

Wachusett Corridor Smart Growth Plan

Open Space and Recreation Element

I. Background

The Wachusett Commuter Rail Extension Project involves the construction of a new Wachusett Station in Fitchburg, a new Westminster Layover Facility, and upgrades to the existing Fitchburg Commuter Rail Line, a branch of the commuter rail network serving Eastern and Central Massachusetts operated by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). The new station will be located in West Fitchburg in close proximity to Route 2 at Route 31 in the existing 231 Industrial Park. The layover facility in Westminster will be located in the existing Westminster Business Park near Route 2A.

The project is expected to:

- Improve mass transit options to communities west of Fitchburg;
- Improve the region's economy by reducing commute time from the Montachusett Region to the Boston area job market;
- Increase the supply of commuter rail parking for travelers in the western part of the region; and,
- Improve the operation and capacity of the Fitchburg Line train Layover Facility.

In addition, by improving overall access to region, the project provides a means of transporting potential visitors to the region who could utilize the Region's extensive open space and recreational resources.

The design of the project has been completed and construction of the station and layover facility began in late 2012. Construction is expected to be completed by the end of 2014. Commuter rail service to the new station is expected to begin in fall, 2015.

To assess the impacts of the Wachusett Commuter Rail Extension for the Smart Growth Plan, a study area corridor was defined as a circle with a 2.5 mile radius with the new Wachusett Station as the center. This study area also encompasses the Westminster Layover Facility. This distance was chosen because it is an easily bikeable distance from the station. The study area covers approximately 12,566 acres or 19.6 square miles. As shown on the map, the study area covers portions of three communities, including the southwestern corner of Fitchburg, the northwestern corner of Leominster, and east central Westminster.¹

For the purpose of this open space and recreation analysis, the focus is on project impacts and opportunities within the defined Wachusett Corridor study area. MRPC GIS was utilized as a primary tool in conducting the following analysis.

¹ A very small portion of Princeton, approximately 17.2 acres, the northern tip of the community, is also within the corridor. This area is primarily forest and, due to its small area, is not addressed separately in this Open Space analysis.

II. Existing Land Use

The land examined in this plan covers approximately 12,566 acres (19.6 square miles) within the circle designating the corridor with the new Wachusett Station as the center. The radius of the circle is 2.5 miles. This distance was chosen, because it is an easily bikeable distance from the proposed Wachusett Station which is considered important, particularly in the context of recreation and open space.

The existing land use within the corridor as calculated through MRPC GIS is shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. As indicated in the Table, the vast majority of land use within the corridor, 8017 acres or 63.8 percent of total area, is classified as Forest. While much of this forested land is within the Leominster State Forest, there is also substantial forested land outside of the State Forest. Within the three Wachusett communities, Forest is the dominant land use for all three. Although a substantially smaller share of total acreage, other primary land uses are Water (5.4%), High Density Residential (4.5%), and Low Density Residential (4.1). Most of the High Density Residential acreage is within Fitchburg while most of the Low Density Residential is within Westminster. It is interesting to note, given the industrial history of the corridor, that only 1.9 percent of the corridor's acreage is classified as Industrial, with the majority of that acreage in Fitchburg. Also, as indicated in the table, nearly 99 percent of Leominster's land use is shown to be undeveloped and is classified as Forest, Forested Wetland, Non-Forested Wetland, Powerline/Utility, or Water.

In terms of areas generally considered "open space," the combined land use categories of Cropland, Forest, Forested Wetland, Golf course, Non-Forested Wetland, Open Land, Participation Recreation, Pasture, Water, and Water-Based Recreation account for over 9,700 acres or over 77 percent of the entire Wachusett Corridor. Recreation land use categories of Golf Course, Participation Recreation, and Water-Based Recreation account for approximately 174 acres or slightly over 1 percent of the Corridor's land use, a small share of total land use. This, of course, excludes the wide variety of active and passive recreation uses within the larger land use category of Forest.

Table1: Existing Land Use	Acres within Wachusett Corridor				% of Area within Wachusett Corridor			
Land Use Description	Entire Corridor	Fitchburg	Leominster	Westminster	Entire Corridor	Fitchburg	Leominster	Westminster
Brushland/Successional	13.7	11.3		2.5	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Cemetery	66.9	56.8		10.1	0.5%	1.1%	0.0%	0.2%
Commercial	112.1	81.0		31.2	0.9%	1.6%	0.0%	0.6%
Cropland	119.7	30.6		89.1	1.0%	0.6%	0.0%	1.6%
Forest	8017.1	2689.4	1444.7	3869.0	63.8%	52.6%	76.3%	69.8%
Forested Wetland	328.5	77.4	109.7	141.4	2.6%	1.5%	5.8%	2.6%
Golf Course	109.1	108.1		1.0	0.9%	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%
High Density Residential	568.0	559.5		8.5	4.5%	10.9%	0.0%	0.2%
Industrial	242.0	197.2	2.6	42.2	1.9%	3.9%	0.1%	0.8%
Junkyard	5.7		5.7		0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%
Low Density Residential	516.5	230.2	5.5	280.8	4.1%	4.5%	0.3%	5.1%
Medium Density Residential	174.0	120.8		53.1	1.4%	2.4%	0.0%	1.0%
Mining	78.8	13.6		65.2	0.6%	0.3%	0.0%	1.2%
Multi-Family Residential	302.5	281.9		20.7	2.4%	5.5%	0.0%	0.4%
Non-Forested Wetland	149.9	38.7	23.3	87.8	1.2%	0.8%	1.2%	1.6%
Open Land	213.7	61.7	1.5	150.6	1.7%	1.2%	0.1%	2.7%
Participation Recreation	60.1	32.1		28.0	0.5%	0.6%	0.0%	0.5%
Pasture	48.3	29.2	2.8	16.3	0.4%	0.6%	0.2%	0.3%
Powerline/Utility	204.0	127.3	35.5	41.2	1.6%	2.5%	1.9%	0.7%
Transitional	116.1	48.0		68.2	0.9%	0.9%	0.0%	1.2%
Transportation	146.8	79.5		67.2	1.2%	1.6%	0.0%	1.2%
Urban Public/Institutional	70.4	65.7	2.8	1.8	0.6%	1.3%	0.1%	0.0%
Very Low Density Residential	107.9	32.3	5.5	70.1	0.9%	0.6%	0.3%	1.3%
Waste Disposal	105.9	27.1	0.2	78.6	0.8%	0.5%	0.0%	1.4%
Water	683.2	116.3	254.1	310.6	5.4%	2.3%	13.4%	5.6%
Water-Based Recreation	5.4			4.2	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
Total²	12566.4	5115.8	1893.9	5539.5	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

² Note: There is approximately 17.2 acres of land within the Wachusett Corridor that are within the Town of Princeton. This includes 13.9 acres of Forest, 2.1 acres of Water, and 1.2 acres of Water-Based Recreation acreage that are not shown in this table within the community breakdowns.

