



Town of Simsbury

933 HOPMEADOW STREET

SIMSBURY, CONNECTICUT 06070

OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE

July 26, 2023

4:30 P.M.

Main Meeting Room, Town Hall

SPECIAL MEETING AGENDA

1. Review Open Space Committee Member Feedback Concerning Draft of POCD for Purposes of Presenting Open Space Committee Feedback on POCD to Simsbury Planning Commission

Adjourn

July 11, 2023

To Mr. McGregor Mr. Chalder, and Ms. Smith -

Please accept these comments about the POCD as part of the public record.

The Open Space Committee will provide additional comments after our next committee meeting. Based on an initial discussion we expect to be providing text boxes and links and some general text that can easily be incorporated.

Thank you for your work and for considering my comments and suggestions below.

Susan Masino
41 Madison Lane
West Simsbury

Open Space Committee
Simsbury, CT

Vice President
Simsbury Grange #197

Professor of Applied Science
Trinity College

1. Specific comments:

- a. Please add Simsbury Grange as one of the events/organizations listed. The Grange has been in Simsbury since 1931, we are the caretakers of a classic and historic Grange Hall, and we host the only certified agricultural fair in the Farmington Valley. We are non-partisan and nondenominational. (PS side note - Join us for live jazz on August 2).
- b. A "Plan Implementation Committee" should be explicitly interdisciplinary. Similarly, any Future Land-Use Plan that is more "specific and forward thinking" should incorporate interdisciplinary science as well as a robust and valid assessment of community perspectives.
- c. In the history section highlight our recent 350th (during covid unfortunately)
- d. Consider using the word "values" wherever relevant and in conjunction with the word "ambience." We risk a connotation/interpretation of ambience that suggests mood and appearance over fundamental substance. People near and far love how the town "looks" but a focus on appearance is not the (sole) intent of the POCD or the sentiment of the community. The real focus is/should be values, and these are reflected/manifested in our ambience and community wellbeing (which includes our beauty and strong sense of place).
- e. The bus transportation section should/could be more specific. We cannot have a "livable community" with public transportation unless it is reliable for the public. For example, there is

no service on route 10 South of Rt 185, despite the numbers of people and businesses on that section. There is no service in the evening nor on the weekends. The service is also limited during the week and does not work for most jobs. People don't realize that if they buy a bus pass they can get an emergency ride if needed. A strategic plan and public education re: public transportation should be a priority as a community lifeline that welcomes and supports people.

2. The POCD has comments/quotes from citizens. These are a nice touch but I suggest removing comments unless they reflect/align with other sources (i.e. peer-reviewed research, valid public opinion poll, previous town votes, 2016 phone survey - which I believe was done in a statistically valid way). Otherwise the statements risk distracting from and diluting more valid data / suggestions / comments. Most of the surveys/feedback at meetings do not represent the town as a whole (or at least there is no evidence that they do) and this should be taken into account.

3. Selling or divesting of small pieces of open space has been discussed and examined three (?) times over nearly 20 years, and the town attorney issued an opinion on it. In each case it was rejected after much thoughtful discussion. The POCD is overlooking this work. Some comments:

- To address the main concerns (maintenance) we moved forward on developing policies to reduce or eliminate mowing.
- To address the motivation (these bits of land are "useless") we engaged in discussions regarding their public benefits – wildlife corridors, potential siting for a neighborhood energy or other communal benefits in the future, flood mitigation, areas where kids can play, potential new trail connections, etc.
- The public sentiment on this is clear (both in town and beyond) – not in favor in general.

For these and other reasons, considering disposal of public land which is held in the public trust is a serious matter that must be proven to be in the public good. It should be subject to a public hearing and perhaps a citizen vote. Until recently these basic public trust safeguards were lacking at the state level, resulting in serious problems. As a result, several years ago 85% of the voters supported a constitutional amendment to ensure a public hearing and full disclosure with respect to state land. This is imperative in town as well.

