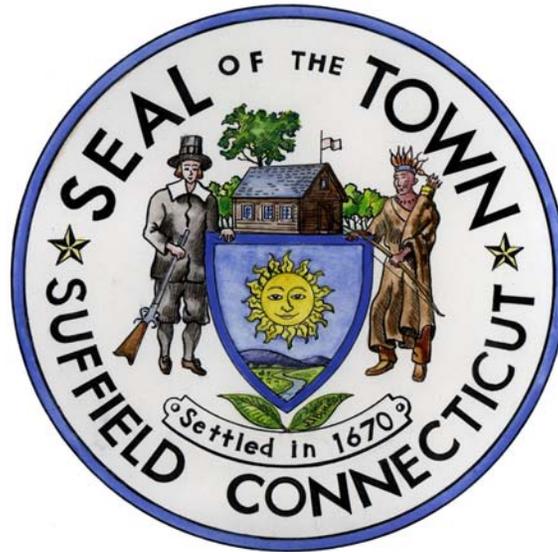


Suffield Open Space Plan

Supplement to the Plan of Conservation and Development



Open Space Sub-Committee & Conservation Commission

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Effective – June 7, 2012

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I. Overview

This Open Space Plan was developed by the Open Space Sub-Committee and Conservation Commission for the purpose of providing town officials, boards and commissions, and the residents of Suffield with a sound basis for land use decisions regarding open space. As pointed out in the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD), open space ranked highest in importance among twelve different planning issues by attendees of a public workshop.

Currently in the Town of Suffield, there are over 3,400 acres of protected or managed open space. This accounts for approximately thirteen percent of Suffield's land area. The 1999 Open Space Plan for the town pointed out that open space "defines our character as a rural New England town." With all of the residential development the town has seen over the last decade, Suffield has managed to keep the rural character that so many residents enjoy.

There was considerable discussion regarding the primary goal associated with open space preservation in Suffield during the preparation of this plan. During these discussions, there was great concern that funding for the open space fund would cease when the goal of preserving 55 percent of residentially zoned land is realized. Simply increasing the percentage of land to be preserved was considered but was not implemented because this plan as well as the POCD recognizes that growth is necessary. Therefore, it was decided to keep the previous goal with one change to the language as follows; "*Reserve and conserve enough land so that, forever after, a minimum of 55 percent of the residentially zoned land in Town will be permanently protected open space.*" As a result, there are 768 acres of residentially zoned land that should be preserved to meet the 55 percent goal. This goal has been our benchmark for over a decade and when it is achieved, the revised goal ensures that the Town will still have a plan to justify continual requests for funding the open space account through the budget process.

The primary purpose of this plan is to identify areas of focus that merit various levels of long-term protection to become a part of a more meaningful system of open spaces. The plan will point out some of the benefits of open space preservation, list goals and objectives, and possible methods to achieve these objectives. Further, the subdivision open space dedication policies will be examined to determine if changes are appropriate.

II. Defining Open Space

Connecticut General Statutes (CGS) Section 12-107b(3) and the 1999 Open Space Plan define open space as *The term "open space land" means any area of land, including forest land, land designated as wetland under section 22a-30 and not excluding farm land, the preservation or restriction of the use of which would (A) maintain and enhance the conservation of natural or scenic resources, (B) protect natural streams or water supply, (C) promote conservation of soils, wetlands, beaches or tidal marshes, (D) enhance the value to the public of abutting or neighboring parks, forests, wildlife preserves, nature reservations or sanctuaries or other open spaces, (E) enhance public recreation opportunities, (F) preserve historic sites, or (G) promote orderly urban or suburban development;*

There are several different kinds of open space in Suffield as illustrated by the following chart;

Kinds of Open Space in Suffield		
Function	Examples	Benefits
Recreation	Playgrounds, ball fields, Sportsman Association, Sunrise Park, Metacomet Trail, Farmington Valley Bikeway, WL Canal Trail, Stony Brook Park	Allows people to enjoy themselves outdoors
Community Character	Scenic roads, Manitook Mountain, West Suffield Mountain, historic sites (Hilltop Farm), scenic vistas	Make the town scenic and historic
Natural Resource Management	Agricultural and forestry lands	Part of town's economy, provides habitat for plants and animals, corridors for animal movement
Natural Resource Protection	Connecticut River corridor and watershed, Farmington River watershed, brooks, streams and other waterbodies	Protects natural resources, habitat, wildlife corridors, groundwater and public water supplies
Public Health and Safety	Wetlands, floodplains, high water table, steep slopes, ridgetops, shallow depth to bedrock	Protect habitat, buffer streams and rivers, gives flood control, protects groundwater

Some of these open space areas are permanently preserved or protected lands such as purchase of development rights or conservation easement encumbered lands. Other protected lands include property owned by the Suffield Land Conservancy, and Homeowner's

Association property or land preserved by regulation such as wetlands and steep slopes. Examples of protected lands include preserved farmland or other lands protected by a conservation easement, town parks and forests.

