



THE AURORA

2010



# Open Space Plan

PROTECTING OUR NATURAL HERITAGE

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# *The Open Space Plan*

## SUMMARY

Forests, wetlands, stream corridors, and farms are all forms of open space. Preserving these open spaces provides communities with scenic views, natural resources, and potential economic benefits from tourism and strong property values. The combination of the picturesque, historic Village of East Aurora and the surrounding Town of Aurora, which still retains substantial open space, creates an increasingly rare, desirable place to live. To preserve this quality of life for future generations, the time to act is now – before increased development threatens our open spaces.

The Aurora Town Board created the Aurora Open Space Committee in January 2007 to address open space protection. The mission of the Committee is to define, inventory, and evaluate the Town of Aurora's priority open space resources and work with the community to develop and promote a plan for the protection of these resources.

In a summer of 2007 community survey, respondents overwhelmingly favored preserving open space. Taking community preferences into account, a procedure was developed and applied to rank the 166 parcels in the Town consisting of 25 acres or more. The result is a preliminary list of priority properties totaling about 4,000 acres that are deemed to have the greatest conservation value. The goal is to protect about 1,500 acres from development, doubling the amount of protected open space that currently exists in the town. As shown in Figure 3 of this document, the majority of the priority properties can be placed in nine groups that are well distributed throughout the town.

The Open Space Committee works with the Town Board, the Planning Board and town residents to protect open spaces in Aurora. Land protection tools will include:

- Promoting the voluntary donation of development rights through conservation easements.
- Securing funds for the purchase of land or development rights for projects that have high natural resource values and community support.
- Assisting with updating of the 1981 Aurora Master Plan.
- Outreach to the public about open space protection.

For up-to-date news about the open space plan, please attend one of our monthly Open Space Committee meetings or go to [http://www.townofaurora.com/open\\_space\\_committee.php](http://www.townofaurora.com/open_space_committee.php).

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# Aurora Open Space Plan



# 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 Committee<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.





# benefits benefits benefits benefits



## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

A study of the fiscal impact of land development alternatives in the Town of Aurora by the Center for Government Research<sup>4</sup> found that under current conditions, the impact of the open space program on reducing residential development would have a negligible effect on tax rates.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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](http://www.farmland-info.org/documents/27757/COCS_09-2007.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> 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.



## 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.

## 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.



# 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:

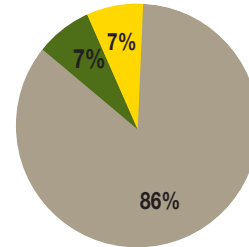
- to provide the Town with a long-range vision for open space protection;
- to inform the public about ways in which open space preservation benefits the community;
- to identify parcels of land with high open space value;
- to develop a program for protecting land with a variety of conservation tools;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

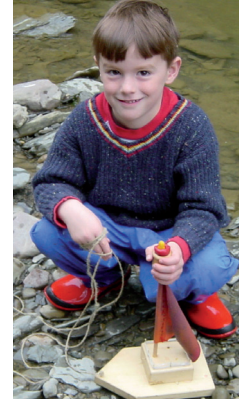
## WHAT HAS BEEN DONE SO FAR?

The Open Space Committee has reviewed the Regional Comprehensive Plan<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

