

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The Town of LaGrange is well-positioned to help protect many of its beautiful open space resources—if the community acts now. Attributes such as open and available land, scenic beauty, and proximity to the county seat of Poughkeepsie, are attracting people to move to LaGrange from places like New York City and Westchester County. Open lands are being converted to residential development at a rate that is concerning to many residents. In particular, the town’s farms are at risk of being lost if action is not taken to help farmland owners keep their land open and in production.



Open spaces in LaGrange include farms, forests, and stream corridors such as the Wappinger and Sprout Creek.

This increasing interest in open land development reverberates throughout the Hudson Valley, bringing many economic benefits. For LaGrange residents, there is a great deal of interest in ensuring a balance exists between development and protecting the farmlands and open spaces that comprise much of the town’s rural character and historic settlement patterns. There is a turning point at which the townspeople must decide to actively support land conservation—whether to support tax incentives to help maintain farmland or whether to purchase an easement for a multi-purpose trail. Communities that invest in open space conservation have seen their communities maintain that balance. For those that have not, the balance tips and the once-open spaces are lost—forever.

Finding a balance between conservation and development is a challenge for every community. The nation’s current system of land use, zoning, and taxation, more often than not, favors development over conservation. Farm and forest land owners have been maintaining open lands for generations. As development pressures increase, landowners face difficult decisions. Many local residents believe these landowners will “do the right thing” and keep the land open. Despite the fact that landowners often want to keep the land open, they also have other fiduciary responsibilities to their spouses, family members, and other parties and rightfully consider their equity in the land an asset—for retirement or other family needs.

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Landowners in LaGrange who simply cannot afford to continue paying taxes as land values escalate, or those who wish to cash in the equity in their land for retirement, have few choices but to sell the land outright. Once the “for sale” sign goes up, it is usually too late to turn the tide. Currently, there are virtually no economically viable long-term options for landowners interested in maintaining their land as open space. While the town can apply for state, county and federal grant programs for the purchase of development rights, the monies for these programs simply are inadequate for demand across the county, state, and nation.

This plan asserts the need for the LaGrange community to address this problem. To do this, a diverse set of options or conservation tools will need to be established and adequate funding will be needed to support these tools. Some farmland owners simply need their taxes reduced so that they can continue to afford to work the land. Other landowners may be looking to retire or transition the land, and may need options that can help to support retirement while maintaining the land’s conservation value. The plan recommendations (Chapter 4) are tailored to meet these diverse needs.

The Problem of Fragmentation

A major result of increasing development in LaGrange is fragmentation of the town’s agricultural areas and its natural habitats. Although fragmentation is typically a word associated with conservation biology, fragmentation of the town’s farmlands is also a major concern. Farmers in LaGrange have described their farms as an interconnected system of lands, all of which are important for production. A small handful of farmers are working both their home farm and renting nearby lands in order to maintain an economically viable farm business. When a piece of the puzzle is lost to development, for example, when a rented farm parcel is sold for subdivision, it becomes much harder for the system to function. As farms become surrounded by residential development, conflicts arise, such as concerns about spraying or the use of fertilizers, making it harder for farmers to do their job.

Fragmentation of habitat leads to similar results for wildlife. When a large area of forest is broken up into smaller pieces, for example by a road, the benefits it provides wildlife diminishes. For some larger animals such as the black bear, fragmentation may result in an area that is too small for its survival. Fragmentation of functioning natural communities, such as the connection between wetlands and uplands, can also have a significant effect on wildlife that depend on connected areas for feeding, breeding or other basic activities.

The concept of fragmentation may oversimplify the deleterious effects of development on wildlife. However, without comprehensive habitat and species data for the town and region, the concept of fragmentation provides a useful way to frame development activities to reduce fragmentation of natural communities. This is of particular importance for the town’s major forest system (the Taconic Ridge), its riparian (creek) systems, and its wetland systems, which include not only the wetlands but the surrounding upland areas.

