

8. Parks, Open Space, and Recreation

Introduction

The quantity, variety, and condition of parks and open spaces contribute significantly to the quality of life of a community. The benefits of parks and open space are varied: they provide opportunities for social interaction and healthful activity, help preserve natural features and environmentally sensitive areas, enhance the overall quality of neighborhoods, and contribute to overall economic development.

In planning for its future parks and open space network, it is important for East Hartford to provide a strong balance active recreation that provides the facilities and programming desired by its diverse community, and a passive system that provides opportunities for more information recreation activities (i.e., walking, jogging, bicycling).

Greenways or linear trails, such as the Hockanum River Greenway, help provide this opportunity. When thoughtfully planned, greenways can link existing parks and open space areas with neighborhoods and community facilities (i.e., schools and libraries), increasing their accessibility from residential areas.

The park and open space resources found in East Hartford are, in general, geographically distributed throughout the Town and are accessible to most of the population. They can be considered one of the Town's signature assets, as they provide green space that helps break up the suburban development patterns, provide recreational opportunities to the surrounding neighborhoods, and can further sustainability and resiliency goals. The challenge is to continue to maintain and enhance these critical spaces so that they meet the changing needs of the community, while recognizing the Town's responsibility for managing its limited resources.

Parks, Open Space, and Recreation Goals

- Provide a system of linked public and private open space that offers both passive and active recreation opportunities, protects environmentally sensitive areas, and leverage opportunities for sustainability and resiliency initiatives.
- Improve and protect residential quality of life by maintaining and enhancing the park and open space system to provide active and passive recreational amenities that are adequate in extent, strategic in location, and equitable in distribution.
- Pursue strategic investments in the open space system that ensure achievable and consistent long-term management and maintenance of facilities.

Overview of Existing Parks and Open Space

East Hartford's parks and open space areas have been inventoried and categorized based on public or private ownership. Figure 1 illustrates the existing publicly and privately owned active and passive recreation and open space areas, as well as proposed expansions to those facilities. As shown in Figure 1, active recreation facilities consist of parks, playgrounds, ball fields, and schoolyards; while passive areas include greenways, cemeteries, and Town-owned floodplains, flood control properties, and vacant areas.