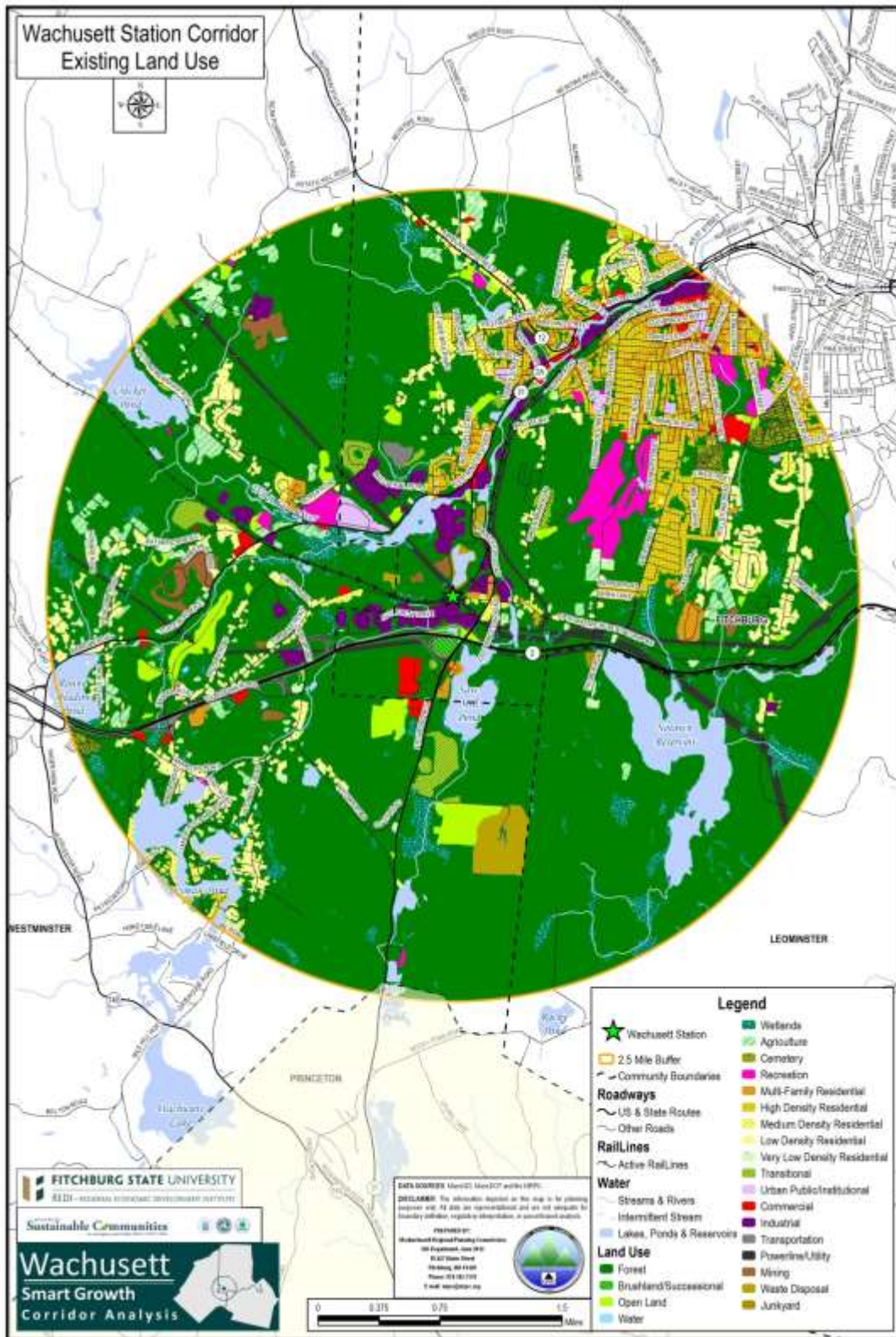


Figure 1: Existing Land Use in Wachusett Corridor

III. Trails and Parks

There is a wealth of recreational opportunities currently available within the Wachusett Corridor in each of the Corridor communities. Public facilities include numerous trails and parks as well as a private country club. The location of these facilities and their proximity to Wachusett Station is shown in Figure 2. A detailed map of the trails and parks adjacent to Wachusett Station is shown in Figure 3.

DRAFT

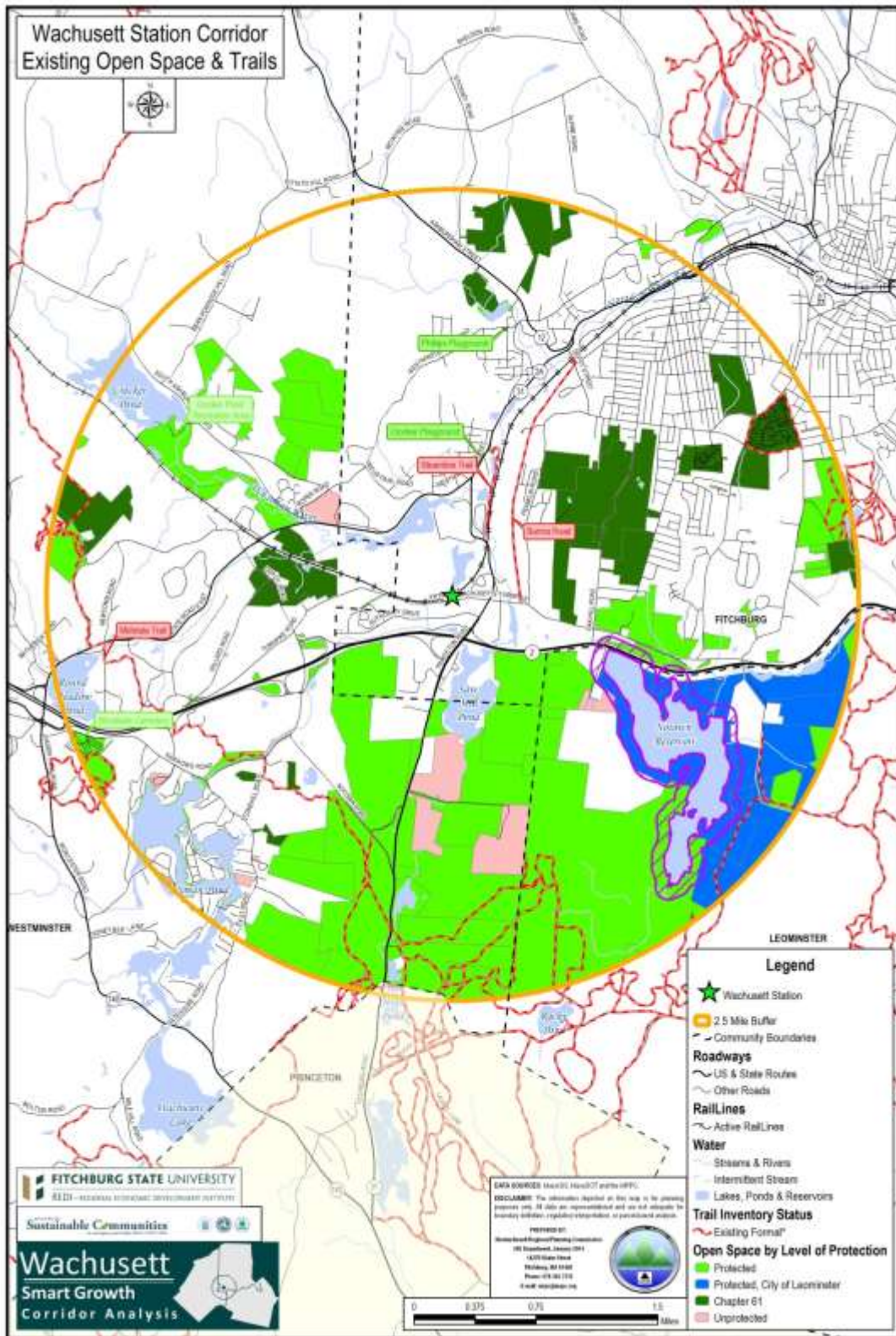


Figure 2: Trails and Open Space in Wachusett Corridor

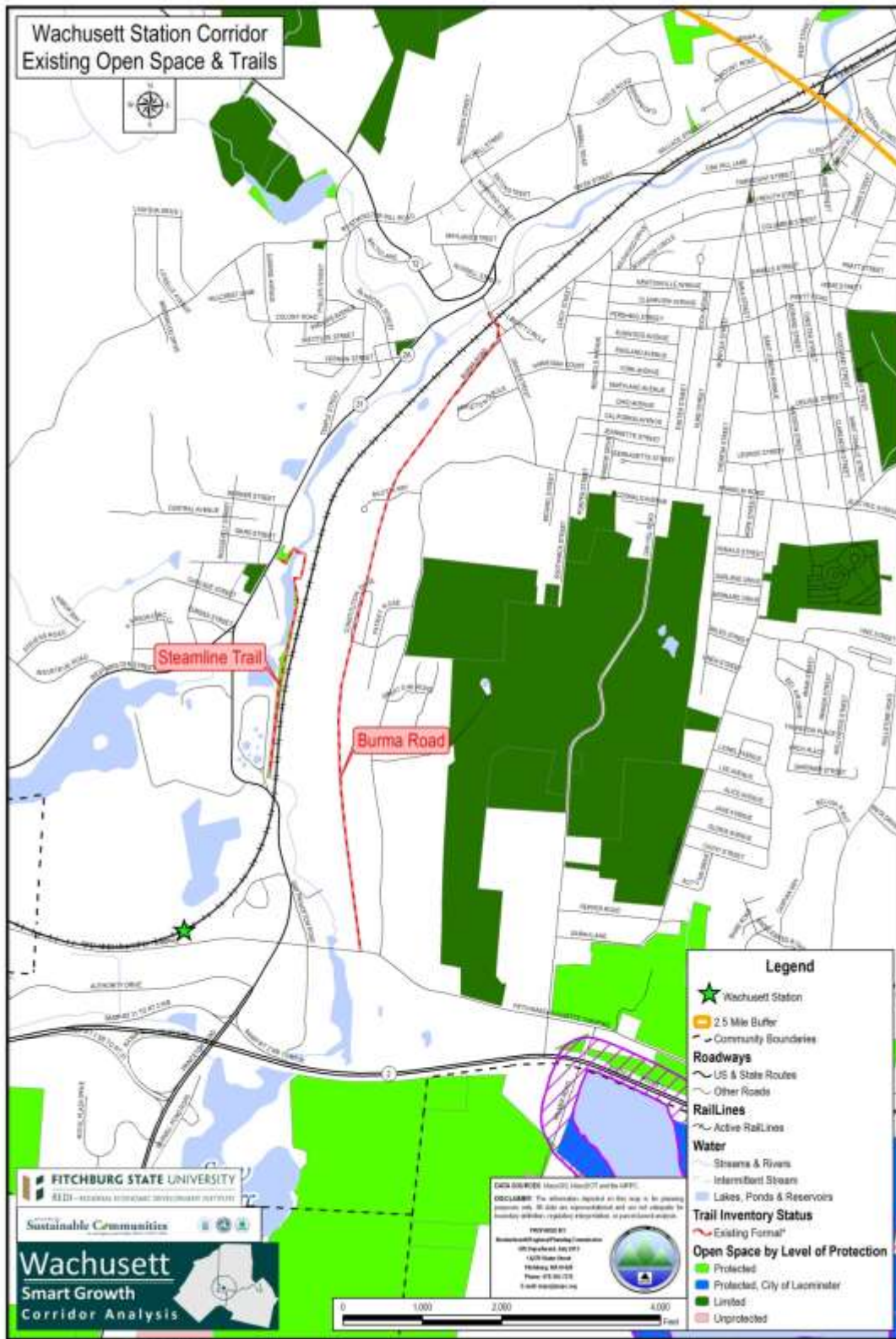


Figure 3: Trails in Vicinity of Wachusett Station Area

Trails:

