

Open Space Committee – 2004 Annual Report

As recommended by the updated Master Plan, selectmen appointed an Open Space Committee that began meeting in May. It is an advisory committee that reports to the Selectmen, with the charge of implementing the Open Space Plan as presented in the Master Plan.

The Master Plan endorses the “village” model of town planning whereby future development centers on existing developed areas or “villages,” and the outlying areas remain rural, assisted by permanently protected open space.

Committee members set about educating themselves about land conservation including current protected lands in town, what other town Open Space Committees are doing, and the many techniques of natural resource protection. There is a lot to learn, and guest presenters helped this process.

Most conservation land in Peterborough is “conservation easement land,” privately owned but with specified development restrictions placed by the landowner that are legally binding as the land passes on to future owners. Peterborough has benefited greatly by landowners who chose to place conservation easements on their land. By “donating” these development rights, landowners are entitled to income tax deductions equal to the market value of the rights surrendered.

Late in the year, the committee began ranking properties in town for their conservation values. Ranking criteria include water resources (wetland, shoreland, aquifer), farm and forestry resources, size, linkage with existing conservation land, trails potential and so on, consistent with priorities endorsed by respondents to an Open Space Questionnaire.

The committee produced a “Land Conservation in Peterborough” brochure that was inserted in the town’s newsletter mailing in December. The brochure gives some history of land conservation in town, reasons why the resulting natural resource protection is important, and states the open space goals of the Master Plan.

The Committee is guided by a story that unfolded some years ago when a landowner approached the town’s Office of Community Development (OCD), passing on word that he planned to sell his land (120 acres) in the next few years. It was land with high natural resource value, and its owner gave the town the chance to evaluate how the land fit in with wise town planning. OCD recommended its purchase to Town Meeting – at a below-appraisal cost agreed to by the landowner. Voters overwhelmingly approved the purchase.

Wise town planning determines where future development should go; and where it should not. When outlying land of the highest natural resource value changes hands in Peterborough, the Committee is working to see that the needs of both the landowner and conservation can be met.

The brochure states that “Future land protection will continue to be primarily through the voluntary actions of Peterborough landowners.” However, “When land of the highest conservation value can only be secured through town funding, the OSC will advocate for that funding” – along with funding assistance from individuals and grants.

The Committee and its members are always available to discuss natural resource protection.

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