

## Section 7: Analysis of Needs

The Gill Open Space and Recreation Plan incorporates the inventory of all the land-based cultural, historic, scenic, natural, archeological, and natural resources available in town (Section 4), identifies the areas containing these resources (Section 5), and, based on the community's general goals (Section 6), makes comparisons between the supply of resources and the demand (Section 7). In **Summary of Natural Resource Protection Needs**, the most important environmental issues are highlighted. In **Summary of Community's Needs**, the recreation and open space needs of the residents are discussed. Finally, in **Management Needs**, the obstacles to the effective resolution of these needs are addressed.

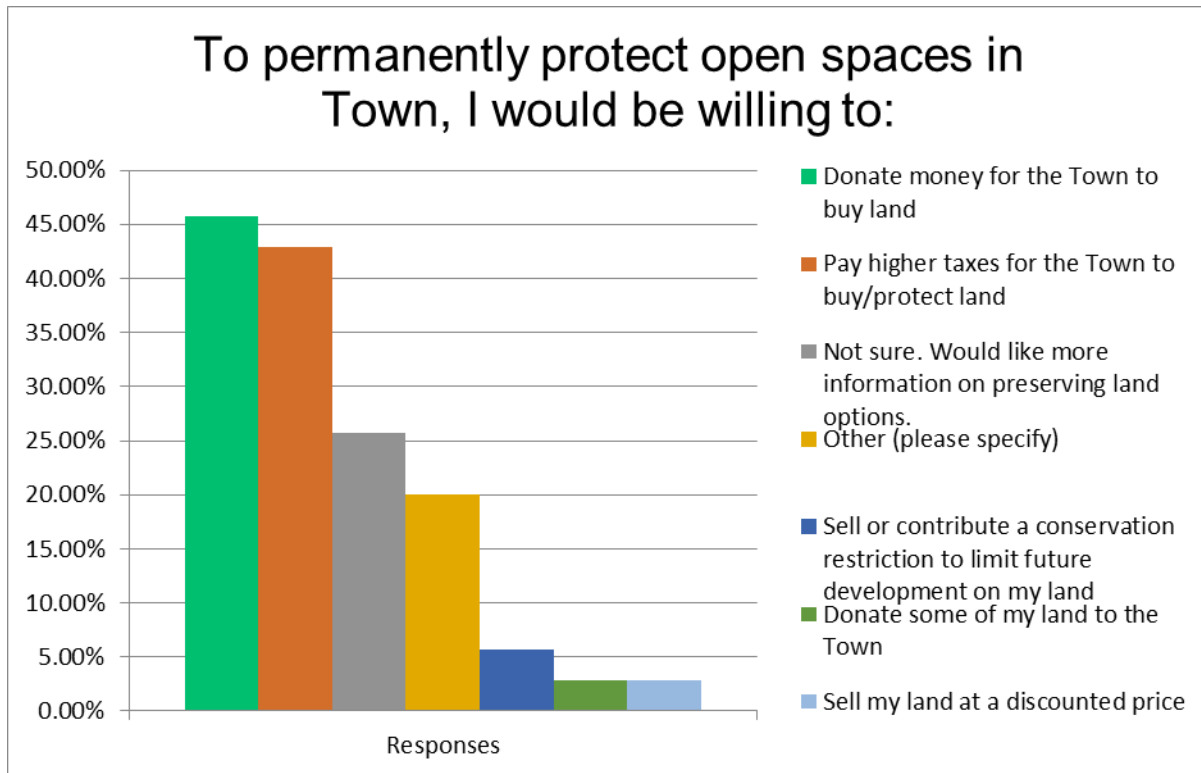
### **Summary of Natural Resource Protection Needs**

The Town of Gill has an impressive number of cultural, historic, scenic, natural, archeological, and natural resources, many of which are shown in the Scenic Resources & Unique Environments Map at the end of Section 4. Residents said in the 2020 Open Space and Recreation Survey the three most important natural resource protection priorities for Gill should be:

- 1) Protect drinking water resources;
- 2) Encourage agriculture / protect farmland; and
- 3) Protect forest land.