Midstate Trail (Westminster and adjacent communities): The Midstate Trail is a scenic footpath located in Worcester County, 45 miles west of Boston. As shown in Figure 4, this 95 mile hiking trail extends from Rhode Island crossing the gentle hills of central Massachusetts and eventually connecting to the Wapack Trail in New Hampshire. A portion of the Trail runs through the Leominster State Forest in Westminster with connections to various trails in the State Forest. The Midstate Trail is considered highly accessible, scenic, and remarkably rural despite its proximity to urban Boston. The trail includes the summits of Mount Wachusett and Mount Watatic, as well as many interesting geologic, historic, and natural features. The highest point on the Midstate Trail is the 2006-foot summit of Mount Wachusett from which the Boston skyline, 45 miles away, is visible in clear weather.

Steamline Trail (Fitchburg): The Fitchburg Steamline Trail is a bike and walking path located in Fitchburg off of Route 2A. The trail is located within the West Fitchburg Steamline Trail Park at 465 Westminster Street which covers 4.15 acres and includes a parking lot. The trail itself is 0.6 miles long and runs along the Nashua River and Flag Brook in the Waites Corner neighborhood. The path has a packed gravel surface and is relatively easy terrain. The trail is the first contracted part of a planned project to build a mixed-use bike and walking trail through Fitchburg. Additional parts of the proposed trail are in the Riverfront and Gateway Parks. It is hoped that this trail will eventually connect with other trails in Fitchburg (see discussion of the Burma Road Trail below) and the neighboring towns of Leominster and Westminster.

Burma Road Trail (Fitchburg): The Burma Road Trail is not currently a “public way” although it is owned by the City of Fitchburg, running over a major City of Fitchburg water main. It is approximately 2 miles from the end of Burma Road off of Depot Street on the north to Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike on the south. Although not formally maintained as a trail, it is passable despite crossing Bilotta Way and running through the Chamberlain Hill condominium development. The trail presents a potential opportunity to connect to the Steamline Trail and also a potential trail connection between Wachusett Station and the Cleghorn neighborhood to the north.

Leominster State Forest Trails (Leominster, Fitchburg and Westminster): Numerous hiking and mountain biking trails are maintained within the Leominster State Forest, including the Midstate Trail and a network of trails which connect to the Midstate Trail. A description of facilities available in Leominster State Forest is provided below in the discussion of Leominster Parks. A map of trails within the State Forest is shown in Figure 5.

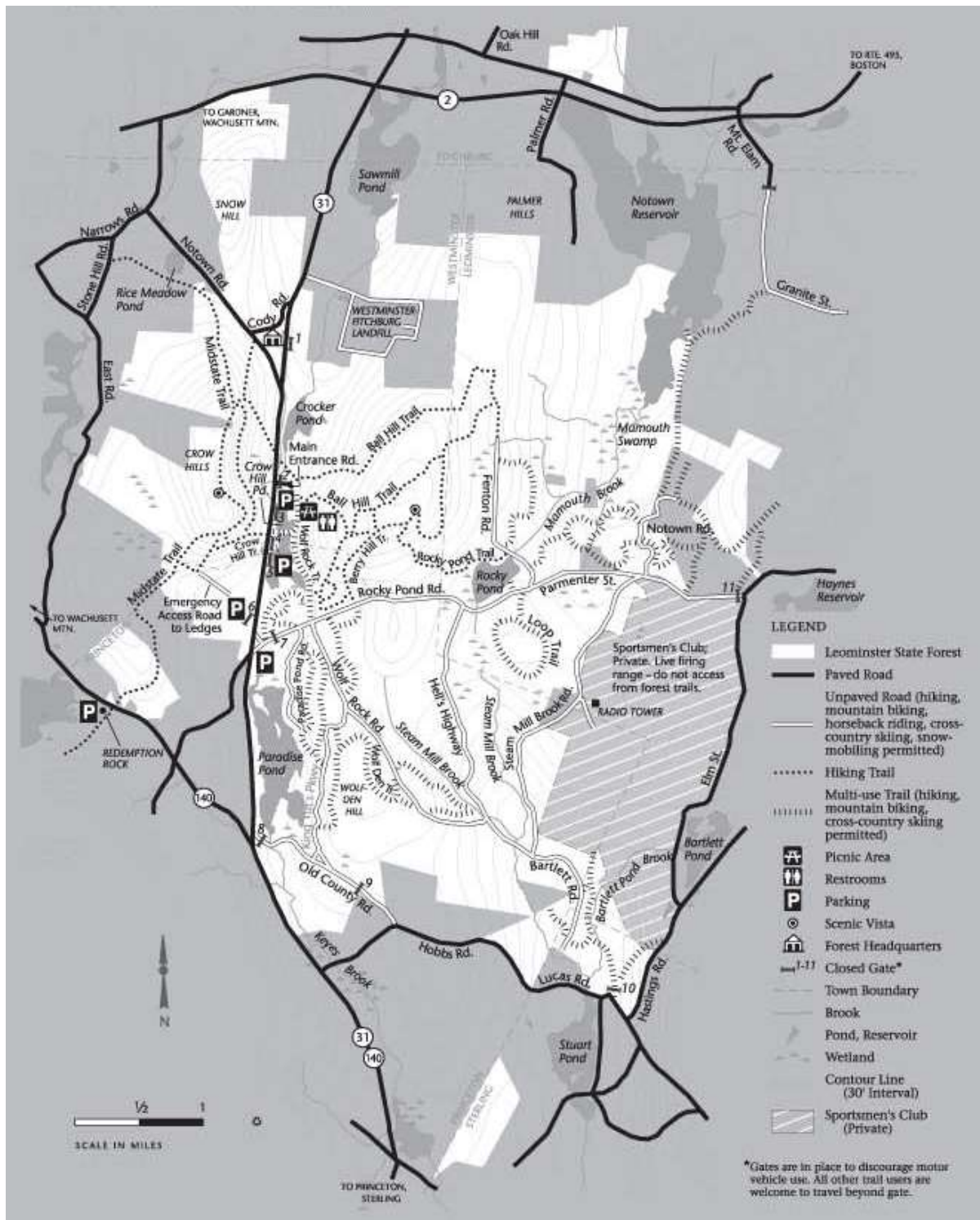


Source: Mappery.com

Figure 4: Map of the Midstate Trail

Leominster Parks:

Leominster State Forest, shown in Figure 5, is a 4,500-acre parcel of forested land, located in the five towns of Westminster, Princeton, Leominster, Fitchburg and Sterling in North Central Massachusetts. The forest is located off of Rt. 2 (exit 28), is an easy drive for local residents, and convenient from the Boston and Worcester communities. Parking is available along Rte. 31 in several areas. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, parking fees are charged in the paved parking lots. The forest provides miles of hiking, bicycling, and equestrian trails with recreational opportunities year round, ranging from mountain biking, picnicking, rock climbing, fishing and swimming in the summer to cross country skiing, snowshoeing, and snowmobiling in the winter. The numerous hiking trails offer the opportunity to observe all kinds of wildlife and the prolific mountain laurel bloom in late June, early July. Leominster State Forest Headquarters is located within Westminster. Near its western perimeter on Route 31 the Department of Conservation and Recreation has developed a 150 foot sandy swimming beach, a 2-acre picnic grove, a parking area, an information kiosk, and sanitary facilities. Demand for use of these facilities is particularly intense during peak summer days, particularly weekends and holidays.



Source: Mappery.com

Figure 5: Leominster State Forest

Fitchburg Parks:

Moran Playground: This 15 acre site in west Fitchburg is primarily undeveloped and forested. A former softball field near the entrance to the park off Ashburnham Street is now used as a soccer field by local soccer organizations.

