ACCESS TO RECREATIONAL FACILITIES IN BENNINGTON REGION TOWNS

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INTRODUCTION

The Bennington Region is fortunate to have a wide variety of high quality recreational facilities located throughout its towns and villages. These playgrounds, playing fields, trails, schools, and other resources are important to the social fabric of the communities, support a high quality of life, and contribute to healthy, active lifestyles. This report includes maps and a brief description of major recreational assets in each of the region’s towns. The maps also include circles with radii of ½ mile for small parks and playgrounds and 1 mile for large community parks – indicating approximate walking and biking “convenience zones” as well as point locations of all residences in each town. It is therefore possible to get a quick idea of how many residential properties are close enough to those facilities to invite access by walking or biking.

Of course, there are many additional issues, beyond linear distance, that affect access to recreational facilities and the report attempts to summarize the overall ease of access as well as specific challenges to access for each community. Some parks, for example, may be located near population centers, but lack a continuous and safe bicycle or pedestrian connection. In other areas, a limited access highway with no provisions for bicycle and pedestrian crossings may serve as a barrier to bicycle and pedestrian access between concentrations of residential development and major town recreational sites.

Access along existing roadway corridors for bicycles also is an important consideration; and while this report does identify several key areas of concern in certain communities, a great deal more information on specific needs and potential projects can be found in the Bennington Regional Transportation Plan and the Bennington Region Active Transportation Guide (available from the Bennington County Regional Commission or at www.bcrcvt.org). In many rural communities, because of distance, weather, and roadway conditions, access to many recreational facilities will by via automobile, so consideration should be given to the adequacy of parking at those locations.

Many of the town descriptions include identification of problems or needs, and some have general or specific recommendations for addressing those needs. Some of the recommendations are in the form of projects that are already at some stage of development while others need to be studied to identify a range of possible solutions. Implementation measures will vary by town and by project, but the Alliance for Community Transformations (ACT) will work with local officials and help coordinate with organizations such as the Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC) to advance projects that are deemed a priority in those communities.

Improving access to recreational facilities is one key element in ACT’s efforts to positively influence the health and well-being of our local communities. This assessment will be reviewed and updated over time, with successes and new needs identified. Further information on the report findings and available resources for implementation can be obtained by contacting ACT through the BCRC.
ARLINGTON

Although a relatively small town with a population of 2,317 (2010 US Census), Arlington is the largest community in the central part of Bennington County and contains significant village centers (Arlington and East Arlington) with a number of important institutional and recreational facilities. Much of the residential development in town is concentrated in the villages, areas which also contain the town’s municipal recreation center (“Recreation Park”), elementary school, middle/high school, library, and town hall. The Recreation Park contains a playground, a variety of playing fields, tennis and basketball courts, a swimming pond, one-mile recreational pathway, a golf course, outdoor ice-skating rink, and picnic pavilion. The schools (located across the street from each other) have indoor gymnasiums and meeting spaces, playing fields, and a playground. The town also includes several fishing and boating sites areas along the Batten Kill, public forest land, and a private campgrounds. Another important local recreational resource is River Road, a quiet unpaved town road that follows the Batten Kill from the center of town westward for 5-½ miles, and is an extremely popular walking, running, and biking route.

The recreation facilities in the center of town (Map 1) are within convenient walking/biking distance for most residents who live in the relatively densely developed village areas. A sidewalk system along East Arlington Road and Route 7A connects many residential areas to the schools, library, town hall, and local businesses. A serious shortfall, however, is the lack of a safe bike-ped connection from the center of Arlington Village to the Recreation Park. This situation both impedes access and causes serious safety concerns; resolution of the problem has been identified as both a local and regional priority and is described further in the Bennington County Regional Commission’s Active Transportation Project Guide. Adequate parking and supporting facilities are available at all of the formal recreation areas and fishing/boating access sites, and parking is available at several locations along and near River Road (including the West Arlington Green at the covered bridge).

