

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

Open space—the sum of public recreation and conservation lands such as Vaughan Field, Jamies Pond, “The Res” (a.k.a. City Recreation Area) and privately owned woods and fields—is one of Hallowell’s most precious resources.

The natural and cultural assets of this city are amazing and highly cherished: a tidal river, the vibrant and pedestrian-scale historic downtown, towering pines, beech forests, rolling grasslands, a cold water stream, and historic quarries. Few other communities in Maine have such a rich interplay of natural and built environments where:

- ❖ Deer still find winter shelter on forested ridgelines;
- ❖ One may see a bald eagle soar above a sweeping river;
- ❖ People bike or walk on a 6-mile rail riverfront trail or explore or hunt in the woods of Jamies Pond Wildlife Management Area;
- ❖ The landscape unfolds in a sequence of visual contrasts: open and enclosed, rural and developed, big river and small pond or brook; AND
- ❖ Many woods and fields have been held for generations by the same families, who have generously allowed the public access and maintained environmental values which benefit us all.

**This plan provides a blueprint for protecting, conserving, and enhancing natural and cultural open space values city-wide—for making sure Hallowell continues to be a great place to live and do business.**

### **Planning Process**

The Open Space Plan Working Group of the Hallowell Conservation Commission developed this draft Open Space Plan at the direction of the Hallowell City Council with the help of H. Dominie Consulting and the input of many community members. Over a year and a half, the group reached out broadly to citizens, local boards, committees and organizations, local officials, and large landowners to establish plan foundations upon sound information and commonly held concerns, ideas, hopes, and priorities. As the public reviews this draft, the group will also request comments from neighboring communities and relevant state agencies. Chapter 1 and several appendices record the results of public meetings, a public opinion survey, and other efforts.

Throughout the process, the working group heard many positive things about activities currently underway or in the works by others in the community to protect and enhance open space values that citizens hold dear. For example:

- Planning Board interim policies prohibit the use of invasive landscaping species and require shielded lighting to retain a star-filled dark night sky;
- The Waterfront Advisory Committee is planning to involve the public in development of the plan for the next phase of Waterfront Park improvements;
- The Tree Board is planning to seek guidance from the public in refining and implementing the proposed City Forest Management Plan and the Tree Board has already begun its Inventory of Urban Trees; and
- The Mayor and Council plan to involve the community in envisioning the future of the Vaughan Field and the Stevens School/Hallowell Annex property.

This plan builds upon, supports, and integrates into a single blueprint the strategies of those in the city who are involved in protecting and conserving open space resources, managing properties available for public access, and providing opportunities for outdoor recreation. It also provides a baseline account of the city's natural and cultural resources and existing facilities related to open space and public access, so that all may rely upon the same factual information.

## **Coordination with Comprehensive Plan and Ordinance Updates**

The need for this plan is urgent – because development is intensifying – and this plan identifies key values, resources, and places which need multi-pronged protection through conservation, land use policy, and land use regulation initiatives. The community has recognized that our old “Comp Plan” and existing ordinances do not give Hallowell the tools needed to deal with growth and change – bit by bit important values are being degraded. We need better information and new approaches for the challenge of balancing development with the natural world and community character we cherish.

This open space plan will provide “one third of the equation” needed to chart a more creative and rational strategy for conserving what is most special about the city's character and environment while accommodating new development and attaining other goals. The updated comprehensive plan and ordinance processes, initiated by the City Council this summer, will provide the other two thirds. The Open Space Working Group, Comprehensive Plan Committee and Ordinance Revision Committees are working closely together to ensure that all are “pulling in the same direction.”

## **How the Plan is Organized**

### **Volume I**

**Chapter 1: Introduction.** describes the various ways that the Working Group engaged the public and other boards and officials in the process. This chapter also discusses the importance and benefits of open space and the need for the plan at this point in time.

**Chapter 2: What We Already Have** contains background information that will give everyone the same foundation of fact upon which the plan has been built. It describes

current open space assets and issues, existing public or dedicated open spaces, and highlights of the public opinion survey results. This section serves as a reference for decision makers and those who wish to learn more about the open space resources, values and opportunities in the city.

**Chapter 3: What We Plan to Do** contains the policy and action framework for moving ahead. It starts with a “Vision” detailing the open space values which citizens want Hallowell to still possess in years to come and the kind of relationship they hope they and their grandchildren will still have with the natural environment. It then identifies guiding principles and action steps for working toward realization of the elements of this shared vision.

**Chapter 4: How We Move Forward** outlines the actions which are of highest priority and stipulates the responsible entity and timeframes for carrying out each.

## **Volume II**

**Appendices** record the proceedings of several public meetings and the results of the public survey. They also contain the maps referenced in the plan, including natural features, present zoning, wildlife corridors, proposed resource protection and priority open space.

## **Plan Vision**

Hallowell citizens and City boards and committees have expressed strong agreement on the kind of open space values and recreational opportunities they want the City to safeguard and enhance. The meaning behind the broad brush statements below which articulate this common vision is further detailed in Chapter 3.

