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SECTION 7 - ANALYSIS OF NEEDS

A. SUMMARY OF RESOURCE PROTECTION NEEDS

The citizens of Sterling value highly maintenance of the rural character of the town—as emphasized in past surveys and public meetings which clearly indicated the community’s desire to conserve open space, including farmlands, wetlands, and water supply land. The farmlands and forestlands of Sterling represent a big part of its economy and a major component of the town’s appealing rural character, and provide open land for wildlife, storm water management, and fresh air.

Much of the land in Sterling is under temporary protection through the Chapter 61 tax abatement programs, and OSIC plans to pursue funding for technical assistance in development of a set of ranking criteria to assess local priorities for protecting such lands as they become available to the Town. Development of a set of ranking criteria to assess the priorities for land protection will enable the Town to assess development projects for compatibility with its protection and recreation interests. Elements of the ranking criteria could include agricultural suitability, availability of water resources that could support future well sites to serve Town needs, historic and archeological resources, and suitability for use in meeting town needs such as a Senior Center.

Preservation efforts require collaboration of the boards and committees in Sterling, including the Recreation Committee, the Conservation Commission, the Historical Commission, the Historical Society, the Agricultural Commission, OSIC, and various town departments. The task is large and collaboration would enhance the success of efforts to improve public awareness and protect resources. Each of these entities will have a set of priorities for preservation, which would all inform the ranking criteria for assessing lands the Town is interested in acquiring or protecting.

Based on input at meetings and extensive work with the Assessor’s Office, OSIC identified a need for greater accuracy and consistency in the recording of Chapter 61 information in the near future to ensure that all concerned boards receive proper notification when these lands are subject to the Town’s Right of First Refusal. With the completion of these tasks, the town can make land protection decisions with accurate information and in the context of land protection goals.

Accommodating and managing future growth in the Town will necessitate provision of water and wastewater infrastructure. Given current limitations on the existing infrastructure, the Town needs to assess its current alternatives for future water supplies and protect the potential sources and the surrounding drainage areas that could affect water quality.

Through its efforts to update mapping of land protection, OSIC discovered a need to sensitize residents to the fact that the northeast and eastern regions of Sterling are relatively unprotected, since they lie outside the watershed the DCR-DWSP protects. There is a need to balance development with protection of natural resources in these areas to ensure that the Town can meet its future resource needs and accommodate its recreational goals and objectives.

Sterling residents are also highly interested in protecting important water resources such as East and West Lakes Waushacum, and the Wekepeke Watershed. The West Lake, including the Quag, under the jurisdiction of the DCR-DWSP, has limited recreational access and very little residential land use, and consequently is less vulnerable to eutrophication (increase in the concentration of chemical nutrients in an ecosystem) and invasive species issues. Though valuable as a recreation resource, the East Lake suffers the threat of pollution from the impacts of recreation and waterfront land uses. As with other developed waterbodies, the East Lake is subject to invasive plant exposure from recreational watercraft as well as excess nutrient loading from both point and non-point sources (fertilizers, failing septic systems, animals, etc.) and is in a relatively eutrophic state.

The public opinion survey results indicated great concern for the prevention of pollution in the East Lake from expanding development and failing septic facilities. Fears of increased development coupled with water quality problems prompt Sterling residents to express concern for the lake. Since 2002, the town has permanently protected approximately 50 acres of upland watershed, including an historic orchard. The Conservation Commission, East Lake Waushacum Associations, and the Sterling Department of Public Works are working together to identify future means of protecting the lake, including educational venues to increase citizen and landowner awareness of threats to the lake, Best Management Practices (BMP), and methods to mitigate threats. Efforts to preserve the remaining

open lands around the lake should dovetail with efforts to mitigate sources of pollution associated with frequent algae blooms.