Crocker Playground: Crocker Playground is a recently renovated neighborhood park located on Westminster Street at the intersection of Wachusett Street in west Fitchburg near Waites Corner. Crocker Park features the David M. Whitney basketball court, a modern playground structures, a new pavilion and picnic area, a water spray area, and perimeter walking path.

Parkhill Park: This park is located in the Cleghorn neighborhood, and features a water spray park with bathhouse, a skateboard park, two play structures with swings, tennis courts, several "Babe Ruth" baseball fields, a basketball court, and a soccer-football field currently under development. It is bounded by Pratt Road, Beech Street, Franklin Road, and Causeway Street. Two parking areas are available, accessed off Pratt Road and Beech Street. In July of 2001, the renovations to Fitchburg's Parkhill Park were completed. The park received new playground equipment, drainage improvements to the baseball field and to the brook, and a new water spray park. The splash park is open every day from 11-6. The balance of the park, including the Ryan Joubert Memorial Skatepark, is open from dawn to dusk

Phillips Playground: This neighborhood park at the corner of Westminster Hill Road and Phillips Street in west Fitchburg has a play structure with swings and basketball court.

West Fitchburg Steamline Trail Park: This 4.15 acre park is located at 465 Westminster Street, and includes a parking lot and walking trail along the Nashua River and Flag Brook. This park is the first implementation of the City's plans to develop a network of trails along the Nashua River, connecting to trails in Leominster and Westminster. The Steamline Trail is discussed above. Adjacent to the Steamline Park is the now-inactive West Fitchburg Steam Plant, the source of the Steamline Trail Park's name. Plans are currently underway to restore portions of the Steam Plan and convert it to a "Regional Energy Efficiency and Environmental Education Center." If accomplished, the facility would become another attraction in the vicinity of the Wachusett Station which could thematically tie-in with parks and recreation facilities already located in the area.

Oak Hill Country Club: Oak Hill Country Club, encompassing approximately 311 acres, is a private, member owned club, located in Fitchburg. The Club was established in 1921 and provides an eighteen hole golf course, dining facilities, function rooms, tennis and swimming facilities. Membership is by invitation only.

Nashua River Riverfront Property: With the abundance of historic mills, bridges, and walls along the Nashua River, and its close proximity to densely developed areas, the Nashua has the potential to become a significant asset to the city's economy and the quality of life for its residents. Fitchburg recently developed a riverfront park located along a section of the river adjacent to downtown on a former Brownfields site. In addition, the city developed the Steamline Trail Park in West Fitchburg along the Nashua River and Flagg Brook, described above. These two, with a small, inaccessible Central

Nashua River conservation property, constitute the full extent of riverside land currently protected. A trail system linking these features has been proposed as the Twin City Rail Trail. It would run along the river and the abandoned CSX Railroad line between the downtowns of Fitchburg and Leominster. Further conversion of riverfront property for conservation and recreational purposes, or sensitive commercial and residential development, will allow Fitchburg to take advantage of this unique resource.

Westminster Parks:

Crocker Pond (town owned) is located off South Ashburnham Road through access over a bridge crossing the Whitman River. The town is working on developing an access through the TRW facility along the old layout of Depot Road. The site contains 101 acres and has a sandy swimming beach and an existing trail network. The pond can be used for swimming, fishing, picnicking, ice skating and non-motorized boating. The land can be used for hiking and cross-country skiing. There is also the potential to develop a portion of the site for playing fields. Crocker Pond is open from Memorial Day weekend until Columbus Day weekend. Stickers are issued out of the Town Clerk's Office beginning in May of each year. To obtain a Crocker Pond permit sticker you must be a resident of the Town of Westminster with a verifiable address per the Westminster Town Census and you must present a valid license and vehicle registration for each vehicle indicating Westminster address. Crocker Pond was formerly known as the Brooks Mill Sportsmen's Club. The club was open to the employees of the James River Paper Company in Fitchburg

Woodside Cemetery is a 21-acre parcel off Narrows Road and abutting Hager Park. It is a significant historic & cultural resource as well as valuable open space. Over 350 gravestones here predating 1830 are registered with the Massachusetts Historical Society. In addition, a Hearse House from the mid 1800's has been relocated to the site. Only two such structures outside this one are known to exist in New England.

Important Recreational Facilities Outside of Wachusett Corridor:

Wachusett Mountain State Reservation (Westminster and Princeton): Although outside of the specific Wachusett Corridor study area, another significant recreational resource in close proximity to the Corridor is the Wachusett Mountain State Reservation. The Reservation is State owned and lies within the southern tip of Westminster off Route 140 and in the neighboring town of Princeton. It contains 2,250 acres (706 acres in Westminster), many of which are well developed for hiking and nature appreciation. Additional amenities on the site include a summit lookout with automobile and chairlift access, numerous picnic areas, an information center and sanitary and parking facilities.

Wachusett Mountain Ski Resort (Princeton): The Wachusett Mountain Ski Resort, operated on land leased from the Wachusett Mountain State Reservation has 22 trails serviced by 7 ski-lifts, including 3 high-speed chairlifts and 3 children-friendly magic carpet lifts and also has 1 Triple Chairlift. Wachusett Mountain has 100% snow-making capacity. Additionally, Wachusett Mountain has night-skiing on most of its trails.

Protected and Unprotected Open Space:

As indicated previously on Figure 2, there are a number of parcels of “protected” and “unprotected” open space within the Wachusett Corridor. Unprotected open space is unprotected by any legal or functional means. It is usually privately owned and can be sold without restriction at any time for another use (e.g. scout camps, private golf course, and private woodland). Protected open space includes lands within the Leominster State Forest which are protected by virtue of their classification as “State Forest” and other lands which are protected under Chapter 61 under the General Laws of Massachusetts. Chapter 61 is a voluntary current use program designed by the Massachusetts Legislature to tax real property at its timber resources value rather than its “highest and best use” development value. Landowners who enroll their land in the program receive property tax reductions in exchange for a lien on the property. The lien requires that enrolled land remain in undeveloped state and be managed for forest resources extraction under a forest management plan approved by the state, effectively maintaining the land as open space. The lien also provides the municipal government of the town in which the property is located a right of first refusal should the landowner put the land up for sale while it is enrolled in the program. Landowners who develop their land while enrolled in the program or for a period of time after withdrawing from the program may be required to pay penalties.

There are three programs under Chapter 61:

- **Chapter 61:** Intended for landowners interested in long-term, active forest management. The value of the property is based on the land’s ability to grow timber.
- **Chapter 61A:** Intended for landowners engaged in agricultural or horticultural use. Assessment is based on the property’s ability to produce agricultural or horticultural products.
- **Chapter 61B:** Intended for landowners interested in maintaining the land in substantially natural, wild or open condition. Assessment of the forestland under Chapter 61B is 25 percent of the current assessed values of the land. In this category, there must be at least 5 contiguous acres of property to qualify.

As assessed by MRPC GIS, there are currently 1584.2 acres of property within the Wachusett Corridor which are classified as Chapter 61 lands (1367.8 acres in Fitchburg and 216.3 acres in Westminster).

IV. Sensitive Environmental Resources

BioMap2

In 2012, the MA Department of Fish and Game completed an update of the State's critical habitat areas as part of its BioMap2 initiative. BioMap2 is designed to guide strategic biodiversity conservation in Massachusetts over the next decade by focusing land protection and stewardship on the areas that are most critical for ensuring the long-term persistence of rare and other native species and their habitats, exemplary natural communities, and a diversity of ecosystems. BioMap2 is also designed to include the habitats and species of conservation concern identified in the State Wildlife Action Plan. The first BioMap initiative was completed back in 2001. The BioMap program is administered by the Department's Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. The program maps two types of habitat: Core Habitats (areas that are critical for the long-term persistence of rare species and species of conservation concern) and Critical Natural Landscapes (large contiguous blocks of land that are minimally impacted by development).

Core Habitat includes:

- Habitats for rare, vulnerable, or uncommon mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian, fish, invertebrate, and plant species
- Priority Natural Communities
- High quality wetland, vernal pool, aquatic, and coastal habitats
- Intact forest ecosystems

Based on GIS mapping there are 1762.316 acres of BioMap2 core habitat area within the Wachusett Corridor Area, consisting of three subareas. This comprises 14.02% of the land area of the Wachusett Smart Growth Corridor Study area. These areas are shown in Figure 6.

The Core Habitat area around the Leominster State Forest and Leominster Watershed Area is identified as BioMap Core 2339. This Core represents a Forest Core, Aquatic Core, Wetlands Core and a Species of Conservation Concern for the Common Loon. The individual Town BioMap2 Report describes this area as "A 3,263-acre Core Habitat featuring a Forest Core, Wetlands Core, Aquatic Core, and a Species of Conservation Concern" (note that 1758.632, about half of the Core Habitat is located within the Corridor Area). Forest Cores are the best examples of large, intact forests that are least impacted by roads and development. Forest Cores support many bird species sensitive to the impacts of roads and development and help maintain ecological processes found only in unfragmented forest patches. This area is part of an important cluster of Forest Cores, which are only partially protected. Most of this acreage is in Leominster with only 18 acres in Fitchburg.

