



Niantic River Watershed Committee, Inc.

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Niantic River Watershed Protection Plan Update Open Space Planning Workshop Summary



Niantic River Watershed Committee

March 5, 2020

This workshop was funded by a grant from the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut.

Introduction

In 2019, the Niantic River Watershed Committee (NRWC) began an update to the 2006 Niantic River Watershed Protection Plan (the Plan). Since 2008, when the Niantic River Watershed Advisory Committee, the forerunner to NRWC, formed, many of the Plan recommendations have been partially or fully achieved. The updated Plan will include new recommendations for watershed management and water quality protection, as well as address more recent environmental challenges such as climate change, sea level rise and coastal resiliency.

The 2006 Plan recognized that preserving open space was integral to the protection of water quality in the Niantic River watershed. The Plan provided two approaches to open space conservation. A tabletop Geographic Information System (GIS) – based model was completed to assess priority areas where the adoption of protective actions would have greatest impact. A Conservation Priority Index was developed to identify areas where open space conservation could protect against future water quality degradation. The Conservation Priority Index is included at the end of this summary report. The Plan also identified land conservation goals (Table 7.3-1) including “...set[ting] watershed land preservation goals and targets base upon available (undeveloped) land and priority watershed areas” and “...protect[ing] acres of priority watershed areas every year (based on target/goals)”.

To address Plan recommendations for the preservation of open space, NRWC invited watershed stakeholders to participate in an open space planning workshop on February 28, 2020. The purpose of the workshop was to develop strategies and lay the ground work for future open space planning. Workshop participants included local land use staff and commissions, land trusts, and regional and state agencies.

Open Space Preservation Stakeholders

The NRWC invited a broad group of stakeholders with varied interests in the protection of open space in the Niantic River watershed to participate in the workshop. Invitees included:

- East Lyme Land Trust
- Waterford Land Trust
- Salem Land Trust
- Avalonia Land Conservancy
- New England Forestry Foundation
- Friends of Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve
- Save the River – Save the Hills
- East Lyme Planning Department
- East Lyme Commission for the Conservation of Natural Resources
- East Lyme Plan of Conservation and Development Update Committee
- East Lyme Parks & Recreation Department
- Montville Planning Department
- Montville Conservation Commission
- Salem Planning Department

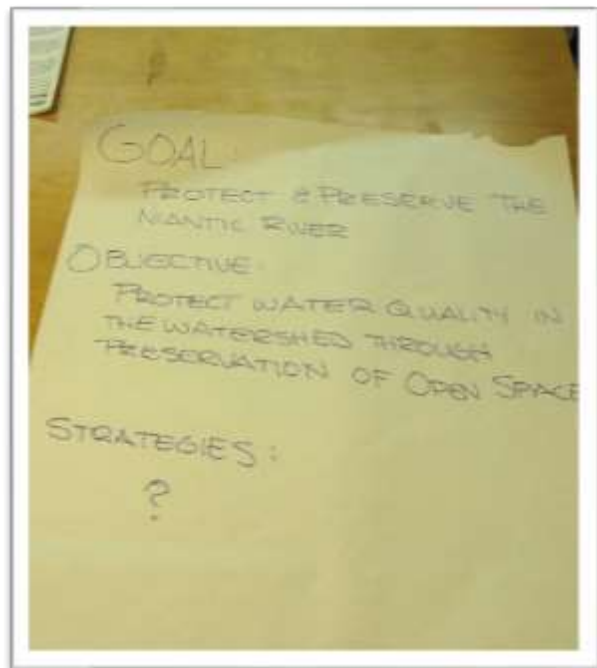
- Salem Conservation Commission
- Waterford Planning Department
- Waterford Conservation Commission
- Waterford Parks & Recreation Department
- New London Water Utility Department
- Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments
- CT DEEP (Watershed, Forestry and Land Management Divisions)

The workshop attendee sign-in sheet is included at the end of this summary report.

Purpose and Goals of the Open Space Planning Workshop

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together stakeholders to initiate discussion about open space planning in the Niantic River watershed. Through guided discussion and workshop activities, NRWC endeavored to develop a collaborative approach to open space planning among the various land use agencies and land preservation organizations in the watershed, and lay the groundwork for future open space planning efforts.

The goals of the workshop were twofold; to identify open space strategies for inclusion in the NRWPP Update and to initiate preliminary open space planning. Because the Niantic watershed spans four towns, open space planning and preservation can be most effective when municipal and land trust land preservation planning efforts are coordinated.



