New England village-style zoning for the Town Center, which would include design standards for building facades, signs, landscaping, lighting, as well as the placement of parking areas and new buildings, and curb-cuts.

2.e. Work with the Historical Commission to implement the recommendations contained within the “Town of Westminster, Historic Preservation Plan,” dated June 1998.

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**Goal Three:** Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups and abilities.

**Objectives:**

3.a. Identify opportunities to develop a multi-use trail that will link major open space parcels, neighborhoods and schools.

3.b. Assist in the development and rerouting of the Midstate Trail in Westminster.

3.c. Secure protective easements on those portions of the Midstate Trail that occur on private property.

3.d. Search out available properties that would be suitable for new athletic fields and toddler playgrounds.

3.e. Create recreation amenities (biking-hiking-equestrian trails, camping sites and picnic sites) on those conservation properties that are suitable for such uses.

3.f. Increase sidewalks within the Town Center to provide greater recreation opportunities for the elderly population.

3.f. Work with the City of Fitchburg to allow public access of waterbodies (Meetinghouse Pond, Mare Meadow Pond and Wachusett Reservoir) for passive recreation such as kayaking, canoeing and fishing.

3.g. Properly maintain our existing recreation facilities and secure additional parking for the ball-fields on South Street.

3.h Investigate opportunities to create a trail network for snow-mobiles that could also be used for more passive recreation uses such as horseback riding and cross-country skiing.

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**Goal Four:** Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.

**Objectives:**

4.a. Support the Midstate Trail Open Space Committee in the identification of priority land acquisition parcels along or abutting the Midstate Trail.

4.b. Work toward a town-wide greenway that protects key wetlands, streams, and rivers.

4.c. Continue to annually allocate funds for the purchase of open space and recreation areas.

4.d. Acquire environmentally sensitive areas as outlined in Section 7 Resource Protection needs.

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**Goal Five:** Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.

**Objectives:**

5.a. Develop a Town-wide signage program for open space and recreation areas.

5.b. Develop a brochure on Westminster's recreation opportunities and open space parcels. Put information on the Town's website.

5.c. Create maps and trail guides for those Town conservation areas that are suitable for public access.

5.d. Encourage volunteerism in developing and maintaining community open space and recreation resources.

5.e. Coordinate environmental education into the school district curriculum using local conservation resources.

5.f. Celebrate open space and recreation resources by having several Town events each year that foster awareness (i.e.: tournaments, races, fairs).

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**Goal Six:** Increase communication and coordination among Town boards and with Town residents.

**Objectives:**

6.a. Continue to guide the implementation of the open space plan, and assist in coordinating the efforts of various Town boards and citizen groups.

6.b. Implement quarterly meetings where liaisons from those municipal entities with open space responsibilities (Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Historical Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Agricultural Commission, Hager Park Committee, Planning Board and Board of Selectmen) meet to discuss community issues.

6.c. Continue to support having a conservation agent on staff – possibly sharing the position with a neighboring town.

6.d. Institute an on-going publicity campaign to inform the public about the actions that affect open space and recreation.

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## SECTION 9 - SEVEN YEAR ACTION PLAN

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The following list of Action Items is arranged by goal and the items are ranked by priority. To complete those action items that will require funding, the Town will avail itself to a number of funding opportunities, depending on availability and political will. A list of possible funding opportunities can be found in Appendix C.

**Goal One:** Protect, conserve and enhance Westminster's farmlands and forestlands as "working landscapes" which are vital to the Town's rural character.

- Adopt Formal Policy on Chapter Land Withdrawals. While the Town utilizes a standard practice of how to deal with lands that are withdrawn from the Chapter 61, 61A and 61B taxation programs (explained on Page 43), the Town should formalize this practice into a written policy. Responsible Municipal Entities: Board of Selectmen, Agricultural Commission, Conservation Commission and Open Space Committee. Timing: Year 1.
- Review Regulatory Restrictions. Review Town bylaws and regulations to determine if there are existing impediments to creating "working landscapes" and propose changes to such bylaws and regulations if necessary. Responsible Municipal Entities: Planning Board, Agricultural Commission and Conservation Commission. Timing: Years 1-2.
- Streamline Permit Process for On-Farm Businesses: Responsible Municipal Entities: Planning Board, Building Department, Board of Health, and Agricultural Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Lease Town Land for Agriculture: To promote economic activity and to generate income for open space management, the Town's Open Space Committee and Agricultural Commission should work jointly to investigate the possibility of leasing Town-owned open space lands for forestry, farming and agriculture. Responsible Municipal Entities: Agricultural Commission and Open Space Committee. Timing: Year 2.
- Prepare Forestry Inventory and Management Plan for Hager Park and Smith Reservoir Land. Currently in progress, this plan could lead to a timber-harvesting plan that can generate revenues for the Town of Westminster. Responsible Municipal Entity: Hager Park Commission. Timing: Years 1-2.