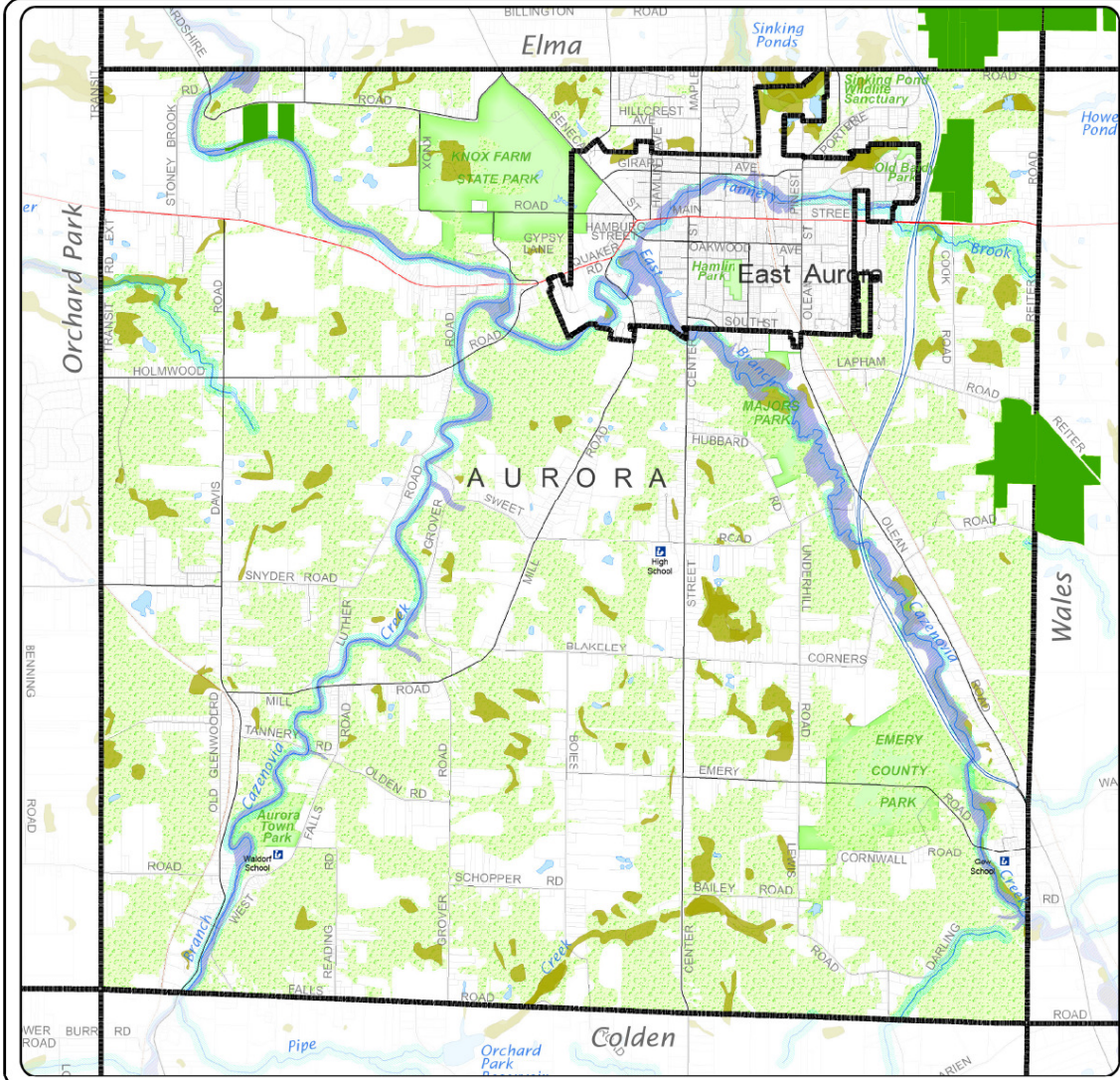
The total area of the Town of Aurora is 20,756 acres. Of this area, only 1,529 acres (7%) is land that is already protected from development. This includes 1,294 acres of municipal parks and 235 acres protected by the Genesee Valley Conservancy, a land trust<sup>7</sup> headquartered in Geneseo. The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


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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

# Town of Aurora Map 1















**TOWN OF AURORA**  
ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK

**Map 1**  
**Environmental Features**

**Forests/ Wooded Areas;  
Floodplains; Stream Buffers;  
and Wetlands**

-  Forests and Wooded Areas
-  200 ft Buffer of Streams
-  FEMA 100 yr Floodplain
-  Wetlands NYS Department of Environmental Conservation & National Wetlands Inventory
-  Streams
-  Lakes/ Ponds
-  Genesee Valley Conservancy
-  Parks
-  Municipal Boundaries