Core 2387 is located around Coggshall Park in Fitchburg and consists of a 391- acre Core Habitat featuring a Species of Conservation Concern. Sharp-shinned Hawks nest in mixed woodlands and coniferous forests, often with nearby open area. They are sensitive to disturbance around the nest, but they do occasionally nest near human development.

Core 2463 is around Phillips Brook on the Fitchburg / Westminster town line and is a 37-acre Core Habitat featuring Aquatic Core and Species of Conservation concern. Aquatic Cores are intact river

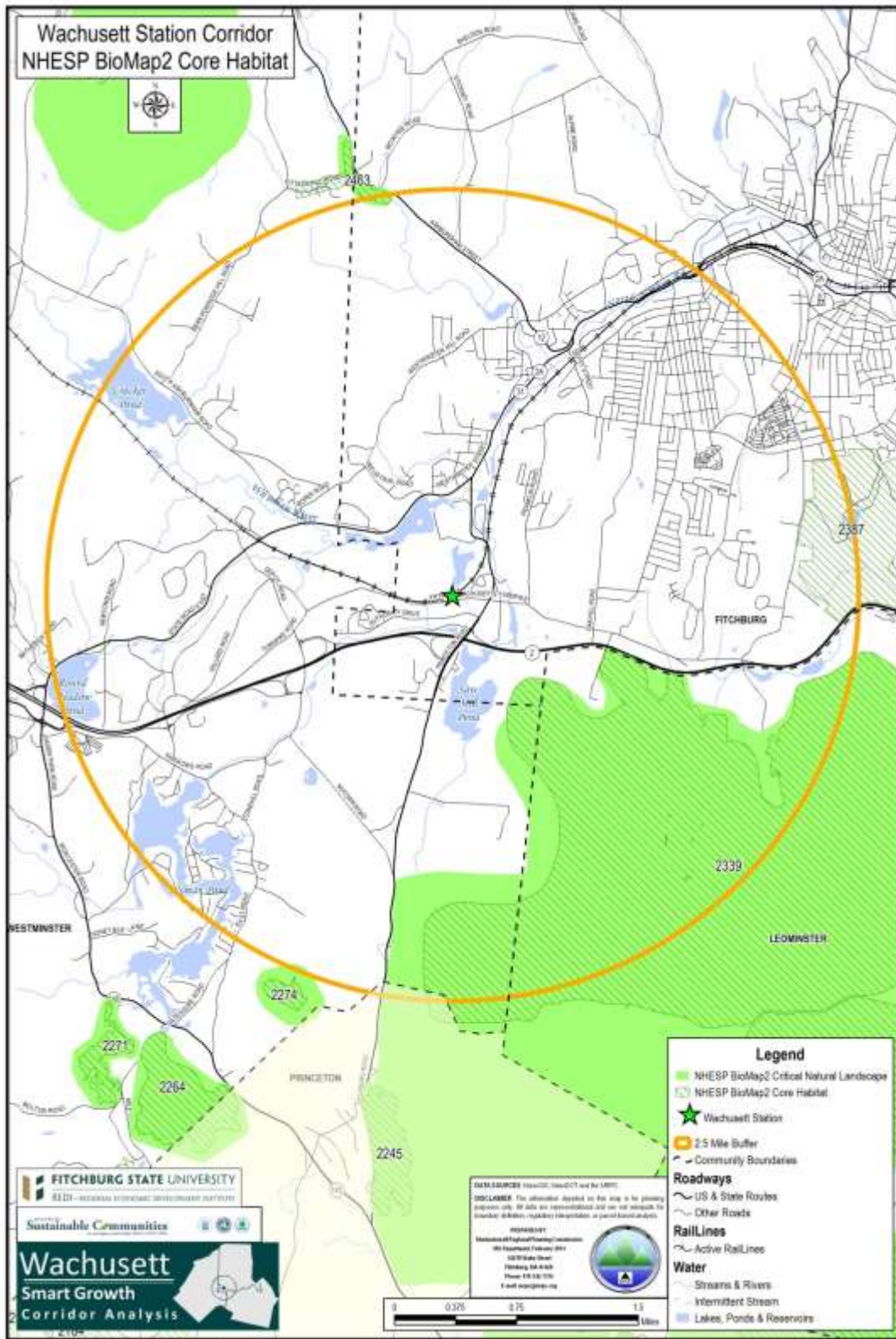


Figure 6: BioMap2 Areas

corridors within which important physical and ecological processes of the river or stream occur. They delineate integrated and functional ecosystems for fish species and other aquatic Species of Conservation Concern. Species found in Phillips Brook include Creepers and Spring Salamanders. Creepers are freshwater mussels that inhabit low-gradient reaches of small to large rivers with sand or gravel substrates. Cool to warm water with diverse fish assemblages best support Creepers. Spring Salamander adults inhabits clean, cold, high-gradient brooks and headwater seeps in forest habitat, usually at elevation greater than 100m. Larvae are entirely aquatic and largely nocturnal, spending daylight hours buried below the streambed or hidden under stones. Adults are semi-aquatic and spend most of their time under objects along the brooks, springs and seeps; however, they will venture into upland forest during rainy weather.

Priority Preservation Areas

To assess the local Priority Preservation Areas for MRPC's 2011 Montachusett Regional Priorities Framework Plan, MRPC reached out to the local municipalities through letters and other correspondence to receive community input regarding Priority Preservation areas. If MRPC received no response from these communities, priority areas from EO 418 Community Development Plans from 2004, Master Plans or Open Space Plans were used to complete the assessment. Those areas considered Priority Preservation Areas which are located in the Wachusett Corridor area within Fitchburg, Leominster, and Westminster are cited below:

Fitchburg

From review of EO 418 Community Development Plan:

1. The lands designated as Outstanding Resource Waters due to their value to the Fitchburg water supplies are of high protection priority. The City defined the entire watershed as a Watershed Protection Overlay District in its Zoning Bylaw. The Fitchburg Water Department, recognizing the value of these lands for protection of its water supplies, has aggressively pursued acquiring these areas. Remaining areas within the Watershed Overlay District are an important priority for protection. Areas nearest the tributary streams should be the first priority, due to their value for wildlife habitat and water quality. Areas that provide connections between existing protected open space and watershed landholdings should be the next priority. Selected private parcels within the Watershed Protection Overlay Districts (identified on Fitchburg's ID Housing, Economic Development & Open Space Areas Map) have been identified by the City.
2. Within the Watershed Protection Overlay District in South Fitchburg are tributaries that feed the NoTown Reservoir in Leominster. These areas contain a region that is identified as priority habitat for State-protected Rare Species and Estimated Habitat for Rare Wildlife. This region overlaps the 100-meter riparian corridor identified in the Massachusetts Resource Identification Project (MRIP)³ as a priority for protection. This portion of the watershed should be a focus for protection efforts, especially since the Rollstone Road area now has subdivision projects under construction.

³ Documented by the Massachusetts Office of Geographic Information (MassGIS)

3. The City's Master Plan identified permanently protecting city-owned parcels next to Moran Park as a priority.

4. Open space, rural landscapes, and wildlife habitats in West Fitchburg are a protection priority while retaining accessibility for current and future residents. New subdivisions should employ Open Space Residential Design (OSRD) standards.

5. Nashua River and its banks are a protection priority that must be coordinated with the City's revitalization goals. The River also offers potential as the "jewel in the crown" of revitalization efforts. Plans for connecting a pedestrian and bicycle path linking Fitchburg and Leominster are coupled with establishing a greenway corridor and riverwalk, connecting a series of parks along the banks of the Nashua River. River advocates should work closely with the Fitchburg Redevelopment Authority and the Planning Department to ensure that their efforts are mutually beneficial.

6. Phillips Brook, which flows besides Route 12 through Westminster into West Fitchburg to its confluence with the North Branch Nashua River, should be an immediate priority for protection. Zoned for residential use, the area is one of the most sensitive places in the City and among the least protected. It represents a Priority Habitat for Rare Species, has potential to flood, and it has a medium yield aquifer.

Leominster

From review of EO 418 Community Development Plan and Open Space Plan:

1. Participants recommended a trail system linking protected city-owned lands at North Monoosnoc Hill and Mount Elam Road with the Mid-State Trail via a trail connecting over South Monoosnoc Hill along the Notown Reservoir south to Parmenter Street and Rocky Pond. This proposal trail system would establish a loop with the existing Monoosnoc Ridge Trail.

2. The Open Space and Recreation Action Plan included a recommendation for a buffer of Fall Brook, the North Nashua River, Monoosnoc Brook and Reservoir Brook as greenways. A hiking trail to follow Fall Brook, the North Nashua and Monoosnoc Brook, closing a large loop connecting each terminus of the Monoosnoc Ridge Trail was also recommended. This proposal was supported by participants of the Public Forum. See Updated OS Plan for further details.