Other open space in Suffield can be considered managed open space in that they are maintained as open space but not protected from future development. Examples of managed open space are golf courses or privately held outdoor recreation facilities, land enrolled in Public Act 490, vacant State land, public utility land, and Town owned open space. With managed open space, there is always the possibility that the property may be developed in the future.

III. Why Protect Open Space & Preserve Farmland

There are several reasons why Suffield should protect open space. These can range from economic to quality of life reasons. Open space can protect natural resources, scenic vistas, provide for recreational opportunities, and protect the rural character that makes Suffield the beautiful community that it is. More specifically, preserving open space;

- Eliminates costs of new government services such as schools, roads, and police and fire protection – the major burdens on local government budgets – and can help stabilize property tax rates.
- Protecting open space protects valuable natural resources including water, air, wildlife, plant life, wetlands, and biodiversity.
- Protecting open space can reduce the costs of government borrowing and improve municipal bond ratings. These ratings reflect the fact that poorly managed growth can make a community expensive to administer and threaten its fiscal health.
- Protecting open space can provide long-term opportunities for residents to use land for recreational and aesthetic purposes – benefits that add greatly to a community’s quality of life.
- Protecting open space also protects the health and safety of the public by protecting areas with steep slopes, areas prone to flooding, and areas with shallow depth to bedrock from development.
- Protecting farmland protects the town’s heritage, prime and important farmland soils, and there are no maintenance costs for the town because the land is worked by the owner or farmer.

IV. Identifying Areas of Focus

The location of open space is an important factor when considering areas of focus. Large contiguous tracts of open space are preferred but we cannot dismiss smaller isolated pieces of land that may have some preservation value. Therefore it is very important that we keep an open mind because there will always be an exception to the rule. There are several variables that enter into open space parcel selection. This open space plan identifies five areas of focus in Suffield;

1. **Connecticut and Farmington River Watersheds, Wetlands and Ridgelines focus area.**

Resource Values: These are areas that protect public health and safety through wetlands protection, watershed protection, groundwater protection, and flood protection. Steep slopes and areas with shallow bedrock are included in this category as well as areas that support a variety of plant and animal species.

Map Reference: Biodiversity and Habitat Map, Maps showing wetlands and watercourses.

2. **Recreational Resources focus area.**

Resource Values: Improve the quality of life for all town residents by providing sites for passive and active recreation. Suffield should work to establish a greenway (corridor) system that incorporates existing trails, where possible, to connect parcels of open space. This focus area also includes areas for outdoor active recreation such as parks and playgrounds.

Map Reference: Maps showing water bodies, trail systems, public and private properties with recreational uses and locations where parks or playgrounds may be located, land trust properties.

3. **Agricultural Resources focus areas.**

Resource Values: Prime and important farmland soils; important for the local economy, food production, scenic beauty, and habitat protection.

Map Reference: Prime and important farmland soils map, preserved farms map.

4. **Historic and cultural focus area.**

Resource Values: Cultural resource protection. These sites show us our past and are extremely valuable historical and educational resources. There is a rich cultural and historical record in the land and historic buildings in Suffield.

Map Reference: None – Must be determined on a site by site basis.

5. **Plant or Animal Habitat focus areas.**

Resource Values: These areas support rare, unique, or endangered plants and animals. An example of a resource in this category would be the Black Spruce Bog located south of Mountain Road just before entering Massachusetts by the Congamond Lakes. These areas are also natural buffers protecting water quality in rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, and groundwater, support inland fisheries, and provide greenbelt corridors for wildlife to move safely over the landscape. These areas have been identified by the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's (DEEP) Natural Diversity Data Base (NDDB) and information gathered from the biodiversity study done by the Farmington River Watershed Association.