Prepared by the Town of Aurora  
Open Space Committee



Feet  
2,000 1,000 0 2,000 4,000

Miles  
0 0.25 0.5 1

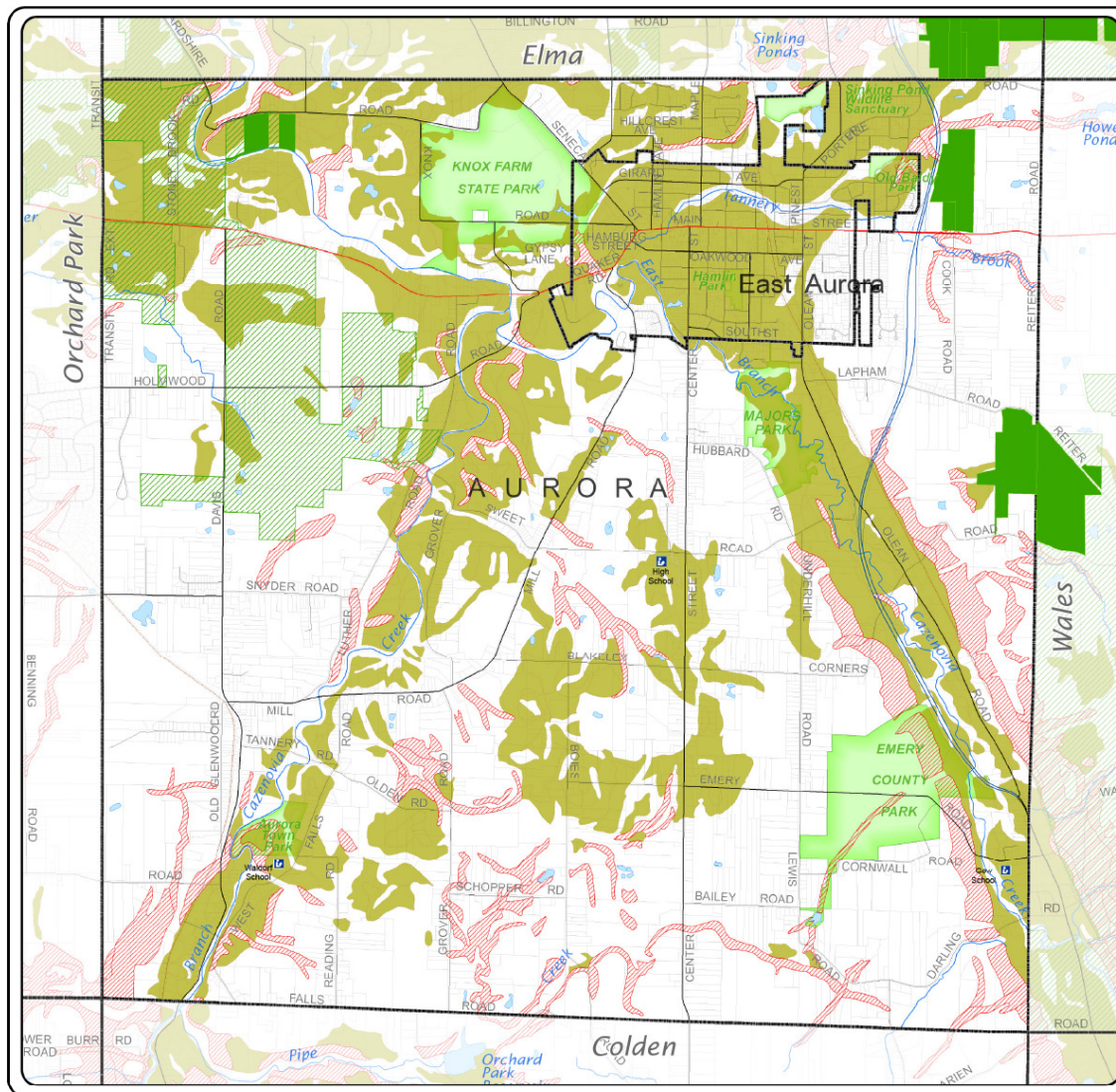



**TOPOGRAPHY** **Maps 1 and 2** show the locations of important natural features of the Town of Aurora. Aurora is located in the Alleghany Plateau, a region of broad, gently sloping ridges 1,000 feet or more above sea level. There are lower, level portions of the plateau located in the northern part of the town including the Village of East Aurora. The most striking topographical feature is a large “U” shaped valley that contains the two branches of Cazenovia Creek. Center Street is located in the middle of the ridge between the two sides of the “U”. The western half of the valley extends from the Village of East Aurora through West Falls and is wide with gentle slopes; the eastern half is relatively narrow with steep slopes on its eastern side near the Town of Wales. Erosion in steeper areas has given rise to several small attractive gorges and waterfalls. One of the best examples, known as Mann’s Creek Glenn, is located in the vicinity of Center and Hubbard Roads. The hilly terrain gives rise to some excellent scenic views, in particular at certain locations along Mill, Lapham, Emery and Boise Roads.

**STREAMS AND WETLANDS** The creek floodplains at the bottom of the valleys have some of the best soils and are a high priority for conservation. Wetlands are found in low-lying areas where water is retained and groundwater seeps to the surface for extended periods of time. By serving as water retention basins, they assist in sedimentation and flood control. There are ten New York State Department of Conservation regulated wetlands within the Town of Aurora which cover 363.69 acres. The 141 wetland areas recognized by the federal government cover 849.77 acres. Although wetlands are offered some protection by law, they still can be lost to development. Perhaps the best known wetland in the Town is Sinking Ponds, a nature preserve located near the northeast corner of the Village of East Aurora.