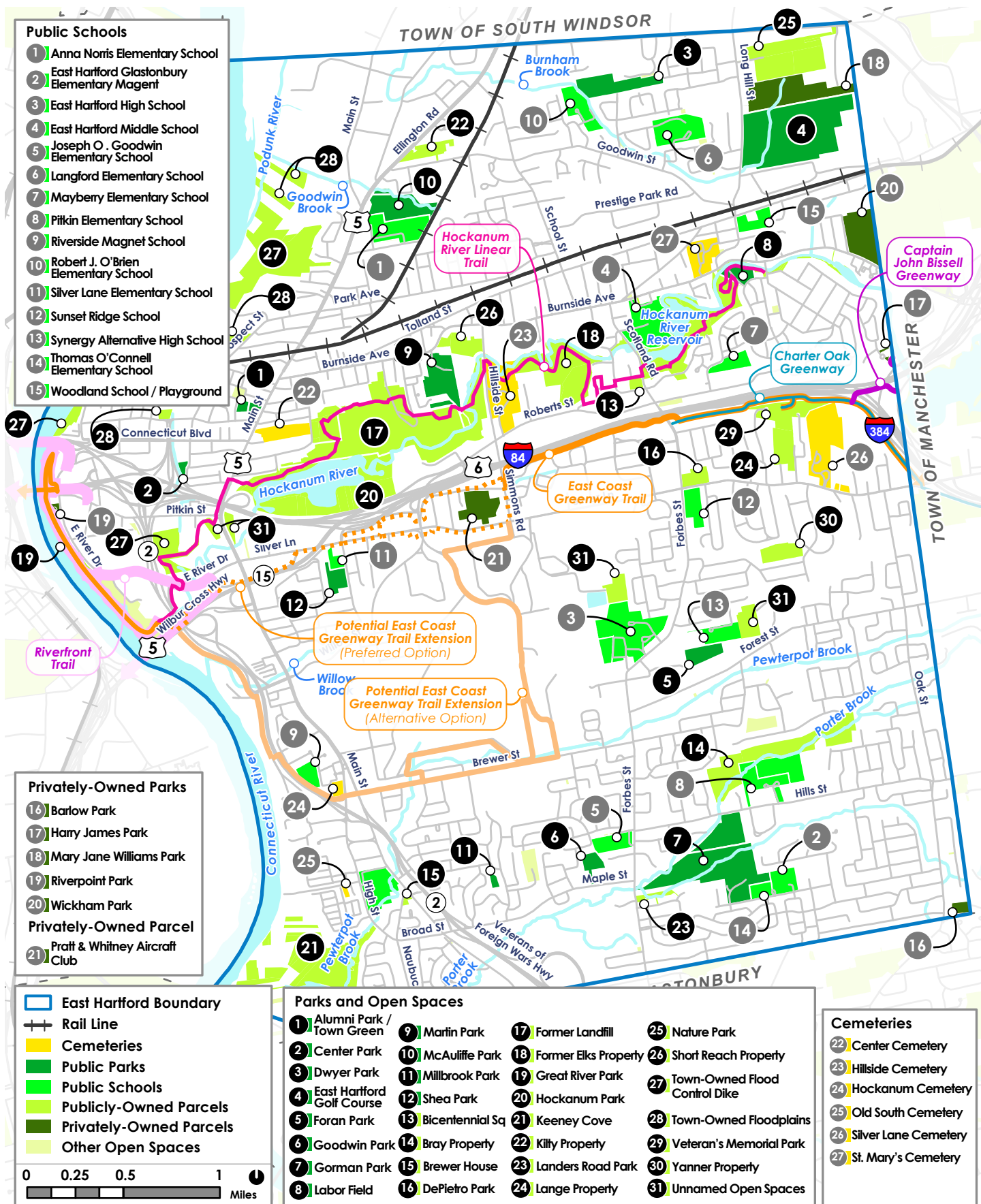


Figure 20: Parks, Open Spaces, and Trail System

In addition to Town-owned property, Figure 1 shows lands held by the Manchester Land Conservation Trust (MLCT) and private recreation and open space areas such as Wickham Park, Saint Christopher and Saint Rose schools and the Pratt & Whitney (Aircraft Club) fields. Given the missions of their owners, these lands are likely to remain in open space use and continue to support the recreation, conservation, and preservation objectives of this plan. For example, since the 2014 POCD, MLCT purchased an additional property, at the southeastern corner of East Hartford, which is now called Barlow Park.

The network of waterways found within the Town, particularly the Connecticut and Hockanum Rivers, have provided a baseline for successful greenway implementation. This includes efforts made by the nonprofit organization Riverfront Recapture, which has turned the Connecticut River waterfront in both Hartford and East Hartford into a major regional cultural and recreational asset. This overall network includes the Town's Great River Park, which offers walking and biking trails, boat launch areas, an amphitheater, and nature study areas. The park is connected to Hartford's Riverside Park, Riverfront Plaza, and Charter Oak Landing by walking paths over the Founders and Charter Oak Bridges.

Other successful greenway projects in East Hartford include the Hockanum River Linear Park, which extends almost the entire length of the Hockanum River in the Town and stretches through Manchester into Vernon; the Charter Oak Greenway, a multi-use trail that runs parallel to I-84 from Forbes Street to Route 83 in Manchester; and the Captain John Bissell Greenway, which connects the Charter Oak Greenway in East Hartford to the Bissell Bridge in South Windsor. As described later in this chapter, expansion of the greenway system will improve accessibility to the local and regional system and enhance the Town's quality of life.

East Hartford's current inventory of recreation and open space totals approximately 1,348 acres¹. The land included in the inventory is summarized in Table 1 and is categorized by ownership and active vs. passive use. Active recreational facilities are defined as areas that accommodate organized sporting activities such as baseball, basketball, soccer, or tennis. These facilities may also provide playscapes for younger children. For the purposes of this inventory, active recreational facilities have been further categorized by whether they are associated with a school facility. Passive recreational facilities are areas that provide low-impact recreation such as hiking or picnicking with minimal development or improvements. Improvements to passive recreation facilities typically include little more than park benches or picnic areas. Some areas included in this inventory function as natural conservation areas (i.e., floodplain) and are generally left as undeveloped open space.