Map Reference: (See Map 2, Page 17 of POCD) Biodiversity map showing vernal pools, generalized locations of significant natural communities and habitats. Map showing wetlands and watercourses (See Area of Focus 1 map).

This open space plan identifies important components of our rural environment and describes these as focus areas. The open space plan is an aid to the future implementation of the Suffield Plan of Conservation and Development. It describes a system of open spaces that help determine where growth and development should occur, and guides public acquisition of open space toward areas of high open space resource values.

V. Subdivision Open Space Dedications

The Flexible Residential Development (FRD) regulations stipulate that any proposed subdivision with 5 or more lots on 10 or more acres is required to dedicate at least 50 percent of the land to be subdivided as open space. Subdivisions of land less than 10 acres may opt to use the FRD regulations. With this dedication of open space, the developer has the flexibility to decrease frontage, setbacks, and lot area. The purpose of the FRD is to cluster the building lots allowing for more open space. Open space dedications are also reviewed by the Conservation Commission which provides a recommendation to the ZPC regarding acceptability of the proposed open space.

Traditional subdivisions (i.e. less than 10 acres) are required to dedicate at least 20 percent of the land to be subdivided as open space. With traditional subdivisions, the Zoning and Planning Commission (ZPC) can accept a fee-in-lieu of open space if there is not an area of land that would be acceptable for open space purposes. The fee is based upon an appraisal of the raw land and the money received is placed into the Open Space account which is used for other open space purposes.

Often times, the open space requirement for an FRD amounts to less than 10 acres. While there may be value to some of these open spaces depending upon location, current use of the land and so forth, there is often a concern on land use boards and commissions that asks the question, “What do we want to do with smaller parcels of open space when a fee-in-lieu is preferred?”

In order to address this issue, this open space plan recommends that the ZPC consider amending the FRD regulations to allow for a “relief valve” from the open space requirement if a fee-in-lieu or traditional subdivision is preferred.

VI. Open Space Designation for Property Tax Use Value

The Public Act (PA) 490 open space classification provides landowners with an option to protect their undeveloped land. This classification does not permanently protect the property but it is a valuable tool to help reduce the tax burden on open space parcels that do not meet the PA 490 farmland or forest land classification. Also, the PA 490 classification for open space is an option for municipalities to adopt. The farmland and forest land classification are mandatory on all towns statewide. PA 490 is the preferred method for temporary preservation of open space property.

It is recommended that the following land in Suffield be designated as open space:

“Any site or area of undeveloped land indicated as open space on an approved subdivision map. For individual property owners seeking PA 490 classification, open space shall be any site or area of undeveloped land equal to 15 acres or more. Undeveloped land means land without buildings, roads, driveways, or other permanent structures or active mineral extraction activities. When determining the acreage of a parcel of open space, the assessor will not include the minimal spatial requirements, or lot size required by the zone.”

As in the farmland and forestland classification programs, the open space land must remain as open space for a period of ten years. If the use changes within that ten year period, a tax penalty applies.

VII. Open Space Objectives

- Assemble large tracts of contiguous open space for a corridor or greenbelt as opposed to scattered parcels. Link existing open space or connecting nodes of development, trails, wildlife corridors or riparian buffers.
- Protect surface and subsurface water resources to maintain a high level of water quality.
- Maintain natural drainage ways.
- Add to existing committed open space. Includes municipal, state or land trust holdings.
- Protect lands of cultural importance, include archeological and historical sites. (Must be identified)
- Protect the municipality's unique and significant natural features including wetlands, floodplains, prime agricultural soils, scenic vistas, and trap rock ridges.
- Preserve areas that shape community design and character – i.e. buffer strips, landscaped yards, street trees and areas visible from the road, sidewalks and community gateways.
- Combine regulatory and land acquisition measures to achieve open space objectives.
- Encourage growth in areas capable of supporting it while at the same time preserving areas unsuitable for development.

VIII. What Kind of Open Space Do We Want?

Suffield has had the most success in acquiring farmland to meet our open space goal. This plan recommends that farmland remains a priority for preservation. Also, during the public review period for the POCD, there were some comments regarding the lack of playgrounds for children in town. This is most notable on the eastern side of Suffield from Route 75 to the Connecticut River, where a majority of our residents live. Therefore, the recreational facilities map recommends some areas where a playground or park may be located. It is also important that the ownership of open space matches the intended use because it would not make sense for a Homeowner's Association to own open space that may be useful for a community park.

