

## **PART 2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PLAN**

### **Overview of Extensive Public Outreach Efforts**

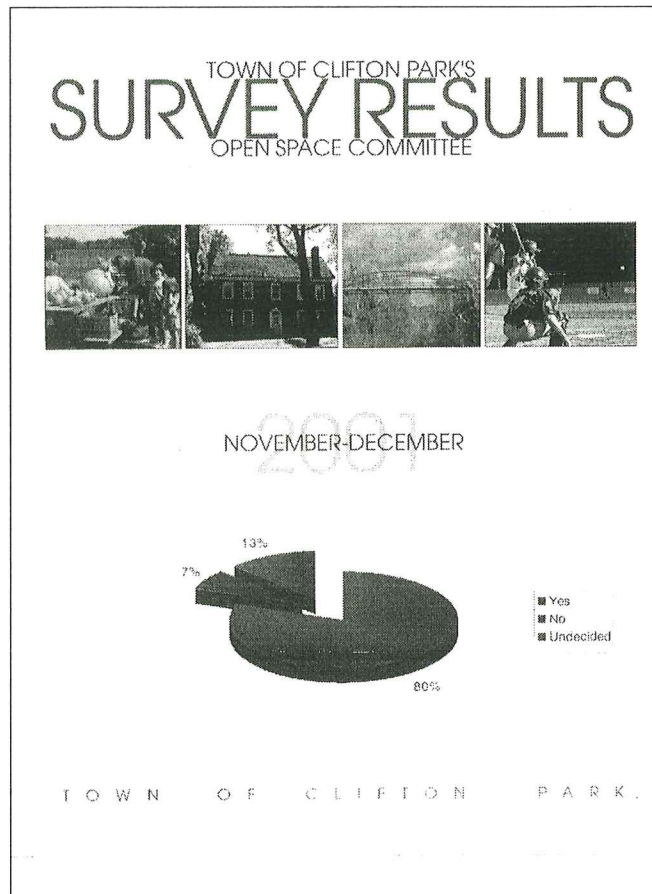
As mentioned earlier, the Town of Clifton Park's Open Space Committee has launched one of the most comprehensive campaigns ever done in the region to involve the public in open space protection planning. The public participation process will continue during plan implementation as specific open space resource protection projects ripen for community review.

The extensive community outreach on Clifton Park's open space conservation issues included the following efforts:

- An informational table at Farm Fest 2001 about the open space planning project;
- A community-wide open space survey #1 for all property owners and residents [mailed in November 2001];
- A customized-for-Clifton Park, "hands-on," public charrette (design workshop) that directly involved community participants in defining potential open space conservation concepts and identifying valued open space areas of town for protection considerations [January 2002];
- Three focus group meetings with stakeholder groups (specifically, agricultural and large landowners; developers and builders; and environmental, civic, cultural and parks and recreation groups) [January 2002];
- A community-wide survey #2 [mailed in June 2002] that asked about prioritizing, and supporting funding future levels of investment in a town open space program;
- A second series of three focus group meetings with stakeholder groups (same groups of stakeholders invited as in January 2002) to solicit comments and feedback on the draft plan [September 2002];
- An additional three (3) general public meetings were held in September 2002 at three different locations throughout town, to obtain public comments on the draft plan;
- Presentations on the open space planning project status to the town board in April 2002 and July 2002.
- Production of an informational video about conservation of open space; and,
- Committee member presentations as invited by civic groups; and,
- Press conferences and media coverage.

## Open Space Survey #1

In November 2001, the Open Space Committee mailed questionnaires to all landowners in town including residents, farmers, and commercial and industrial owners – for about 8,000 parcels. A copy of the “Town of Clifton Park Open Space Conservation Survey 2001” is included in Appendix A. Typically, mailed questionnaire surveys get a 1 to 3% rate of return; but Clifton Park’s survey had about a 30% rate of return with a total of 3,043 questionnaires completed. This overwhelming positive response indicates that the public is interested in how the community grows, and that open space is protected and used wisely.



**The 2001 Open Space Survey enjoyed a more than 30% response rate.**

The town’s planning director coordinated the intake and tracking of the questionnaire’s responses, and the performance of data entry and analysis. Computer specialists from Niagara Mohawk contributed services to set up the data entry and processing system. Under the oversight of the town’s planning director, staff members of Audubon New York contributed services for data entry and analysis. The open space committee, with assistance from Audubon New York, assessed and

**Clifton Park Open Space Plan**  
**January 2003**

interpreted the survey results. The co-chairs of the open space committee formally presented the survey findings to the town board in April 2002.

The survey consisted of ascertaining the relative importance of seven different aspects of open space protection – open space and rural character, farmland, recreational parks and playgrounds, unique natural areas and wildlife habitats, trails and bike paths, drinking water quality, and cultural resources such as historic sites. Response choices ranged from “*highly important*,” “*somewhat important*,” “*somewhat unimportant*,” “*highly unimportant*,” and “*undecided*.” The final question determined the level of public support for the Town to invest in open space protection.