**FARMLAND** Historically, farming was an important component of land use and the local economy, but the number of active farms has decreased dramatically in the last 50-60 years due to economic pressures. Countywide, the total number of farms declined 27% between 1987 and 1997 alone. The active farms in Aurora include Christmas tree farms, horse stables, farms cultivating hay and straw, and farms producing fruits, vegetables, and maple syrup. The loss of active farms has resulted in land reverting to second growth forest, and the extent of wooded areas in the town has actually increased in recent years. Erie County has established several agricultural districts within Aurora. These districts are located in the northwest quadrant of the town and together comprise 1525 acres (7.9% of the town). Farmers within an agricultural district receive incentives (such as property tax benefits) to keep their land in agricultural uses. Any non-agricultural development within an agricultural district is subject to a higher level of scrutiny under the State Environmental Quality review procedure, and it requires an assessment of the impacts of any action on agriculture. However, the regulations governing agricultural districts, like zoning laws, do not provide guaranteed protection from development (see “Land Protection Tools”). Furthermore, it is important to note that much of the land that is actually still in cultivation is not located within an agricultural district.

# Town of Aurora Map 2













## TOWN OF AURORA


ERIE COUNTY, NEW YORK

### Map 2 Environmental Features

**Prime Farm Soils;  
Steep Slopes; and  
Agricultural Districts**

-  Agricultural Districts
-  Slopes 15% or greater
-  Prime Farm Soils
-  Streams
-  Lakes/Ponds
-  Genesee Valley Conservancy
-  Parks
-  Municipal Boundaries

Prepared by the Town of Aurora  
Open Space Committee



2,000 1,000 0 2,000 4,000  
Feet

0 0.25 0.5 1  
Miles

# Survey and Property Ranking



## SURVEY

A community survey, conducted in March through September of 2007, revealed that 86% of the respondents feel that protecting open space is important. Residents gave highest priority to forests and wildlife habitat, followed by stream corridors, wetlands, scenic views and farmland. Many stressed that there were overlaps between these categories and that they were all important. Two thirds indicated that protecting a large number of acres was more important than having public access to protected land.