The most efficient and effective way the Town of Gill could work towards achieving all three of these priorities is to actively continue public outreach and education on land protection options and work on developing criterion to help prioritize additional parcels for protection. Protection of land may become particularly important due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. A potential consequence of the pandemic is there may be increased development pressures in rural towns with broadband, such as Gill, where people can live in a sparsely populated area, while being able to work from home. It is important to note in the 2020 survey many residents supported the idea of increasing the amount of permanently protected open space in town. Figure 7-1 below shows the various ways in which residents are willing to protect open space.

Figure 7-1: Gill 2020 Open Space and Recreation Plan Public Survey, Land Protection Strategies



Gill’s landscape, in the form of forestland, farmland, and open fields, offers great benefits to protecting its drinking water. Fortunately, one of the best ways to protect water quality is to also protect forest lands – the third highest priority for survey respondents. To better target the protection of these resources, the Town of Gill may want to focus on continuing the good working relationships with regional land trusts for the purpose of assigning the Town’s right-of-first refusal in the event a key parcel of land has important water quality protection assets. Often land trusts are able to bring together sources of income and potential buyers of land and development rights in a shorter time frame than if the Town were to try on its own. By being prepared, Gill may be more likely to see the preservation of choice parcels of forest containing wildlife habitat and other important natural resources. By setting aside town funds toward future land conservation projects, the Town will be able to react faster in the event matching funds are needed for a potential preservation project.

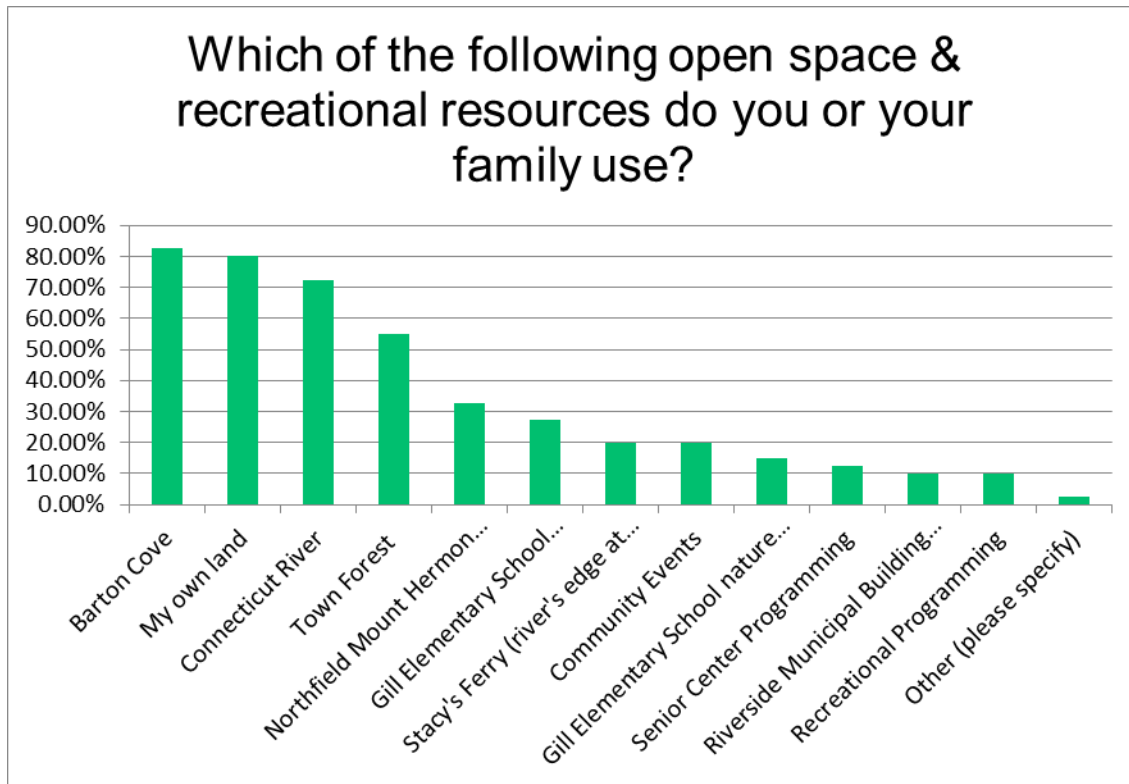
Of all its resources, one in particular has been discussed repeatedly throughout the planning process. As the demand for local food continues to grow in Franklin County, and as the number of small, diversified farms continues to increase, residents of Gill identify agricultural land as one of their most valuable resources. In some ways, Gill is well positioned to continue to grow its small, diversified farms and to continue to preserve agricultural land. Currently, over 800 acres of land containing prime farmlands is permanently protected and an additional 1,100 acres of agricultural land is temporarily protected under Chapter 61A. Where farming and farmland protection is concerned, one of the best resources Gill has is its active Agricultural Commission. Another consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is the increased awareness of food security

