

## Introduction



New Paltz is distinguished by its unique and much cherished landscape setting including the Shawangunk Mountains and the expansive Wallkill River Valley and flats. The New Paltz community (the collective Town and Village) is also graced with equally important wetlands, woodlands, and farms, as well as valued scenic and historic landscapes. This plan provides a community-based vision and course of action for preserving these significant landscape assets in the midst of continuing growth. It sets milestones for open space protection and provides a framework for achieving open space goals in both the short-and long-term using a model partnership approach among the community, landowners, and the Town and Village of New Paltz.

There has been diverse interest in preserving the landscapes and open spaces of New Paltz, both in the past and present. The preservation and stewardship of significant acreage of the Shawangunk Ridge and the creation of the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail are just two of the community's many success stories. These two open space resources are widely valued, respected, and visited by the community and have become integral components of the regional character. New Paltz is also known for its success in conserving historic landscapes and places including the Huguenot Historic District in the Village of New Paltz.

As the population continues to grow and suburbanize, it is increasingly important to define a

vision and goals for the future of the New Paltz community. Protecting New Paltz's open space includes preservation and conservation of significant ecological areas such as the Shawangunk Ridge and wetlands near the Wallkill River and the Swartekill on the eastern side of the Town. However, it also includes protection of the character of the community, which includes a balanced mix of farms, old fields, historic landscapes, streams, and water features to name just a few. This can be accomplished through comprehensive protection of open space, and with development that respects the open space assets and unique character of the land. Increasing development pressures,

### What is Open Space?

**Open space is a system of natural, cultural and recreational lands and resources that collectively provide critical benefits for people and wildlife.** An open space system includes natural resources such as streams, wetlands and watersheds. It includes working landscapes such as farms and managed forests. It includes cultural and recreational resources such as heritage resources of historic places and scenic corridors; as well as trails and fishing access.

Protecting open space resources such as lakes, rivers, farms and forests is an important step in maintaining the exceptional quality of life that sets the New Paltz community apart from other regions. It also helps to sustain important economic, scenic, historic and recreational landscapes that attract residents and visitors to live, work, shop and recreate in New Paltz.



A protected farm field along Plains Road provides an attractive winter landscape scene.

## The Mission of the New Paltz Open Space Committee

New Paltz is fortunate to possess a diversity of natural resources, small-town quality of life and a vibrant tourist economy nurtured by the aesthetic beauty of its countryside. The New Paltz Community Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 1995, cited the need to retain and protect the Town's unique environmental features and natural resources. In recognition of this, the Town Board created the New Paltz Open Space Committee in 2000. The mission of the Committee is to define, inventory, and evaluate our priority open space resources and work with the New Paltz community to recommend and promote a plan for the protection of these resources.

*-Adopted May 22, 2001*

mounting especially on foothills and valley area (where lands are flat and easily developable) have the potential to alter the viewshed to and from the Shawangunks. Development along the foothills and up to the "break in slope" of the ridge can also stress the fragile ridge ecosystem. Likewise, development in the valley flats has the potential to change the character of the "town and country" feel of the area (for example, as one drives out of the Village along Route 299).

**This open space plan sets the stage for identifying, prioritizing, and implementing protection of the community's open spaces.** The plan recommends an open space program that includes three components: **a comprehensive land conservation program** (to protect open spaces outright through purchase, conservation easements, and other mechanisms); **a conservation development program** that provides tools

for planning new development in a way that will protect the rural character and ecological integrity of the New Paltz community; and a **strategic funding program** to ensure that the open space program can be fully implemented.