A review of the goals and objectives of the Niantic River Watershed Protection Plan helped to frame discussion regarding the identification of open space preservation strategies.

Open Space Planning Strategies

After reviewing the relationship of open space preservation planning to the goals and objectives of the Niantic River Watershed Protection Plan, workshop attendees engaged in a brainstorming session to identify strategies to support open space preservation objectives. Potential open space planning strategies developed during the discussion include:

1. Identify/specify town funds for land preservation
2. Foster communication and collaboration between and among land trusts, municipalities and other organizations/agencies
3. Determine importance of open space and the willingness of the community to spend money to protect it
4. Identify criteria/develop a methodology to identify parcels to protect

5. Develop a strategic plan to guide land protection

Open Space Planning Priorities Overview

In order to frame discussion regarding open space preservation in the Niantic River Watershed, local, regional, and state open space strategies were briefly reviewed. Open space planning documents included:

Town of East Lyme:

- Town of East Lyme Plan of Conservation and Development (2009).
- Town of East Lyme Open Space Steering Committee Report (2009).

Town of Montville:

- Town of Montville Plan of Conservation and Development (2010)

Town of Salem:

- Town of Salem Plan of Conservation and Development (2012).
- Town of Salem Open Space Plan (2007).

Town of Waterford:

- Town of Waterford Plan of Preservation, Conservation and Development (2012).
- Town of Waterford Plan of Preservation, Conservation and Development – Part 2 Implementation Element (2012).
- Town of Waterford 2012 Plan of Preservation, Conservation and Development – 2015 Supplement (2015).

SE CT Council of Governments (SCCOG):

- Regional Plan of Conservation and Development 2017. (Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments, 2017).

Lower CT River Land Trust Exchange:

- The Lower CT River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange Natural Resource Based Strategic Conservation Plan. (Lower CT River Council of Governments, 2014).
- Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange Funding Guide/Matrix. (Lower CT River Council of Governments, 2017).

State of Connecticut:

- Connecticut State Open Space 2018 Annual Report. (DEEP, 2018).

Review/Update Existing Open Space Maps

A key component to open space planning is to ensure that existing open space is documented correctly. Prior to conducting an exercise to identify areas for future open space preservation, workshop participants reviewed the draft open space map prepared by NRWC's Plan Update consultants, Fuss & O'Neill. Discrepancies in existing permanently protected open space layers were noted on the draft maps and will be forwarded to Fuss & O'Neill so the open space map can be updated. The updated open space maps are included at the end of this summary report.

Identify Key Data for Land Preservation

Participants briefly discussed types of data necessary to identify and rank parcels for preservation. The group had previously reviewed the criteria specified in the Lower Connecticut River and Coastal Region Land Trust Exchange Funding Guide/Matrix, which identified important criteria such as connectivity to existing open spaces and/or corridors, NDDB sites, parcel size, presence of core forest, wetlands and critical habitats, threat of development, and historic significance among other criteria. Since key data have already been adequately identified, and a methodology developed for ranking criteria, the group decided it wasn't necessary to "re-invent the wheel."



Workshop participants Julie Wainscott (L) and Deb Dunn (R) review and update permanently preserved open space parcels in Waterford.

Identify Parcels/Areas for Future Open Space Protection

The final activity of the workshop was to review the draft open space maps and identify future areas for preservation. The approach taken was "pie-in-the-sky," so no effort was taken to ascertain the specific characteristics or availability of the highlighted areas. The purpose was simply to identify potential future areas for preservation and to engender a collaborative approach among the various organizations toward the identification of parcels for preservation. Participants generally focused on stream corridors and headwater areas. Large parcels were highlighted, as were parcels that connected existing protected open space to create larger connected open space corridors. The marked-up open space maps are included at the end of this summary report.



Eric Thomas, Don Danila, Greg Decker and Kris Lambert (L-R) review the draft open space parcel map.

Next Steps

Many workshop participants will be attending the Connecticut Land Conservation Conference at Wesleyan University in Middletown in April 2020. It was decided to discuss meeting again after the workshop.