For other open space, the areas of focus mentioned earlier in the plan list the different categories of open space that we should look for. When open space is considered, we should consult this plan to determine if it fits into one of these areas of focus. In many cases, a property may fit into different areas of focus simultaneously. In these circumstances, the Conservation Commission, Open Space Sub-Committee, and Zoning and Planning Commission should consider the best use of the property as open space. For instance, a property may have an area of high natural diversity and should be preserved for that reason or a property may be valuable to continue a trail corridor for recreational purposes. While farmland remains a priority, there are several other types of open space that, if preserved, will enhance the rural residential character that Suffield residents enjoy.

Methods for Permanent Preservation

To achieve the objectives of this plan, the following methods of preservation are suggested with the first point being the preferred course.

- Purchase of development rights in cooperation with State Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Possible alternative methods of preservation/acquisition include the following;

- Conservation Easements that will keep the land as open space.
- Fee simple ownership of land as open space by land trusts or the Town of Suffield.
- Acquisition of properties and/or conservation easements by the Town under the subdivision regulations.

IX. Maintaining what we have

The Conservation Commission (ConsComm) is the Town entity that is responsible for maintaining several properties in town (Approximately 633 acres). Some of the more notable properties include Stony Brook Park, the McKinnon property on Mapleton Avenue, and the Barley Sheef / Roesburg open space parcel adjacent to Farmstead Lane. Currently, the conservation commission receives \$2,000 annually to help in the maintenance of these parcels. Generally, one member of the ConsComm takes charge of seeing that these properties get minimal mowing and in some cases contracts with someone to cut the hay. However, there is no maintenance agreement or schedule that is followed.

This open space plan recommends that management plans be developed for the above mentioned properties to start. Management plans provide a framework within which town officials can develop a measured response to address current and future concerns or needs. In general, these management plans should describe who is responsible for maintenance, what type of maintenance is needed, how often the property should be maintained. The management plans should also be agreed to by the ConsComm, and the Board of Selectmen for town owned open space parcels to provide for better coordination and implementation.

Without management plans, there is a lack of accountability when open space parcels are not maintained. There is no one place someone can look to see who is responsible for maintaining a certain property which has created problems in the past. A real life example is where someone cut the hay on an open space property that wasn't supposed to as someone else had agreed to do it. Much, if not all of these problems can be avoided through better communication and a management plan. Several complaints about the lack of maintenance on open space are related to parcels owned by the Town. However, maintaining open space takes staff or contracted services. Currently, the town lacks the capacity to tackle much of this responsibility with current staffing levels.

These management plans shall contain maintenance requirements to aid in providing guidance to future ConsComm members and town staff. For newly acquired properties, a management plan should be developed and followed to the fullest extent possible. In some cases, there is no need for maintenance on properties that the town is responsible for. Similarly, preserved farmland, in most cases, is well taken care of by the landowners that are working the land. Likewise, there are farmland open space parcels that were acquired out of the subdivision process which the town leases to local farmers. As a result of this ongoing maintenance, a management plan for these properties is unnecessary.

For properties that have management plans, they should be kept in the Zoning and Planning and Conservation Commission offices at a minimum. Therefore, if there are new members of the ConsComm or new staff, there is a plan to maintain the acquired open space properties in a manner consistent with past practices. A comprehensive list of all open space parcels, acreage, use, location, and who is responsible for them is available in the office of the Town Planner.

X. Open Space Goals and Recommendations

Goal 1 – Preserve Town Character

Recommendations

- Preserve farmland
- Protect lands with scenic view sheds, particularly those with public access
- Protect historic and cultural resources
- Protect other areas that define and shape community character

There are no State or Federal laws that require the preservation of town character, making this goal optional. However, following the recommendations of this goal will add to character and the quality of life that residents enjoy so much. It is recommended that Suffield continue preserving farmland to achieve this goal by purchasing the development rights to at least one farm every year.

Ways to accomplish the goal:

- Fund the open space account through the budget process every year.
- Continue to improve communication between all town boards and commissions. Most notably, the Conservation Commission and Zoning and Planning Commission when it comes to subdivision open space.