## A History of Open Space Involvement

The area has a long history of research, community activism, and interest in protecting and conserving open space in New Paltz and the surrounding region. Primarily, this research has been centered on key regional landscape features such as the Shawangunk Mountains, which has been extensively studied, photographed, and visited. Some of the partners in research and conservation in New Paltz and the surrounding region include:

- Hudson Basin River Watch
- The Open Space Institute
- The Nature Conservancy (TNC)
- The Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership
- Mohonk Preserve
- New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
- New York-New Jersey Trail Conference
- Friends of the Shawangunks
- Palisades Interstate Park Commission (PIPC)
- Wallkill River Task Force
- Wallkill Valley Land Trust
- Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association

The roles of these organizations and agencies include scientific research, open space conservation, nature interpretation and education, and trail construction and maintenance. Many of these entities will be discussed later in this report.

## A Community Planning Process

A formal effort to protect open space on a community-wide level was initiated in 2000, with the formation of the Town of New Paltz Open Space Committee (“the committee”). The committee was formed partially as a result of the 1995 Town comprehensive planning process, which identified a significant level of plan objectives related to open space protection.

The mission of the committee is to “define, inventory, and evaluate our priority open space resources and work with the New Paltz community to recommend and promote a plan for the protection of these resources” (see complete mission statement in the text box on page 3). Since its formation in 2000, the committee initiated the development of an open space inventory for the Town and Village, entitled *New Paltz Inventory of Open Spaces*, which was completed in December 2003. The committee also helped to organize an



Open space committee co-chair Michael Zierler discusses conservation options with workshop participants.

open space photo shoot that received a volume of exceptional submissions, many of which have been used throughout this report. A public workshop on open space visioning was conducted in January 2003, in conjunction with the inventory process. This workshop was aimed at identifying the most valued open spaces in the community. The open space inventory report identified existing open space lands and resource-

## 2004 Community Open Space Survey Results

Of those who responded to the 2004 community open space survey:

- 77% said the Town and Village should actively pursue protecting open space as a strategy to keep New Paltz fiscally healthy and affordable.
- 66% supported concentrating development in or near the village center of New Paltz, and preserving open space in outlying areas.
- An overwhelming number (82%) supported policies to retain agricultural activity in our community.
- Over 2/3 of respondents (67%) favored some level of a tax increase to support open space protection.
- Of those who would accept a tax increase for open space, 2/3 supported a range of \$10 - \$100 per year. Another third supported a range of \$100 - \$300.
- Over 75% of the people believed the community should pursue innovative strategies to protect open space.

es and helped to evaluate community preferences in this regard. In addition, the committee designed and conducted a community-wide survey to gauge citizen support for protecting open space in early 2004 (see Appendix C). These early efforts demonstrated strong community support for conserving open space in New Paltz.

This most recent phase of the planning process began in early 2005. Initial efforts were focused on synthesizing the inventory report and the community values into the New Paltz Community Open Space Vision Map, which is discussed in Section II of this report. The vision map expresses a landscape-level approach for interpreting the community's open space character.

Two early focus groups were conducted specifically for conversation with large-acreage landowners in the community, many of whom were agricultural landowners. These meetings were aimed at understanding the existing and emerging issues, opportunities, and concerns of such landowners as a precursor to identifying options for landowners to keep their lands active and open, or to develop with sensitivity, if this is a landowner's preferred option. Section III: Landowner Options, identifies numerous alternatives for landowners, many in partnership with local governments and regional organizations.

Next, a community-wide workshop was held to present the community vision concepts and the draft plan recommendations in June 2005. This workshop was well-at-

tended (in excess of 60 people) and produced a strong favorable sentiment towards the plan recommendations and the cooperative approach.