4. Some claims in the POCD are too strong and/or seem to imply no other options.

Too strong:

- a. claiming that we are now in a "new normal" and outlining what that is too strong. We have no idea if that is true and we may be at an inflection point. The pandemic was just declared "over" on May 11 and in parallel there is a lot of interest and grassroots energy in deep local commitments, less reliance on supply chains - which could mean more local sustainability, more community resilience, less on-line shopping etc. A more accurate framing for the report is we are doing the plan four years early to take stock of what's going on and to acknowledge that things are changing – (and will continue to change). It's true and I assume this is why we're doing the POCD right now.
- b. Similarly, saying that should implement the entire plan (and implying that not doing so is irresponsible) is also too strong, per above. The reality is that things may change further, or more quickly, or change direction. At the same time the town's finances may change, new

disruptions may happen. We need to recognize and make it explicit that having a good plan and being flexible are both part of being a good community.

Options and alternatives could be suggested:

- c. "older people tend to live in households with a smaller number of people." This is a sad reality that is contributing to a loneliness crisis in our society (and also related to public health spending). Perhaps Simsbury could think of creative ways to help older people connect and cohabitate and, in doing so could even contribute to our stock of naturally affordable housing. There are models of cohousing where several older people will share a home and can even share a caregiver. This could free up houses, benefit everyone involved, and work within our existing infrastructure which is the most immediate, cost-effective, and climate-friendly option by far.
- d. Related to this, the sidebar on adaptive reuse on page 45 should be connected directly to creating affordable housing opportunities. Unless that connection is explicit people may not make that link. We need to identify common sense solutions.

5. Some of the language is negative, and/or too vague to provide any future guidance.

- a. one goal is to *maintain and enhance our sense of place*. If part of that means not harming our existing community ambience and values then this should be expressed more specifically as a "first do no harm" spirit of the POCD. Otherwise "maintain and enhance" may be interpreted and translated very differently by different people, which is not the goal of the POCD.
- b. the page on "Fiscal Conditions" is very hypothetical (and negative, without a clear basis for it). This should be adjusted or removed - not the right frame or mindset for an aspirational POCD.
- c. No one is building one-story buildings in the center of town, we don't need to "encourage or **require** multi story buildings."

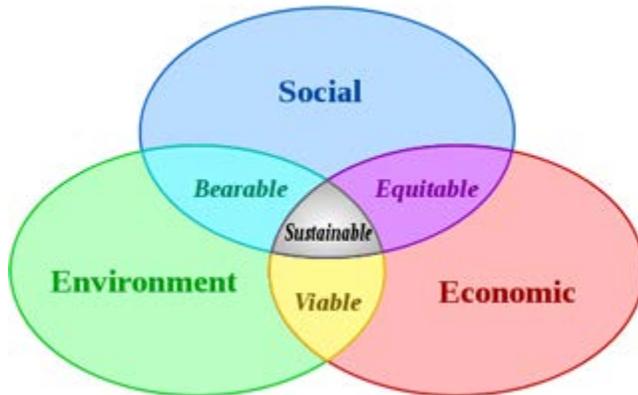
As final points: we all know that people love the town, love living here, and love to visit. We should be proud of it, and in many ways we are well above other towns.

As a citizen and a scientist I keep coming back to baseline questions (that should be happening at every level). The goal of a POCD should be a well-run town built on common values that is ready to adapt and take care of the community. Simsbury is a leader in so many ways, and willing to listen and adapt.

Meanwhile, the explicit goal of every POCD (in every town) to grow and develop. Who benefits, and what is the end game? Growth is by definition not sustainable - which is why we need to be really strategic. Protecting our community lifelines requires that we prioritize healthy food, clean water, natural ecosystems, etc. Otherwise we are harming everyone.