The 2002 OSRP identified the Wekepeke Watershed, in the northern section of Sterling, as a valued multi-dimensional resource. Since then, the Nestle Corporation and the Town of Clinton entered discussions related to developing the Wekepeke Watershed as a potential source for bottled water. The Town of Clinton put out a request for proposals (RFP) for exploration, which precipitated alarmed opposition on the part of Sterling residents and Town officials, concerned about the threat of privatization of the water resource and depletion of the aquifer. The Town of Clinton rejected the Nestle proposal in 2008. At present, the status of Clinton's intentions or Nestle's interest in the resource is unknown.

Concurrently, the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife acquired a conservation restriction (CR) on the Clinton-owned portion of the watershed. The CR provides for public access including fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, and other wildlife-related recreation, but does not preclude the Town of Clinton from tapping its water resources. MassWildlife's Natural Heritage Program identified lands surrounding the CR as Biomap core wildlife habitats, most of which are not part of the CR and are currently unprotected.

OSIC recognizes needs both to educate its own members further and to develop public educational opportunities pertaining to the Town's options for natural resource protection strategies and land use planning. Such opportunities would serve as a useful public participation venue and could guide interested landowners to the various sources of information and assistance available for preserving and protecting their lands. The recent creation of an Agricultural Commission in town and a cost of community services study by the American Farmland Trust (AFT) conducted in early 2009, have spurred high hopes for assisting eligible landowners with keeping valuable farmlands as working farms. (Three farms in Sterling have entered the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program already.) Numerous resources are available through the state government, private foundations and trusts, the American Planning Association, and the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative. The OSIC will tap these resources as they address these needs.

B. SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY'S NEEDS

1. Recreation Needs

In general, it appears to OSIC that many citizens in Sterling, as well as potential visitors, are unaware of the current numerous recreational opportunities available in town. Two years ago, OSIC initiated a project to provide information for the town's website to serve as a guide to recreation in Sterling for anyone interested in sampling these recreational opportunities, but the project was placed on hold while OSIC focused on updating the Open Space and Recreation Plan. This plan incorporates some of the initial information gathered for the recreation guide.

The MassOutdoors 2006 report notes "There is a clear dominance of land protected for watershed purposes in this region (central Massachusetts), even more so than in the Connecticut Valley Region. The implication of this fact for recreation interests is, perhaps, obvious. Watershed lands are most often managed exclusively for water supply protection interest, which often precludes recreation use. Because public health and safety are of interest, this cautious approach to land management is understandable. However, this region, more than any other, must come to grips with this dilemma, either in the form of increased protection for other types of resources more compatible with recreation, or in carefully revised watershed management strategies." This paragraph, and especially the final sentence, clearly lays out a serious concern citizens and other outdoor recreationists face in Sterling. This situation was noted in previous plans, commented upon at several town meetings and town surveys, and discussed at OSIC meetings.

Over the years, OSIC surveys indicate that Sterling residents have continuing interest in public access to land under the jurisdiction of DCR's Division of Water Supply Protection (DWSP), such as the Quag and the Stillwater River watershed, for recreation purposes and for their scenic presence. Residents have expressed interest in access for permitted uses such as fishing and hiking, as well as to walk their dogs; and dissatisfaction with DWSP's access limitations, including prohibition of animals places where they once trained their dogs in water retrieval. OSIC has identified a need to strike a balance between water protection needs and local recreational needs, and intends to invite DCR-DWSP to take the lead on efforts to encourage information sharing with the interested public through educational seminars concerning the use policies and their purpose. OSIC sees need both to identify areas where such activities could take place on publicly owned land and to mitigate the loss of valued recreational access for dog owners and their pets. Comments from the DCR-DWSP in the 2002 Plan were notably blunt in opposition to the desires and concerns of Sterling citizens for recreation access to DCR lands. However, during this current Plan

Draft review, a letter from DCR-DWSP struck a noticeable, agreeable tone, indicating a willingness and desire on the part of agency staff to meet and work with citizens to address some of their concerns about recreational access.

