TOURISM IN NEW ENGLAND TOWNS: A THREAT TO THE RURAL FABRIC

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Abstract.—A traditional tourist attraction in New England is the classic rural New England town. These small communities have a small-town feel bounded by family farms and wooded lands. These towns are heavily visited during the fall foliage season and during spring maple sugaring operations. The rural character of many New England communities is threatened by a growing population as citizens forego urban plight and move to pastoral environments to build "McMansions" on retired farmlands. This paper presents an analysis of changing demographic characteristics in one community and the preference for open space.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to define one measure of quality of life related to open space preservation for Southwick, Massachusetts (see Figure 1), a community with a rapidly growing population. With a current population of 9,000, should the community be "built-out" to current zoning, we might find the population peaking at 29,000! A measure of "Green" is calculated to represent those citizens motivated to support open space provisions in the community. It is based on the households' preference for six strategies to acquire and protect open space lands. Data were collected for the Community Open Space and Recreation Demand Survey (Bristow et. al 2002).

New England has been the case study for land preservation for decades. As early as 1921 and reemphasized in 1962, Benton MacKay, a regional planner, proposed strategies for greenways (MacKaye 1921, 1962). Population growth in the region has an impact on natural resources.

In the following sections, the reader will find some summary information from the Community Open Space and Recreation Demand Survey. Next, the methods employed for this study are introduced followed by the results. Lastly, a discussion of some of the more insightful findings will take place.

2.0 BACKGROUND

During the fall of 2001, the author met with members of the Southwick Open Space Committee to prepare a survey instrument that could be administered to the citizens of Southwick, MA. The survey instrument was modeled after questionnaires used in previous community open space and recreation surveys and tailored to meet the specific needs of Southwick. The instrument solicited information about household characteristics (length of residency, number in family, and age), preferences for strategies to protect open space and recreation resources in the community, visitation patterns for local resources, and information about needed expansion and/or provision of recreation opportunities.

A random telephone survey was utilized for this project. Thus, this survey is a stratified (by listed residential telephone numbers) random sample. Given that the population of Southwick is 8,835 residents and 3,318 households, (U.S. Census 2000), the 892 total calls made represent a 26.8 percent attempt rate of contacting the residents of Southwick. The sample size of 251 represents an overall sample of 7.6 percent of the population.

2.1 Residency

The minimum amount of time any given participant lived in Southwick was one month, while the longest amount of time was 75 years. The mean was 18.7 years.

2.2 Importance of Land Use Strategies

Preserving farmland yielded a 'most important' response from 125 households (49.8%). In the preserving historical places strategy, 120 households (47.8%) specified that this is most important. For conserving land, natural and open space areas, 154 households (61.4%) showed that this is most important. The last strategy, creating new or expanding current recreational areas, 65 households (25.9%) felt that this is most important. Thus conserving land and natural and open space is the most important factor land use strategy for the community.