**This resulting plan is a marriage of the community's vision and call to action balanced with landowners' needs and priorities.**

## Community Values

As mentioned above, a workshop to obtain community feedback on the most important open space resources was held in January 2003. This workshop resulted in a list of the community's most valued open spaces, with a "top 10" list (see text box below) of repeatedly-mentioned places, which include natural features such as streams and wetlands as well as scenic views, locally-special places, and agricultural and open lands. **The workshop participants identified approximately 7,000 acres (an additional 30% of the New Paltz community) illustrating the community's high standards for preservation.**

### The New Paltz Community's "Top 10" List of Important Open Spaces:

1. Scenic view from Route 299 west of the Wallkill River
2. Wallkill River and its floodplain
3. Swaartekill/Plutarch wetlands complex and aquifer
4. Village woodlands between Shivertown Road and Henry Dubois Road
5. Tributary 13 (desired to be renamed as the Mill Brook)
6. Kleinekill and Humpo Marsh
7. Woodland in the Shawangunk foothills
8. Lands between Huguenot Street and the Wallkill River
9. Open land between Route 299 and Libertyville Road
10. Open land between the Thruway, South Putt Corners Road, and Route 32 South

Further, the New Paltz Open Space Committee's 2004 survey was designed to measure community interest in open space protection, through a random sampling of the New Paltz population. The survey was intended to identify the community's priority resources and the level of support for eventually investing in protection of open space resources. In addition, the survey was geared to gauge interest in where growth should occur.

The community's response to the surveys (35% response rate) was substantial and generally indicated support for open space and farmland protection. For example, 77% of respondents indicated that the Town and Village should actively pursue protecting open space as a strategy to keep New Paltz fiscally healthy. Details of the community survey are provided in the text box on page 4, and the full community survey and results are provided in Appendix C.

## Open Space Planning Partners

### **Protecting open space and managing future growth is a shared effort, involving the New Paltz community, its residents, and its landowners.**

The Town is leading the planning effort and is providing the initial organizational and financial support to develop an open space program. The Open Space Committee has provided administration and guidance to the project, and has met monthly to accomplish open space planning goals, including the development of this plan.

The community has helped to identify important open spaces and has created an open space vision for the future of

New Paltz. As mentioned previously, the community has set high standards for open space protection and has been extensively involved and interested in the development of open space priorities, and in the development of this plan.

All parties recognize that landowners play a key role in the use and protection of lands in New Paltz. In fact, many of the lands that have been identified by the community as important to the overall open space vision are owned by a handful of landowners. Landowners continue to keep lands open (in farming, forestry, or undeveloped parcels for example) and are the primary stewards of the land. The Mohonk Mountain House along the Shawangunk Ridge is a primary example. Landowner efforts should be respected and supported to the highest extent. They should be provided with options and flexibility so that they can keep their lands open, if they choose to do so, amidst an expanding residential and commercial market. This plan will help to ensure that there is a range of options available for landowners who wish to keep their lands open for future generations.



This plan addresses the need to protect historic resources, such as these homes along Huguenot Street, as an important component of the community's character.

## Existing Open Space Framework

Currently, about 2,800 acres, or 12% of the total land area of the Town and Village (22, 848 acres) are permanently protected. Over half of the protected lands are part of the Mohonk Preserve and the vast majority of this protected land occurs west of the Wallkill River. Several private landowners of smaller but significant parcels have opted to place conservation easements on their property in concert with land trusts. While the community has a sizable portion of open space protected, it is mainly focused on the ridge and does not provide any protection for other significant ecological, cultural, agricultural and scenic areas, including many of the “top 10” landscape features that were identified for protection by the public (see text box on page 5).

The Protected Lands Map (Appendix A) illustrates existing protected open space lands.

## Summary

This plan has grown from previous efforts, including an early visioning process in which the community helped to identify open space values and priorities. The community’s high standards for open space call for the conservation of a significant acreage of New Paltz’ resources, and a diverse and well-connected system of open spaces. **The significant amount of land and resources desired for protection engenders the need for a partnership-based approach for this plan in which landowners and community work together to obtain mutual benefits.**



Protection of open spaces such as the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail pictured above is a lasting contribution.

*New Paltz Open Space Plan*



The Wallkill River as it traverses the Town of New Paltz is surrounded by agriculture and forest lands, with the dense village settlement on the eastern side, at the top of this photo.