- Continue the Forest Management Plan at the Muddy Pond Conservation Area. This program needs to be continued in order to provide the early successional habitat that is required for migratory bird breeding habitat. Responsible Municipal Entity: Conservation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Investigate the Creation of Agricultural Incentive Areas: Investigate the feasibility of creating one or more Agricultural Incentive Areas under the MA Right to Farm Law (MGL Chapter 40L), to protect farmers from rising property taxes, betterment assessments, and nuisance lawsuits. Responsible Municipal Entity: Agricultural Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.

**Goal Two:** Protect and preserve the cultural resources that are vital to the Town's rural character.

- Village Zoning for Town Center: The Town should enact village-style zoning for the Town Center, including detailed design standards for new development. Responsible Municipal Entities: The Planning Board in conjunction with the Board of Selectmen. Timing: Year 1.
- Implement Town's Historic Preservation Plan. Review the 1998 Historic Preservation Plan and determine which projects are appropriate to pursue as applicable. Coordinate the implementation with appropriate boards, commissions and municipal departments. Responsible Municipal Entity: Historic Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Prepare Protection Plan for Westminster Village Academy Hill Historic District. Responsible Municipal Entity: Historic Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Investigate New Strategies to Preserve the Scenic Qualities of Westminster's Rural Roads: Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, DPW Commissioners, Tree Warden, Historical Society and Planning Board. Timing: Years 1-2.
- Preserve Historically and Architecturally Significant Buildings. Identify and preserve culturally significant buildings and sites through public education and participation, as well as investigate the effectiveness of adopting a Demolition Delay Bylaw. Responsible Municipal Entity: Historic Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Improve and Expand the Town's Farmer's Market: Expand the number of events that take place during the market's hours of operation; allow a sign in the new traffic island near the Cracker Factory that would promote the farmer's market during its time of operation; and create handicapped parking spaces at the

common where the market is held. Responsible Municipal Entities: Agricultural Commission, Board of Selectmen, and Department of Public Works. Timing: Years 1-7.

**Goal Three:** Provide a broad range of recreation opportunities for all age groups and abilities.

- Create a Crocker Pond Resource Management and Protection Plan. Responsible Municipal Entities: Crocker Pond Recreation Committee and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Provide Recreation Opportunities. Continue to provide recreation opportunities for all age groups keeping pace with increases in population. Responsible Municipal Entity: Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Secure Funding for Recreation. Continue to lobby for adequate budget to support existing programs. Responsible Municipal Entity: Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Find Land in Town Center for Children's Playground. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Years 1-2.
- Look for Land for New Recreation Fields. Continue to evaluate Town-owned properties (particularly those taken by tax title) as well as privately-owned parcels that would be suitable for recreational fields based on needs analysis. Responsible Municipal Entity: Planning Department, and Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Create Bike/Pedestrian Access to New Wachusett Station. Create bike trails and pedestrian links leading to and from the new Wachusett Station being built on the Fitchburg side of the Westminster/Fitchburg boundary line. Such trails could link the new train station with our local amenities such as the Midstate Trail, Leominster State Forest, Mount Wachusett and our Town Center. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Board of Selectmen and Planning Board. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Create a Sidewalk Master Plan. Develop a network of sidewalks in the Town center and densely populated neighborhoods that will contribute to recreation opportunities for the elderly and enhance pedestrian circulation. Responsible Municipal Entity: Board of Selectmen and Commission of Public Works. Timing: Year 3.