and the importance of local farms and food supply. This should have a beneficial impact on Gill’s farms and farm stands as people seek fresh food grown close to home.

### **Summary of Community Needs**

Planning for a community’s open space and recreation needs must satisfy the present population’s desires for new facilities, spaces, and services, and also must interpret and act on the available data to prepare for the future needs of Gill residents. Although the Gill Open Space and Recreation Plan will be updated again in seven (7) years, the types of actions identified in Section 9 will take into account the needs of the next generation as well. The following Figure 7-2 shows which recreational and open space resources in town are the most and least used from the 2020 Open Space and Recreation Plan Survey.

Figure 7-2: Gill 2020 Open Space and Recreation Plan Public Survey, Recreational Resources



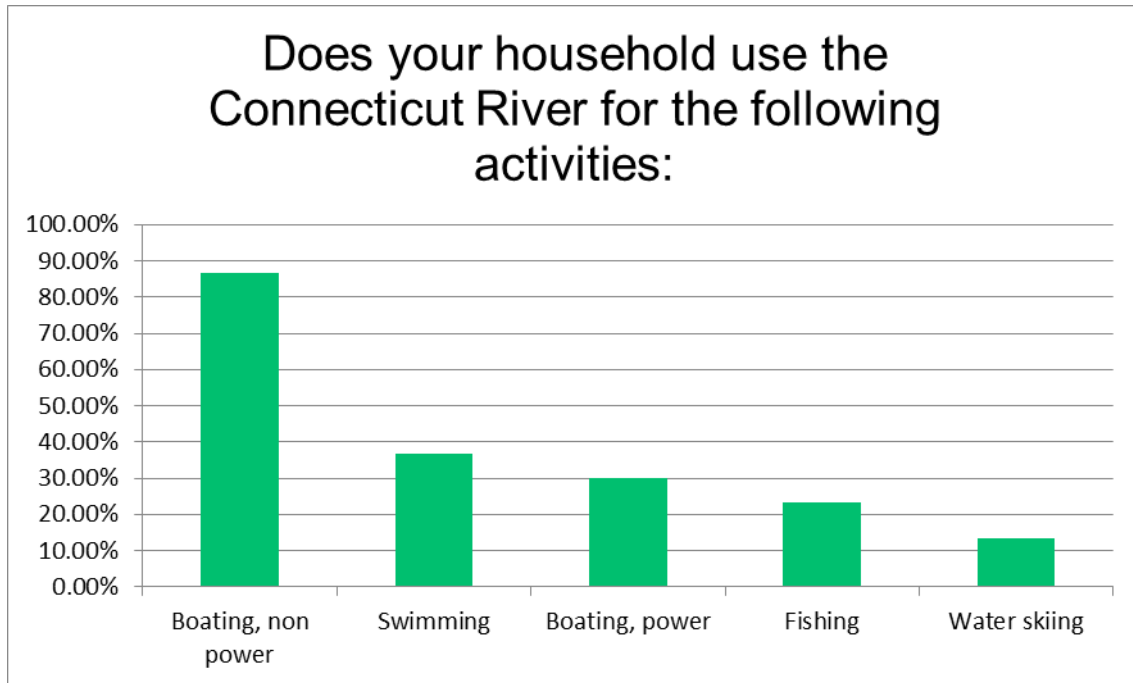


Children enjoy an unseasonable warm fall day at Gill Elementary School.