## PROPERTY RANKING

In order to identify the land most important for conservation, the committee ranked the 166 parcels in the town that consist of 25 acres or more. Each of these properties was evaluated with respect to the 10 attributes listed in Table 1. In addition to the attributes covered in the survey, the committee also considered the presence of steep slopes and floodplains, whether a parcel is in an agricultural district or adjacent to already protected land (for example, any of the municipal parks), and the distribution of potential protected land within the town. Care was taken to ensure that some of the chosen land is within, or adjacent to, the Village of East Aurora. Public preferences expressed in the community survey were used as weighting factors. Finally, the prioritization system was biased towards large parcels because they provide the most cost-effective, comprehensive way to conserve natural resources. **This does not preclude the protection of meritorious smaller parcels** such as the many small parcels along East Cazenovia Creek or near the Village of East Aurora. Using all of these parameters, a score was calculated for each property.

<sup>8</sup> In evaluating these criteria, maps from the following sources were used: Town of Aurora, Erie County Dept. of Environment and Planning, NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation, NYS Office of Cyber Security and Critical Information Coordination, New York Natural Heritage program, US Dept. of Agriculture, US Dept. of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Federal Emergency Management Administration.

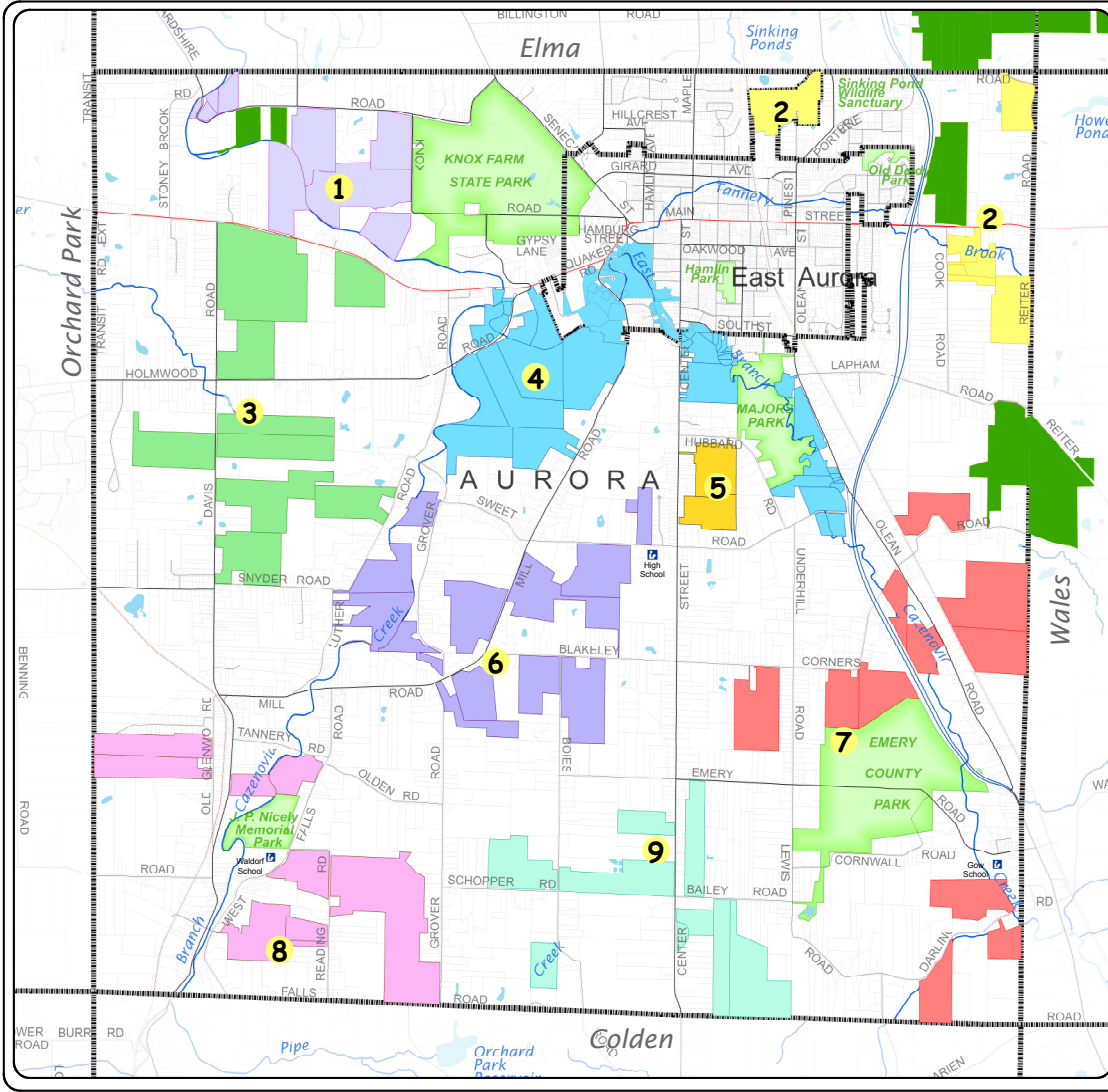
### TABLE 1


#### Criteria used to rank properties<sup>8</sup>

Tree cover	Each 5 acres or more of contiguous woodland
Water resources	Creeks and tributaries; other water bodies
Wildlife habitat	Endangered species habitat; diverse habitat - presence of a mix of water, forest and open land (edge effect)
Farmland	Location in agriculture district; presence of prime soils; active farming in the last 10 years
Scenic views	Unique panoramic view or varied picturesque landscape that is accessible to the public
Wetlands	Federal or New York State Department of Environmental Conservation designated wetlands
Steep slopes	> 15% Slope