- Make Full Use of New Community Center for Senior Recreation Programs. Responsible Municipal Entity: the Council on Aging and Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Develop a multi-purpose field complex at Hager Park or other suitable Town-owned site. Responsible Municipal Entities: Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission, Hager Park Commission, and Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Construct Connection Trail for Hager Park. Construct trail in Hager Park connecting the “Perimeter Path” with “Lowlands Lane,” to provide better access to this section of the park. Responsible Municipal Entity: Hager Park Commission. Timing: Years 3-5.
- Create Trails in Smith Reservoir Land. Develop Trails in the Smith Reservoir land managed by the Hager Park Commission, located on both sides of Route 140, south of the Hager Park land. Responsible Municipal Entity: Hager Park Commission. Timing: Years 3-7.
- Restore the Hayfield at the Rambler Area. Responsible Municipal Entity: Hager Park Commission. Timing: Years 1-2.
- Continue Maintenance of Shelter at Muddy Pond. Responsible Municipal Entity: Conservation Commission. Timing: Year 2.
- Access to Waterbodies. Work with the City of Fitchburg to allow public access of waterbodies (Meetinghouse Pond, Mare Meadow Pond and Wachusett Reservoir) for passive recreation such as kayaking, canoeing and fishing. Responsible Municipal Entities: Parks and Recreation Commission, Open Space Committee, and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Develop Trails on Conservation Lands. Develop bicycling/hiking/equestrian trails on those conservation lands that are appropriate for such uses. Responsible Municipal Entities: Conservation Commission and local biking/hiking/equestrian groups. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Develop Camping/Picnic Sites on Conservation Lands. Develop camping and picnic sites on those conservation lands that are appropriate for such uses. Responsible Municipal Entity: Conservation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.

- Create New Point of Access for Crocker Pond Trails. Investigate the Town's options for regaining access to the Crocker Pond trail network via the Old Depot Road/TRW Driveway. Responsible Municipal Entity: Crocker Pond Recreation Committee. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Investigate the Town's Options for Constructing an Indoor Multi-Use Sports Complex. This idea would have a professional recreation consultant work with the Parks and Recreation Commission to prepare estimates for the cost of an indoor recreation facility and the potential revenue that such a facility could generate for the Town. Building amenities currently under consideration include: basketball courts, indoor athletic fields for soccer, lacrosse, football and field hockey, weight room, batting cages and shower facilities. Responsible Municipal Entity: Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Snow-Mobile Trails. Investigate opportunities to create a trail network for snow-mobiles that could also be used for more passive recreation uses such as horseback riding and cross-country skiing. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee working with private recreation groups (snow-mobile clubs, equestrian clubs, and cross-country ski clubs). Timing: Years 1-7.

**Goal Four:** Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.

- Investigate Natural Resource Protection Zoning. Investigate adopting Natural Resource Protection Zoning (NRPZ) as a successor to the Town's cluster housing bylaw as a means of allowing for new residential development while preserving key natural resources. Responsible municipal entity: Planning Board. Timing: Years 1-2.
- Identify Land in Need of Protection. Using the criteria outlined in Section 5 of this plan, identify and make recommendations for purchase of key land parcels to be protected as open space. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Agricultural Commission, and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Funding for Open Space Acquisitions. Increase the annual Town Meeting contribution to the Conservation Commission's open space acquisition fund. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Advisory Board and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Year 2.
- Create a Town-wide Greenway. Work to create a town-wide greenway that protects key wetlands, streams and rivers. Responsible Municipal Entities: Conservation Commission, Open Space Committee and Planning Board. Timing: Years 1-7.

- Inventory Vernal Pools. The Town's list of State-certified vernal pools dates back to 2003 and needs to be updated. There are numerous potential vernal pools throughout the Town that would receive State-certification if only they were properly documented. Responsible municipal entity: Conservation Commission. Timing: Years 1-2.
- Establish a Local Farming Trust Fund. Such an account could be used for: helping local farmers prepare applications to the State Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program; support the "Growing Great" Scholarship that is currently administered by the Friends of Westminster's Farmers and Gardeners organization; support the establishment of an incubator farm for new farmers to refine their skills and develop a market for their products; and support the establishment of farmer cooperatives. Responsible Municipal Entity: Agricultural Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Strengthen Midstate Trail. Acquire Conservation Restrictions, easements or outright purchase of land along the Midstate Trail. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, and Planning Board in conjunction with the Midstate Trail Committee and North County Land Trust. Timing: Years 1-7.