According to MassOutdoors 2006, the top three recreation activities of interest to central Massachusetts residents were swimming, walking, and sightseeing tours and events. "Taken in the aggregate as types of activity, this region shows a broad interest in all types of recreation, with at least one significant activity noted in each of the field-based, water-based, trail-based, passive, and wilderness activities. The greatest emphasis would appear to be found in Passive Recreation Activities group... When asked what new facilities would most benefit them, residents of the Central Region showed the highest interest in facilities for walking (16.4%), swimming (17.0%), hiking (14.4%, the strongest interest in the state), road biking (12.1%), and playground activity (10.2%)." (MassOutdoors 2006) Given the following discussion of Recreation needs, it would appear that Sterling's needs and desires reflect the MassOutdoors 2006 findings.

The 2007 Sterling OSIC public opinion survey and the public forum revealed increased public interest in smaller neighborhood playgrounds and community parks, skateboard parks, and parks for dogs, as well as enhanced trail systems on the lands already under protection. Though development of the Sterling Rail trail and surrounding trails are examples of major improvement to public access to DCR-DWSP lands, interest in continued improvement remains high. The interest in walking correlates with findings in the MassOutdoors 2006 report, where 58.6 percent of respondents in central Massachusetts indicated a high level of interest and demand for walking as a recreational activity. Pedestrian safety was a high priority in the survey, and residents expressed interest in methods to improve transportation networks to increase pedestrian opportunities.

East and West Lakes Waushacum, both legally defined as Great Ponds with a public right of access, encompass important recreation opportunities for Sterling citizens and visitors to the town. Protection of and appropriate public access to these areas for recreation are very important to the town. The West Lake, including the Quag, is subject to the public access limitations established by the DCR-DWSP. At the East Lake, fears of increased development, coupled with water quality problems, prompt Sterling residents to express concern. There appears to be a public perception that the Town Beach at Sholan Park has problems with high fecal Coliform counts,¹ yet the Recreation Department has not closed the beach for high counts for seven years, according to Judy Janda (See Appendix G). OSIC, the Conservation, Commission, and the East Lake Waushacum Association perceive a need for enhancing a management program for the Lake to include efforts to educate recreational users in proper custodianship of lake resources through personal responsibility in use of the lake. Since 2002, the Conservation Commission has worked diligently to create a point of public access to the 50 acres of upland watershed the town acquired to protect, now called The Waushacum Overlook. The Conservation Commission seeks support for its efforts through a recreational trails grant application to create trail linkages between Waushacum Overlook and other conservation properties near Sholan Park in the area.

The East Lake is valuable as the primary site for water-related recreation in Sterling, and the public opinion survey results indicated satisfaction with the Town Beach at Sholan Park. It should be noted that swimming in central Massachusetts, (61.4%), is the activity most widely engaged in by residents in this region. The boat ramp on the East Lake is owned and operated by the Town of Sterling. Currently, the town's policy is to allow parking at the town beach/boat ramp for Sterling residents, with minimal accommodations for other visitors. In the summer of 2009, while working on a proposed bylaw to codify parking rules at the lake, side discussions were held by the group of interested officials and citizens about the possibility of charging a fee to non-residents for parking (and easy access to the beach and boat ramp). The fees could be a source of revenue for beach park staffing and lake protection. The information from the MassOutdoors 2006 report may serve to inform subsequent discussions.

MassOutdoors 2006 noted that the central Massachusetts region also expressed the strongest participation rate statewide in boating, especially non-motorized. The West Lake is open for non-motorized boats and the Recreation Department notes that the kayaking programs offered at East Lake Waushacum are very popular, even though they have only been in place for 2-3 years. Kayakers and canoeists are also seen putting in at the Stillwater River near the Stillwater Farm, though beaver dams and the damage from the 2008 ice storm has made for many portages between Rte 62 and the downstream out take point at the Muddy Pond bridge.