As shown in Figure 7-2, most people recreate on their own land, while the Connecticut River, Barton Cove and the Town Forest are also popular resources. The survey was conducted and finished during the earliest part of the COVID-19 pandemic, before many people truly understood quarantine, isolation, and social distancing. Based upon the heavy demand for Town Forest trail maps during the spring, summer, and fall of 2020, use of the Town Forest has boomed during 2020 and it is likely the Town Forest would rank higher in a survey conducted today. Most respondents (48%) said existing recreational facilities are in a good condition, while only 15% said they need improvement. A community need that was identified is better recreational options, particularly for those attending the Gill Elementary School. The Gill Elementary School nature trail, after a period of disrepair, has again become a source of recreation, education, and enjoyment after a parent group revived the trails a few years ago. Action items to address these deficiencies, including assessing the possibility of a new recreational facility for the school and/or community are included in the Action Plan.

The Connecticut River is an excellent natural resource that is the focus for recreational activities for Gill residents. As shown in Figure 7-3 below, the most popular activity on the Connecticut River is canoeing and kayaking. Residents can access the River via the public boat launch in the Riverside area. An additional access point in town is the little-used Stacy's Ferry, a one-acre Town-owned property. Stacy's Ferry was identified as a recreational area in need of improvement. Assessing strategies for improving Stacy's Ferry are included in the Action Plan. Some ideas include better non-power boat access to the river, a picnic area, and a park.

Figure 7-3: Gill 2020 Open Space and Recreation Plan Public Survey, Connecticut River



Protecting rivers and streams – particularly the Connecticut River – has been a priority in Gill for many years. As discussed in Section 4 in **Erosion on the Connecticut River**, ongoing riverbank stabilization projects have been conducted in Gill since the mid-1990s. Gill has had landowners serve as representatives on the Connecticut River Streambank Erosion Committee. The Town could continue to support a representative – potentially from the Conservation Commission – to serve on the Committee.

The Town of Gill could also encourage residents to participate in the annual Connecticut River Source to Sea Clean Up. Involving youth – including students from Gill Elementary, Four Winds School, and Northfield Mount Hermon School – in this program could help plant a seed for good stewardship of Gill’s natural resources and the natural resources wherever these students reside as adults. Action items relating to protecting river and streambanks include joining the Connecticut River Streambank Erosion Committee and exploring model floodplain protection bylaws.

**Summary of Management Needs**

The survey asked how well publicized recreational programs and facilities are in town. About 41 percent said they were aware of the recreational and open spaces resources listed in the survey, while 58 percent said they were not aware. The Committee discussed improving publicity by contributing a regular OSRP column to the quarterly Gill Newsletter and developing a guide to

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OSRP facilities and programs for the Town's website. These strategies are included in the Action Plan.

Nearly all respondents think the recreational facilities in Gill are well-maintained. Parent volunteers have assisted with improvement at the Gill Elementary School playground and refurbishment of the nature trail at the School. Upgrading Stacy's Ferry is another recreational desire. Residents were also asked to list any additional recreational facilities or activities they would like to have in Town. Responses include:

- Hiking/mountain biking trails
- Swimming/pool area
- Paths for walking, biking, cross country skiing or snow shoeing
- Picnic area
- Summer town party/festival
- Dog park
- Playground at the Riverside Municipal Building

The creation of trails is a topic that came up during Committee meetings as well. Therefore, forming a trails committee and producing a trails map are included in the Action Plan.

Implementing the 2020 Open Space and Recreation Action Plan will require the support of the community and the oversight of an active, permanent OSRP Committee. Perhaps the most pressing management need is community support, an active, ongoing OSRP committee, and the support of such entities as the Select Board, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Historical Commission, and Agricultural Commission. Strong and diplomatic leadership of the OSRP Committee will be key to good public involvement and successful implementation of the Action Plan over the coming years.

The Town's commitment to encouraging a permanent Open Space and Recreation Committee could be a next step in the process of achieving some of the natural resource protection and recreation needs. The Committee could continue the work started during this Plan update process by providing leadership to follow through on several key action items to address balancing conservation and recreation needs with some development.



Barton Cove provides a peaceful setting for a pair of fall fishermen.

### **Americans with Disabilities (ADA) Act Findings**

The Town of Gill conducted an ADA Self-Evaluation and Implementation Plan in 2018 of all town-owned buildings and facilities. This included the recreational facilities of the Town Forest and school playgrounds. The school playground, in particular, needs to be improved to become more accessible. The findings can be found in Appendix D.