Simsbury Conservation Commission – Comments on current 2023 POCD Draft

Page 6: Comment: The diagram on page 6, while effectively addressing the built and social environment does not address the 'unbuilt' and 'ecological' aspects of the environment. As such the document is highly slanted toward the perspective of the diagram. Livability is not viable if ecological / environmental health is not specifically called out. The diagram bullets below provide a better model:



- To reduce air, water and land pollution
- To facilitate the conservation of natural resources for our future generations
- To ensure the protection of biodiversity
- To implement sustainable development
- To restore the ecological balance

From glossary on page 135

Sustainability - The capacity to endure. For humans, sustainability is the long-term maintenance of responsibility, which has environmental, economic, and social dimensions, and encompasses the concept of stewardship, the responsible management of resource use.

Page 9: What We Want To Protect (Conservation)

Strategies to protect the things that Simsbury residents have indicated are important to them (natural resources, **biological diversity**, **ecological health**, open space, community ambience and sense of place, etc.) NOTE: **The term 'natural resources' is not a catch-all term for the environment or ecological health.** There are many aspects of the environment that are not, by definition, natural resources but are nonetheless valuable to ecological health. For instance, dark skies are not necessarily a natural resource but are essential to ecological health.

Page 14: "This growing settlement was **resented** by Native Americans." Comment: Resented is not the right word!! Change to "**The Native Americans' way of life was threatened by this growing settlement**" or "**The Native Americans fought against the threat that was posed by this settlement.**"

Page 27:

POCD Approach

As part of the 2023 POCD update, the Planning Commission decided to retain the organization of the 2017 POCD with the following refinements:

1. Identify the following as over-arching principles in the 2023 POCD
 - a. Livability.
 - b. Diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - c. **Environmental, social, and economic** Sustainability and resiliency.

Page 32: Sidebar on left

Healthy Plant Communities

Healthy plant communities are areas which contain ~~a variety~~ **an ensemble** of native plant species

ADD new paragraph: Through the choice of plants and landscape decisions, all Simsbury residents, businesses, and Town entities have a direct impact on the health of plant communities. Native plant guidelines are being followed for some town properties.

Page 34: Goals/ Strategies

ADD **4.5 Preserve and enhance biodiversity and ecological health.**

H. If a property will be developed, encourage open space development where such development will still preserve important resources. (Not sure what this means. What is open space development?)

ADD **I. Protect and enhance biological diversity by the elimination or control of invasive species.**

ACTION STEPS

Protect Natural Resources **and Enhance Ecological Health**

3. Develop funding, strategies, plans and initiatives to control invasive species including educational programs and regulations to encourage the public, commercial and municipal agencies to address these issues on their property.

Page 35: **Comment:** The use of the circle diagram in the top right-hand corner is problematic. It puts 'Open Space' in the 'Built Environment' category which is the opposite of the definition of Open Space in the text on the left. The circle mentions "Outdoor space" which could mean a parking lot or patio.

Under Simsbury Sustainability logo: Preserving open space will help Simsbury be more ecologically sustainable **if properly stewarded.** (NOTE: Open space that is overrun with invasive plant species **provides few environmental benefits.** Example: Kudzu overrun areas in the south states).

Page 36:

In the 2023 community meeting held as part of preparing the POCD, the topic of "open space" received the most planning points (see Chapter 4 of this POCD). Some of the key points identified in the discussion included:

- Open space is an important part of Simsbury’s attractiveness and its ecological health.
 - Simsbury should look at disposing of small parcels which do not contribute to an open space system. **COMMENT: We question the value of putting these comments from the community meeting in the POCD. This issue has been looked at by Open Space Committee and other groups. Many of these properties have limited access. Many are wetlands and not suitable for development. There is also a question of the legality of selling such properties that were acquired during residential subdivision approval process. Some of these properties function as pocket habitats and habitat connectors. Alternative /management stewardship practices should be explored for these properties.**

Open Space Organizations

The Town of Simsbury has several organizations that collaborate on open space issues. For example, Simsbury has an Open Space Committee which **could** coordinates:

- Possible open space acquisition, and
- Stewardship of existing open space holdings.