A considerable number of residences are located outside of the biking/walking “service areas” of the formal recreation sites in town (Map 1), particularly in West Arlington, along several local roads south of the villages, and in one residential development north of the villages, near the Sunderland town line. Residents in these areas rely on automobiles to bring them to recreation sites in the village areas, but also have relatively good bicycle routes available along River Road (serving West Arlington) and a network of local roads south of the villages. Bicycle access to the villages from the north is restricted to Route 7A, which has relatively narrow shoulders, marginal pavement condition, and relatively high vehicular traffic volumes. Future roadway improvements along Route 7A should consider the needs of bicyclists along this corridor.
BENNINGTON

Bennington is the largest community in Bennington County, with a population of 15,764 (2010 US Census), and it contains a wide variety of recreational resources available to local residents—many of which also are used by visitors and residents of nearby towns. A complete inventory and assessment of those recreational assets has been prepared by the town (Bennington, Vermont—Park and Open Space Plan, February 2009). Many of those facilities— which include playgrounds, playing fields and courts, trails, a recreation center/swimming pool, school facilities, and private recreation sites—are depicted on Map 2, along with the location of single and multi-family residential development. The Bennington Park and Open Space plan reveals that the town has a rich variety and abundance of recreational facilities, with good access to most of the centrally located facilities, although some shortfalls are evident and noted. A clear facility need is for additional indoor recreational space accessible to town residents. Access to existing recreation sites is generally good, with a large majority of the town’s population within convenient walking/biking distance of one or more public recreation sites (Map 2). Several important needs are evident, however:

- The town’s major outdoor recreation venue, Willow Park, is located just east of US Route 7. Although a good pathway connects to the sidewalk network that covers most of the densely developed part of the center of town, Route 7 presents a physical barrier to access from the many residential areas on the west side of the highway. A safe crossing of the highway is needed, preferably along the Northside Drive—Kocher Drive corridor, with connecting sidewalks/pathways to existing sidewalks and the park entrance. This project currently is being studied by the town and the Bennington County Regional Commission, with some federal funding available for implementation.
- The population center of North Bennington—with its many recreational assets—is separated from the population and recreation sites in Bennington by a relatively inhospitable bike-ped environment along the Route 67A/7A corridor. A safe route for bicyclists and pedestrians would connect the centers as well as the many residences that exist between them (e.g., the Applegate and Willow Brook neighborhoods). Two projects have been proposed to address this need: a pathway between the Applegate and Willow Brook developments that would tie into the town’s sidewalk system (and the aforementioned US 7 crossing) and a multi-use on and off roadway route that would run from the bike-ped bridge at Hicks Avenue to the entrance of Bennington College.
- The White Rocks trail is a long-established and popular hiking route that winds through the Green Mountain National Forest to a scenic lookout high above Bennington. The trailhead is located on North Branch Street, near the densely developed residential neighborhoods in Bennington, but parking at the site is limited and poorly developed and marked. An improved parking area would facilitate greater access to this outstanding recreational asset for residents and visitors.
DORSET

Dorset is a historic town with most of its development concentrated along two valleys, one following Route 7 (East Dorset to North Dorset) and the other following Route 30 (South Dorset to Dorset and nearby East Rupert). The town’s population of 2,031 (2010 US Census) is quite dispersed along these valleys (Map 3), with much of the residential development outside of the walking/biking service areas of recreational facilities. Those recreational facilities include facilities at the Dorset School on Morse Hill Road, the playing fields at the Long Trail School on Kirby Hollow Road, and the town hall and playground in East Dorset Village. Emerald Lake State Park, located along Route 7 near North Dorset, but distant from most residences, contains a variety of recreational facilities including a swimming beach, hiking trails, playground, and camping and picnicking sites. The town also is traversed by many trails, some of which are on public land (mostly in the Green Mountain National Forest).

With most of the organized recreational sites relatively distant from much of the town’s population, it is important that parking be available at the facilities that do exist, and in fact, parking appears to be adequate at most of those locations. Residents may also bicycle to some of the recreation facilities; the Dorset West Road is an ideal road for bicyclists of all ability levels (serving as an important recreational asset itself) and provides a route (with short connections) to the Dorset School and Long Trail School from many residents on the west side of town. Of course, school facilities are only open to the general public when not in use by the school so the lack of recreation sites suggests that it would be useful to pursue opportunities for new facilities somewhere near Dorset Village.