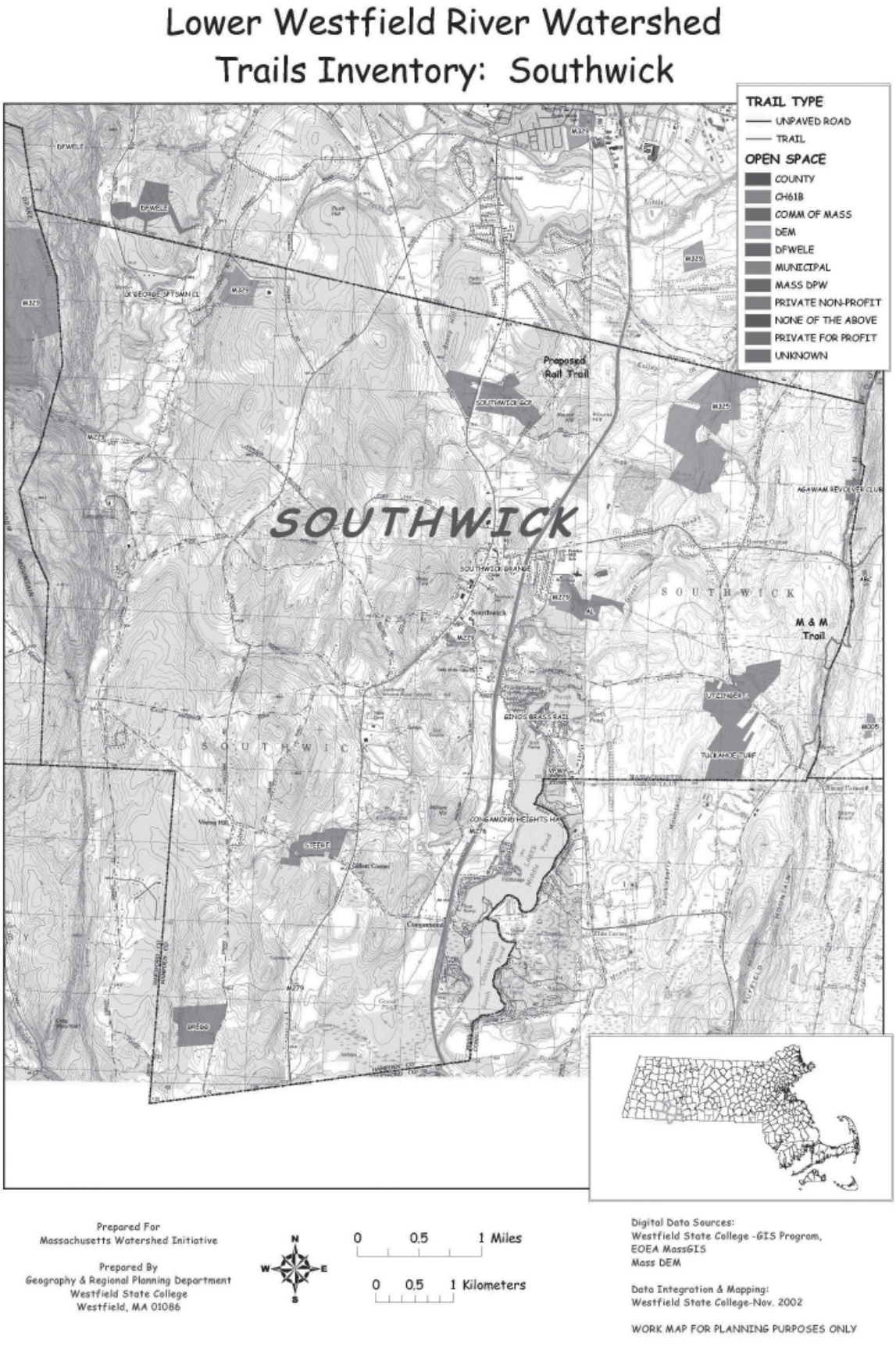

Figure 1.—Southwick, Massachusetts and open space.

2.3 Growth

Southwick citizens were most receptive to growth in the area of conservation and open space lands (90.8%), and business and commercial development (58.3%). The least interest in growth was found in the categories of residential (39%), industry/manufacturing (38.3%), and no growth (32.4%). Note also that the residents uniformly supported the preference for growth in conservation and open space; a low standard deviation of 0.29 indicates this wide support. The remaining growth strategies yield higher standard deviations (e.g., 0.46+), indicating greater variation in the responses.

2.4 Quality of Life

One hundred and eleven households (44.2%) rated housing costs only as fair. In the case of housing conditions, 142 households (56.6%) rated the condition as good. A majority of households (146 or 58.2%) rated the conditions of parks/playgrounds as good, and the vast majority of households (213 or 84.9%) rated the police service as good. Regarding the question of condition of streets, 115 households (45.8%) rated the condition as good. Public schools were rated as good by 147 households (58.6%). For fire protection, 198 households (78.9%) rated the protection as good. Lastly, 98 households (39.0%) rated shopping facilities as good and 99 households (39.4%) rated them as fair. Most citizens feel the services are good in the town, while housing costs and shopping opportunities are viewed by the citizens to be only fair.