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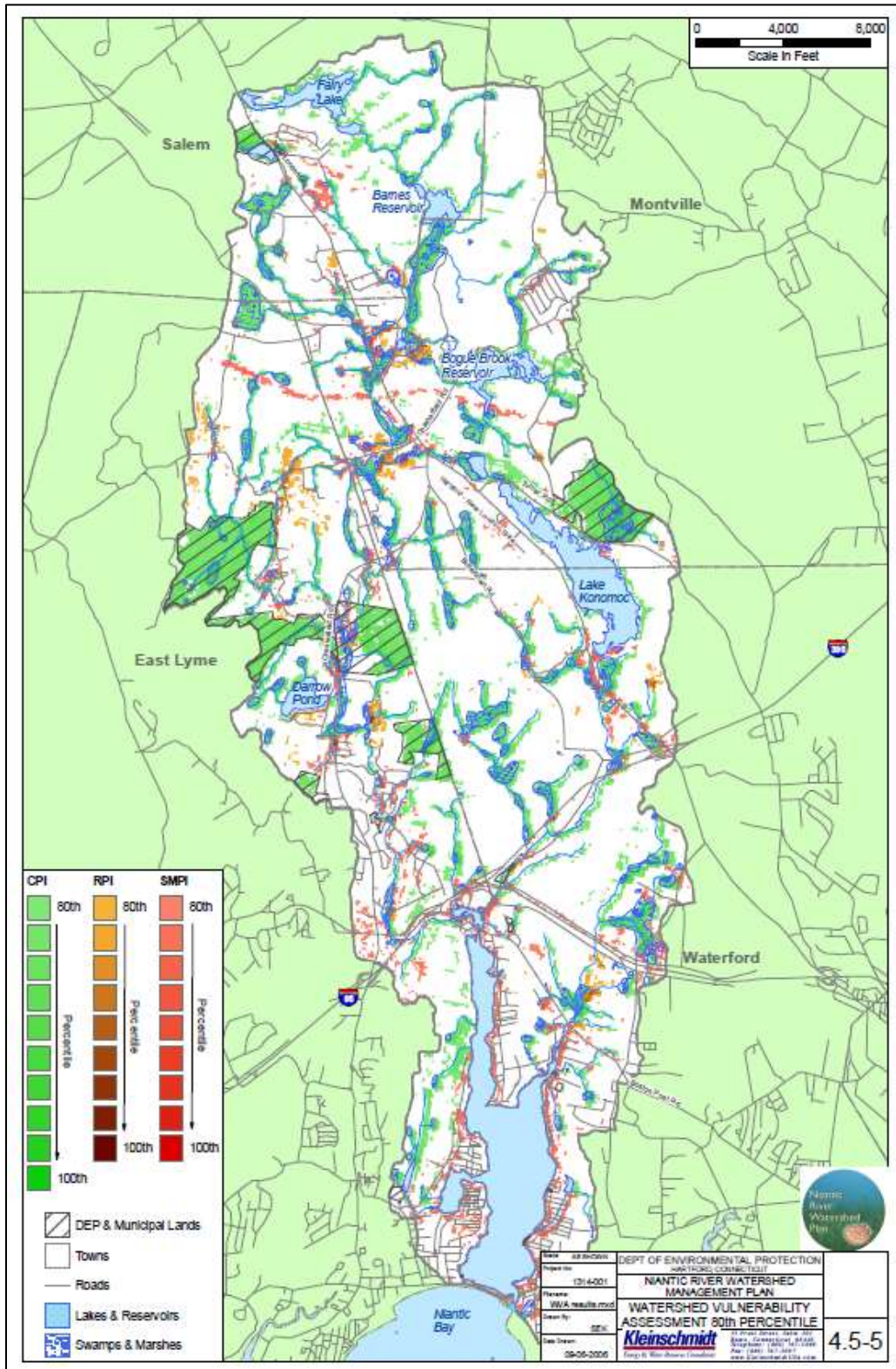
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Attachment A
 Niantic River Watershed Protection Plan
 Watershed Vulnerability Assessment