The Town’s Fiscal Health

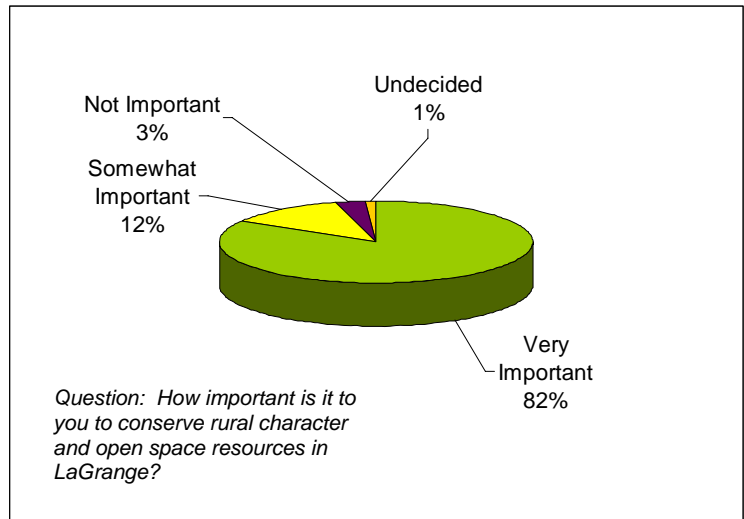
As open space is developed, there is another important point to consider; the financial costs of development to the town and its taxpayers. As the number of housing developments increase, so does the infrastructure that needs to be maintained and services that need to be provided. While an increase in residential development may appear to be a financial windfall, there is a point at which the cost of providing education and other services and maintenance actually becomes a burden to the taxpayers and taxes then must rise. There eventually comes a time when there is little or no open space for scenery or recreation, and the taxes are too high for long-time residents and other people who want to continue to live in the community.

Community Values

LaGrange is a community that cares about its open space resources. Town residents understand that open space provides many benefits to the community. Streams and riparian areas, such as those associated with Wappinger, Sprout and Jackson Creeks, perform critical “environmental services” such as maintaining clean drinking water. Farmlands in LaGrange produce vegetables, fruits, dairy products, landscape plants, and other essential products. Forest lands, such as those along the Taconic Ridge, are important environmental and recreational amenities. Each of these resources add to the character of LaGrange.

In the summer of 2006, the town’s open space committee conducted a mail survey to gauge the interest of town residents in preserving open space. Does the community think that open space conservation is important? What resources do they value? Are they willing to pay for conservation of open space?

The results were overwhelmingly supportive, with a 20% percent response rate (1,080 surveys returned), and 82% of respondents considering conservation of the rural character and open space resources to be very important. The results of the survey indicate that LaGrange residents want to conserve open space resources, particularly farmlands and water resources, and they are willing to contribute financially to accomplish this. Based on this strong evidence for support, LaGrange town officials and the open space committee decided to go forward with developing an open space plan to guide decision-making about where to focus efforts and what tools would be most effective.



Question 1 of the Town of LaGrange Open Space Plan Community Survey

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Among the major conclusions of the survey are the following:

- *82% of respondents said it is very important to conserve rural character and open space resources in LaGrange.*
- *Active farmlands and orchards were identified as the top priority for open space conservation in LaGrange, followed by aquifers and lands for water quality. Nature preserves and wildlife habitat were next in line.*
- *89% of respondents said that the town should protect open space resources as an investment in keeping the Town of LaGrange fiscally healthy and affordable.*
- *81% of respondents said they would feel comfortable spending \$15 or more per year for an average household for a local open space program; 54% of respondents would be comfortable spending \$31 or more.*

The survey form and a summary of its results are provided in Appendix A.

Open Space Planning Process

This open space plan is a continuation of work begun by the town's 2005 comprehensive plan update. One of the main goals of the town's 2005 comprehensive plan is to "balance growth and development with the need to protect natural resources and open space."

Some of the key objectives of the comprehensive plan include:

- Preserve and protect important natural features
- Promote recreational opportunities for all segments of the community
- Develop a conceptual trail network and expand passive recreational areas
- Identify and preserve open space and agricultural uses through a variety of techniques

Because the community's rural character and open space resources are important to residents, these objectives have been taken on by an open space committee, which formed in 2005 to help implement the open space plan. This committee, made up of volunteer members of the community, has been diligently working towards the completion of this open space plan.

The open space committee has been meeting monthly since its formation. They hired a planning consultant, Behan Planning Associates, LLC, to facilitate the planning process, conduct resource inventory and analysis, develop open space priorities and draft an open

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space plan with recommendations for implementation. The committee has taken a very active role in shaping the planning process and products and has served as a voice for the town and community in the planning process.

Public Meetings and Workshops

An important component of successful open space conservation is the support of the residents and landowners of the town. Town residents and large-acreage landowners often have different goals and concerns. Residents of the town often want to preserve the lands around them, the lands that they see and experience on a daily basis. Owners of these large tracts of open space land often feel “targeted” by the community in such efforts. Thus, a fair share of the planning process was devoted to working with landowners to understand their concerns and discuss the types of tools they might need to conserve open space resources on their lands.