The University of Connecticut football stadium at Rentschler Field is an active recreational facility of statewide significance. While the stadium can be seen as contributing to East Hartford's recreation opportunities, because of its fairly limited use for that purpose, it has not been included in the inventory of Town parks and open spaces.

¹ Total excludes the three East Hartford linear parks: Charter Oak Greenway, Hockanum River Linear Park, and Captain John Bissell Greenway, as these parks are measured in linear miles rather than acreage.

Table 1: Parks and Open Space Inventory, 2024

Active Open Space		Passive Open Space	
<u>Public Parks</u>	Acres	<u>Public Ownership³</u>	Acres
Alumni Field/Town Green	4.4	Bicentennial Square	2.3
Dwyer Park	23.8	Bray Property	69.7
Foran Park	11.5	Brewer House/Gardens	1.4
Goodwin Park	7.3	Center Park	2.2
Gorman Park	63.3	DePietro Park	7.0
Labor Field	11.6	East Hartford Nature Park	41.7
McAuliffe Park/Norris Elementary ¹	45.5	Great River Park	21.8
Martin Park	26.5	James Property	12.0
Millbrook Playground	2.0	Keeney Cove	101.7
Shea Park	9.0	Kilty Property	7.9
East Hartford Golf Course	101.4	Landers Road Park	2.6
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>306.3 acres</i>	Lange Property	12.9
<u>Public School¹</u>		Short Reach Property	5.3
East Hartford Middle School	18.5	Town-Owned Flood Control Dike ³	149.2
East Hartford – Glastonbury Magnet	7.7	Town-Owned Floodplain	34.5
East Hartford High School	35.7	Unnamed Open Space (near high school)	8.6
Goodwin Elementary	6.4	Unnamed Open Space (Main Street)	3.3
Hockanum Elementary/Park	16.0	Unnamed Open Space (next to Synergy HS)	10.4
Langford Elementary	19.0	Veteran's Memorial Park	18.2
Mayberry Elementary	7.3	Woodlawn Circle Open Space	2.6
O'Brien Elementary	13.1	Yanner Property	10.8
O'Connell Elementary	3.3	Former Landfill	97.9
Pitkin Elementary	14.3	Former Elks Property	51.0
Silver Lane Elementary	2.7	<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>674.7 acres</i>
Sunset Ridge Elementary	6.0	<u>Private Ownership</u>	
Synergy High School	19.5	East Hartford Patrolmen & Firemen	6.9
Woodland Elementary	2.5	Harry James Park ⁴	0.7
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>172 acres</i>	Mary Jane Williams Park ⁴	40.2
<u>Private Ownership</u>		Riverpoint Park ⁴	1.0
Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Club	19.3 acres	Wickham Park	22.5
		Barlow Park ^{2, 4}	4.2
		<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>75.5 acres</i>
		<u>Cemeteries</u>	
		Center Cemetery	11.4
		Hillside Cemetery	31.4
		Hockanum Cemetery	2.7
		Silver Lane Cemetery	37.9
		Old South Cemetery (Private)	0.9
		Saint Mary's Cemetery (Private)	15.5
		<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>100.1 acres</i>
Active Total	497.6 acres	Passive Total	850.3
GRAND TOTAL: 1,347.9 ACRES			

(1) Acreage represents area used for recreational purposes only

(2) Does not include linear parks

(3) New acquisition since 2014

(4) Indicates land held by the Manchester Land Trust

Source: Town of East Hartford Department of Parks and Recreation; Manchester Land Trust; 2014 POCD

Active Recreation

East Hartford's diverse array of active recreational facilities is a tremendous asset its residents. The 27 parks, school facilities and open spaces included in the inventory represent a broad spectrum of active uses, ranging from school playgrounds to baseball fields, soccer fields, basketball courts, and pools. These active spaces in total comprise about 500 acres of recreational area.

The Town has three parks that are the showpieces of its parks and open space system. The McAuliffe Park/Norris Elementary School complex in the northern end of East Hartford includes baseball and softball fields, a swimming pool, basketball courts, and play areas for children. Since the 2014 POCD, the North End Senior Center, previously adjacent to the park along Remington Road, closed as part of the consolidation of the Town's senior centers (see Chapter 9).