**Goal Five:** Increase public awareness of open space and recreation resources.

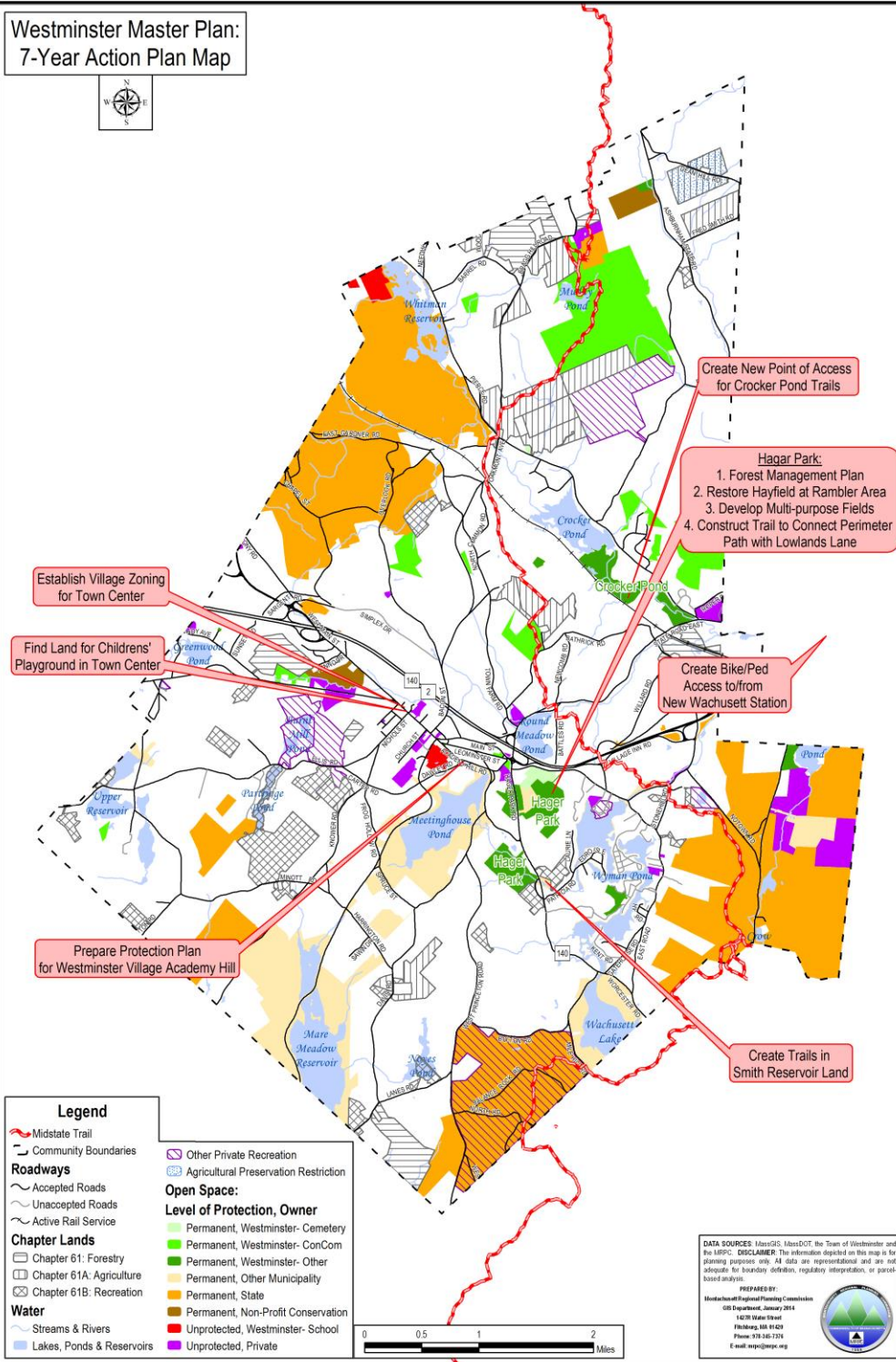
- Prepare an Open Space and Recreation Brochure. Design and print a brochure on Westminster's numerous open spaces, trail networks and recreation opportunities. Put information on Town of Westminster website. Responsible Municipal Entity: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, and Parks and Recreation Commission. Timing: Year 2.
- Continue to Support the Conservation Agent Position. Responsible Municipal Entities: Conservation Commission, Advisory Committee and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Protect Cold Water Streams and Fisheries. Work with Mass Wildlife to identify, inventory and protect the Town's cold water resource streams and fisheries. Responsible Municipal Entity: Conservation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Adopt Low Impact Development Regulations. Implement the Town's Low Impact Development (LID) Bylaw by adopting a set of LID regulations. Responsible Municipal Entity: Planning Board. Timing: Year 2.
- Update the Wetlands Bylaw as Needed. Responsible Municipal Entity: Conservation Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.