Comment: Unlike Culture, Parks and Recreation, the Open Space Committee has no funding or budget set aside to do so. Unless there is a recommendation for funds, this language is aspirational only.

SIDE BAR comments on left of page:

- We need to proceed with active management of selected forest parcels on town owned land. **Comment: Even though this might have been a comment at the community meeting, it would be more accurate to express this as “We need to proceed with stewardship of select forest parcels on town owned land.” as there is a lot of scientific disagreement on active management strategies. There is no disagreement on stewardship of these forests. There are also several forests in Simsbury that are involved in active forest management but few forests that have been designated to be left to develop into mature/old growth.**

Page 37 - Map legend: Managed Open Space **Not defined in Glossary**

Page 38: 14. Prevention ~~against~~ long-term soil erosion.

Page 39: Sidebar

Housing And Open Space

While open space is important to residents, the POCD recommends that Simsbury seeks ways to balance the desire for open space preservation with the need for affordable housing. **Comment: This sentence unnecessarily pits open space against affordable housing! It is counterproductive to the POCD statements concerning the preservation of Open Space to look to Open Space to solve this issue when other properties exist. Instead there should be a discussion of the opportunities for, or incentives needed to redevelop formally developed sites instead (such as the Hartford, Wagner Ford sites etc.), the redevelopment of existing housing sites (Virginia Connolly etc), the purchase of other housing properties by the Town.**

Page 42: ACTION STEPS Preserve Open Space

- 1. Comment: It is strange that the first action on the Open Space Action Plan would be the discussion of the selling of this land for housing!** This action step does not match the discussion of goals and policies in the previous page. The number one threat to our open spaces is invasive (primarily plant) species. The Parks & Open Space Master Plan was supposed to have addressed the need for a biological assessment of the open spaces in Town and a prioritization of stewardship projects for these spaces. Unfortunately, this was not done (the majority of the report was devoted to Parks.) It should be a recommendation that the Town complete another study to evaluate the health of our Open Spaces, our stewardship practices, and the need for additional wildlife corridors.

ADD **2. Establish funding for the Open Space Fund from the Operating Budget.**

Page 44:

Some of the features that contribute to community ambience and sense of place in Simsbury include:

- Natural ~~resources~~ **features** such as the topography of Talcott and the West Mountains and the Farmington River.

Page 45: Dark Sky sidebar

A dark-skies ordinance or regulation typically:

- requires all outdoor light fixtures to shine downward only.
- ~~prohibits light streaming up into the night sky, where it interferes with a clear view.~~ This bullet is redundant to the bullet above. Instead ADD: **regulates the wavelength (3000K or less), duration, and intensity of outdoor lighting.**

Page 46: Water Features

- 6. Ponds and wetlands**

Page 49: Legend – Difficult to distinguish waterbody from Institutional Land (colors too similar)

Page 50: This map seems to understate the prime farmland soils and other farmland soil that are present in Town. See: https://www.simsbury-ct.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf9751/f/file/file/ag_resources.pdf

Page 54: Goals / Strategies

ADD **6.5 Preserve and enhance the ecological health and regional identity by promoting the use of native plants in our designed landscapes.** (Comment: The native plants and wildlife contribute to a sense of place. As native plants are the base of the food chain and support this wildlife, promoting the use of native plants contributes to this goal.)

Page 55: POLICIES AND ON-GOING PROGRAMS

ADD **T. Promote the use of native plants in our designed landscapes and the removal of invasive plant species.**

Page 56: ACTION STEPS

3. Develop a comprehensive program for maintenance / replacement of street trees along major roadways (especially the iconic sycamore trees along Hopmeadow Street in Simsbury Center) with a preference for native tree species.

ADD **4. Develop a stewardship plan for the removal of non-native invasive plants from town properties.**

(Comment: The community “ambience” will be seriously jeopardized by street trees strangled by oriental bittersweet vines. Already trees along RT 185 near the Pinchot Sycamore are covered in these vines and dying.)

