

Aurora Open Space Plan



INTRODUCTION

Mention the Town of Aurora to anyone and the image of open spaces with land as yet uncluttered by overdevelopment comes to mind. Whether those open spaces are rolling meadows offering panoramic vistas from ridge to valley, woodlands blessed with conifers and hardwoods, or wetlands and waterways with abundant wildlife, they are cherished features that set the Town apart from many of its neighbours. Mention the Village of East Aurora, and the image is of a walkable, cohesive community nestled into the open space that surrounds it. It is the pairing of these two wonderful settings – picturesque village and magnificent rural town – that contribute to the outstanding quality of life enjoyed by Town of Aurora residents. However, this quality of life will be at risk if future development is uncontrolled. Once a large parcel has been subdivided into five-acre lots with houses, it is not likely to be returned to a wide open scenic vista, a significant and diverse wildlife habitat, or a parcel large enough to be an active farm. Therefore, to ensure that generations yet to come will enjoy the benefits of open spaces as much as our forebears did and as much as we who write this document do now, the Town of Aurora is pleased to present this Open Space Plan.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES Since the early 1800s when settlers pushing west along Big Tree Road from Geneseo arrived in what is now the Town of Aurora, the geography and natural beauty of the area have been among its drawing cards. As the nearby Town of Buffalo grew into a major port city, the Town of Aurora prospered as well, and the Village of East Aurora became a commercial hub surrounded by rural charm. Dairy operations abounded, as did horse farms (with familiar names like Jewett, Hamlin and Knox) owning substantial parcels devoted to equestrian activities.

With improved transportation, the Town of Aurora became a sought after place of residence for those whose work took them to Buffalo and its surrounding suburbs. In today's Internet world, East Aurora is as convenient a part of the globe in which to live as any major city. Consequently, the pressure to develop is increasing, as is evidenced by the transformation of some surrounding towns from rural to overdeveloped. Unfortunately, a reputation as a pleasant place to live and conduct business quickly becomes a Catch 22: the more people move to a place renowned for its rural character, the more in jeopardy that rural character becomes. To address this concern, the Town of Aurora Board formally created the Aurora Open Space Committee¹ in January 2007. The mission of the committee is to inventory, evaluate and prioritize the Town of Aurora's open space resources and work with the community to develop and promote a plan for the protection of these resources.





Aurora Open Space Plan



WHAT IS OPEN SPACE The phrase “open space” suggests different things to different people. For purposes of the Aurora plan, open space is defined as any part of Aurora’s landscape that is essentially undeveloped including woodlands, stream corridors, wetlands and farmlands. These areas of land may be in their natural state, serving important environmental and aesthetic functions, or they may be used for forestry, agriculture or low-impact recreation. The common denominator is that all open spaces maintain some part of the Town’s natural heritage. An open space parcel may include existing residential or agricultural structures, but strict limitations will be placed on the construction of new structures. While some conserved open space parcels may allow for public access, this is not a requirement and will vary as different parcels are considered for protection.

¹ The Open Space Committee is comprised of the Town of Aurora citizens listed on the inside back cover. The committee meets at 7 PM on the fourth Tuesday of each month in the Aurora Town Hall, and interested citizens are always welcome to attend. Please call the Town Clerk’s Office (652-3280) to verify that a meeting will occur as scheduled.





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WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF OPEN SPACE?

Fiscal benefits

Property values Studies show that home buyers identify living near open spaces and trails as a highly desirable feature in selecting a home.² Not surprisingly, property values tend to rise in Towns where open space is conserved because people are attracted to places that offer this increasingly rare benefit. By boosting property values, one-time investments in land conservation can continue to increase tax coffers even long after the land conservation efforts have been paid for.

Economic investments Scenic vistas and open land provide a sense of community and a high quality of life that attracts tax-paying businesses and residents to communities. The experience of visitors who come to historic East Aurora to explore the Roycroft Campus, Vidler's and Knox Farm State Park is enhanced by the picturesque countryside in the surrounding Town. Preserving our sense of place will help maintain and expand the tourism segment of our local economy.

Taxes Studies show that towns that embrace open space typically hold the line on taxes. Development generates property tax income, but can also escalate costs of services for schools, sewage, water, police and fire protection as well as wear and tear on infrastructure — e.g., roads, bridges, drainage.³

A study of the fiscal impact of land development alternatives in the Town of Aurora by the Center for Government Research⁴ found that under current conditions, the impact of the open space program on reducing residential development would have a negligible effect on tax rates.

² The Trust for Public Land, *The Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space, How Land Conservation Helps Communities Grow Smart and Protect the Bottom Line*, by Steve Lerner and William Poole, 1999.