Floodplains	Federal Emergency Management Association designated 100 year floodplains
Linkages	Adjacent or near other protected land (e.g. parks)
Property size	Each 25 acres up to 100 or more acres



# Town of Aurora Map 3





## TOWN OF AURORA

Erie County, New York

### Map 3 Priority Conservation Properties \*

**Priority Property Grouping**

- 1 - Knox Park
- 2 - Sinking Ponds/ Northeast
- 3 - Agricultural District
- 4 - Stream Corridors
- 5 - Mann's Creek Glen
- 6 - Central
- 7 - Emery Park
- 8 - West Falls
- 9 - South Central


■ Genesee Valley Conservancy

■ Parks

Municipal Boundaries

\* NOTE: This does not preclude the protection of meritorious smaller parcels

Prepared by the Town of Aurora  
Open Space Committee



2,000 1,000 0 2,000 4,000  
Feet

0 0.25 0.5 1 1.5  
Miles

**Map 3** shows the locations of the priority properties that scored the highest in the ranking process. Designation by the Open Space Committee as a priority property does not imply interest or commitment by the landowner. The total area covered by these properties is approximately 4,000 acres. Most of the priority properties can be thought of as falling into logical groupings, and the locations of these groupings are indicated on the map. In several cases, existing parks can be regarded as the nucleus of a group. The groupings, ordered from north to south, are as follows:

1. **Knox Park area.** Adjacent properties primarily on Willardshire Road in the northwest quadrant of the town.
2. **Sinking Ponds wildlife sanctuary area.** Properties adjacent to the existing nature preserve.
3. **Agricultural districts.** Properties on or near Davis Road to the Town of Aurora line.
4. **Stream corridors.** Properties along East and West Cazenovia Creeks and near the Village of East Aurora.
5. **Mann's Creek Glen.** Properties located between Majors Park and the high school.
6. **Central area.** Properties on Mill, Sweet and Blakeley Roads near the high school.
7. **Emery Park area.** Neighboring properties on Blakeley Road and the steep slopes bordering the East Cazenovia Creek valley.
8. **West Falls area.** Properties near J. P. Nicely Memorial Park in West Falls.
9. **South central area.** Properties close to Center Street near the southern border with the Town of Colden.