Attachment B
Attendee Sign-in Sheet

NRWPP Update Open Space Planning Workshop
Feb. 28, 2020

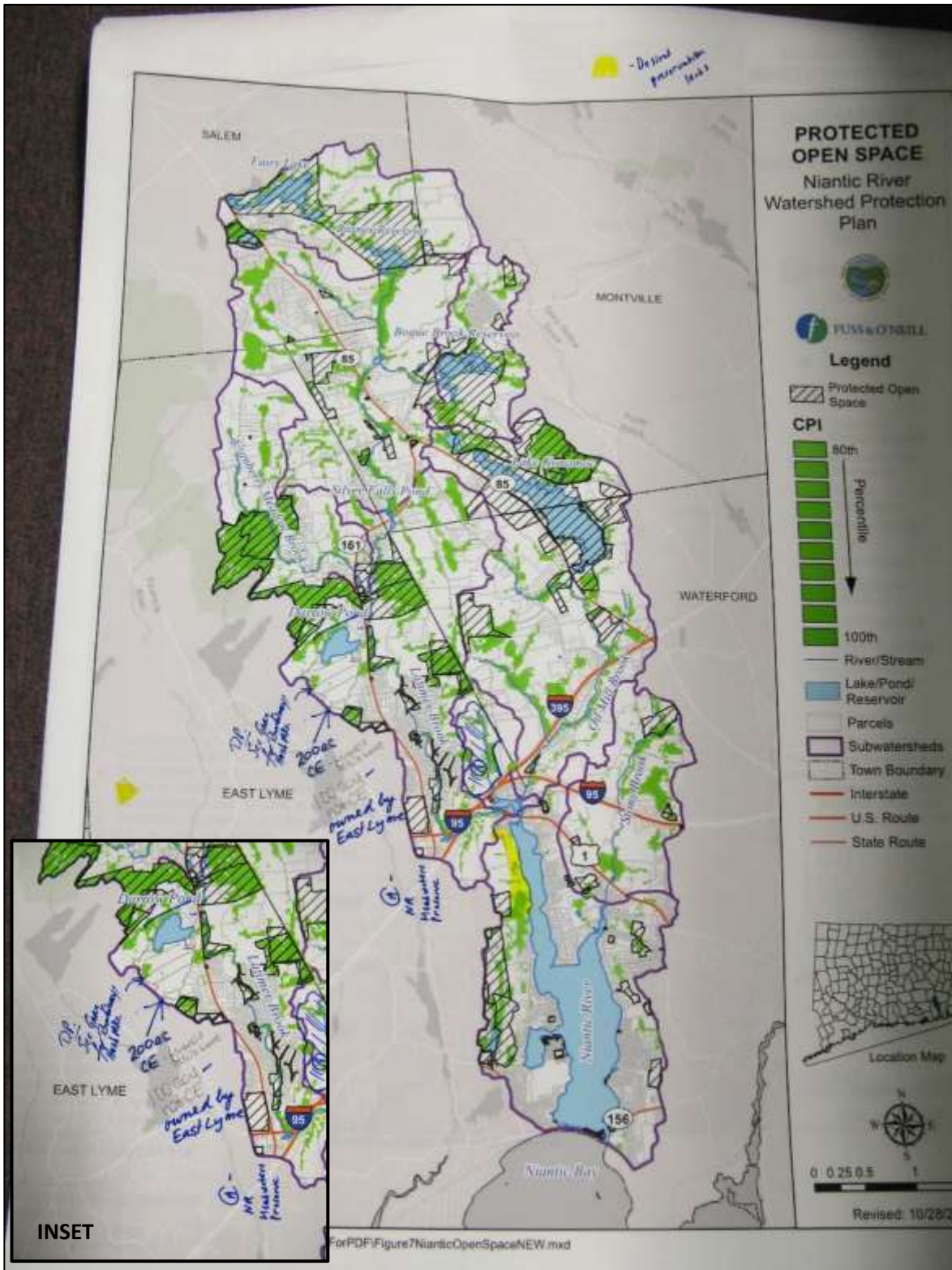
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Attachment C
Open Space Preservation Strategies

STRATEGIES:

1. IDENTIFY / SPECIFY NECESSARY FUNDS FOR LAND PRESERVATION
- TOWN-DESIGNATED FUNDS
- \$\$\$
- survey of town res re impact of townland preservation
2. FOSTER COMMUNICATION COLLABORATION BETN & AMONG LAND TRUSTS, MUNICIPALITIES & OTHERS
- Communication
3. DETERMINE IMPORTANCE OF OPEN SPACE / WILLINGNESS TO SPEND \$ TO PROTECT IT. (COMMUNITY/TOWN BASED)
- Community support
4. IDENTIFY CRITERIA FOR ~~IDENTIFY~~ PARCELS TO PROTECT
- METHODOLOGY
- How?
5. DEVELOP STRATEGIC PLAN TO IDENTIFY LAND TO PROTECT
- What?

Attachment D
 Updated Draft Protected Open Space Map



Attachment E
Updated Draft Protected Open Space Map
with Future Open Space Areas Highlighted in Yellow