³ American Farmland Trust, *Farmland Information Center Fact Sheet, Cost of Community Services Studies*, August 2007, http://www.farmland-info.org/documents/27757/COCS_09-2007.pdf

⁴ A not-for-profit research organization based in Rochester and founded in 1915 whose mission is to enable government, business and nonprofit leaders to improve the quality of life in their communities.



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Habitat conservation

Natural areas provide critical habitat for a wealth of animal and plant species, including rare and threatened species. These habitats can include intact wetland and forest ecosystems, or open corridors that permit movement and dispersal of wildlife between geographically separate natural areas. Certain species thrive at the edges or boundaries between two types of habitat making conservation of these areas essential for biological diversity.



Preservation of local farms

Farming is an important part of the heritage of Aurora, and our active farms enhance the economic vitality of our community. Farms like Lisa's Greenhouse provide products and services for the community as well as income for the farm families. Farms also provide opportunities for residents to purchase locally grown foods and other products at our cherished farmers market. Keeping land with prime farm soils under cultivation ensures that such land will be available if the demand for local agriculture expands in the future.

Psychological/Sense of well-being

Open space provides a feeling of closeness to the natural world, a feeling that reduces stress and anxiety. Even the passive viewing of natural landscapes imparts both physiological and psychological benefits. Keeping lands available for low-impact recreation such as hiking, birding, nature photography, cross-country skiing, or canoeing has the potential to offer physical benefits that contribute to a high quality of life.

Wetlands/Water quality protection

Wetlands, forests, and meadows protect ground and surface water by acting as a natural filter that removes pollutants and debris before they enter our water system, maintaining the high water quality of our streams. The benefits of wetlands go beyond protecting water quality: wetlands buffer water levels to reduce flooding, balance and recharge groundwater levels, and reduce soil erosion.



What are the goals of the plan?



The ultimate goal of the open space plan is to protect about 1,500 acres of open space from development in perpetuity. The specific aims are:

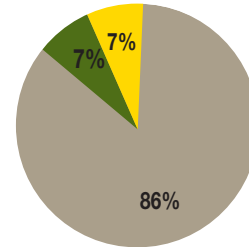
- to provide the Town with a long-range vision for open space protection;
- to inform the public about ways in which open space preservation benefits the community;
- to identify parcels of land with high open space value;
- to develop a program for protecting land with a variety of conservation tools; and
- to identify funding sources for land protection.

Achieving these aims will go a long way towards preserving natural resources, maintaining the rural ambiance of the Town, and ensuring that Main Street in the Village of East Aurora continues to be a vibrant economic center.

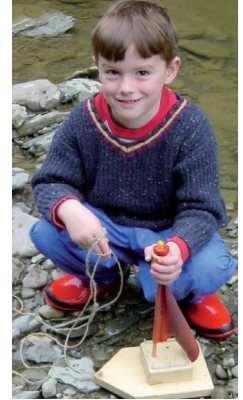
WHAT HAS BEEN DONE SO FAR?

The Open Space Committee has reviewed the Regional Comprehensive Plan⁵ and researched the methods of land protection used in other communities in New York State (for example, the towns of Clarence and Pittsford) and throughout the country.⁶ The committee also hired John Behan, a statewide expert on open space planning, to review its preliminary plans and to discuss these plans with members of the Aurora Town Board and the Aurora Planning Board. During the summer of 2007, a survey was conducted to determine the conservation priorities of community members. Taking community preferences into account, a procedure was developed and applied to rank the larger parcels in the town with respect to their conservation values (see “Survey and Property Ranking”). Presentations designed to educate the public about the open space plan have been made to numerous community groups, and outreach will continue. Landowner meetings were held in November 2007 and February 2008 to inform them about the program and to determine their interest. A \$2.5 million bond referendum was unsuccessful in 2008. Since then, the committee has continued to focus on its mission and identify open space protection opportunities. For details about future activities, see “Next Steps”.

Our Goal: Doubling Protected Land



- Goal of additional protected acreage: 1,500
- Acreage currently protected: 1,529
- Unprotected Acreage: 17,462



ENVIRONMENTAL FEATURES OF THE TOWN

The total area of the Town of Aurora is 20,756 acres. Of this area, only 1,529 acres (7%) is land that is already protected from development. This includes 1,294 acres of municipal parks and 235 acres protected by the Genesee Valley Conservancy, a land trust⁷ headquartered in Geneseo. The long term goal is to approximately double the amount of protected land in the Town.

⁵ Regional Comprehensive Plan for the Towns of Aurora, Elma, Holland and Wales and the Village of East Aurora, May 2003.

⁶ For example, the Town of Shelburne Vermont’s 2006 Open Space Conservation Plan, the Alford Massachusetts Open Space & Recreation Plan, and the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions’ Open Space Plan.

⁷ A nonprofit organization that actively works to conserve land by undertaking or assisting in land or conservation easement acquisition, or by its stewardship of such land or easements.