## LAND PROTECTION TOOLS

Zoning laws alone do not protect land from development over long periods of time. It is the prerogative of governments to change laws, and this could result in residential development in places where it was once prohibited. Although land can be preserved through outright purchase by a governmental agency, this is an expensive option, and it removes land from the local

tax rolls. While the Town of Aurora may purchase some land through the open space plan, another tool that may be used is known as a *conservation easement*.

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a tax-exempt, charitable conservation organization known as a land trust. An easement permanently places limitations on how the land may be used in order to protect its conservation values. It is a recorded deed restriction, and the right and responsibility to enforce the restriction is given to the land trust, which monitors each property annually to ensure that conditions of the easement are being met. Conservation easements resulting from the Aurora Open Space Plan will be held by a local land trust such as the Western New York Land Conservancy<sup>9</sup> or they



may be co-held by a land trust and the Town of Aurora. One of the benefits of a conservation easement is that the property remains on the tax rolls.

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<sup>9</sup> The Western New York Land Conservancy is a 501(c) 3, not-for-profit land trust whose mission is to preserve and protect important open spaces, scenic vistas, fragile natural ecosystems and working farms in the eight counties of Western New York. In the Land Conservancy's 19-year history, it has protected almost 4,500 acres of land and has ongoing partnerships with several area municipalities including Amherst, Marilla and Clarence. More information about the Land Conservancy can be found at [www.wnylc.org](http://www.wnylc.org).



When a conservation easement is placed on a property, the right to do certain things (most typically build houses or further subdivide the land) is restricted, but the ownership of the property is not affected. The landowner can still sell the property or leave it to his or her heirs. Typically, activities like farming and limited logging are still allowed, additional farm buildings can be erected, and the owner can choose to permit hunting. Furthermore, an easement need not apply to a complete parcel as it is presently constituted. For example, owners can reserve additional lots for family members. Each case is treated individually, and the owner can specify the restrictions that will apply to his/her property as long as the conservation values of the property are still maintained.

The presence of an easement changes the monetary value of a property. The cost of the development rights is the difference between the (higher) value of the property before the easement and the value afterwards as determined by a thorough, detailed appraisal. Placement of an easement involves the purchase of the development rights from the landowner or the donation of those rights by the landowner. There are significant tax benefits<sup>10</sup> for landowners who donate, or partially donate, development rights.

It is important to remember that the landowner participation in open space protection is completely voluntary.

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<sup>10</sup> More information about donations and tax benefits is available at [http://www.townofaurora.com/open\\_space\\_committee.php](http://www.townofaurora.com/open_space_committee.php).



*Communities have discovered that once open space is lost, there is no going back.*

# Next Steps



The Town of Aurora is committed to preserving the rural character of our community and protecting the town's scenic views and diverse natural resources. The goals of the Open Space Plan are:

- Identify, research and pursue specific land protection projects. The following criteria will be used to select the projects: open space value, community support, cost and funding prospects.
- Educate the community about the benefits of open space protection and the methods for accomplishing it (e.g. available tax benefits for donated conservation easements.)
- Research additional public and private funding mechanisms.
- Make recommendations on policies for open space.
- Support and provide input into the Planning Board's work to develop a Master Plan for the Town of Aurora that compliments the recommendations of the Open Space Plan.

The Open Space Plan will be reviewed and updated as necessary, but no less frequently than every five years.

## TOWN OF AURORA OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

### MEMBERS

### AFFILIATIONS

Nancy Smith  
Co-chair

Stewardship Manager  
Western New York Land Conservancy

Libby Weberg  
Co-chair

East Aurora Village Deputy Mayor

Larry Brickman

Senior Vice President at  
ecology and environment, inc.

Kathryn Lasher

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Thank you to David Floyd, Mary McCutcheon, Kristin Nelson and Rick Ohler for their assistance in developing the Open Space Plan. In addition we would like to thank Trust for Public Land, especially Clark Wallace and Matt Zieper, for their guidance and input.