On the east side of town, access to the town hall and its small playground on Mad Tom Road is quite good, although crossing Route 7 near the East Dorset General Store is hazardous due to traffic volumes and speed. Emerald Lake State Park, as noted, is quite remote from population centers, but has good parking (during its open season) and bicycle access along Route 7 is good due to wide and well-maintained shoulders and good site distances.

Many Dorset residents use the extensive facilities at the Dana Thompson Recreation Center on Route 30 and at Riley Rink/Hunter Park, located just north of the recreation center. It would be possible to develop a multi-use pathway from the Dorset School to those facilities along existing municipal rights-of-way and an abandoned rail line – thus establishing a new bike-ped facility and enhancing recreational access to those facilities in Manchester.

Many of the trails in Dorset could be used more extensively for recreation by residents and visitors, but they are not well-marked and trailheads are difficult to find with limited parking. Consideration should be given to working with the Green Mountain National Forest or other groups to improve access to these trails.
Glastenbury is an unorganized town with a population of only 8 people (2010 US Census). The vast majority of the town is owned by the US Forest Service as part of the Green Mountain National Forest. A number of important hiking trails, including the Long Trail/Appalachian Trail traverse Glastenbury (Map 4) and residents have direct access to thousands of acres of forest land for hiking, cross-country skiing, and other outdoor recreational pursuits.

Glastenbury residents rely on the neighboring town of Shaftsbury for many services; the town park, state park, and school facilities in that community are available to Glastenbury residents, but because of the remote location of Glastenbury residences, access is via automobile. Fortunately, parking at these areas is good, and the town should be sure that its residents have access to those sites.
LANDGROVE AND PERU

The mountain towns of Landgrove (population 158, 2010 US Census) and Peru (population 375, 2010 US Census) are located in the northeastern portion of Bennington County. Each community contains a small playground – at the town hall in Landgrove and on North Road near the fire station in Peru – and the Hapgood Pond Recreation Area (US Forest Service) lies approximately half way between Peru Village and center of Landgrove. Peru also maintains an attractive town green in the village center and Landgrove has tennis courts in its historic village. In addition, the Long/Appalachian trail, and several other National Forest trails are found in Peru and some connect to trails in the northern part of Landgrove. Peru also is home to a popular downhill ski area and a cross country ski center.

As small rural mountain towns, it is not surprising that Peru and Landgrove have relatively few developed recreational assets, but each community does have resources available to local residents. For the most part, access to these facilities is good, although a number of residences are outside the convenient service area of the parks and playgrounds (Map 5). A particular issue identified by local residents is the lack of safe access for pedestrians and bicyclists to the Hapgood Pond Recreation Area (and the nearby town playground) from the Peru Village area. While most of the roads in the towns are unpaved and low-traffic, traffic on Hapgood Pond Road often moves at high speeds and limited space is available for bicycles and pedestrians to share the road safely. Several years ago, the town completed a feasibility study of a pathway that could be constructed adjacent to Hapgood Pond Road, but construction cost has been an obstacle to implementing that plan.

Unlike many towns in the region, trailheads tend to be well-marked and have adequate parking provided. The towns should remain in contact with the Forest Service to ensure that these access sites continue to be available and well-maintained.
MANCHESTER

Manchester is the commercial, cultural, and institutional hub of the northern part of Bennington County. The level of development and activity in the town is greater than its population of 4,391 (2010 US Census) would suggest. The town is fortunate to have an abundance of recreational assets, including a large community recreation center (Dana Thompson Recreation Park) with playing fields (one with a grandstand), a swimming pool, tennis and basketball courts, a walking/running trail, and a new building with a function room, school-based recreation facilities at the elementary/middle school (located between downtown and the Recreation Park) and Burr and Burton Academy, two town greens, three golf courses, private fitness centers and spas, and numerous hiking trails (in the Green Mountain National Forest and at the Equinox Preserve).