On November 6, 2006, a public workshop was held to obtain feedback on conservation values and priorities within the town. At this workshop, participants were split into groups covering different geographic areas of the town and asked to identify resources and places that are important for open space preservation. The community expressed concern over the loss of farmland to development, helped to identify scenic areas and roads, and identified areas of importance for recreation. LaGrange Middle School students also attended this workshop and presented their recommendations for preserving open space in the central area of town.



LaGrange Middle School students share their vision for open space at the November 6th meeting.

Part of a successful open space planning process is to expand the lines of communication between town residents and town government officials with the landowners who are the stewards of the open space land enjoyed by so many. They include farmers who own and/or work significantly large parcels of land, or owners of private forests or other lands significant to habitat and/or scenic quality of the town.

By engaging key stakeholders in the process, the plan can target specific tools and recommendations that will ultimately assist landowners in conservation efforts, if they choose to do so. Likewise, the town officials get a better understanding of the challenges facing the landowners, and can work toward providing the best incentives and tools that are most helpful for landowners toward keeping their land open and undeveloped.

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This partnership and co-education between the town and landowners is the key to a successful town-wide open space system. On February 8, 2006 a meeting with large-acreage landowners was held. The purpose of this meeting was to solicit concerns and opportunities from landowners related to open space conservation and particularly farmland protection. This



LaGrange landowners have a dialogue with the town regarding tools that could help them preserve their lands.

meeting also provided a good opportunity to help land owners understand

conservation options and tools. The session proved useful on both counts, and the dialogue between the town officials, planners, and land owners continues to grow.

With the mutual support of the broader community and those that own large areas of the open space, LaGrange is poised for success in conservation of open space resources and wise management of its growth.

Plan Process and Goals

The main goal of this open space plan is to identify priority open space resources and develop a plan of action for their conservation. To do this, many steps were undertaken. A first, and important, step in developing an open space plan is to create an inventory of existing resources. These include natural resources such as the water and ecological systems in the town, as well as recreational and cultural resources like existing trails and historic features. Understanding the resource patterns is useful in determining priorities for open space conservation. For example, by noting where there are overlapping resources, or where large areas of conservation lands can be assembled, it is possible to identify for preservation those areas that provide the most benefit to the community.

The resources in LaGrange are discussed further in Chapter 2, and the process of prioritizing conservation lands and developing a vision for the town's open space resources is discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents a plan of action that is tailored specifically to the resources, priorities, and values identified throughout the planning process. Chapter 5 provides conclusions.

Land Use Patterns in LaGrange

The three most predominant land use types in LaGrange are residential, vacant land, and agricultural. At 44.3%, residential is the predominant use in the town, followed by 6,200 acres of vacant land (24%), indicating a town in transition from agriculture to residential. Development proposals have been brought forward to the LaGrange Planning Board for many of these vacant lands. Agricultural lands comprise about 14% of the town's land

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area. The remaining land use types (roads, community services, industrial, etc.) make up 17.6%, with no single use occupying more than 4%. The table below summarizes the land use acreages.

Land Use Summary Table (from the 2005 Town of LaGrange Comprehensive Plan):

Land Use	Acres	Percentage
Residential	11,428	44.3%
Vacant Land	6,200	24.0%
Agricultural	3,624	14.1%
Road Right-Of-Way	1,009	3.9%
Community Services	966	3.7%
Wild, Forested, Conservation Lands and Public Parks	809	3.1%
Commercial	625	2.4%
Public Services	499	1.9%
Recreation and Entertainment	289	1.1%
Industrial	262	1.0%
Unknown (no info. available)	78	0.3%
Total	25,790	100.0%

Existing Open Space in LaGrange

Currently about 1,422 acres of land in LaGrange are permanently protected in some way. Those means of protection include public parks, other publicly owned land, and permanent conservation easements held by the Dutchess Land Conservancy. Another 216 acres of open space are privately-owned recreation facilities such as camps and sportsman clubs.

Parks and Preserves

James Baird State Park, located in the center of LaGrange between the Taconic State Parkway and Freedom Road, encompasses 544 acres of land. It is located along the Taconic Ridge and provides recreation opportunities as well as valuable protection for rare plant communities. Town parks in LaGrange include Freedom Park in the northeast part of town, Stringham Park, LaGrange Park, and several town-owned



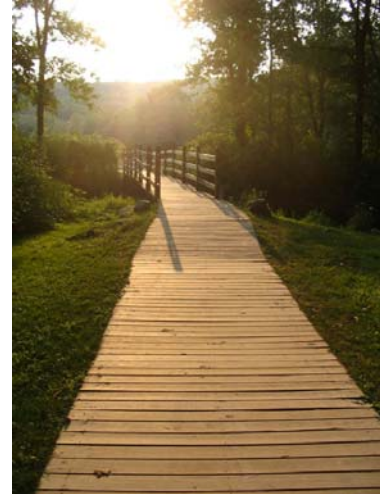
LaGrange's Stringham Park is a major asset for residents of the surrounding neighborhoods.