Goal 2 – Protect Natural Resources and Wildlife Habitats

Recommendations

- Protect streams, ponds, lakes, and associated wetlands
- Protect watersheds and natural drainage ways
- Protect lands or water that provides habitat for state endangered or threatened species of plants or animals (Refer to NDDDB to determine if these areas may exist on the property in question)

Watercourses and wetland soils are protected from development or alteration by State and/or Federal law. The town plays an important role in protecting natural resources and wildlife habitats by guiding development away from sensitive areas. The town should seek to protect these areas in large tracts, if possible. There are grant opportunities offered by the DEEP that provide funding for properties that contain these areas.

Ways to accomplish the goal:

- Create a list of properties that contain natural resources and/or wildlife habitat and create a system to rate and rank these properties.
- Seek funding to aid in permanently preserving these properties.
- Protect these areas from development through the open space requirements of the subdivision regulations.

Goal 3 – Maintain and Enhance Recreational Areas

Recommendations

- Maintain recreational opportunities for residents and visitors
- Protect lands that would be conducive to future active or passive recreation
- Protect lands that are adjacent to existing recreational areas

This goal is optional for the town in that there is no requirement to provide recreational resources. However, if there is an opportunity to obtain a property that would be conducive to recreational uses, the town should acquire it. This is especially true in the eastern portion of town where more of our residents are living. The open space set aside requirement of the subdivision process can be a mechanism to achieve this goal. Town staff and land use commissions play a pivotal role in identifying parcels that may work well for a park or playground when a property is being considered for development.

To help accomplish this goal, there needs to be continued support by the Town for;

- Staffing levels to support maintenance and enhancement of recreational areas
- Capital equipment to support maintenance and enhancement of recreational areas
- Financial commitment to support maintenance and enhancement of recreational areas
- Develop a Capital Expenditure Plan and line item – open space fund specific for recreational areas
- Pursue payments in lieu of open spaces, per Connecticut General Statute: Sec. 8-25b
- Share knowledge and communication with town departments and groups when grants or sponsorship opportunities become available.

Goal 4 – Protect Lands That Provide Connections to Existing Permanently Committed Open Space

Recommendations

- Protect lands that abut or provide connections between properties owned by the state, town, or land conservancy to create greenways/open space corridors that are contiguous
- Protect and enhance existing greenways/open space corridors
- Identify and protect wildlife corridors

Ways to accomplish the goal:

- Identify these areas in Suffield using Geographic Information System (GIS).
- Determine the best way to protect the properties in these areas, i.e. grant resources, outright purchase, donations, or ask owners if they would voluntarily place the land in a conservation easement. Pursue the best option.