Access to recreational facilities for much of the town’s population is excellent as an extensive sidewalk network connects locations around the downtown and along principal roadway corridors, including Route 7A (north to the town hall and Hunter Park and south to Manchester Village and Burr and Burton) and Richville Road. The central location of many of the organized public recreation sites means that much of the residential population is within convenient walking/biking distance to those facilities (Map 6). The multi-use pathway that connects the elementary and middle school (which is adjacent to the downtown and the town’s sidewalk network) with the recreational facilities at Hunter Park (including Riley Rink) has greatly enhanced bike-ped access for many town residents. Plans to extend this pathway northward to serve additional residential areas en route to Dorset are being developed.

Parking at all of the recreation sites is adequate and trailhead locations are well-marked and maintained. Particularly notable is the improved parking for users of the Equinox Preserve trails at the end of West Union Street. Another access to the Preserve exists at the end of Equinox Pond Road, but parking at that location is severely limited and not likely to be expanded.

Quite a few residences are located outside the recreation park service areas (Map 6), especially in neighborhoods off West Road, North Road, East Manchester Road, and Barnumville Road. Bicycle access from West Road and North Road is generally good (especially when the aforementioned multi-use pathway is extended at least as far as North Road). Access to central recreational facilities from the East Manchester Road area via Richville Road is relatively convenient and safe for residents of those areas. Bicycle access along Barnumville Road to the center of town also is possible, but some of those neighborhoods are more remote and the roads less appealing for some bicyclists.

The most significant concern with recreational access in Manchester is the streetscape along Route 11/30 (Depot Street) between Richville Road and Route 7A. The existing sidewalk design does not invite pedestrian use and crossings can be hazardous. The town is looking at a re-design of this area, as well as a possible “riverwalk” between Depot Street and Main Street to improve those conditions and provide continuous access from outlying neighborhoods to central recreational facilities.
POWNAL

Pownal is a rural residential community located between Bennington and Williamstown, Massachusetts; its 2010 population was 3,527 (US Census). The town has three principal village areas: Pownal, Pownal Center, and North Pownal. Existing recreational facilities are somewhat limited, with facilities at the Pownal Elementary School (near Pownal Center) and a recreation field near North Pownal. The town also owns extensive forest land, with a trail network, on the former Pownal Tannery lands between North Pownal and the New York State line (on the slopes of the Taconic Mountain Range). Other public land includes extensive holdings in the Green Mountain National Forest, with some recreational trail access. The town hall is located in Pownal Center and a library in the Pownal village area.

Many residential properties in Pownal are outside the convenient service areas of existing recreational facilities (Map 7). The most obvious need is in the Pownal village area, where a high concentration of housing is located with no nearby organized recreational sites. The former Pownal racetrack is located immediately adjacent to the village area and presents some potential opportunities to include recreational facilities as part of any comprehensive redevelopment plan that may be advanced in the future. Interest in developing a multi-use pathway from Williamstown to Pownal also has been expressed in recent years – such a pathway would provide a convenient and bicycle-pedestrian friendly route for local residents to access the many opportunities in the Williamstown area.

Burrington Road is a town highway that parallels Route 7 between Pownal and Pownal Center (it is, in fact, a portion of the old Route 7). The road is a popular and scenic recreational route for walkers and bicyclists, but the surface condition has deteriorated making its use less attractive and maintenance difficult. A plan has been developed to incrementally convert the road to a high quality gravel surface and to add two or three scenic pull-offs that also can serve as recreational access points.

Access to the town property and trails near North Pownal currently is somewhat limited by intervening private property. It might be possible to incorporate access rights, a parking area, and other improvements in any property redevelopment that occurs in that area. A final concern in Pownal is the location of the school on the east side of Route 7 – across the highway from the Pownal Center village area. It is important to ensure that traffic speeds are controlled and that adequate pedestrian crossing safeguards are in place.
RUPERT

Rupert is a rural community (population 714, 2010 US Census) with extensive agricultural and forest lands. Most of the population is located in the valley areas on the east and west sides of the town, with higher elevation forest land (including the 3,000+ acre Merck Forest and Farmland Center) separating them. Small playgrounds and recreational fields are located in Rupert and West Rupert Villages and a multi-town community recreation facility is located in the Mettawee Valley along Route 30. A popular fishing access site on the Mettawee River also is located on Route 30.