### **Park and Open Space Equity**

Traditional measures of park and open space equity assess whether environmental justice populations in urban areas have the same access to open space and recreation resources as others in their community. Measuring park and open space equity is difficult in small, rural towns. In the case of Gill, no environmental justice populations are identified. These populations, as defined by the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, are made up of “high minority, non-English speaking and low-income neighborhoods”.

Where Gill is concerned, there are few established parks and other public recreation spaces. However, the established parks and recreation spaces are distributed relatively equally throughout town. In the north part of Gill, the Northfield Mount Hermon School’s recreational facilities are available for residents to use, albeit on a rather limited basis (and not at all during the COVID-19 pandemic). There are also hiking trails throughout the NMH School property, which are available for residents to use. In Gill Center, the Gill Elementary School’s nature trail is available to the public and is an excellent open space and recreation resource. In the Riverside area of Gill, the Riverside Municipal Building’s recreation field is open to the public. The boat ramp in Barton Cove is also a recreational resource open to all residents. Walking trails in the Town Forest, the FirstLight-owned Barton Cove recreation area, and state forest land off Pisgah Mountain Road are also publicly available.

Additionally, there is much open space everyone has access to, either through ownership or through permission of friendly neighbors. And, as shown in the OSRP Public Survey, 80% of respondents indicated their own land is the most often used “recreation area or program” in Gill. Easy access to open space is one measure of open space and recreation equity in Gill.

As the population of Gill continues to age, as is the trend in town and throughout the country, there may be more pressure placed upon the town to provide open space and recreational activities for older citizens. Any future development of land or facilities for open space and recreation should include careful consideration of access for older citizens, as well as for those with disabilities. These needs should be also addressed as a matter of course under ADA requirements. However, specific programs could be specifically targeted at those citizens with special needs. Gill’s Council on Aging is a member of the Gill Montague Senior Center – through which many activities for seniors are offered, including lunches and fitness programs.

The recreational needs of teenagers in Gill are currently being met through the regional high school and middle school located in Turners Falls. There are also many teen-oriented programs available nearby in Greenfield. Some of the nearby recreational resources all residents can enjoy include:

- *Snowmobile Network*<sup>1</sup>: Bernardston Gill Leyden Snowmobile Club
- *Recreational Resources at Northfield Mount Hermon*
- *Northfield Mountain Recreation and Environmental Center*<sup>2</sup>:  
Northfield Mountain is a four-season recreation facility situated along a beautiful sweep of mountainside, with satellite facilities strung along a 7-mile stretch of the Connecticut River. Spend a day cross-country skiing, hiking and mountain biking on 26 miles of trails. Camp at Barton Cove, where you can put in for canoeing or kayaking, and hop on an upriver canoe shuttle at the Barton Cove recreation area. Take an interpretive riverboat cruise on the 44-seat Heritage Riverboat. Other offerings include public picnic areas, camping for boaters at Munn’s Ferry, rock climbing at Rose Ledge and a fishway for springtime viewing of thousands of migrating fish.

## **Regional Strategies for Open Space, Natural and Recreational Resource Protection**

A variety of state and regional studies have been completed, which can help the Town of Gill further identify local recreation and land protection priorities. The Commonwealth completed the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), *Massachusetts Outdoors 2017*. SCORP plans are developed by individual states to be eligible for federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grants and serve as a tool for states to use in planning for future needs and uses of outdoor resources for public recreation and relaxation. As part of the update process to the 2017 SCORP, a survey of Massachusetts residents was conducted to assess their desires and needs for outdoor recreation. The surveys show the top priority for survey respondents is the desire for more trails of all kinds. Respondents said they want more town-wide

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bglsnow.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.h2opower.com/recreation/northfield-mountain-recreation-and-environmental-center/>



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trail systems, hiking trails, and multi-use trails for both walking and bicycling. These priorities reflect the responses from the 2020 Open Space and Recreation Survey distributed to Gill residents.

In 2009, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments completed a corridor management plan for the 29-mile eastern portion of the Mohawk Trail Scenic Byway (Route 2) from Greenfield to Athol. The vision for the plan is to expand economic, tourism and recreational opportunities along the Byway while educating people about the Byway and preserving its unique scenic qualities, natural resources, historical structures/places, industrial and agricultural heritage and community character.