Westminster

None of the Priority Preservation Areas identified by the Town of Westminster are within the Wachusett Corridor.

Prime Agricultural Soils (from MRPC Massachusetts Regional Strategic Framework Plan)

As shown previously in Table 1, there are 181.76 acres within the Wachusett Corridor which are currently in active agricultural use. However, as classified by MassGIS, additional acreage within the Corridor is considered potentially suitable for agricultural use. Figure 7 presents a GIS Map of Prime

Agricultural Soils within the Wachusett Corridor. Given the importance of local and regional food security, economic opportunities provided by working landscapes and environmental benefits of locally/regionally grown foods (e.g. reduced energy usage with decreased transportation of food from outside the Region) lands that are identified as Prime Agricultural Soils have been identified as Regional Priority Preservation Areas.

The different types of Prime Agricultural Soils are classified as follows:

- Prime Farmland – Land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops, and is also available for these uses (the land could be cropland, pastureland, rangeland, forest land, or other land, but not urban built-up land or water).
- Farmland of Statewide Importance – This is land, in addition to prime and unique farmlands, that is of statewide importance for the production of food, fiber, forage, and oilseed crops, as determined by the appropriate state agency or agencies. Generally, these include lands that are nearly prime farmland and that economically produce high yields of crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods.
- Farmland of Unique Importance – Land other than prime farmland that is used for the production of specific high value food and fiber crops. Examples of such crops are citrus, tree nuts, olives, cranberries, fruit, vegetables.

Based on the GIS analysis, existing and potential farmland acreage within the Wachusett Corridor, shown in Figure 7, is classified as follows:

Prime farmland	505.8 acres
Farmland of statewide importance	2037.5 acres
Farmland of unique importance	232.8 acres
TOTAL	2776.1 acres

22.09% of all lands within the Wachusett Corridor are incorporated within locations of Prime Agricultural soils.

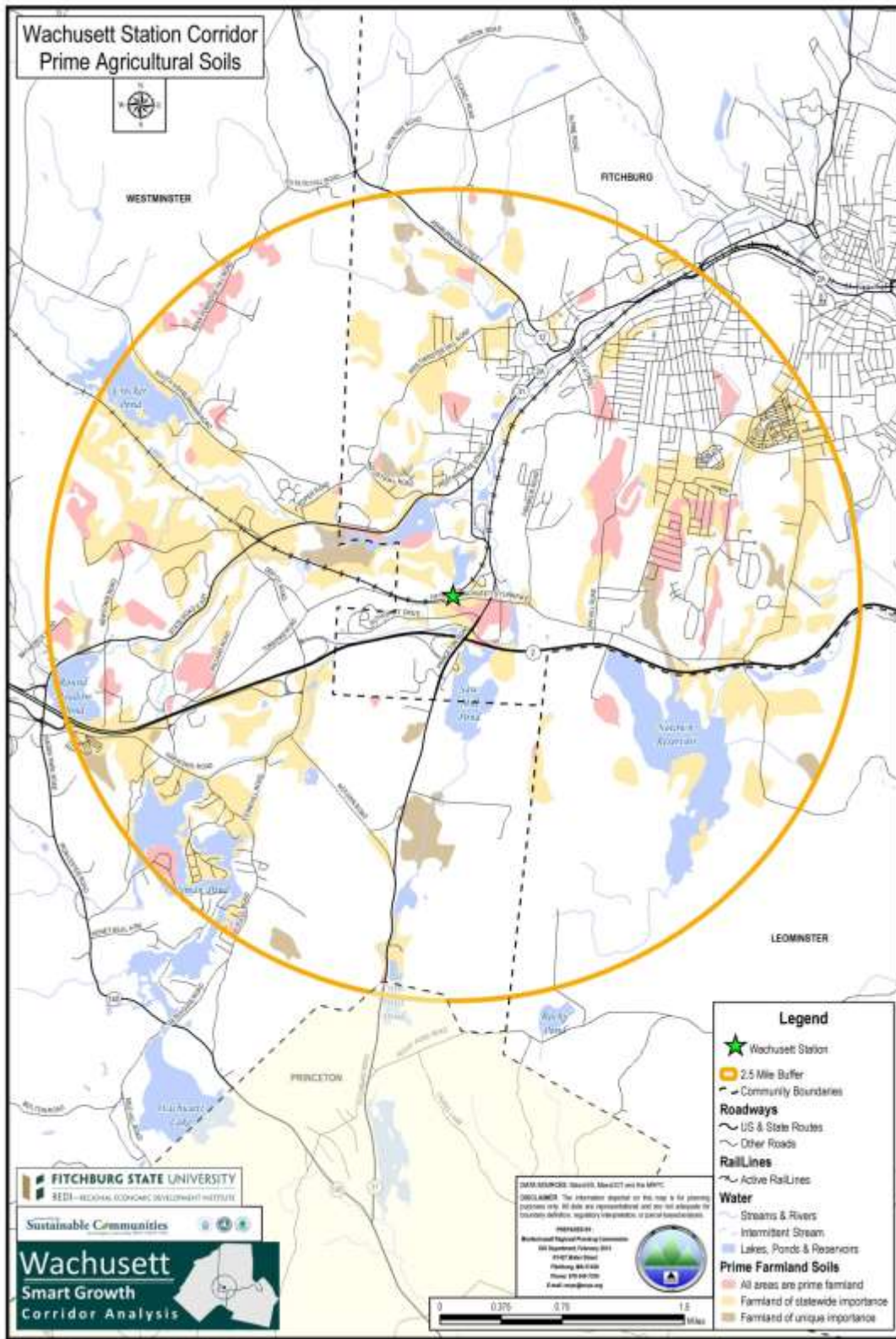


Figure 7: Prime Agricultural Soils

V. Community Open Space Plans

Each of the Wachusett Corridor communities have prepared community open space plans to document available resources and identify actions to preserve open space and recreational areas. Each of these plans was recently updated and is currently going through an approval process. Therefore information provided in the following discussion should be considered current but “draft” and subject to revision pending final approval of the individual plans. Each of these draft plans was reviewed and taken into consideration in developing recommendations for the Wachusett Corridor.

Westminster

The purpose of Westminster’s draft 2014 Open Space and Recreation Plan is “to identify the most important parcels of land to preserve; and to use land acquisition in concert with other land preservation techniques to meet the Town’s open space goals. The primary open space goals for the next seven years are to use traditional and innovative techniques for protecting additional open space, keeping pace with development.”

Selected goals and strategies of the Plan with particular relevance to preserving open space and enhancing recreational resources in the Wachusett Corridor are as follow:

- **Encourage a “working landscape” for Westminster.** This can be accomplished by ensuring that impediments to open space land uses such as agriculture/aquaculture, silviculture, and recreation are avoided. Further, the Town should strive to promote these land uses as a means of open space protection. Objectives to accomplish this goal include:
 - Protect those properties the Town has identified for preservation through Agricultural Preservation Restrictions and Conservation Restrictions.
 - Promote residential, commercial and industrial infill within existing developed areas to limit development in other areas thereby protecting rural character.
- **Protect and preserve the natural and cultural resources that are vital to the Town’s rural character.** Based on the results of a citizen survey and forums conducted on behalf of the Town’s Master Plan update project, Westminster citizens value the Town’s rural character very highly. Preserving natural landscapes and cultural resources are critical components of the Town’s rural character.
- **Enhance recreational opportunities in Town and to keep pace with the growing population.** The Westminster Parks and Recreation Commission has identified several needs for the planning horizon of this document (7 years), including new space for athletic fields, and a children’s playground in the Town Center. Objectives to accomplish this goal include:
 - Identify opportunities to develop a multi-use trail that will link major open space parcels, neighborhoods and schools.
 - Assist in the development and rerouting of the Midstate Trail in Westminster.
 - Secure protective easements on those portions of the Midstate Trail that occur on private property.