The population centers of Rupert and West Rupert both are served by those small recreational facilities (Map 8), and while few residences are close to the community recreation center on Route 30, it is conveniently located with good parking to serve residents of Rupert and Pawlet; Route 30 also is a popular bicycling route with good pavement conditions, relatively low traffic volumes, and good visibility, making it a good access route from East Rupert and other residences on the east side of town.

Merck Forest includes an extensive trail network, meeting facilities, camping, and offers a variety of outdoor educational activities. It has good parking and well-marked trailheads and trails, although it is relatively distant from population centers and bicycle access is challenging because of the steep hills on Route 315.

Another popular outdoor recreational facility is the D&H Rail Trail that runs through West Rupert, Rupert, and north to West Pawlet. It can be accessed from several locations near roadways, although parking at these informal trailheads is not always ideal.

The principal indoor recreational facility available to the town is at the Mettawee Valley School which is located in Pawlet. It is several miles from most Rupert residences, but the small populations in the area made construction of a school serving multiple towns the most efficient way to provide educational services in a high quality facility.

For a small rural town, Rupert has a rich collection of recreational facilities with most residences having convenient access to one or more of them.
SANDGATE

Sandgate is a remote town (population 405, 2010 US Census) located in the Taconic Mountains between Mount Equinox and the New York State line (Map 9). With a population dispersed primarily along the Green River Valley, Camden Valley, and the winding dirt road that runs through Sandgate to Rupert, no organized recreational facilities have been developed in the town. In-town recreational activities include walking and biking along the quiet roads and trails and fishing and swimming in the Green River.

Sandgate supports the Arlington Recreation Park and many students attend school in Arlington as well. The facilities and activities at these nearby venues in Arlington are available to Sandgate residents as well.
SHAFTSBURY

Shaftsbury is one of the larger towns in the Bennington Region (population of 3,590, 2010 US Census) – located just north of Bennington. The town has a fairly dispersed population as concentrated mixed use development in its principal village center of South Shaftsbury has been limited by a lack of sewer infrastructure and its proximity to many competing uses in nearby areas in Bennington. The South Shaftsbury village area is, however, well-served by convenient recreational facilities including Howard Park, a community park with a variety of playing fields and a nature trail (Map 10). Shaftsbury Elementary School, with its gym, outdoor playing fields, and playground also is located in South Shaftsbury. Access to all of these facilities is generally excellent, as a comprehensive sidewalk system has been developed throughout the village and to Howard Park in recent years. One ongoing concern is the safety of the crossing at Route 7A near the school (and on the route to Howard Park). Enhanced traffic calming, access management, and pedestrian crossing facilities would improve access from the residential neighborhoods west of Route 7A to the recreation sites located on the east side of Route 7A.

Residents in the southern part of Shaftsbury also are in relatively close proximity to the many recreational facilities at Lake Paran and in the Village of North Bennington. Access to these areas from South Shaftsbury Village is not ideal, as Route 67 is a busy highway characterized by high vehicle speeds. A recreational footpath has been developed from the Frost House Museum on Route 7A near South Shaftsbury Village to Lake Paran, but it would be beneficial to residents in both communities to develop an improved access route, especially for bicycles, directly connecting the village areas.

A popular state park, Lake Shaftsbury, is located in the northern part of the town, with swimming, picnicking, boating, fishing, hiking, and group camping facilities available. The few nearby residents have convenient access to the state park, but as it is in a rural area, most residents (of Shaftsbury and surrounding communities) drive to the park – where abundant parking is available.