Martin Park, off Burnside Avenue, is another prime recreational facility. Its ballfields, skateboard park, pool facility, and play areas are important assets in the central part of the Town. The park's connection with the Hockanum River Linear Park via a pedestrian bridge enables neighborhood access to the regional trail network, while the presence of structures associated with the Makens Bemont House in the park creates a connection to East Hartford's history (see Chapter 10).

Finally, Gorman Park, in the southern end of town, is the Town's largest multipurpose park. It has a pool and pavilion picnic area, basketball courts, baseball fields and a soccer field. Much of the park's area is wooded and undeveloped, including a pond and stream.

Other important active recreational assets include the Long Hill Country Club (formerly East Hartford Golf Club), a public 18-hole course in the northeastern section of town, a new dog park at Foran Park, a new cricket field at Shea Park, a new pickleball court in Hockanum Park; and East Hartford's five outdoor pools: Gold Star Pool in Goodwin Park, Lord Pool in Gorman Park, Terry Pool in Hockanum Park, Drennan Pool in McAuliffe Park, and the Martin Park Pool.

Since the 2014 POCD, the Town has undertaken a wide range of park improvements, as shown in Table 2, including a comprehensive signage program, facilities for emerging sports (e.g., cricket, pickleball, and futsal) and renovations/upgrades to various existing amenities. In addition, the Town is considering construction of a 60,000-square-foot sports bubble to include multipurpose courts, artificial turf, a walking track, weight training area, party room, restrooms, and concessions. Construction of the facility is anticipated as being funded by a combination of impact fees from bonding and new development at Rentschler Field, with operation being taken on by a private entity.

East Hartford's parks system also includes a network of school-associated facilities, which introduce needed recreational space into residential neighborhoods, while also serving as important links in the overall open space system and connecting the schools to their neighborhoods. The Town must continue to work with the Board of Education to maintain and enhance these facilities.

There are also several key privately held facilities in East Hartford. Although the Town exercises no direct control over the use of these facilities, ongoing coordination is needed with their owners to ensure they remain strong elements of its recreation and open space network.

Table 2: Completed, Current, and Potential Park Improvement Projects, 2014-2024

Completed Projects	Current Projects	Potential Projects
<i>Alumni Park</i>		
Playscape New signage New message board on Main Street.	Basketball court	Parking lot pavement/curb replacement Light post upgrades Christmas tree replacement
<i>Bicentennial Square</i>		
Conceptual designs New signage	None	Tree replacement Installation of flagpoles and garden Irrigation Update memorial
<i>Center Park</i>		
New signage	None	None; currently unprogrammed space
<i>DePietro Park</i>		
New signage	Pollinator garden Parking lot	Stone dust pathway with benches Bridge across brook Irrigation
<i>Dwyer Park</i>		
New Signage	Basketball courts Pavement of College Drive parking	Installation of concrete bathrooms
<i>Foran Park</i>		
New signage Dog park with amenities	Basketball court Water line to dog park	Drainage improvements Playscape updates Walkway to Barbonsel Road
<i>Great River Park</i>		
New signage New electrical system for concerts	None	Bandshell at amphitheater Addition of handicapped seating
<i>Goodwin Park</i>		
New signage Pool mural/handicapped entry	Swing set repairs Wi-Fi improvements at pool	Swing set replacement Installation of concrete bathrooms Additional storage Pavement of lower parking lot Basketball court renovation Playscape replacement Replacement of fencing
<i>Gorman Park</i>		
New signage Renovated stadium and "Pony Field" Pool handicapped entry	Basketball courts New scoreboard, concession stand, press box at stadium New fencing and dugouts New futsal court Wi-Fi improvements at pool	Playscape replacement Splash pad Shade structure at pool Additional storage Field renovations Update of bathrooms and pool house Sand volleyball court Dam replacement Installation of trails in wooded area
<i>Hockanum Park</i>		
New signage Basketball and pickleball courts Pavilion Swing set and play area Pool filter/handicapped entry	Basketball courts Court lighting Parking lot paving Wi-Fi improvements at pool	Replacement of pool vessel Connection of pool drain to sewer Installation of concrete bathrooms Additional storage
<i>Labor Field</i>		
New signage Basketball courts Pavilion New fencing, trail entrance to park	None	Fencing/dugouts at field Repair of loop walk trailway