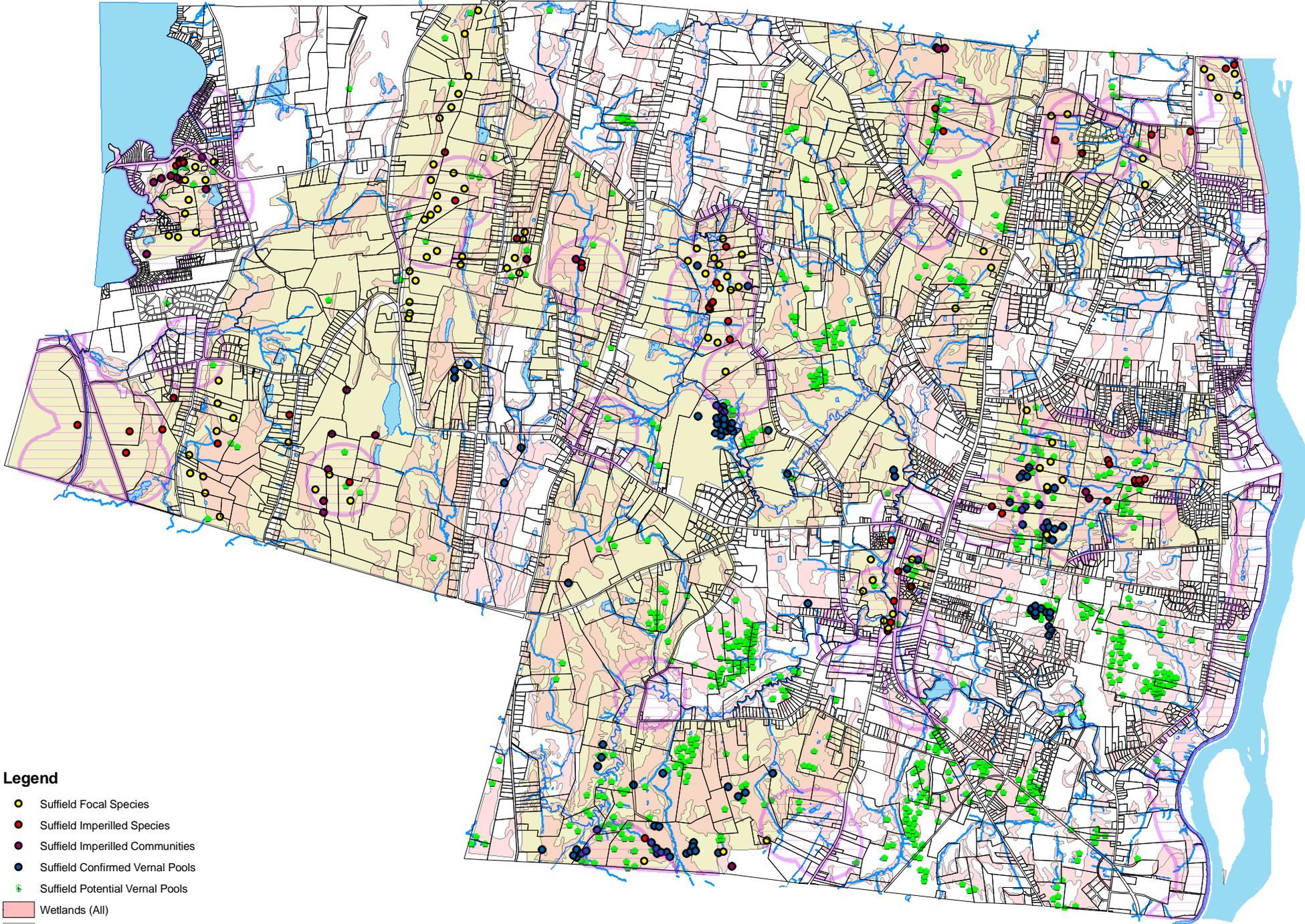
There are several groups that are responsible to make sure these goals are realized. The Conservation Commission, Zoning and Planning Commission, Open Space Subcommittee, Board of Selectmen, and Board of Finance lead the way in terms of responsibility. Coordination and communication amongst the various boards and commissions is of utmost importance to accomplish the goals in this plan. Town staff and our residents are the keys to making sure these groups know what is going on. Residents of Suffield play an important role in making sure this plan gets implemented by communicating with town officials, attending public meetings, and ensuring there is accountability with respect to this plan and its' goals.

XI. Conclusion

Whatever the use of a particular piece of open space might be, the success of Suffield's open space program is dependent upon cooperation of local agencies and the leveraging of state and federal resources. The Conservation Commissions role in recommending open space preservation strategies to the Zoning and Planning Commission and other local agencies is critical to the plans success. Since this plan is a supplement to the 2010 Plan of Conservation and Development, it should be reviewed periodically with the POCD. However, it should be referenced every time open space is being considered for acquisition.

For Suffield, open space provides a sense of place that can be enjoyed by all. Whether used for recreation or protection of important environmental resources, open space is valuable for the town. As mentioned previously, open space ranked highest among planning issues that were most important to the attendees of a public workshop. The objectives in this plan are meant to provide a framework by which our open space decisions should be made. The goals and recommendations provide guidance to land use boards and open space decision makers to create a meaningful system of open spaces. When open space is dedicated and it is to be used for recreational or farming purposes, this plan recommends creating a management plan for the property. The management plans will provide guidelines to those responsible for maintenance thereby ensuring we maintain what we have. This will take the cooperation among various groups so that funding is maintained through the budget process.