Basically citizens desire that:

**Generations from now, Hallowell will still be a place where people desire to live, raise a family, work, and own businesses because the quality and distribution of open space strongly sustains natural functions and community identity and supports outdoor recreation and enjoyment of nature, even in the core of the city.**

They believe that this common vision will best be achieved by:

- 1. Planning for the long term and coordinating action among those responsible within City government for planning for open space, updating the comprehensive plan and land use ordinances, and making development decisions; and**
- 2. Partnering with willing landowners, as most of the open space remaining is in private hands. It is vital to ensure that those who use private lands for**

**outdoor enjoyment understand and honor the differences between public and private lands, and respect the property and requirements of both.**

Four overarching goals or themes give more “flesh” to the specifics of Hallowell’s open space vision. They are presented in order of the depth of concern people expressed throughout the planning process. In short, in the Hallowell of tomorrow:

- 1. The natural environment will be strongly expressed and well protected;**
- 2. The city’s identity will continue to be uniquely defined by its historic, visual, and other special values;**
- 3. People will be able to easily walk or bike to every-day destinations where they shop, work, go to school, or access a recreation area; and**
- 4. Children and adults alike will have access to a diversity of well-maintained and safe open spaces and facilities for outdoor play, natural wonder, fitness, and mental well-being.**

## **Plan Actions and Priorities**

Chapter 3 identifies the major issues, guiding principles or policies, and actions needed to address each of the four major goals listed above. Chapter 4 summarizes all of those actions in one chart, Table 4, to allow the reader - at a glance - to understand priorities among actions and who is proposed to have responsibility for each action.

As the reader will see, there are sixty nine (69) actions listed in these tables. That’s a lot to do and there is likely not enough time or money for volunteers and staff to cover them all in the next five years. That’s why priorities are so critical. The most crucial or time-dependent actions are slated to receive highest priority action. Other actions will be undertaken as the appropriate lead has the resources to accomplish them; implementation of some may have to wait until after this plan is updated in five years.

## **Highest Priority Actions**

Based upon its findings, the Conservation Commission has identified several actions for high priority attention which we believe will both conserve the city’s natural environment and unique identity and ultimately enhance local businesses and the economy.

**Fundamentals:** At the top of the list are those actions related to water quality, rural character, and habitat integrity, all fundamental to the city’s unique identity and quality of life. Some ordinances will need to change before the Comprehensive Plan update is finalized. If these actions are not undertaken before much more development occurs, the City will be left with few options, especially affordable ones, for reversing the almost certain degradation that will occur. They include:

1. Strengthening ordinances and coordinating voluntary efforts to protect water quality, wetlands, and stream buffers (Actions 1-3);
2. Supporting zoning, development patterns, ordinances and incentives that conserve rural character and environmental quality, and reduce habitat fragmentation (see Action 4: a crucial first step will be holding seminars during the Winter of 2008 to learn about creative development options and financial incentives that support open space) (see also Actions 5-8, 10, 19);
3. **As quickly as possible**, working with willing landowners, Kennebec Land Trust, state agencies, neighboring communities and others to explore the conservation of the:
  - a. undeveloped buffer with Augusta to the east of I-95 and north of Winthrop Street, along the common boundary, including the undeveloped land at the Stevens School (see Actions 10, 15, 16); and
  - b. unfragmented habitat adjoining and connecting The Res and Jamies Pond (Actions 9 and 24); and
4. Creating a City fund to allow rapid action when opportunities arise for long term protection, acquisition, and land management. This fund would be gradually capitalized by tapping such sources as development impact fees, The Res (City Forest) timber sales (if any), donations and other options to allow rapid action when opportunities arise (Action 8).

**Long Term Integrated Improvements to Facilities.** Citizens and groups are also excited about the opportunities that exist for Hallowell to become an even better place to walk, bike, or otherwise enjoy the out of doors, and avoid using fossil fuels to get around town. Currently, responsibility and coordinating mechanisms are unclear for the development, management, and coordination of biking and pedestrian pathways and off-road trails to create an integrated system. Likewise, the City has no accepted implementation plan for making The Res function at its full potential as one of the City's finest gems. For these reasons, the following measures are also deemed among the highest priorities on Table 4:

1. Establishing, by Conservation Commission action, a Trails Subcommittee with ongoing responsibility for hiking trails and other "off-road" trails (Action 12);
2. Establishing, by City Council action, a Bike/Ped Committee with ongoing responsibility for ensuring safe sidewalks, walking routes and bike paths throughout town with a special focus on routes to school (Action 11);
3. Charging both of the above groups with coordinating the development of a city-wide integrated system of trails, sidewalks, pathways, and bike lanes (Action 13);
4. Reactivating the Recreation Committee to oversee formal recreation facilities at The Res and Vaughan Field (Action 14);

5. Charging the Conservation Commission, Tree Board, Recreation Committee and others to integrate and improve existing plans for The Res (our largest municipally-owned open space) into a realistic implementation strategy and annual work plan (Action 22, 23);
6. Exploring the possibility of transfer of or access to the former Mobil property on the riverfront and integrating it with the Rail Trail and Waterfront Park to provide access to this beautiful stretch of the river (Action 17); and
7. Undertaking the steps necessary to achieve long term protection and planning for Vaughan Field (Actions 18-21)

## **Conclusion**

There is much to be gained and little to be lost from taking these and other steps to plan open space and develop the community mindfully to maintain Hallowell's quality of life and economic vibrancy as it grows and changes.

**Open Space, both publicly- and privately-owned, is an irreplaceable resource which is critical for:**

- Safeguarding the natural environment and environmental functions;
- Promoting health and fitness;
- Enhancing psychological well-being;
- Limiting need for services / public expenditures;
- Sustaining community character and prosperity; and
- Maintaining and enhancing business and community diversity.

Hallowell's challenge in safeguarding these values is to find ways to achieve balance and foresight in a manner which benefits all concerned—from local wildlife and backyard gardeners—to large landowners who hope to manage their resources wisely and benefit from their value—and children who need green space for imaginative play, maintaining a healthy weight, and finding nurture in the great outdoors.