<i>Martin Park</i>		
New signage Field renovations Playscape replacement Maintenance shed Pool handicapped entry	Basketball courts New futsal court New park entrance gate Historic buildings work Wi-Fi improvements at pool	Parking lot pavement/expansion Electrical upgrades Fence replacement Replacement of pool vessel Splash pad
<i>McAuliffe Park</i>		
New signage Pool vessel/deck, handicapped entry Stadium and field renovations	New swing sets Pool mural/improved Wi-Fi access Improved railroad crossing Basketball courts New scoreboard	Irrigation Playscape replacement Walkway repaving Parking expansion Tiffany Street culvert Additional storage
<i>Millbrook Playground</i>		
New signage	None	Playscape update New swing sets
<i>Nature Park</i>		
New signage Trail and access improvements	Bridges in bog areas Kiosk in parking lot	Connect with Manchester Land Trust
<i>East Hartford High School (Penny tennis complex)</i>		
Court upgrades/repairs	Additional court repair	Court renovations
<i>Shea Park</i>		
New signage New parking area New cricket field & pitch	None	Additional fill and grading Drainage improvements
<i>Woodland Park</i>		
New signage New playground equipment Field renovations	None	Addition of T-ball field

Source: Town of East Hartford Parks & Recreation Department, 2023

Passive Recreation

Passive recreational facilities tend to be unimproved areas that provide low-impact recreation such as hiking, birdwatching and picnicking. These areas often serve as landscaped buffers between non-compatible and sensitive land uses, such as transportation corridors and wetlands. Passive recreational lands can also serve ecological purposes by protecting significant environmental areas (e.g., floodplains and mature forests) and play a significant role in stormwater management. However, these minimally developed areas should be properly maintained to ensure that they are safe for recreation, and free of litter or dumping.

East Hartford's most significant passive open space assets are its dedicated trails, which help to knit together the Town's overall open space network and to link it to neighboring communities.

- ***Hockanum River Linear Park Trail.*** This 3.5-mile boardwalk and stone dust trail extends roughly from the Charter Oak Bridge east-northeast to the Manchester town line. The trail, which will ultimately run 4.6 miles, connects several key Town assets, including the riverfront, Town Hall, dedicated parks and open space areas, and schools. Parking facilities are located at Hillside Street, Martin park, Elm Street and Town Hall. Phase 3 of the Hockanum River trail is planned to continue to connect gaps. This phase which will the greenway by approximately 3,700 feet, from Hillside Street along the Hockanum River eastward toward the historic mill at the end of Cottage Street before connecting back to Old

Robert Street. The boardwalk throughout the Hockanum River trails needs replacement, including the bridge over the river in Martin Park.

- **Charter Oak Greenway.** This 9.8-mile paved bike trail runs from East Hartford, through Manchester, to Bolton. The trail originates at Forbes Street and Ridgewood Road in East Hartford, running eastward along I-84 and I-384, and is part of the East Coast Greenway. It is planned to continue along Silver Lane and through Rentschler Field, eventually connecting with anticipated waterfront access along the Connecticut River.
- **Captain John Bissell Greenway.** This is a short spur of the Charter Oak Greenway that runs under I-84 to connect with segments of the East Coast Greenway in Manchester.

Other important passive recreational assets include the 22-acre Great River Park along East River Drive, which has picnic areas, boat launch facilities, an amphitheater and a riverwalk; the 42-acre Nature Park in the northeast portion of town, with hiking trails, and the 18-acre Veteran's Memorial Park, which has a clubhouse available for rental. Additionally, there are large swaths of undeveloped open space throughout East Hartford, including the floodplain areas north of the Bulkeley Bridge and land surrounding Keeney Cove.

Cemeteries, while not typically considered to serve a recreational function, nonetheless play a role in the overall open space system, providing respite of green space from their urbanized surroundings. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 9, East Hartford has six cemeteries, four of which are Town-owned, totaling approximately 100 acres of land.