ADD 5. Adopt the enabling legislation in PUBLIC ACT NO. 95-239 to protect ridgelines.

Page 95:

Comment: How do the areas outlined as possible housing opportunities overlap with designated wetland areas, areas of prime or significant farmland soil, wildlife corridors, etc. said to be goals for preservation. It would be useful to have a map that shows those conflicting goals and areas where these conflicts are minimal.

b. Permitting two family dwelling units by Special Exception in logical locations (such as where water and sewer services exist). Comment: Does the lack of public water and sewers impact the development of West Simsbury center for affordable housing and if so, why is this area identified as a housing opportunity?

Page 96: ACTION STEPS

Addressing Housing Needs

2. Institute a moratorium on new residential development of multi-unit dwellings until the adoption of zoning regulations to require new residential development to set-aside units for low/moderate income households. (Otherwise we are chasing out tail. As more units are built, our percentage of low-income housing falls and the 10% target will be even harder to attain putting additional pressure on the development of the remaining open space land.)

Page 100:

ADD: Ecologically-smart Choices for Designed Landscapes Landscaping choices have profound effects on the populations of birds and the insects they need to survive. Property owners can benefit birds and other wildlife by simply selecting native plants when making their landscaping decisions. Native plants are those that occur naturally in a region in which they evolved. They are the base of local food chains and support native wildlife. Non-native plants, plants from other continents with similar climates, introduced because of their beauty, do not support the life cycles of native wildlife. Many have become invasive pests, outcompeting native species and degrading habitat in remaining natural areas. Research has shown that native oak trees support over 500 species of caterpillars, an essential food for nestling songbirds. Non-native ginkgos, a commonly planted landscape tree from Asia, host only 5 species of caterpillars. As it takes well over 6,000 caterpillars to raise just one brood of chickadees, the more native plants in a landscape, the greater the number of successfully fledged songbirds and the greater the number of species of songbirds.

As our landscapes become increasingly fragmented by development, and as the opportunity to preserve more open space diminishes, it is necessary to look to our designed landscapes to connect these wild areas. Simsbury’s Proclamation as a Pollinator Pathway Proclamation is one such effort to promote the ecological health of the area through the planting of native species that benefit our native pollinators.

Page 102: POLICIES AND ON-GOING PROGRAMS

F. Promote the use of ~~drought resistant~~ (native) plant materials in home, business, municipal and other designed landscapes. Comment: while some native plants are ore drought tolerant, some are not drought resistant (i.e., wetland plants). But the goal here should be to promote native plants for their

many ecological functions and role in a healthy ecosystem and not just for one attribute (drought tolerance).

ADD: L. Promote Town and public efforts to remove invasive plant species from their properties.

ACTION STEPS

1. Establish a Native Plant landscaping policy for all Town Properties.
2. Establish an Invasive Plant management policy for all Town Properties.

Page 125: Legend error - the blue areas are not watercourses.

Page 132: Open Space should be defined.

Need to add **Natural Resources** definition to Glossary (page 132)

Either: **materials or substances such as minerals, forests, water, and fertile land that occur in nature and can be used for economic gain.**

Or: **resources that are drawn from nature and used with few modifications. This includes the sources of valued characteristics such as commercial and industrial use, aesthetic value, scientific interest, and cultural value.**

Page 133: Watercourses - Rivers, streams, brooks, waterways, lakes, ponds, marshes, swamps, bogs and all other bodies of water, **natural or artificial, vernal, intermittent, public or private.** (Comment: we should match the State regs.)

Page 138: Acknowledgements Comment: Curious why the Conservation Commission is not credited, consulted, or involved more in the Plan of CONSERVATION and Development. Either our Commission's comments are not going to be included in the POCD and therefore we shouldn't be acknowledged, or they will be included and we should be acknowledged.