- Create recreation amenities (biking-hiking-equestrian trails, camping sites and picnic sites) on those conservation properties that are suitable for such uses.
- Work with the City of Fitchburg to allow public access of water bodies (Meetinghouse Pond, Mare Meadow Pond and Wachusett Reservoir) for passive recreation such as kayaking, canoeing and fishing.
- Properly maintain our existing recreation facilities and secure additional parking for the ball-fields on South Street.
- Investigate opportunities to create a trail network for snow-mobiles that could also be used for more passive recreation uses such as horseback riding and cross-country skiing.
- **Identify and prioritize lands for acquisition.** With almost 30% of the Town's total land area under permanent protection, Westminster has protected the majority of its critical environmental resources. The Town is reluctant to exercise its right-of-first-refusal and purchase additional Chapter lands unless they achieve multiple open space/recreation goals described in their Open Space Plan. The more open space/recreation priorities a parcel meets, the more likely the Town will consider acquisition. One of the goals for this Plan is that the Town continues to identify and prioritize lands for acquisition based on the "multiple goods" strategy described in their Open Space Plan. Objectives to accomplish this goal include:
 - Support the Midstate Trail Open Space Committee in the identification of priority land acquisition parcels along or abutting the Midstate Trail.
 - Work toward a town-wide greenway that protects key wetlands, streams, and rivers.
 - Continue to annually allocate funds for the purchase of open space and recreation areas.
- **Advertise and raise awareness of Westminster's open space and recreation resources.** The Economic Development chapter of the Westminster Master Plan has identified eco-tourism as one component of the Town's future economic development strategy. Towards that end, it will be important for the Town to advertise and raise awareness of its open space and recreation resources.
 - Develop a Town-wide signage program for open space and recreation areas.
 - Develop a brochure on Westminster's recreation opportunities and open space parcels. Put information on the Town's website.
 - Create maps and trail guides for those Town conservation areas that are suitable for public access.

Fitchburg

The City of Fitchburg's draft 2013-2020 Open Space and Recreation Plan states its overall goal as follows: "Fitchburg is a community with significant public open space and recreational resources. Protecting, maintaining, updating and utilizing these resources appropriately is essential to the city's efforts to provide a good quality of life for current and future residents, attract and retain businesses and promote the health of the environment and the community."

To accomplish this, the draft plan includes the following selected goals and objectives which are relevant to the Wachusett Corridor:

- Goal: Develop and Maintain a safe and sought after park system in Fitchburg that provide a variety of recreational activities for all residents.
 - Maintain existing playgrounds and open space areas.
 - Upgrade facilities to current standards as funds allow.
 - Continue recreational opportunities at city parks for individuals of all abilities and ages.
- Goal: Provide walking and biking paths for recreation and commuting.
 - Maintain and improve sidewalks and walking paths in developed areas, including accessibility improvements.
 - Finalize Fitchburg's Complete Streets Resolution
 - Install sidewalks and bike lanes where they do not exist, particularly those areas that access schools, parks, trails and shopping clusters and design thoughtful connections between highly used areas.
 - Keep the map of citywide walking trails in Fitchburg updated and create good "take away" trail maps for trail users.
 - Complete the Steamline Trail in West Fitchburg for walking and bicycling.
- Goal: Provide better access to recreational opportunities.
 - Improve marketing to increase awareness of Fitchburg's park and open space system.
 - Improve marketing of organized recreational and cultural opportunities provided at Fitchburg parks and open space.
 - Improve public transportation to city park system.
 - Improve signage to and within city parks.
- Goal: Protect and promote Fitchburg's watershed.
 - Continue to improve access to and awareness of the Nashua River and other water bodies as city assets.
- Goal: Develop and maintain partnerships among the city and its schools, other community organizations and residents by encouraging public-private ventures.
 - Continue to work with groups such as the Montachusett Public Health Network, Montachusett Regional Trail Coalition, North County Land Trust, Mt. Grace Land Trust and the Mass. Audubon Society to protect open space and develop walking trails.
 - Continue partnerships with agencies such as the Montachusett Opportunity Council, Inc. to support efforts like Fun 'n FITchburg whose efforts help create a safe and sought after park system in Fitchburg.
- Goal: Protect, promote, preserve open space and wildlife habitat.
 - Properly maintain city owned forested areas.
 - Implement or enforce regulations to limit sprawl.
 - Work with local, regional and state organizations to preserve open space and wildlife habitat.
 - Continue and expand environmental programming in parks and trails.

Leominster

The City of Leominster is currently updating their Open Space and Recreation Plan. The draft Leominster Open Space and Recreation Plan 2013-2020 presents the following community vision for open space and recreation within the City:

“Leominster is an active community where all its children and adults can find a broad range of opportunities to recreate and where the natural environment is appreciated and cared for by all residents. This Vision begins with a commitment by our City’s leaders to plan for and promote more active and healthy lifestyles for all of our residents and a commitment to providing leadership, direction and passion in the stewardship of our natural resources and to sustain and enhance their value to the community.”

To achieve this vision, the draft plan includes the following selected goals and objectives which are relevant to the Wachusett Corridor:

- Goal: Make our recreational areas more attractive and accessible to encourage increased use by local residents.
 - Address the accessibility issues at all recreation sites and on our trails within the City.
 - Explore the siting and construction of one or more dog parks within the City.
 - Create a signage program that brings consistency, accuracy, style and usefulness to signage at our parks, on our trails and on our recreation lands.
- Goal: Increase the range of recreational opportunities for all ages and abilities within the City.
 - Develop a blue trail (a water trail) on the North Nashua River.
- Goal: Expand and enhance the trail network within the City of Leominster.
 - Explore completion of the greater Monoosnoc Trail loop around the City tying the various trails together within the City into a comprehensive network.
 - Complete the Monoosnoc Brook Trail so it connects from Pierce Pond to the North Nashua River.
 - Continue efforts to repair, re-route, re-construct trails and fire roads on the watershed lands within the City.
 - Develop a trail vision for the City with the help of the Leominster trail stewards.
 - Extend the existing trail network with additions in the Sholan Farms area and the north Monoosnoc Hills region.
 - Continue capacity building work with the Leominster trail stewards to enable them to develop and maintain the City’s trail network.
- Goal: Make Leominster a recreational destination within the state
 - Explore development of a collaborative relationship with the Great Wolf Resorts to make trail connections from the resort to the Leominster Trail Network around Notown Reservoir
 - Make trail connections to other communities.
 - Explore the creation of a mountain bike park using lands from Leominster State Forest, the Leominster watershed lands and other protected open space to develop a formal mountain bike park. Explore building a trail connection from the new West Fitchburg train station to open space lands south of Route 2 in Leominster and Fitchburg.
- Goal: Take a more pro-active stance with regard to the promotion of healthy and active lifestyles.
 - Explore what it would take to make Leominster more “walkable” and “bikeable”.
- Goal: Acquire key parcels of land to enhance our parks, open space inventory and watershed lands.

- Acquire key watershed parcels especially around Notown Reservoir and the Jungle Road well fields.
- Explore the addition of open space parcels currently owned by the Leominster Land Trust to the City's holdings.

DRAFT

VI. Open Space Preservation

As is the case nearly anywhere, there is a need to balance a variety of land uses within the Wachusett Corridor to support a healthy, diverse, and economically prosperous community. Given the finite nature of real estate, there are frequently conflicting demands placed on limited available resources which often strain the ability of a community to preserve its open space. This can be particularly difficult in an area such as the Wachusett Corridor which is likely to experience a variety of development pressures resulting from the increase in local activity resulting from the development of the Wachusett Station. As discussed in the preceding sections of this Plan, the communities of Fitchburg, Leominster, and Westminster have all developed plans to identify open space priorities. Yet it is a significant challenge for these communities to obtain the resources necessary to achieve these priorities and to acquire and/or preserve open space. However, there are a number of tools which are available to Massachusetts communities to help them in their efforts to preserve and/or acquire open space, some of which may be appropriate for the Wachusett Corridor. In all cases, further investigation into these opportunities is necessary to identify specific needs and the most appropriate program(s) to address those needs.

Some of the primary programs for consideration include the following:

1. **Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)** – TDR is a regulatory strategy that employs private market forces to protect open space and target new development to appropriate locations. First, open space is permanently protected for water supply, agricultural, habitat, recreational, or other purposes via the transfer of some or all of the development that would otherwise have occurred in these sensitive places to more suitable locations. Second, other locations, such as city and town centers or vacant and underutilized properties, become more vibrant and successful as the development potential from the protected resource areas is transferred to them. In essence, development rights are "transferred" from one district (the "sending district") to another (the "receiving district"). Communities using TDR are generally shifting development densities within the community to achieve both open space and economic goals without changing their overall development potential. TDR needs to be incorporated into the local community zoning bylaws to be applied.
2. **Chapter 61** – Under Massachusetts General Law "Chapter 61," landowners can voluntarily agree to keep land in forestry, agriculture, or open space and recreational use for a specified period of time in exchange for a reduction in local property taxes. As discussed above, there are already a number of Chapter 61 properties in the Wachusett Corridor. By obtaining property tax relief, landowners are able to continue to hold and use land for open space purposes, rather than development. In exchange, municipalities receive a right of first refusal to purchase the land at fair-market value if it faces the prospect of being converted to another use during the enrollment period. There are three programs under Chapter 61 – Chapter 61 for forestry lands, Chapter 61A for agricultural lands, and Chapter 61B for open space and recreational lands. Each program has unique requirements relevant to minimum acreage (generally 5 to 10 acres), specific property tax savings, and other provisions.