Finally, the Town's Department of Parks and Recreation offers several special-purpose facilities for use or rental by East Hartford residents. These include the Community Cultural Center across from the Town Green and the Selden Brewer House on the southern end of Main Street. As of early 2024, Veteran's Memorial Clubhouse was closed for a \$6.8-million renovation and is scheduled to open later in the year. Prior to closing in March 2020 at the outset of the pandemic, the Parks and Recreation Department managed the clubhouse; however, a local catering company will run the facility when it reopens, through a public-private partnership that is intended to make this historic resource self-sustaining.

Future Open Space System

East Hartford is fortunate to have a park and open space system that is in relatively good condition and geographically well-distributed, with a wide diversity of uses. In looking to the future, it will be important to maintain facilities that are adequate in extent, strategic in location, and equitable in distribution to meet the unique active and passive needs of the Town's residents. The future health of the system will depend in part on the efficient programming, maintenance, and rehabilitation of the existing facilities.

Criteria for Future Open Space Acquisition

As indicated in Table 1 above, East Hartford has a wealth of both active and passive recreational open space, the total acreage of which satisfies the NRPA's suggested minimum acreage. Therefore,

the Town's focus should be less about acquiring additional open space acreage, and more about how to best equitably manage and maintain existing open space.

In considering any future open space acquisition, the following criteria should be used in prioritizing property, focusing primarily on acquiring and protecting land that provides the following benefits:

- Provides a new recreational amenity that cannot be located at an existing park or public open space and has been determined to be needed by the community
- Links existing parks and open spaces together to form interconnected greenways
- Links existing parks and open space to neighborhoods and the downtown area
- Preserves agricultural land
- Preserves natural drainage areas, including waterways and surrounding wetlands and floodplains
- Strengthens East Hartford's flood control system by facilitating improvements and long-term maintenance to the dike

The benefits of acquiring such open space should be carefully balanced against the cost of long-term maintenance and loss of taxable land.

Implementation Tools and Techniques

Implementation tools commonly used to protect open space can be divided into two general categories: regulatory and non-regulatory. Regulatory tools use the development process to implement controls to protect natural features or to establish open space, such as the following:

- **Site Planning Regulations**
- **Inland Wetland Regulations**
- **Zoning Regulations** – i.e., Preservation overlay zones (special district zoning)
- **Subdivision Regulations** – Open space dedication requirements and/or In Lieu Fees

Non-regulatory tools used to protect open space usually involve some type of ownership status. The following are examples of some of the more common techniques:

- **Fee Simple Purchase** – Involves the outright purchase of land
- **Easement** – A partial interest in property conveyed by the landowner to the Town or a non-profit such as a land trust with specific restrictions on land development or access privileges.
- **Land Trust** – Private, nonprofit organizations that acquire land for recreation or conservation. The establishment of an East Hartford Land Trust, or greater coordination with the existing Manchester Land Trust, should be explored.

Additionally, East Hartford's designation by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) as a "Targeted Investment Community," creates an opportunity to leverage funding through the State's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program to acquire open space.

Open Space Protection Focus Areas

The criteria defined above are helpful in identifying areas of Town to focus open space protection efforts, as summarized below.

Farmland Protection

Preserving portions of East Hartford's remaining farmland would help retain a sense of the Town's agrarian origins. The State Farmland Preservation Program has expressed little interest in acquiring farmland in East Hartford. Therefore, successful preservation would require locally led efforts; the Town should explore establishing a municipal farmland preservation program. There are resources available to support the Town in farmland preservation efforts, such as the American Farmland Trust, a nationwide organization that has provided technical assistance to Connecticut municipalities. The group has helped local municipalities implement strategies such as initiating an Agriculture Commission, reviewing farm tax reduction options, encouraging buy-local opportunities, and developing right-to-farm ordinances. Other tools that may be considered include transfer of development rights, land banking, agricultural zoning, and the use of conservation subdivisions.

Floodplain Protection and Stormwater Management

As discussed in Chapter 6, East Hartford's relatively flat landscape creates a less than optimal drainage capacity. This is evidenced by the large expanse of floodplain along the Town's major watercourses. Protection of East Hartford's remaining undeveloped floodplains (particularly along the Connecticut River) and the land that directly abuts watercourses is critical to ensure that natural drainage patterns are retained, and that stormwater runoff can be controlled.