In central Massachusetts, the least used resources by Central residents are bikeways (relatively few exist nearby) and agricultural lands. The MassOutdoors 2006 report speculates the lack of bikeways in the region may be a reason for this low response, but it's very obvious in Sterling that the rail trail is highly regarded and utilized. The OSIC sur-

¹ Conversation between Judy Janda of the Recreation Department and Marion Larson, OSIC member, 2008.

vey indicated many people use the trail for biking, walking, and cross-country skiing and the interest level in expanding the trail is high.

The unexpectedly low agriculture number is harder to interpret for MassOutdoors 2006. It suggests that perhaps there is in fact less agricultural activity remaining in Central Massachusetts than is generally supposed, or perhaps simply that residents may more readily take its presence for granted, not seeking this experience either locally or further afield as a recreation pursuit. Given the presence of Davis Farm and its Mega Maze, an Agricultural Commission formed in the past year and a farmers market is in its fifth year at the Butterick Building, Sterling may be bucking the Central Massachusetts trend.

A significant piece of information from the MassOutdoors 2006 Report found that residents in central Massachusetts were especially interested in sightseeing tours and events (55.9%) which is the highest in the state). Perhaps it would behoove agricultural interests to consider marketing the agricultural activities available to a wider audience in the region and perhaps, especially for the Sterling Fair, make even greater efforts to expand the agricultural flavor of the event.

Since 2002, the Recreation department has improved its scheduling of existing recreation facilities and tightened its use policies, which has alleviated the need for a new soccer field identified in the previous plan (2002). Groups still tend to reserve fields and not use them. Such practices may relate to low usage fees, groups simply block out time “just in case” they need a field. The Town revised its maintenance practices to make the Chocksett Athletic fields more durable, though increased use of fertilizer may have precipitated recent algal blooms in the small pond at the Sterling Greenery Community Park.² Management practices employed at the fields should address environmental concerns for the pond, and could include creating flow diversion barriers for areas where fertilizer is used. The Agricultural Commission may have suggestions for improving the soils for growing better turf.

There could potentially be a future need for soccer fields. Critical evaluation of school enrollment data and sports enrollment statistics, as well as regional availability of sports programming, will enable the Recreation Department to assess future need. In the current economy, many schools are now charging fees for participation in athletics, including the Wachusett Regional School District. Regionally, non-school soccer leagues are available at Devens and the town of Lancaster. With the release of the 2010 census, the Town will need to analyze potential shifts in demographic and enrollment patterns at the school district, and the athletic and recreation programs.

Though the census had not identified Sterling as an Environmental Justice (EJ) community, the bordering towns of Clinton, Leominster, and West Boylston do contain EJ populations. Recreational opportunities and facilities for people with disabilities are rare in Sterling. In 2002, the Open Space and Recreation Committee conducted a 504 Self-Evaluation survey of seven conservation and recreation properties that are representative of the recreational experiences in Sterling, in accordance with the State’s planning requirements. These sites are under the jurisdictions of the Conservation Commission, the Board of Selectmen, or the Department of Public Works. For each site, the committee recommended several improvement strategies to create compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, setting the groundwork needed for a Transition Plan (See E Facility Inventory). The ADA self-assessment for this plan is underway, as discussed in Section 5.

Since the 2002 plan, the Town has installed handicapped accessible portable toilets at the Town Beach at Sholan Park and at the playing fields at Griffin Park. Judy Janda, the Recreation Department Director, reported in a 2008 conversation with OSIC, that the department provides additional aides in the children’s swim programs for participants with special needs. She also expressed strong interest in exploring ways in which to make programs and facilities more inclusive for people with disabilities and expressed enthusiasm with the idea of hosting a workshop to be open for towns in the region that focuses on ways to make outdoor programming accessible.

The Board of Selectmen recently appointed Matt Marro as its ADA Coordinator and made appointments to the Committee on Disability. Matt also works for the Department of Mental Retardation and has extensive experience with ADA compliance issues.

