

## **PARKS, RECREATION, AND OPEN SPACE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most critical components in maintaining and enhancing a community's quality of life is its system of parks, recreation, and open space. The careful location of parks and open space areas and preservation of the Town's natural resources as a complement to existing development can be a useful tool in guiding the Town's development into a logical, orderly and environmentally sensitive pattern. In addition to recreational and aesthetic benefits, open spaces provide a framework for various land uses. Properly located, they become boundaries and buffers between conflicting uses of land and a nucleus for building neighborhood areas. Natural features can be preserved as valuable scenic and environmental attributes of the Town. A park system and recreational program can also go a long way toward resolving the age-old problem of a community offering nothing for young people "to do."

This chapter examines the current state of Easton's Parks and Recreation system and proposes methods by which it might be improved. It also calls for the establishment of a Town-wide system of "green infrastructure." This refers to the parks and open space areas, as well as the paths and corridors that link these areas. It also proposes areas for new parks to be developed in the future as the Growth Area becomes developed.

### **BACKGROUND**

Table 12 represents an inventory of existing Town parks and opens space areas. One of the most notable points is that there are a fairly large number of parks (14) in Easton. In 1995 at the Town Planning Workshops, however, participants confirmed that they overwhelmingly use only one park, Idlewild.

Taken together, these two findings suggested that while Easton had a sizeable acreage for parks, much of it was undeveloped and/or underutilized.

Since the adoption of the 1997 Plan, much work has occurred in the area of parks. Improvements have been made at Idlewild and Moton Parks. The Rail-Trail has been extended and the North Easton Park has been developed into a first class sports complex, to the degree that it has since hosted a number of State and Regional Championship Tournaments.

Multiple entities are responsible in some way for Easton's overall Park System. The Planning and Zoning Commission obtains land for parks through the subdivision process as one of the requirements for subdivision is the provision of 1,200 square feet of parkland per dwelling unit. The Commission also is involved in the specifics of where the parks should be located, how many there should be, etc... for a subdivision during the review process.

Once the land is obtained, it becomes the responsibility of the Easton Park Board to determine how that parkland should be improved. This group operates with the assistance of a full-time Parks and Recreation Director who also is responsible for Easton's summer recreation program.

The ongoing maintenance of Town parks is the responsibility of the Department of Public Works, providing trash pick-up, grass cutting, and installation and maintenance of equipment, furniture, etc... With a growing system of parks, this area of responsibility grows proportionally as well.

Finally, the Mayor and Town Council have the important role of prioritizing the development of the Town's park system, primarily through the budget process. They determine which improvements are implemented (and when) and occasionally also approve funds for the acquisition of park land. These tend to be the larger, regional-scale parks as opposed to the smaller

neighborhood parks that are more customarily obtained by the Planning and Zoning Commission through the subdivision process.

TABLE 12 EXISTING PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

TYPES AND AREAS	SIZE (ACRES)	OWNERSHIP	FACILITIES
Mini-Parks			
Thompson	0.5	Town	Benches/Fountain
Clifton	0.25	Town	Passive
Neighborhood Parks			
South Clifton	10.0	Town	Undeveloped
Chapel East	1.7	Town	Playground Pavilion
Matthewstown Run	1.2	Town	Playground Picnic Area and Table Baseball Field
Tots Park	0.70	Town	Undeveloped
Golton II	0.8	Town	Playground
Glenwood Elementary*	10.0	County	Playground Softball Field Baseball Field Basketball Courts
Mount Pleasant	6.46	County	Playground Fields
Mulberry Station (3 different parcels)	3.95	Town	Playground
Waylands	0.468	Town	In 2010 adding: Playground Picnic Area Benches
Brettridge	1.344	Town	Undeveloped

