

Introduction

What do trees have to do with comprehensive land use planning? Plenty. Put street trees, town parks, community forests, small wooded properties and woodlots together and you have a major piece of community infrastructure with aesthetic appeal and economic wallop.

When trees and forests are integrated into the planning process, they can:

Significantly reduce stormwater run-off costs

Reduce soil erosion

Protect waterways from pollution

Reduce heating and air conditioning costs

Muffle traffic noise

Reduce the cost of regular municipal services like road maintenance

Offer recreational opportunities

It's almost magical that trees and forest land can offer so much, but many of the benefits they offer are both tangible and measurable in dollars and cents. For example:

► According to city data supplied to Environmental Impact RC & D, 37 medium sized trees on approximately 6 acres slowed the flow of stormwater by 37% during heavy rainfall. A comparable property with 18 trees slowed stormwater by 18%. At a typical stormwater management cost of \$2.00 per cubic foot, well-tended trees on municipal property add up to big savings.

► In-town house lots with trees and subdivision lots with adjacent forested open space, typically sell faster and for higher prices than house lots with few or no trees.

► A mid coast Maine city is currently trying to mitigate the effects of seasonal flooding. Flooding and associated costs could have been reduced if a streamside vegetation buffer, including trees, protected the stream. According to municipal officials, the cost of mitigation is four million dollars. They are also discussing settlement with adjacent homeowners who have suffered seasonal flood damage for years.

► Town owned forests managed under a well-designed forest management plan often provide enough revenue to offset the maintenance costs for recreation use, while providing a green recreation resource. Town forests also provide a whole range of other ecological and economic benefits from pollution filtration to flood control.

Community Prosperity

We all want our towns to prosper. We want vibrant communities that provide opportunities for new businesses, jobs and services. We want safe and attractive communities that provide the right place to raise a family and are good places to live and visit. Ideally, we want to be proud of the community we call home.

But what is prosperity? Is it measured by a large tax windfall that comes when a super discount store decides to build at the edge of town? Or is it measured by the increased number of visitors who come to enjoy the town or the number and variety of employment opportunities? Or is it a whole range of factors — from good public schools, to low property taxes and topnotch emergency services — that add up to make a community vibrant?

The local sawtimber and veneer mills in Strong, Maine are crucial to current prosperity. In Aroostook, agriculture is key. Aquaculture, blueberries, cranberries, lobstering and logging are big parts of the equation in Downeast Maine; tourism and wood products figure large in Western Maine; while many towns rely on high tech and service jobs to fuel their economic engines.

Maine's forests and forest industry are an important part of its economy. Ninety percent of the state is forested — a higher percentage than any other state in the country. Recent data supplied by David B. Field, Giddings Professor of Forest Policy at the University of Maine, shows that the forestry sector of the state economy (which includes timber and non-timber products and services such as maple syrup production and hunting activities) employs just short of 32,000 people. According to Field, products and services from this sector amounted to \$5.6 billion in 1996 and generated an income of over \$1 billion for employees and self-employed individuals.

But then, a prosperous community is not just made up of its jobs — or its streets and schools, the emergency services it provides and the tax revenues it collects, either. It is made up of people at restaurants and coffee shops, civic groups and reading clubs, high school sports teams, roads and town parks, neighbors and neighborhoods, backyards and wooded lots and the brooks and streams that run through them.

Not every element fits into a Comprehensive Plan, but many do — because a community is much like a piece of fabric, woven and held together by its infrastructure and its people.

Legislative Mandate: The Comprehensive Land Use Plan

Title 30-A MRSA, Chapter 187 mandates that municipalities within Maine develop a Comprehensive Plan if they are going to regulate land use. The Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act identifies several goals, including the goal of safeguarding the “State’s agricultural and forest resources from development which threatens those resources.”

This guide is meant to supplement the State Planning Office manual *Comprehensive Planning: A Manual for Maine’s Communities* by providing more information on integrating forests and other natural resources into comprehensive and municipal planning.