For each question, responses clearly indicated strong public support (at least 75% in favor) for all aspects of open space protection in Clifton Park. The survey instrument is provided in Appendix A: Public Participation. When ‘highly important’ and ‘somewhat important’ responses for each question were combined and then compared, the relative ranking of overall importance was determined, as follows:

1. Securing additional land conservation in order to protect drinking water quality is overwhelming important to 94% of those responding to question #6. Of those, it is highly important to 83%, somewhat important to 11%, somewhat unimportant to 2%, and highly unimportant to 2%.
2. An overwhelming 92% of those responding to question #1 indicated that the conservation of rural character and open space resources is important. Of the total, 70% believed it was highly important; and 22% somewhat important. Only 7% found this issue to be unimportant.
3. Securing additional conservation of unique natural areas and wildlife habitats is important to 87% of those responding to question #4. A clear majority of 65% felt said it was highly important; 24% somewhat important; 7% somewhat unimportant; and 5% highly unimportant.
4. Securing additional conservation of farmland and viable agriculture is important to 85% of those responding to question #2. Of those, 54% said it was highly important, 31% somewhat important, 9 % somewhat unimportant, and 4% highly unimportant.
5. Securing accessible trail systems and bike paths is important to 77% of those responding to question #5. Of those, it is highly important to 44%, somewhat important to 33%, somewhat unimportant to 12%, and highly unimportant to 10%.

6. Securing additional conservation of cultural resources such as historic sites is important to 77% of those responding to question #7. Of those, it is highly important to 41%, somewhat important to 36%, somewhat unimportant to 15%, and highly unimportant to 7%.
7. Securing additional local recreational parks, ball fields and playgrounds is important to 72% of those responding to question #3. It was highly important to 34%, somewhat important to 38%, somewhat unimportant to 17% and highly unimportant to 9%.

#### Question on Public Investment

The last question of the survey asked if the respondents would support the Town of Clifton Park's investing in open space projects in the future to conserve important open space resources. **An overwhelming majority of 80% answered 'yes' in support of public investment while 13% remained undecided. Only 7% of respondents indicated opposition.**

Overall, the vast majority of the surveys revealed unequivocal support for all aspects of land conservation and for the public investment to make it happen.

#### **"Hands-on" Public Charrette (Design Workshop) – January 2002**

More than 75 people participated in a town-wide, half-day public workshop and design charrette held at the Gowana Middle School on the Shenendehowa Central School District campus in Clifton Park, on Saturday, January 19, 2002. Behan Planning Associates, LLC presented a project overview, and a presentation on "Envisioning Open Space." Participants selected an area of the town to study and discuss as part of one of six separate groups.

Under the guidance and direction of a team of professionals from Behan Planning Associates, LLC, staff from the town planning department and open space committee members, the individual groups worked through a series of questions to process and evaluate the resources in their study area. Two groups evaluated town-wide landscape scale open space issues, while the remaining four groups evaluated separate quadrants of the town – northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest. The goal of the charrette exercise was to develop concept bubble maps for each study area to show proposed open space areas to protect. All participants reconvened in the auditorium for presentations of individual group's ideas and findings, followed by a wrap-up discussion.

A summary of findings from the charrette is included in Appendix A: Public Participation.



**Participants mark maps to express open space resource conservation concepts at the public workshop (design charrette) in January 2002.**

### **Focus Group Meetings – January 2002**

The open space committee organized three focus group meetings in January 2002 to reach individuals and entities within the town that would be most impacted and involved with any future open space planning initiatives. The committee invited the following entities to focus group meetings: agricultural and large-parcel landowners; developers and design professionals involved in land use development in town; and other potentially interested community organizations and civic groups. The town's open space planning consultant, Behan Planning Associates, LLC, led the presentations and facilitated discussions at each focus group meeting.

The first focus group meeting was held on January 7, 2002, at the Vischer Ferry Fire Station #1 for agricultural and large parcel landowners. A second focus group meeting was held on January 10, 2002 at the Town of Clifton Park Town Hall for developers and design professionals. The third and final focus group meeting was held on January 16, 2002 at the Town of Clifton Park Town Hall for community organizations and civic groups.

A summary of findings from the focus group meetings is in Appendix A: Public Participation.

## **General Informational Meetings held with Civic Groups**

Audubon New York developed a public presentation that was also converted to a video for use in outreach meetings to civic groups throughout the town. Members of the Clifton Park Open Space Committee presented the video and introduced the open space project to interested civic groups upon request. Presentations were made to community groups including:

- ' Southern Saratoga Chamber of Commerce,
- ' Friends of Clifton Park Open Space,
- ' Clifton Knolls Civic Association.



**Residents identified valued open space at the design charrette in January 2002.**

## **Summary of Public Participation Findings for Plan Development**

Collectively, these efforts have raised the public's awareness and interest in open space protection in Clifton Park to a level far surpassing the committee's own expectations. The findings from the focus group meetings, the design charrette, and the community survey results are located in Appendix A: Public Participation.