Area of Focus 1 - Suffield Natural Resources, Biodiversity, Wetlands

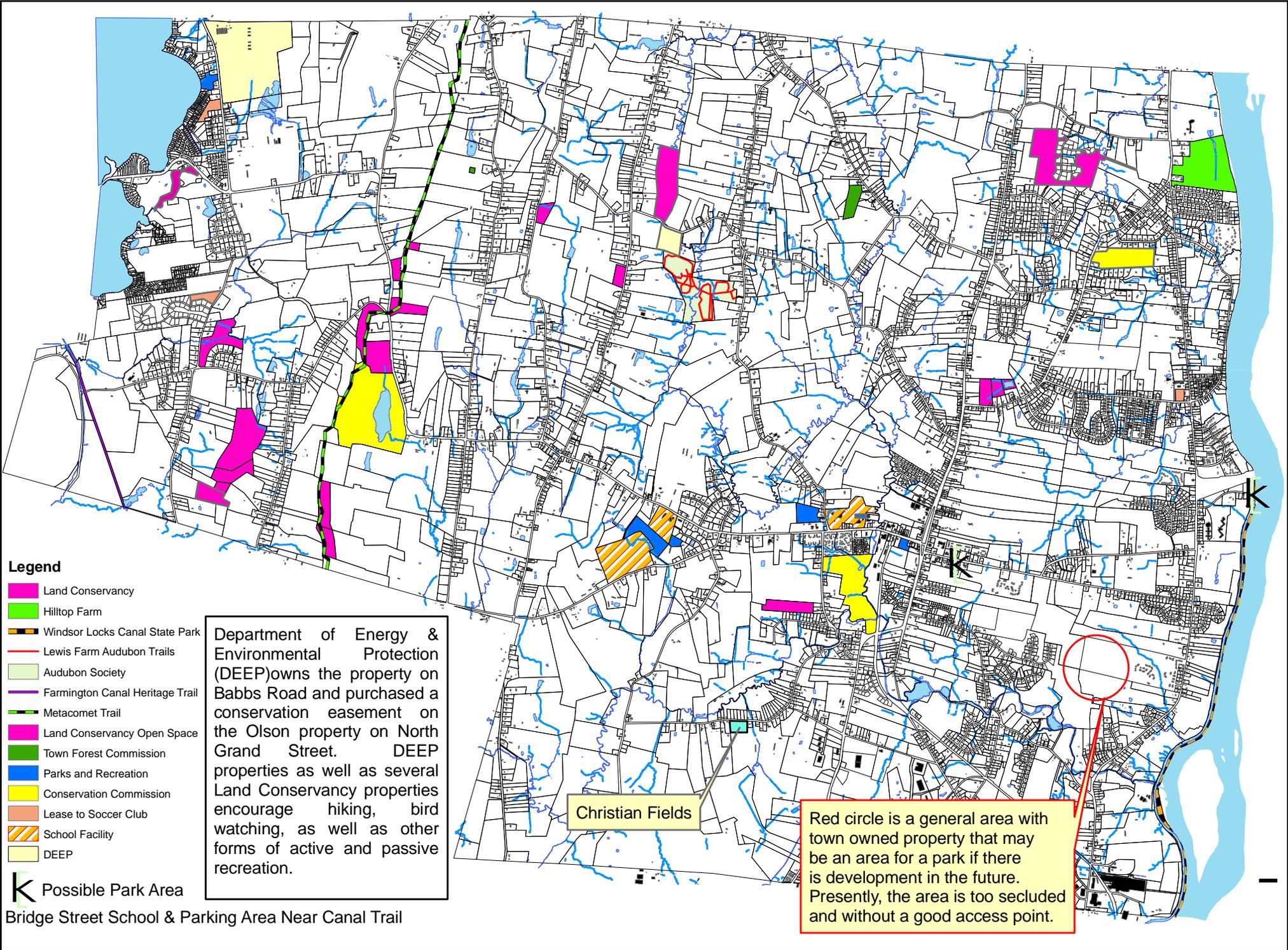


Legend

- Suffield Focal Species
- Suffield Imperilled Species
- Suffield Imperilled Communities
- Suffield Confirmed Vernal Pools
- Suffield Potential Vernal Pools
- Wetlands (All)
- Suffield Primary and Secondary Habitat Areas
- DEP Natural Diversity Area
- Water Bodies

Source - Farmington Valley Biodiversity Project (2004)

Area of Focus 2 - Recreational Facilities



Legend

- Land Conservancy
- Hilltop Farm
- Windsor Locks Canal State Park
- Lewis Farm Audubon Trails
- Audubon Society
- Farmington Canal Heritage Trail
- Metacomet Trail
- Land Conservancy Open Space
- Town Forest Commission
- Parks and Recreation
- Conservation Commission
- Lease to Soccer Club
- School Facility
- DEEP

Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) owns the property on Babbs Road and purchased a conservation easement on the Olson property on North Grand Street. DEEP properties as well as several Land Conservancy properties encourage hiking, bird watching, as well as other forms of active and passive recreation.