Community Parks			
Idlewild	15.0	Town	(2) Softball Fields Track Picnic Area & Tables (3) Tennis Courts Basketball Court Football Field Playground Children's Park Area Fountain/Garden Area Pavilion
North Easton Park	26.2	Town	(4) Baseball Fields Playground (3) Football/Soccer/Lacrosse/Field Hockey Fields Picnic Area Pavilion
Moton Park	12.2	Town	Track Picnic Tables & Pavilion Playground Basketball Court
County Swimming Pool	2.8	County	Swimming Pool
Easton High School*	18.0	County	Football Field Soccer Field Field Hockey Field Lacrosse Field (3) Ball Fields Track
Easton Middle School*	12.5	County	(3) Ball Fields Football Field (2) Field Hockey Fields Lacrosse Field
Stoney Ridge	20.0	Town	Playground Picnic Area Benches
Special Park Areas			
Rails-To-Trails	8.0 (est.)	Town	Walking/Bicycling Path

Talbot County YMCA	10.0	Quasi-Public	Indoor Facilities (14) Tennis Courts Deck Tennis
VFW	5.0	Quasi-Public	Baseball Field
Talbot County Historical Society	1.0	Quasi-Public	Historic Structure & Gardens
Warner Wildlife Sanctuary	8.0	Quasi-Public	Nature Conservancy
Skate Park	2.197	Town	Fenced-in Skate Area Benches
RTC Park	58.344	Town	Undeveloped
Easton Village		Town	Canoe/Kayak Launch

Source: *Talbot County Land Preservation and Recreation Plan Draft, 1987 & Easton Comprehensive Development Plan, 2004.*

\* - *Although listed in the inventory here, the recreational amenities are not generally available for use by the general public.*

## **FUTURE PARKS**

One area, in which it is crucial for the Planning Commission and Park Board to work together, is the planning for future park sites. The 1997 Comprehensive Plan made the following recommendations for future parks:

- The Rails-to-Trails Park should be built in its entirety, from approximately Idlewild Avenue to the North Easton Park. Furthermore, the Town should work with the County to extend this trail wherever possible. Such an extension in a westerly direction towards St. Michaels seems particularly feasible. The portion of the trail presently planned to open in the summer of 1997 should be extended northward. However, in recognition of the concerns of residents from the neighborhoods north of Tanyard Branch, the Planning and Zoning Commission recommends that once the trail

crosses this stream, it should veer eastward and follow the eastern boundary of the former RTC property that was acquired by the Town in 1996. The final link in the trail, from this parcel to the North Easton Park should be built when the intervening parcel develops, using a corridor as the park dedication required for its development. It should then cross Chapel Road across from the North Easton Park entrance. Furthermore, this entrance should be developed only for non-motorized access in conjunction with the downgrading of the intersection of Chapel Road and U.S. Route 50 as described in the Transportation section of this Plan.

- A plan should be formulated for the development of the recently purchased park on the land that was formerly to be developed as future phases of the Chapel Farms Subdivision. Given the relatively vast size of this property (and particularly of usable land), a wide array of uses is possible.
- The Town should work with the State of Maryland to help insure the preservation of Seth Forest. The Town should also ask the State to consider the possibility of making this property more accessible. This property might be appropriate as a Regional Park of some sort rather than simply as passive and largely unused, unknown, and perhaps unappreciated open space.
- Two areas on the western side of Easton should be considered as waterfront parks. One is located along the Easton Parkway and a portion of the site is already used informally as a place where people pull off the road to have lunch or just to look at Papermill Pond. This site is identified in Easton's Critical Area Program as appropriate for a park, perhaps with a boardwalk/nature trail,

- (Not depicted on Future Land Use Map) In the long-range planning period (i.e. by 2020) a new Community (or Regional) Park, on the scale of Idlewild or Moton, should be secured and developed on the eastern side of Town, east of U.S. Route 50. This is the portion of Town anticipated to accommodate the majority of future growth and as such, a community park is essential within this area. Furthermore, this area may not necessarily be provided by any one development. As an alternative, the area for the park might be pieced together by adjoining subdivisions.