In recent years, East Hartford's waterfront passive resources (Great River Park and Hockanum River Trail specifically) have been disproportionately affected by stormwater events, resulting in the walking path at Great River Park being shuttered due to damage and the trail's wooden walkways being in desperate need of replacement. With the clear onset of the effects of climate change, it is now more important than ever to continue bolstering waterfront and floodplain protection efforts. The Town has received federal funding to address poor conditions at the Hockanum River Trail, and there are potentially further opportunities to apply for state and federal grant funding to further protect and repair floodplains and manage stormwater.

The ongoing redevelopment of Rentschler Field presents another opportunity to preserve vital floodplains, as parcels that make up Rentschler Field contain wetland areas and include sections of the Pewterpot Brook that are prone to drainage problems. Preservation of these areas as part of any development proposals would help retain the natural drainage patterns in this area.

Linkage and Expansion of Greenways

Improving and linking East Hartford's greenway network Throughout the Town and to the wider region should be a major focus of open space enhancement efforts. The Capitol Region Council of Governments (CROG) has taken a significant step in this effort by initiating the East Coast Greenway Study in 2023. This study investigates the best methods by which to fill regional gaps in the East Coast Greenway (ECG), a 3,000-mile biking and hiking trail that extends from Florida to Maine. A key focus area is East Hartford.

There are three potential routes that are being explored to make connections to the ECG. One would improve and connect the Hockanum River Trail to the ECG via paths that run along Pitkin Street, Main Street, and Hillside Street. A second potential route would essentially run along Silver Lane, directly connecting the Charter Oak Greenway with the Great River Park Greenway. A third option would run south of the Pratt & Whitney Stadium at Rentschler Field through National Development property to Brewer Street and then to Riverside Drive near Goodwin University. This third route has the potential to create a rare north to south linkage of open spaces in the Town, which has long been identified as a need. Each of the routes studied presents an opportunity to increase connectivity, encourage multimodal recreational transportation, and connect open spaces in East Hartford to open spaces and trails in neighboring towns.

As of the fall of 2023, CRCOG determined that the top ranking potential alignments are the Silver Lane corridor, with grade-separated crossings, and the route through Rentschler Field. These short-listed options will undergo more detailed analysis in the study's subsequent phases.

Issues and Opportunities

Continue to maintain and upgrade facilities to serve the Town's residents

East Hartford has a significant network of active and passive open spaces, which contributes greatly to the strength of its neighborhoods and quality of life. The challenge now is to ensure that these open spaces are adequate and appropriate to serve their surrounding communities. To that end, the Town should carefully consider any new open space acquisition to assure that it provides a compelling public purpose, and instead focus its resources on upkeep, renovations, and improving amenities at its existing parks.

Table 2, above, identifies some potential projects throughout the Town's parks, which should be considered in future years based on further analysis and funding. In exploring improvements to the parks system, the following priorities were identified in this planning process:

- Ensure that parks can serve multiple purposes
- Focus on improving outdated amenities, including to provide handicap accessibility and Wi-Fi connection at all parks
- Consider long-term climate change impacts in park planning, e.g., installation of shade structures at all parks

The 2014 POCD identified a need for the Town to evaluate whether five public pools are still needed based on its changing demographics and the significant cost to operate due to the need for lifeguards and other seasonal staff. However, since that time, the Town has upgraded each of its pools. While closure of one or more pools should still be considered in the long-term, given this recent investment, the Town should instead explore the installation of one or more splash pad facilities, which are geared toward younger children and do not require a significant lifeguard presence. Additionally, the Town should consider introducing a modest user fee for residents, to help cover the cost of maintaining the pool facilities. The fee for non-residents also appears quite low and could be raised to better reflect operational costs.

One area of opportunity for newly created space is to develop an indoor recreational complex (sports bubble) at an appropriate location. Sites that have been considered include McAuliffe Park, along Silver Lane, or Town-owned undeveloped open space. Locational considerations include roadway access to handle anticipated traffic, space for substantial on-site parking, and opportunity to build on trail and sidewalk connections to existing parks or schools. The Town should also consider whether such a complex could house meeting space and amenities for seniors, both of which have been identified as community needs (see Chapter 9).