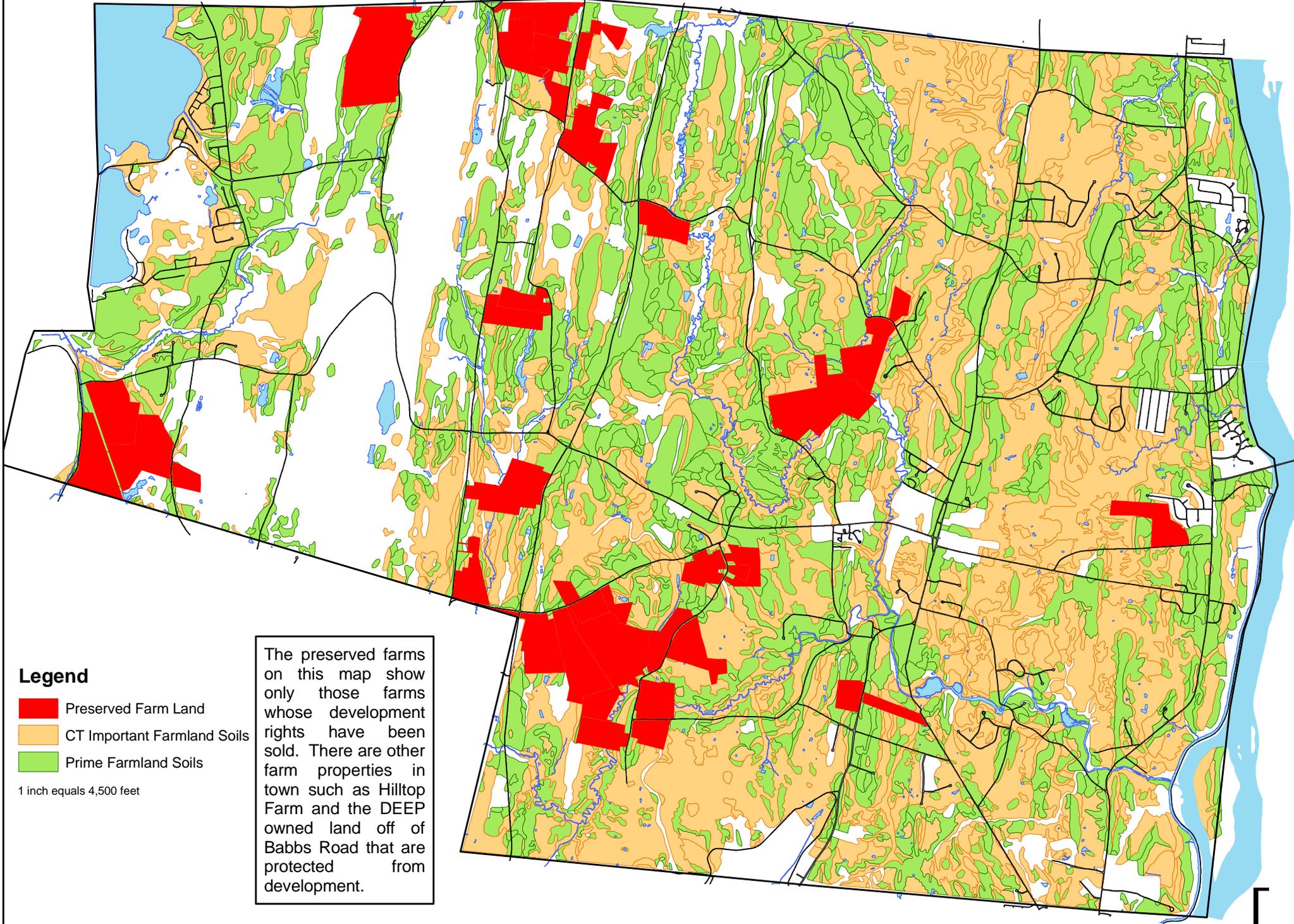
Christian Fields

Red circle is a general area with town owned property that may be an area for a park if there is development in the future. Presently, the area is too secluded and without a good access point.

K Possible Park Area

Bridge Street School & Parking Area Near Canal Trail

Area of Focus 3 - Agricultural



Legend

-  Preserved Farm Land
-  CT Important Farmland Soils
-  Prime Farmland Soils

1 inch equals 4,500 feet

The preserved farms on this map show only those farms whose development rights have been sold. There are other farm properties in town such as Hilltop Farm and the DEEP owned land off of Babbs Road that are protected from development.