3. **Community Preservation Act (CPA)** – CPA is a smart growth tool that helps communities preserve open space and historic sites, create affordable housing, and develop outdoor recreational facilities. CPA also helps strengthen the state and local economies by expanding housing opportunities and construction jobs for the Commonwealth's workforce, and by supporting the tourism industry through preservation of the Commonwealth's historic and natural resources. CPA allows Massachusetts communities to create a local Community Preservation Fund for open space protection, historic preservation, affordable housing and outdoor recreation. Municipalities must adopt CPA by ballot referendum. Community preservation monies are raised locally through the imposition of a surcharge of not more than 3 percent of the tax levy against real property. The state supplements these local funds with matching funds although the amount of the match has decreased in recent years. The legislative body (town meeting or city council) determines how the money will be spent. The only stipulation is that, each year, at least 10 percent must be set aside for housing, 10 percent for historic preservation, and 10 percent for open space. The remaining 70 percent can be spent on any of those needs or on recreation needs. Funds can also be reserved for future use but all funds must be spent locally.
4. **State Funding for Acquisition of Conservation and Recreation Land** – The Division of Conservation Services (DCS) in the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs offers a variety of grant programs to municipalities for the acquisition of conservation and recreation land, as well as the development and renovation of parks:
 - **Our Common Backyards Program** – The Our Common Backyards Grant Program is a new grant program aimed at building a new playground or spray park in each of the Commonwealth's 54 cities. The program will help cities create or renovate parks in the neighborhoods that need them most.
 - **Massachusetts Land and Water Conservation Fund** – The Federal Land & Water Conservation Fund (P.L. 88-578) provides up to 50% of the total project cost for the acquisition, development and renovation of park, recreation or conservation areas. Municipalities, special districts and state agencies are eligible to apply. Nearly 4000 acres have been acquired and hundreds of parks renovated using the \$95.6 million that Massachusetts has received from the state side portion of the federal program since 1965. DCS administers the state side Land & Water Conservation Fund program in Massachusetts. Access by the general public is required.
 - **Massachusetts Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity (LAND) Program** – The LAND Program (formerly the Self-Help Program) was established in 1961 to assist municipal conservation commissions acquiring land for natural resource and passive outdoor recreation purposes. Lands acquired may include wildlife, habitat, trails, unique natural, historic or cultural resources, water resources, forest, and farm land. Compatible passive outdoor recreational uses such as hiking, fishing, hunting, cross-country skiing, bird observation and the like are encouraged. Access by the general public is required.
 - **Massachusetts Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) Program** – The PARC Program (formerly the Urban Self-Help Program) was established in 1977 to assist

cities and towns in acquiring and developing land for park and outdoor recreation purposes. Any town with a population of 35,000 or more year-round residents, or any city regardless of size, that has an authorized park /recreation commission is eligible to participate in the program. Communities that do not meet the population criteria listed above may still qualify under the "small town," "regional," or "statewide" project provisions of the program.

- **Conservation Partnership Grant** – The Conservation Partnership Grants provide funding to assist non-public, not-for-profit corporations in acquiring interests in lands suitable for conservation or recreation purposes.

DRAFT

VII. Goal, Objectives, and Strategies for the Wachusett Corridor Smart Growth Plan

The following goal, objectives, and strategies are based on a review of available data, current land use, identification of potential open space and resource enhancements, and opportunities to improve open space and recreational resources in the corridor. This should be considered a starting point in the implementation process, which will be highly dependent upon the ability of the Region to enlist the appropriate partners to follow through on specific strategies.

Wachusett Corridor Open Space and Recreation Goal:

Support the use, preservation, and enhancement of open space and recreation resources in the Wachusett Corridor in coordination with the establishment of the Wachusett Station and the extension of commuter rail service on the Fitchburg Branch of the MBTA Commuter Rail network.

Wachusett Corridor Open Space and Recreation Objectives:

1. **Preservation of Open Space and Recreational Resources:** Protect and conserve open space, sensitive environmental resources, and recreational facilities and resources to enhance the quality of life for area residents and visitors.
2. **Access to Open Space and Recreational Resources:** Facilitate improved access to open space and recreational resources within and adjacent to the Wachusett Corridor. Particular emphasis should be on enhancing access for lower income populations.
3. **Access to Wachusett Station:** Maintain and expand the regional trail network and facilitate connections to improve access to and from Wachusett Station for non-motorized transportation modes, specifically pedestrian and bicycle access.
4. **Public Information about Regional Open Space and Recreational Resources:** Increase public awareness of the Region's open space and recreation assets to potential visitors from within and outside of the Region.

Recommended Strategies:

1. **Establish a network of sidewalks and paths to allow safe pedestrian and bicycle access to the Wachusett Station and connections to adjacent residential and commercial areas.** Safe access by pedestrians and bicyclists necessitates a clearly defined network of sidewalks and paths that provide direct routing, safe crossings and are protected from vehicular traffic. Given available right-of-way and location of high volume roadways within the corridor, establishment of this network will require further analysis to identify optimal alignments and configurations.
2. **Provide public transit/shuttle service between Wachusett Station and nearby recreation areas. Examine the operating schedule of train service and enhance the schedule as appropriate to accommodate use by recreational travelers to the region.** This will require coordination with MART and the MBTA to provide adequate service and schedule coverage to accommodate the needs of recreational travelers. These travelers would presumably have different scheduling needs than work commute travelers which would likely require increased service coverage on weekends.

3. **Provide safe and secure bicycle parking facilities at Wachusett Station and other primary bicycle destinations within the Wachusett Corridor.** To fully accommodate bicycle utilization as a viable transportation mode within the corridor, safe and secure bicycle parking must be available at primary activity centers. This could include bicycle racks and/or lockers, depending upon the site. In the case of bike lockers, equipment could be partially or fully financed through rental fees.
4. **Allow/promote bikes on all modes of public transportation, including buses, shuttles, and trains.** Restrictions on bicycles on public transportation services in the corridor could potentially impede the use of bicycles as a viable mode of transportation. Efforts should be made to identify restrictions and find means to accommodate bicycle access that does not create a nuisance or safety hazard for transit operators or passengers.
5. **Define and improve pedestrian and bicycle connections to Steamline and Burma Road Trails: Conduct a trail corridor study to facilitate access to the trail from Wachusett Station.** In conjunction with Strategy #1 above, these two trails provide the greatest opportunity for access to the station from Fitchburg's residential community to the north. Efforts should be made to identify feasible connections and trail improvements to establish a functional and safe means of pedestrian access.
6. **Define and improve pedestrian connections to Midstate Trail: Conduct a trail corridor study to facilitate access to the trail from Wachusett Station.** Similar to Strategy #5, efforts should be made to identify feasible connections and trail improvements to enable access to the Midstate Trail, a potentially desirable route which could be utilized by both day- and overnight-hikers.
7. **Explore opportunities to establish a mountain bike destination within or in proximity to Leominster State Forest that provides coordinated access for cyclists including allowance for bikes on trains and connecting trails between Wachusett Station and Leominster State Forest.**
Key implementation steps could include the following actions:
 - a. Coordination/collaboration with MBTA, MassDOT, DCR, EOEEA, and City of Leominster
 - b. Design assistance from New England Mountain Bike Association (NEMBA)
 - c. Identification of Route 2 crossing options (overpass or underpass) which would be accessible to bicyclists and hikers. Would require collaboration with MassDOT, City of Leominster, and possibly DCR.
 - d. Other considerations include preservation of open space and recreation areas in vicinity of Notown Reservoir, improvements to Leominster State Forest trail network, coordination with local hospitality and tourist bureaus, possibly tie-in with new Great Wolf resort, and opportunities to provide bike rental or bike sharing services.
8. **Assist the Wachusett Corridor communities in the identification of appropriate properties for preservation and identify appropriate tools and/or funding programs to support their efforts. Provide assistance as appropriate to pursue these programs.** This could be accomplished in conjunction with the updating of the Open Space Plans of the three Wachusett municipalities.
9. **Create and market a "brand" to publicize and promote recreation opportunities in the Wachusett Corridor.** Establish name recognition for the Wachusett Corridor and a profile to identify the area and promote its resources. Include a logo, trail and landmark maps, a website, publicity campaigns, and coordination/tie-ins with other environmental and outdoor recreation

organizations such as the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), the Nashua River Watershed Association, the Sierra Club, Nashoba Valley Peddlers, and the New England Mountain Biking Association (NEMBA).

- 10. Collaborate with commercial recreational enterprises within the Region including Great Wolf and Wachusett Mountain to promote their facilities and provide coordinated access and possible marketing strategies.** This should be pursued in conjunction with the “branding” of the area and could produce synergistic benefits for all entities involved.
- 11. Assure that all facilities developed under this plan or in association with the development of the new station and rail service are constructed and maintained to preserve sensitive environmental resources.** This includes meeting appropriate “Green” construction and development standards (e.g., Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design or LEED standards), and assuring that construction is performed in accordance with local, state, and Federal environmental regulations and policies.