2.5 Conservation Land Use

A majority of Southwick residents or 216 households (86.1%) agreed that the land should be kept in its natural state. There are 187 households (74.5%) who believe that land should be developed as passive recreational areas. Finally, the last type of land use strategy asked if people preferred the land to be developed as active recreational areas. Only 98 households (39%) favored this type of development. It is apparent that the citizens do not favor active recreation development.

3.0 METHODS

From this survey, a measure of environmental awareness was calculated. This "green measure" is the aggregate of several proposals to increase open space protection. The survey asked whether the household agreed or did not agree with the strategy. The measures are:

a. vote for strengthening zoning/development restrictions on wetlands and floodplains?
b. vote for town-supported land acquisitions?
c. sell or donate land to the town?
d. donate money to buy land?
e. vote for a tax increase specifically for open space preservation?
f. vote for a tax on real estate sales in Southwick to establish a land bank to fund town purchases of farmland or open space?

The more factors agreed with, the more "green" the family could be considered. Green households could represent groups with higher environmental sensitivity. A two-step cluster analysis determined the breakpoint between non-green and green households. Given six strategies on average, households needed to favor almost four to become green. Those who favored fewer actions were seen as non-green and those that favored the majority of actions could be green. This dichotomy was then evaluated with a t-test to see the significant differences.

4.0 RESULTS

Southwick is a "bedroom" community within commuting distance to large urban areas. And as such, the rural fabric of the region is threatened by urban sprawl. Individuals who have recently moved into the area have different expectations than do long-time residents. Results suggest the recent residents encourage residential and commercial growth within the community now that they live there, thereby changing the rural character of the area. There also appears to be a significant difference in the assessment of strategies to protect open space among the citizens

A majority of residents support the notion of strengthening zoning laws in the community. Next popular, citizens favor land acquisition as a mean to preserve open spaces. The four remaining strategies were equally supported and each received an approximate 50

percent approval. For the details, while 206 households (82.1%) are in favor of strengthening zoning/development restrictions on wetlands and floodplains and 179 households (71.3%) supported land acquisitions, only 122 households (48.6%) would sell and/or donate land to the town. Donating money or increasing taxes to preserve open spaces were options favored by only 51.8 percent and 37.5 percent, respectively. These environmental strategies were aggregated to create the Green measure.

A significant relationship is found between the length of residence and environmental sensitivity (independent samples t-test=-1.908, p=0.05). Investigating the individual strategies to protect open space found only one significant relationship, indicating that the aggregate measure of green is a powerful determinant. Specifically, a test of association for the cross tabulation of length of residence and favoring residential growth shows that longer-time residents appear to be against additional residential growth (Gamma = 0.213, p = 0.05). For example, households that have resided in the town for more than 21 years are more likely not to favor residential growth. Twenty-seven percent of the entire sample fall into this category, and 69 percent of all of the long-time residents are against residential growth. For the short-term residents (less than five years), the ratio of favoring residential growth and not is more like 50/50.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this research suggest that the original character of rural communities that may attract citizens to settle in the first place may actually change as rural lands are transformed into building lots. This in turn may reverse the characteristics of the community and further discourage additional settlement as the region becomes a suburb.

Greenways, as MacKaye (1921) envisioned, would provide a mechanism for smart growth to address urban sprawl, while providing needed habitat for wildlife and lands for ground water infiltration. The M&M Trail found on the eastern edge of the map (Figure 1) represents one such "dam" to encroaching urban sprawl. Additional greenways in the area will benefit the native wildlife habitats.

Given the rural nature of this and many other New England communities, the potential for converting farmlands into housing developments needs immediate attention. Protecting viewscapes is one tool that will help, and "farmscapes" are one of the initial attractants to the migrating citizens.

Next, there is a need to investigate the implications of population growth, the resulting urban sprawl, and the threat to open space.

Tied to an increasing population in rural communities is the important need to provide affordable housing. Massachusetts has experienced a net loss of population from 2003-2004. Housing costs are one of the reasons for this out-migration.

Southwick has a history that needs preservation. Southwick was incorporated in 1770. Historic structures and landmarks are competing for the same space that the citizens are demanding.

These are some of the compelling reasons to employ "Smart Growth" techniques to meet the varied needs of the citizens in New England. Time is short since one housing development may totally obscure one historic landmark.

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