

Introduction

What is Open Space?

Open space, in the simplest of terms, is undeveloped land, but in reality it is often much more. Open space should be considered the landscapes and open areas that link together the built environment in which we live. Often it is the nature and extent of these connections, and the manner in which the population uses these areas that help define a community. There are many types of open space and everyone has their own perception of what open space means. Here are some examples of what open space can be.

<i>Forests</i>		
<i>Fields</i>		
<i>Meadows</i>		
<i>Hedgerows</i>		
<i>Lakes</i>		
<i>Ponds,</i>		
<i>Rivers</i>		
<i>Streams</i>		
	<i>Historic Sites</i>	<i>Yards</i>
	<i>Historic Structures</i>	<i>Gardens</i>
	<i>Scenic Views</i>	<i>Orchards</i>
	<i>Scenic Corridors</i>	<i>Vacant Lots</i>
		<i>Athletic Fields</i>



Why do we need Open Space?

The benefits of open space are myriad and far reaching. Open space not only provides recreation opportunities and wildlife habitat, but it has an effect on human health and community well being as well. Open space creates areas for active and passive recreation, contributing to the physical and mental well being of those who utilize it. The benefits of open space break down into four main types.

- **Aesthetic Value** – Open space often protects “beautiful places” and differing landscapes such as forests, fields, waterways, gardens and scenic vistas offer aesthetic benefits to an area. Open space creates a pleasant and vibrant living environment. The restorative powers of natural scenery have been written about since the works of Thoreau. Residents and visitors alike form impressions about an area based on the natural spaces and green areas.
- **Ecological Function** – Lands in open space protection can help maintain the important balance in air and water quality. Open space can also help preserve vital storm water recharge lands and protect important environmental features. Floodplains, wetlands, and steep slopes can become hazards if developed, but if

they are preserved in their natural state, they provide important ecological functions by maintaining their ability to absorb flood waters and retain pollutants, preserving air and water quality.

- Recreation Opportunities – People of all ages enjoy outdoor activities of all kinds. Whether pick up games or organized leagues, citizens need fields and courts for active recreation. These facilities also provide citizens meeting areas and comfortable spots to savor the relaxation they require.
- Cultural Identity – Historic and cultural resources help define who we are and where we have come from. Preserving natural areas, farmlands, battlefields, historic structures and districts are important efforts for maintaining the quality of life for a community.

How many types of Open Space are there?

There are countless types of open space. Everyone has their own conception of what open space is and often times, many seemingly different types of open space occupy the same site. But, open space generally falls into differing categories that play individual roles within a community. Here are some examples that illustrate the universe of possibilities.

Active Recreation

- Soccer Fields
- Football Fields
- Baseball & Softball Diamonds
- Running Tracks
- Swimming Pools
- Beaches
- Tennis Courts
- Basketball Courts
- Exercise Trails
- Skate Parks and Skating Rinks
- Performance Spaces
- Golf Courses & Driving Ranges
- Boat Launches





What are Benefits of an Open Space Plan?

A good Open Space Plan requires a comprehensive planning approach, meaning that the process needs to look at opportunities and constraints in the area, rely on public input and produce innovative and custom solutions to meet determined needs. The Open Space Plan can be just as complex as the Land Use Element of a Municipal Master Plan or a County Strategic Plan. States, Counties, and Municipalities should not take a cookie cutter approach to their Open space plans, relying on other jurisdictions to craft plans and simply copying the same approach. Each community and region has its own particular open space opportunities and needs. The Open space planning process that results in a competent plan creates certain advantages that include but are not limited to:

- Creating a proactive plan for open space protection – Counties and Municipalities can create a proactive plan for identifying needs and creating capital plans for acquiring and developing facilities instead of reacting to land use changes brought about by the private sector
- Prevents reactive actions created by individual development proposals – When a jurisdiction has a plan in place, it will know how individual development proposals fit into the larger framework and can be prepared to implement changes in proposals to realize the vision of the plan

Passive Recreation

- Hiking Trails
- Bird Blinds
- Boardwalks
- Picnic Areas
- Quiet Places

Natural Resource Protection

- Forestlands
- Wetlands
- Wildlife Management Areas
- Floodplains
- Steep Slopes
- Groundwater Recharge Areas

Historic Resource Preservation

- Historic Buildings and Facades
- Historic Districts and Areas
- Interpretive signage
- Public and Private Preservation efforts

- Provides opportunities for funding – Open space plans that satisfy NJDEP Green Acres Program requirements meet one of the prerequisites for matching funds and acquisition grants
- Creates community buy-in and support – A well crafted Open Space Plan will include public input and will provide a document that can be shared with community leaders and citizens to help build support for capital plans, open space acquisitions and recreation facilities improvements

A key element of any Smart Growth Initiative – Open space planning is an integral part of any Smart Growth Planning initiative. Open space planning can be seen as planning the “Green Infrastructure”. Just as a community wants to plan it’s physical form and maintain it’s transportation, utility and communications infrastructure, it wants to do the same for it’s open space or “Green Infrastructure”.