In 2009, the Town moved the Recreation Department office from the Butterick Building to the 1835 Town Hall. The first floor of the 1835 Town Hall is handicap accessible via a ramp at the back of the building and the Town has designated handicapped parking there. Most or all Recreation programs take place on the first floor. The 1835 committee is trying to identify and pursue funding for accessibility improvements including installation of an elevator to serve the second floor, in a manner that is consistent with the Historic character of the building.

² Once named Cutler Pond.

Nearly all Town forest parcels and selected conservation parcels in Sterling are landlocked by private lands, making public access of any kind, never mind for people with disabilities, technically impossible.

Open-air concerts at Memorial Park attract a variety of people of varying ages and abilities. People have observed a few cars with handicapped placards parked at the edge of the park with people in the cars, on a bench, or in wheelchairs or scooters enjoying the concerts. At times, people observed cars without handicap placards in handicap spaces, but the Town has neither a bylaw nor an ordinance authorizing the police to ticket or tow cars parked illegally in these spaces, and it lacks a volunteer program to patrol disabled parking. Bus trips scheduled by the Recreation Department currently do not offer any special accommodations for people with disabilities.

In recent years, the Town, through the enthusiastic efforts of the Sterling Play Area Recreation (sub) Committee, has created the Sterling Greenery Community Park at the corner of Muddy Pond and Griffin Roads and adjacent to the Chocksett School grounds and athletic fields complex. SPARC designed the park to accommodate people of all ages and abilities, incorporating many elements, such as a fenced-in state-of-the-art playground for 2-5 year olds and separate playground equipment for 5-12 year olds, walking paths, sitting areas, a pavilion, and natural elements (trees, shrubs, flowers, and plants).

Phase II of the project would include the purchase and installation of playground equipment for 5-12 year olds accessible to users with disabilities, and SPARC plans to pursue a PARC grant to accomplish this goal. The project will require funding for the equipment, shipping, installation, and necessary safety surfacing.

The Town Common requires funds to repair the fence and other unreported site damage due to accidents and oversized DPW plow equipment. In 2000, the Board of Selectmen appointed a Town Common Committee to address these issues. Initially, the project was part of a Chapter 90 upgrade to Town Center, including removal of utility poles, and other improvements, but the funding was diverted to renovate the DPW facility.

The scope of work in the OSRP requires removal of a certain amount of accumulated earth (years of winter sanding), and under planting with perennials. Replacement and relocation of broken granite posts and worn out wooden rails along the transverse sidewalk would allow easier winter plowing in the short run and facilitate compliance with ADA accessibility requirements in anticipation of the long-term DPW plan to reconfigure the downtown intersection. The committee anticipated that the work could be a partnership of the DPW, the town's on-call contractors, the Boy Scouts and other volunteers, and various in-kind donations.

DPW drawings for redevelopment of sidewalks, etc., are available for review, and can serve as a foundation for the project development. Such a project would require involvement of the MJTC, the MPO, and MassHighway, in addition to the Sterling DPW and other Town boards and committees, since Route 12 is under the jurisdiction of MassHighway. The Town could pursue a grant to fund the needed repairs and expand the project to include improvements for better access and compliance with ADA. Grant resources could focus on ADA, pedestrian safety, historic, or redevelopment of the central business district.

The Board of Selectmen has established a Town Common Revitalization Committee comprised of members of the BNUC, OSIC, DPW, COA, First Church, Historical Commission, ADA Committee, the Board of Selectmen and others the Board of Selectmen deemed appropriate. The Building Needs and Utilization Committee (BNUC) at its June 6, 2008 meeting, expanded its interest in the Town Common issues to consider redevelopment of the entire Town center to improve aesthetics and economic potential, and viewed the Town common as an anchor parcel for the redevelopment. In 2009, BNUC shared the concept with members of the First Church, the Garden Club, the Council on Aging, the Open Space Implementation Committee, and the DPW and developed a preliminary plan for the Board of Selectmen, and the concept has been explored in several meetings since then.