As first reported in the 2004 Plan, this is an area in which great progress has been made since 1997. The Rail Trail has been extended and instead of veering off of the logical path down the former rail line, the trail continued down this line. Neighborhood concerns were addressed through landscaping in this area. The development (and future planned development) of the Rail-Trail is described further in the Transportation Element of this Plan. In short, it calls for the gradual continued expansion of this trail in as many directions as possible. It is hoped that it will eventually connect to a wider-scale County-initiated Trail System.

The Town also has held discussions with the State concerning the use of Seth Forest and this resource seems to be in no danger of being lost. Finally, a vast waterfront park is part of the development plan for Easton Village on the Tred Avon River, a project located on the property described in the 1997 Plan, which is currently in the review process. Better still, this park is proposed to be connected to the land across the river via a pedestrian bridge. Funds for this bridge have been allocated by the developer and we are merely awaiting the appropriate time to construct it.

The RTC Park has been owned by the Town since 1995. It still remains undeveloped although its possible use was studied in 2003. This study was conducted by a consultant working closely with a Council member and a citizens committee. It presented two possible development scenarios for the park, with the favored one being what it described as “A Central Park for Easton”, which was characterized as a “modern Olmstead Park.” Although never officially approved by the Town, this Plan was valuable in establishing some parameters for the development of the site and for illustrating the wide array of possibilities for that development.

One question that has been asked for a while now is just what does the Town want/need in the way of future parks as well as development of existing parks? In an effort to shed some light on this question, an intern working for the Planning department studied this issue and produced a report on the matter. The Report’s findings can be summarized as follows:

- While Easton is consistent with National Standards for the number of parks for our population, the size of some of these parks is below the Standard.
- The Town meets the general standard for the provision of most active amenities (i.e. ball fields, basketball courts, tennis courts, etc...).

- There is a shortage of most of the more passive elements of a park system. These include amenities like walking trails through undeveloped parkland, picnic areas, and open space that is just plain open instead of dedicated to some structured activity.
- While Easton may be consistent with National standards for most park uses, some needs may not be met when one considers the actual local demand for certain uses. This may be due to differences in local or regional preferences for a given sport or activity as compared to National averages. For example, one would expect lacrosse to be much more popular here than in the nation as a whole and therefore Easton would need to provide more lacrosse fields than a national standard would suggest.

As pointed out in the Municipal Growth Element of this Plan, State guidelines for parkland indicate that the potential future population of the Town will require about 315 acres of Town-owned parkland (630 acres total) above and beyond what the 1,200 square feet per dwelling unit that should be acquired via the subdivision process. The need for all of this space may be reduced somewhat by the future addition of the Talbot County Community Center to the Town Limits (now outside of Town at the very edge of the Growth Area) and by the presence of a public golf course located outside of Town, but in the Greenbelt, immediately adjacent to the Growth Boundary. These two areas represent an additional 51 acres at the Community Center (which includes both indoor and outdoor recreational activities) and 265 acres at Hog Neck Golf Course. Together, these 316 acres would satisfy the non-Town-owned half of the projected shortage, leaving just the need for 315 acres of Town-owned parks to be provided in our Growth Area.

Since virtually all of the future residential development of Easton will occur to the east of the current Town boundaries, it seems logical that the parks required to serve those people be located in this area as well. One possible location has been discussed previously. That is at the terminus of the current section of Beechwood Drive that traverses through Easton Club East on the parcel of land immediately north of that development. Since this parcel is adjacent to an age-restricted community and very near the edge of the Seth Forest, it seems like an appropriate location for a large park devoted to passive recreation needs. Forested area can be protected and/or added adjacent to Seth Forest and walking trails and woodland gardens would seem to be suitable at this location.

The Park described above would be very convenient for people in the southern portion of the future growth area. It would then seem logical to look for a second park in the central portion of the growth area, in the general vicinity of the Waylands/Matthewstown Run/Dover Road/Black Dog Alley area, and a third one in the northern portion of the growth area that would be convenient to the Mulberry Station and Chapel East subdivisions as well as future growth in surrounding areas. General locations for each of these potential parks are shown on the Future Land Use Map found in the Implementation Element of this Plan.