First, towns must examine the role forests play in their municipality. Commercial forestry is a major local activity in some towns. In

In a state where every yard is a clearing and would grow back to forest if given a chance, an overlooked and critical piece of community infrastructure is as common as the color green.

Think forests.

Think trees.

larger towns and small cities, the local forest may rarely consist of shade trees, open space, or public parks. Once the forest inventory is complete and the information is analyzed, policy decisions that are consistent with state and local goals can be based on in-depth information. This, in turn, leads to policies and strategies specifically tailored to the needs of individual communities. Policy implementation is the final step in the process, but a Comprehensive Land Use Plan is a working document. A well-designed Plan can provide strong guidance towards making appropriate and balanced land use policy decisions, but it isn’t written in stone. It will be necessary from time to time for the town to review, reevaluate and revise these policies.

What this Guide Offers

Your knowledge and experience in community planning and decision making, combined with the background information offered in this guide will help you to consider the street trees, backyard woods, parks, community forests and public and private undeveloped forest land when making land use decisions and preparing or updating your Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

Clearly, each town will value the forest’s resources differently, but this guide provides a range of infor-

mation necessary to effectively assess the complex, interrelated forest ecosystem and associated natural resources so it can be incorporated into local planning.

Part One takes a close look at the effects of different land use decisions through exam-

ples of how trees, soil, water and wildlife habitats differ in woodlots, existing subdivisions, new subdivisions and community-owned woodlands. Economic and recreation factors are also explored.

Part Two is a forest and natural resources primer for planners and others involved in the comprehensive planning process. It provides background information to assist in the inventory and analysis stages of the planning process.

Part Three provides decision-making guidelines for including trees and forests in the comprehensive land use planning process. It is meant to supplement the State Planning Office manual as well as serve as a reference document.

Part Four provides a range of resources available to assist communities in integrating forestry and related natural resource management into the nuts and bolts of the planning process.

Part Five provides information for landowners in Clip-n-Copy pages that are easy to copy and distribute.

A glossary of forestry and tree-related terms are provided in the back of the guide.

The Fabric of the Community

What happens if you pull on one thread in a piece of fabric? If it is a small enough tug, the threads

may realign slightly and create a barely noticeable change. If it is a crucial thread, or if many little threads are tugged, then the whole fabric changes.

Communities are much the same; a small change will have little overall effect, whereas many small changes add up and can affect the very structure and character of a community indefinitely.

Many towns and cities are changing fast. The fabric of communities across the state is most certainly being tugged and stretched by land use changes.

Those involved in comprehensive planning decisions are charged with being today's guardians and tomorrow's stewards of the community. They have to try to balance budgets, provide services and encourage growth while keeping taxes low and communities vital.

Planning often involves difficult choices. Some land use decisions will pull at critical threads that realign a community,

shape it and change it forever into something different. That change can be a good thing; it can add up to prosperity and progress. Or it can add up to burdensome expenses and changes in community character so deep that vitality seeps away over a few short years.

The trick is to know which threads are crucial so it is clear what will happen if they're pulled. The best any community can do is have a thorough understanding of the effects of making land use decisions before those decisions are made and implemented. And to do that, they

need effective tools that are easy to find and easy to use. Tools that allow those involved in community planning to effectively identify those critical threads in the community fabric, to weigh the costs and benefits of land use decisions that pull one of those threads and to determine what impact a land use planning decision will have on community vitality in the short and long terms.

Certainly, municipalities are faced with a wide range of weighty planning decisions. Behind them all is a feature so common in the landscape that it appears almost irrelevant in the planning process; a feature so quietly present that is easy to overlook as an essential force in shaping many of our cities, towns and communities throughout history — yet a feature as much a part of the physical infrastructure of a community as its buildings and roads.

Think forests.

Think trees.

It is always a good idea to look for a licensed professional forester to join your Comprehensive Planning Committee or Conservation Commission. They can provide insights into relationships between trees, water quality, erosion, development, economics and more. For information on how to find a forester in your area, contact the Maine Forest Service at 1-800-367-0223.