Explore all available funding options for new and enhanced recreational amenities

East Hartford's substantial parks and open space network requires significant ongoing funding. In addition to the Town's five-year capital plan, there are other funding streams that should be pursued. Traditional sources include CDBG funding and resiliency and historic preservation grants (for acquisition of floodplain/flood control properties and improvements to historic buildings within parks, respectively).

To supplement these typical funding sources, East Hartford should explore two other avenues that can ease the burden on its capital plan and capacity to seek grants: user fees and the private sector. While the imposition of new fees is often difficult, user fees can help to better connect the ongoing usage of community amenities with their maintenance and operational cost. As discussed above, pool fees represent one area of opportunity; another is the public golf course, where non-residential membership fees are nearly equal to those for Town residents. The Town should assess recreational fees in neighboring communities to determine appropriate levels that would remain competitive.

Regarding the private sector, the Town has had success recently in creating public-private partnerships such as at Veteran's Memorial Clubhouse, where a private operator has been tapped to run the newly renovated public facility. A public-private model should also be used for development of an indoor sports complex and any other substantial new recreational or community amenity.

Improve visibility and connections to existing parks and greenways

Since the 2014 POCD, the Town has made great strides in terms of increasing visibility of its parks by creating a unified, easily identifiable signage system. However, accessing parks by foot, bicycle, or public transit can still prove difficult for residents, as there is a lack of sidewalks leading up to parks, and a lack of appropriate bicycle infrastructure within many parks. Additionally, several parks lack suitable wayfinding methods and lighting, which are basic features that increase navigability and feelings of safety. To address these issues, the Town should consider implementing a policy which requires sidewalks to be constructed within a half-mile radius of each major park, and continue to improve amenities within the parks, including wayfinding methods, bike locks/paths, and signage. Additional connection points using street-ends and utility easements should be considered.

Finally, the Town should continue its efforts to link existing parks and greenways. The redevelopment of Rentschler Field and other key sites offers an opportunity to gain meaningful public open space through the planning and approvals process. For example, in 2015, Goodwin University developed its property along the Connecticut River by constructing several academic and administrative buildings, and has provided acres of public access to the riverfront extending as far south as the Putnam Bridge connecting Glastonbury and Wethersfield. This extension of the existing Riverwalk pathway

created a significant open space asset, not just for East Hartford, but for residents of the region. The Town should continue to work with the university and other private landowners along the waterfront and adjacent to other greenways to continue implementing similar connections.

Lastly, the Town should continue to work with CROG and other regional partners to confirm the best options for completing gaps within the regional greenway network. Currently, the preferred route to connect the Charter Oak Greenway and the Riverfront Trail appears to be along Silver Lane. Filling this gap will require coordination with CTDOT and significant funding. The route through Rentschler Field to Brewer Street, while not determined the preferred option, nonetheless retains value for its potential to create a much-needed north-south greenway connection. This route should be pursued through all available funding as further development in Rentschler Field occurs. Other existing north-south connections, such as along Forbes Street/Scotland Road and Simmons Road/Hillside Street, should be improved through widened sidewalks and signage, to better connect the Charter Oak Greenway and Hockanum River Linear Park trail.

Continue to explore options for underused Town-owned open space

The 2014 POCD noted that East Hartford has several large open spaces that are not developed for a particular recreational use. Some of these spaces abut existing parks or are near greenways, and thus present future opportunities for creating linkages, through strategic acquisition of connecting properties. Others are relatively isolated, and their primary role may be acting as vegetative buffers to neighborhoods.

Since the 2014 Plan, East Hartford has worked to activate some of its underdeveloped passive open spaces, such as through trail improvements at Nature Park. However, the fact remains that there is likely more open space than the Town has the capacity to develop and maintain. As noted in the prior POCD, one option may be to explore transferring one or more open spaces to a land trust or other nonprofit organization, to be responsible for ongoing upkeep of the space, which would continue to be preserved. In addition, if there are isolated undeveloped Town-owned properties that have little environmental value or potential for recreational use, the Town should explore options to locate other necessary public facilities to those sites (see Chapter 9) or even selling the property to a private or nonprofit entity for development of new housing types (see Chapter 4).