A special type of park that is very desirable to Easton residents is a waterfront park. There is a significant element of undeveloped waterfront land as part of the Easton Village project. This will eventually include a pedestrian bridge across the Tred Avon to Easton Point. The redevelopment of Easton Point is discussed elsewhere in this Plan. A number of possibilities exist for the redevelopment of Easton Point if/when it should come into Town. A significant public waterfront park should be part of any such scheme.

## GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

The concept of green infrastructure was first introduced to the Easton Comprehensive Plan in 2004 when the term was still relatively new in the field of planning. It refers to the system of parks and open spaces in a community, as well as the linkages or connections between these areas. A community's green infrastructure is important because just as the more commonly known infrastructure (i.e. roads, water, sewer, etc...) is essential to support a community's physical development, so to a community's green infrastructure supports its ecological functions. It also is important for making communities more livable.

The Conservation Fund defines green infrastructure as "the Nation's natural life support system - a strategically planned and managed network of wilderness, parks, greenways, conservation easements, and working lands with conservation value that supports native species, maintains natural ecological processes, sustains air and water resources, and contributes to the health and quality of life for America's communities and people."

There are numerous benefits provided by a system of green infrastructure. These include both ecological and economic benefits. From an ecological perspective the benefits include:

- Ensuring plant and animal biodiversity.
- Creating pathways to allow for interchange between native plant and animal communities.
- Maintaining the health of native ecosystems and landscapes by sustaining their physical, chemical, and biological processes.
- Filtering pollutants from air, water, and soil.
- Helping to cool streams and soil through shading.
- Buffering developed areas from floodwaters.

The economic benefits include:

- Increasing property values as homes located near parks and greenways sell for more than those that are not.
- Raising the community's quality of life. Communities that have planned systems of open space, including greenways, parks and trails, generally develop the reputation of being desirable places to live. Seattle, Washington, Boulder, Colorado, Portland, Oregon and Raleigh North Carolina are examples of such places.
- Attracting businesses. The communities cited above, not coincidentally, also have had great success in attracting new businesses as often times a community's quality of life is a key factor for businesses when deciding where to relocate or open a new business.
- Increasing tourism and tourism-based businesses.
- Attracting environmentally sensitive development and the developers who specialize in that niche.

Given these benefits, as well as the existence of at least a skeletal system of green infrastructure, it seems like a classic "no-brainer" for Easton to develop a more formal and planned green infrastructure system. Elements of this are discussed in the Economic Development Chapter of this Plan where the AKRF Plan for the redevelopment of Downtown Easton is described. Two of the more significant projects proposed in that plan involve the day-lighting of Tanyard Branch and the development of a "green ring" of heavily treed streets and open spaces around downtown.

## **PARKS, RECREATION, AND OPEN SPACE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

Goal: To meet the park and recreational demands of all of Easton's citizens.

Objectives:

- ✓ Continue to study and monitor the demand for various park and recreation uses (above and beyond National Standards, which the Town largely meets).
- ✓ Further develop a Plan for the use of the "RTC" park.
- ✓ Locate and acquire more passive-use open space.
- ✓ Coordinate the work of the Planning and Zoning Commission, Park Board, and Town Council in acquiring and planning parks.
- ✓ Coordinate park planning with Talbot County to prevent duplication of amenities/services and to insure that between the two entities, all of Talbot County's recreational needs are being satisfied.

Goal: To provide a system of green infrastructure (see Future Land Use Map).

Objectives:

- ✓ Identify appropriate open space areas to serve as green centers or anchors and connect them through a series of pathways and green corridors.
- ✓ Plan future parks, open spaces and corridors in a manner that compliments and helps to build the green infrastructure system (Two such parks are proposed on the Conceptual Land Use Map for the long-term planning period on the Eastern Side of Town).