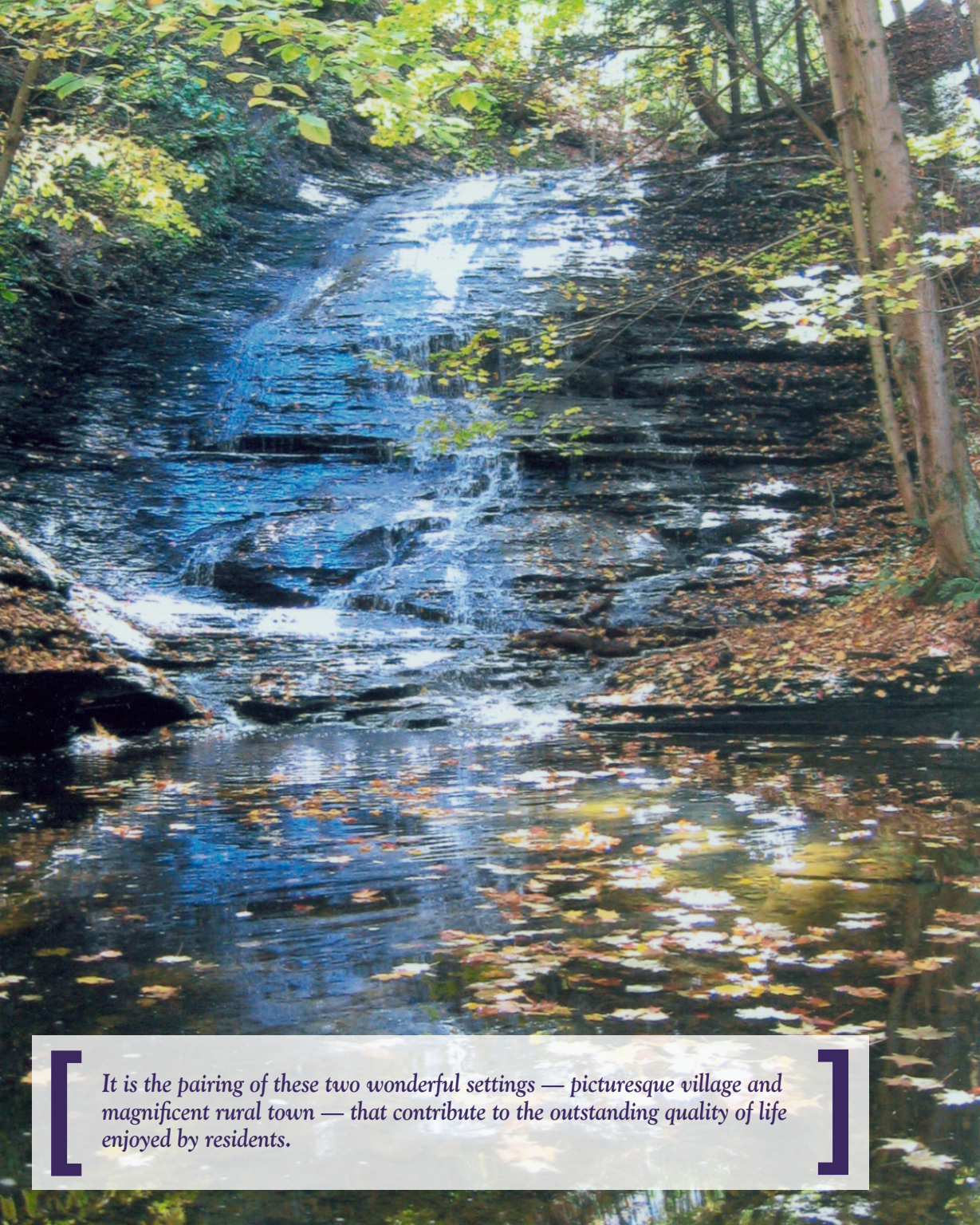
If you have comments or questions about the open space plan, please contact

Nancy Smith or Libby Weberg  
c/o Town of Aurora  
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East Aurora, NY 14052

**Telephone:** (716) 652-7590

**Email:** [supervisor@townofaurora.com](mailto:supervisor@townofaurora.com)





*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 residents.*