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properties that have the potential to become parks. The Overlook Preserve, owned by the Nature Conservancy, protects 139 acres of ponds, wetlands, and forest which provides valuable habitat for the Blanding’s turtle.

Conservation Easements

The Dutchess Land Conservancy, a land trust focusing their efforts on “preserving the rural character and open lands of Dutchess County,” holds easements on approximately 341 acres in LaGrange. One of those properties is the Sprout Creek Farm, which includes a market, creamery, and opportunities to learn about agriculture in the region.



Boardwalk in Freedom Park.

Private Open Space

Other existing open space in the town includes privately-owned recreation areas such as lands owned by Red Wing Properties, camps, sportsmen’s clubs, and golf courses. These private recreation lands contribute in different ways to the open space system of the town. While they may change hands and are not considered permanently protected, they do offer benefit of open space in that they contribute to scenic value, wildlife habitat, and recreation opportunities. For example, The One Ten Rod and Gun Club in the northeast corner of the town, provides over 100 acres adjacent to the Hereford-Taconic Multiple Use Area (MUA), adding to the size of the large forested area in that part of the town.

Existing Regulations

Open space in the Town of LaGrange extends beyond what is currently protected as parks or preserves. Much of the open space in the town, including farmlands or upland forested areas, has little or no permanent protection from development. There are existing regulations already in place that help protect resources like designated wetlands. These tools are discussed throughout this plan and include town zoning laws; existing local, federal and state regulations for stream and wetland protection; tax incentives provided through state programs such as through agricultural districts in the state forest tax law (480A). Opportunities to augment existing regulations to achieve conservation are discussed throughout this plan.

Existing Open Space Summary Table:

Owner/ Easement Holder	Acres
State of New York (James Baird State Park)	544
State of New York (Taconic-Hereford Multiple Use Area)	152
Town of LaGrange	246
Nature Conservancy (Overlook Preserve)	139
Dutchess Land Conservancy (Easements)	341
Total	1,422

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Regional Perspective

LaGrange possesses many regionally-significant open space resources, including the Taconic Ridge; Wappinger Creek, Sprout Creek, Jackson Creek and their watersheds; and farmlands that are part of the Hudson River Valley. Many regional efforts have already been advanced to conserve these resources. For example, the Taconic State Parkway is a state-designated scenic byway and has a corridor management plan that helps to preserve its scenic quality. Much of the lands of the Taconic Ridge are preserved by New York State (James Baird State Park, Hereford-Taconic MUA). The Wappinger Creek Intermunicipal Watershed Council has been formed to address common concerns related to the Wappinger Creek Watershed.

Dutchess County has taken many steps to help its communities plan wisely for growth and conservation. The county continues to provide invaluable support for its communities, for example through the landmark *Greenway Connections* report, the planned Dutchess Rail-Trail, and its Open Space and Farmland Protection Matching Grant Program.

Adjacent communities have also been involved in open space efforts. Particularly, the Town of Beekman adopted an open space plan in 2005 and town voters approved a \$3 million bond in November of that same year. The LaGrange Conservation Advisory Council (CAC) and Pleasant Valley CAC have been collaborating on trail planning efforts along the Wappinger Creek. Many other efforts in adjacent communities, from comprehensive planning to hamlet development, are addressing open space conservation and land use patterns.

While this plan is directed specifically at identifying priorities for LaGrange, it has not been done in isolation of the regional influences and activities. While the maps in this plan end at the town borders, mainly due to the availability of data, the resources do not. In the resource analysis and prioritization, the town's patterns have been examined in their regional context. There are many opportunities identified in this plan for intermunicipal and regional collaboration. In most cases, these intermunicipal opportunities will be more cost effective, will provide more effective results, and will reach a larger constituency. A regional approach to implementation of this open space plan should be taken whenever feasible.

Conclusion

This planning process and its resulting recommendations are based on a sound sequence of planning that was initiated as part of the town's comprehensive plan and continued as a dialogue between the community, landowners, and the town. The priority resources identified in this plan (Chapter 3) consider the town's resources from an ecological and agricultural perspective. However, the plan's recommendations, and the basis for future action, are grounded in community and landowner support and participation.