In summary, the public comments to guide the open space committee on the community's values, direction and ideas for approaching open space conservation are best reflected in the following statements:

1. Protect drinking water resources.
2. Protect scenic rural landscapes and vistas, and important environmentally sensitive areas.
3. Work with agricultural landowners to develop a program for permanent protection of working farms. Give farmers more real options with the valuable equity in their farmland, and/or fair compensation.
4. Create well-designed pedestrian/biking/open space connections among the town's individual residential neighborhoods and to destinations of town-wide appeal. Enhance existing trails, and plan the creation of interconnections among neighborhoods and parks, building upon existing trail systems. Enhance residents' quality of life by increasing pedestrian enhancements and accessibility to the town's commercial and civic centers, as well as to historic hamlets.
5. Work with developers at the earliest stages of site planning and design for lands that will still be developed to ensure important resources are conserved. Seek voluntary solutions over new additional regulations.
6. Make sure there is enough room in the future to meet growing needs for active recreation parks.

Another topic that was raised at the design charrette related to public interest in land use issues specific to the "commercial town center" of Clifton Park, namely the area of town that has experienced significant development in the vicinity of Exit 9 of the Northway. The complexity of issues of potentially increasing density in this area, and redeveloping it into a more attractive, pedestrian-friendly center over time is part of a larger town comprehensive plan issue, and warrants further public conversation. Any future planning and zoning analysis of this commercial town center should also include for consideration the future build-out development of the neighboring Shenendehowa School District campus properties located west of this commercial center.

## **Public comments on the draft plan – Fall 2002**

The Clifton Park Open Space Committee presented a draft plan, the ***“Town of Clifton Park Open Space Concept Plan, Discussion Draft, June 17, 2002,”*** published separately, to the town board for public review and comments. A copy of the draft plan is on file with the Town of Clifton Park Planning Department. Copies were made available to the public upon request.

To obtain feedback from the public, the committee held three additional focus group meetings and three general public meetings in September 2002. Notes from each meeting were prepared by Behan Planning Associates, LLC on behalf of the Clifton Park Open Space Committee and are included for the public record in Appendix F. The committee reviewed these public comments with Behan Planning Associates at a committee meeting held on November 6, 2002.

Many comments were considered to be already addressed within the plan – with some clarification needed – and this has been provided in the January 2003 plan. Responses to other key comments have been incorporated as revisions to the open space plan. Finally, a few of the comments will be addressed later – in the development of the details of the open space program and implementation activities, in close collaboration with the town board.

As an overall response to public concerns, the successful development of any future, new individual locations for open space access, trails, parks, and public access to land in the Town of Clifton Park will require site-specific planning, design and public input processes for working with all applicable involved and adjacent landowners and the community to ensure project support. The public is invited to continue to participate, to get involved, and to comment upon the ongoing implementation efforts within the Town of Clifton Park community.

A detailed summary of the public comments obtained from public meetings is located in the Appendix F. Additional individual, written statements presented at the public meetings, as well as e-mail correspondence received on the draft plan are on file with the Town of Clifton Park Planning Department.

## **Town-Wide Survey #2 – July 2002**

The committee sponsored a second community-wide questionnaire mailed to all property owners in town. The primary focus of the second survey was to evaluate public interest in paying for local open space protection program efforts. The town received about 2,983 responses, which is a

rate of return of about 25%. Audubon New York again provided in-kind services to tabulate the responses in coordination with the Town of Clifton Park Planning Department. The survey indicated community support for moderate investment in a five-year program to achieve moderate open space goals. Below are the questions and a summary of the responses.

**Question one was: “In order to help the town prioritize any future projects, select two open space protection categories.”** Wildlife nature preserves and watersheds received the highest number of responses of those responding, with farmland and trails tied for second.

Wildlife Nature Preserves – 67%  
Farmland protection – 40%  
Town-wide paths and trails – 40%  
Scenic roads – 25%  
Parkland and ball fields – 21% selected this choice.

**Question Two was: “Would you support the Town of Clifton Park establishing a dedicated open space account to implement a future open space program?”** About 73% of those responding indicated that they would support a dedicated open space account to implement a future open space program. About 10% said “no,” and another 16% indicated that they were “unsure.”

**Question Three was: “What amount do you feel comfortable with spending, such as a portion of the county tax, to initiate and implement an open space program?”** (Based on approximately 10,000 households.)

The responses received on the amount people would feel comfortable spending are the following:

- About 24% of respondents selected “\$5 to \$10;”
- About 27% of respondents selected “\$15 to \$25;”
- About 20% of respondents selected “\$35 to \$50;”
- About 6% of respondents selected “\$60 to \$75;”
- About 8% of respondents selected “\$100+;” and,
- About 13% of respondents selected “None.”

The mean household investment would be about \$29.00 per household.

**Question Four was: “What should the town do about an open space program for the next 20 to 30 years?”** After the first five years of funding an open space conservation program, the majority of those who responded recommended evaluation of the program to determine future funding needs.

- About 68% of respondents selected “evaluate;”
- About 17% of respondents selected “maintain;” and
- About 10% of respondents selected “increase.”

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the diverse public involvement processes for the Clifton Park Open Space Plan have enriched and informed the preparation and the refinement of the open space plan. The public input received to date, as well as ongoing public input as individual open space projects proceed, provides meaningful direction and guidance to this plan and to future open space protection projects occurring throughout the Town of Clifton Park.