- Agricultural-Related Education and Outreach. There are a number of education initiatives that the Town's Agricultural Commission could pursue to promote local farmers and local food sources, such as: expanding the Backyard Growing training series; sponsor a speaker series on the benefits of local food sources; work with local schools and support school gardens; support local 4H programs; work with regional land trusts to preserve lands of agricultural significance; and support more activities and events at the summer farmer's market. Responsible Municipal Entity: Agricultural Commission. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Signage. Develop a Town-wide signage program for key historic sites, cultural resources, recreation resources, open space resources, tourist destinations (including food and lodging), and municipal buildings. Responsible Municipal Entities: Economic Development Committee, Parks and Recreation Commission, Conservation Commission, Historic Commission, Public Works Commission, Agricultural Commission and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Years 1-4.

**Goal Six:** Increase communication and coordination among town boards and with town residents.

- Inter-Municipal Coordination. Implement quarterly meetings where liaisons from those municipal entities with open space responsibilities meet to discuss community issues. Responsible Municipal Entities: this effort should be organized by the Open Space Committee with representatives from the Conservation Commission, Parks and Recreation Committee, Historical Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee, Hager Park Committee, Agricultural Commission, Planning Board and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Educate Landowners on Conservation Options. Continue to distribute information about Chapter 61 programs and other land protection options to landowners of 10 acres or more. Contact landowners with environmentally sensitive land or recreationally significant parcels. Put land protection information on the Town of Westminster website. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee working in conjunction with the North County Land Trust. Timing: Years 1-7.
- Promote Open Space Resource Education. Work with schools, assorted civic groups and citizens to foster open space education and appreciation. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Agricultural Commission, and Planning Board working in conjunction with the North County Land Trust. Timing: Years 1-7.

- Encourage Volunteerism. Recruit volunteers to help with environmental education as well as developing and maintaining community open space and recreation resources. Responsible Municipal Entities: Open Space Committee, Conservation Commission, Hager Park Commission, Crocker Pond Recreation Committee, Parks and Recreation Commission, and Board of Selectmen. Timing: Years 1-7.





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## SECTION 10 - REFERENCES

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The following sources were used in the preparation of this Plan:

- Town of Westminister Master Plan – 2000
- Town of Westminister Master Plan – 2014 (in progress)
- Town of Westminister Community Development Plan – 2004
- Previous Westminister Open Space & Recreation Plans (last iteration: 2007)
- Westminister Planned Production Affordable Housing Plan – 2012
- Westminister Economic Development Strategy – 1995
- Comprehensive Wastewater Management Plan CWMP - 2007
- Montachusett Region Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (MRCEDS) – 2009
- Westminister Solid Waste Management Plan – 2001
- 1995 – 2020 Vision for the Nashua River Watershed – 1995
- Greater Gardner Sustainable Growth Management Plan – 1995
- Montachusett Regional Strategic Framework Plan – 2011
- MRPC Buildout Analysis for Westminister – 2011
- Final Report of the Economic Development Study Committee: Westminister's Future Economic Development Opportunities – 2007
- Nashua River Watershed Five Year Action Plan 2003-2007
- DEP TMDL Report for the Nashua River Watershed – 2007
- DEP TMDL Report for the Chicopee River Watershed – 2006
- DEP TMDL Report for the Millers River Watershed – 2003
- 2012 DEP Water Quality Assessment Report for Massachusetts
- Town of Westminister Historic Preservation Plan of 1998
- Freedom's Way Heritage Association: Westminister Reconnaissance Report - 2006
- Massachusetts Wildlife Magazine, #4 - 2013

Information was also provided by such local sources as:

- Westminister Office of the Assessor
- Westminister Department of Public Works
- Westminister Conservation Commission
- Hager Park Commission
- Westminister Agricultural Commission
- Westminister Town Clerk
- Crocker Pond Recreation Area Committee

- Westminster Parks and Recreation Commission
- Westminster Planning Board
- Westminster Board of Health
- Westminster Historic Commission

Various State of Massachusetts departmental websites: DEP, DCR, Department of Fish & Game – Division of Fisheries & Wildlife, Agricultural Resources, EOEEA, etc., Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, Bio-Map, Living Waters, Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, and others.

Various non-profit websites: The Nature Conservancy, American Farmland Trust, North County Land Trust, Mount Grace Land Trust, and MRPC.

All maps (with the exception of the Farms and Agricultural Soils map which was prepared by the North County Land Trust) and acreage calculations were performed by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC) 2012, 2013 and 2014.