There are no organized recreation areas within convenient walking or biking distance for many of the town’s residents – many of the residences are located along the extensive network of secondary town roads in the agricultural western part of town and the hilly forested eastern side of town. These roads – and connecting trails – do afford many of the residents with accessible walking and biking routes, and safe routes to the South Shaftsbury Village area.
STAMFORD

Most of Stamford’s 824 residents (2010 US Census) live in the valley of the upper reaches of the Hoosic River (Map 11). Much of the northwestern part of the town is owned by the US Forest Service and the Long/Appalachian Trail crosses through that part of Stamford, with a few access points, especially along the old County Road. Another important recreational asset in that mountainous section of Stamford is Sucker Pond and the adjacent state forest land. Trails access the pond, one of the largest water bodies in the region, from several directions.

Stamford has a fairly compact and well-defined village area along Route 100 near not far north of the Massachusetts state line. In addition to a concentration of housing and a few small businesses, the local school and town hall are located in this area. This important public property includes indoor and outdoor recreational facilities, a playground, and several playing fields. Access to the site has been a concern for many years in the community, as Route 100 is a fairly busy roadway and there are only narrow shoulders and no sidewalks in the village area. A project to create a short sidewalk segment on the west side of Route 100 in the village is under development, but it will be important to provide a safe crossing to the school/recreational facilities. The sidewalk, or widened road shoulders, could be extended north and south to provide improved access for residents living on side roads off Route 100.
SUNDERLAND

Over three-fourths of the Town of Sunderland is located within the Green Mountain National Forest (Map 12), so the entire population of 956 (2010 US Census) lives in the western portion of the town. Although there are several commercial establishments along Route 7A, the town has no real village center, as the population is fairly uniformly distributed along several local roads. The most important recreational assets in the community are those available at the Sunderland Elementary School, located on Sunderland Hill Road, and the many natural resource based recreational opportunities in the Green Mountain National Forest.

Only about ten percent of the town’s population is within convenient walking/biking distance from the local school, so access to the site for most residents is via automobile. Many town residents also use facilities at the public schools in Arlington and at the Arlington Recreation Park (which is supported by the Town of Sunderland). Parking at all of those facilities is excellent, and a sidewalk extends from East Arlington (adjacent to the Sunderland town line) to the Arlington schools, library, and the center of Arlington Village.

Sunderland has historically been a gateway to many of the most popular recreational destinations in the southern part of the Green Mountain National Forest. Hiking trails, mountain summits, lakes, streams, and camping have all been readily accessible, and extensively used, by local residents. Unfortunately, this ready access has been provided by the Kelley Stand Road, large portions of which were obliterated during Tropical Storm Irene in 2011. Without Kelley Stand Road (itself an important recreational asset for walkers, runners, campers, and cross-country skiers), access to these local recreational opportunities has been severely restricted. Fortunately, the US Forest Service is providing technical resources and funding for reconstruction of the road and bridges – it is hoped that construction will be completed by the end of 2014.
WOODFORD

Woodford’s 424 residents (2010 US Census) live mostly in Woodford Hollow, near Bennington, and, at a much higher elevation, near Woodford Lake; both areas are surrounded by the Green Mountain National Forest, which occupies over 90% of the land area in the town. The town contains many recreational resources available to local residents and visitors. An elementary school is in Woodford Hollow, Woodford State Park, with a small lake, boating, camping, and hiking facilities, is located toward the eastern side of the town, a major cross country ski center is near the center of town, and several important trails with trailheads are found along Route 9.

The school is located within the walking/biking service area of many of the town’s residents who live in Woodford Hollow, but access is along Route 9, a busy state highway. Some type of improved pedestrian facility would encourage walking and biking and enhance safety. There are relatively few residents living near the state park, although there is plenty of parking available at the park. When the state park is closed, however, people who want to snowshoe, ski, or fish at the park have to use the snowmobile parking lots on the opposite side of Route 9 and make a somewhat hazardous crossing of Route 9 – where vehicles often travel in excess of 50 miles per hour. Provision of some parking on the south side of Route 9 in this area would improve recreational access and safety.

The parking lot at the Long/Appalachian Trail crossing on Route 9 is large and well-marked. The popular Little Pond Trail is marked, but the parking area is rough and access to Route 9 can be dangerous. Improved signs and a resurfaced parking lot would improve safety and enhance utilization of the Little Pond Trail.