Wachusett Greenways and Town of Sterling volunteers have collaborated on the planning efforts for the Sterling Rail Spur and the Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT). Wachusett Greenways has identified a temporary linkage between the Sterling Rail Trail and the MCRT in Oakdale using Gates Road to Bean Road, which becomes Prescott Street in West Boylston. From there, the recommended pathway uses Pleasant Street, an inactive, unpaved, historic road owned by the Town of West Boylston, to reach Route 140 in Oakdale. This pathway involves pedestrian crossing of Route 12 in the Bean Road/Boutelle Road area and requires improvements for both safety and user experience along the trail.

Further extension of the trail along the I-190 corridor is also of interest and may extend through the Town of Lancaster and the City of Leominster. A tentative proposal is in place for land trusts of each respective town to lead evaluation of this possibility. To date, trail planning efforts have focused on identifying trail pathways and barriers.

Future efforts will focus on exploring an ultimate connection to Leominster to create an alternative transportation mode to I-190 accessible by bicycle.

Development of an extension of the Sterling Rail Trail from its current northern terminus at the old cider mill northward, following the course of the old Fitchburg and Worcester Rail Line, is a key linkage in a regional network of hiking and biking trails. The alignment would extend the trail just east of Route 12 to the Chocksett Road vicinity, through lands owned by the Town of Sterling immediately west of Oak Hill Cemetery, onto a Wachusett Greenways easement through industrially zoned lands ultimately leading to Chocksett Road,³ to a proposed trail connecting Leominster and Fitchburg along another abandoned rail bed. Extending the Sterling Rail Trail from the Cider Mill to the Oak Hill Cemetery, (through the center of town) would face a challenge due to encroachment on the rail right of way, dumping, etc. However, the utility of having a continuous trail, rather than two disconnected sections of a trail, is significant.

Full development of the trail requires critical planning focus on the safe crossing of Chocksett Road. In particular, MassHighway and the Town of Sterling need to evaluate critically options for incorporating safe (ADA compliant) pedestrian passage in the redesign of the Chocksett Road⁴ and Route 12 intersection. MassHighway has proposed the possible installation of a traffic circle or roundabout at that location, which is currently in the preliminary design stage. MassHighway has scheduled Project 604699 (initiated and approved in late 2005) with an estimated construction cost of \$1,500,000, and funding through the Transportation Improvement Program once the design is completed. Sterling Town Meeting has approved funds for the design, and MassHighway anticipates construction to commence after 2013. The MassHighway project manager is Arthur Frost. Safe pedestrian crossing of Route 12 at Chocksett Road would facilitate the trail project and ease access to commercial amenities on the opposite side of Route 12 for trail users.

MRPC also lists the nearby intersection of I-190 Interchange (Exit 6) and Route 12 as a high priority location in need of study in its Roadway Safety Conditions Report of April 2008. Given the nature of trail development alternatives in this region of the Town, it might prove worthwhile to consider the Chocksett Road Intersection and the I-190 intersection of Route 12 in a combined design project, incorporating pedestrian safety concepts for both locations.

Development of the three pedestrian crossings of Route 12 (at Bean Road/Boutelle Road, at Chocksett Road, and at I-190 Exit 6) will require inclusion in the annual Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for the region as required by federal regulations issued jointly by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). The TIP development process involves discussions with the MRPC, the Montachusett Joint Transportation Committee (MJTC) and the Metropolitan Planning Organization⁵ concerning priorities for implementation of transportation and transit projects proposed during future federal fiscal years for the region.

Through the various public opinion surveys, Sterling residents have continuously expressed a desire for more hiking and horseback riding trails, as well as other recreational needs. Similarly, residents who currently walk the road network have expressed a need for pedestrian safety improvements. Both town and regional entities have engaged in discussions to consider options for creating trail linkages, including cart paths, fire roads, and historic and/or abandoned town roads. Such trails could support appreciation for the historic, agricultural, and rural character of the community. One important trail linkage that has prioritized is a northward extension from the Sterling Rail Trail to a regional trail in the general vicinity of I-190. OSIC has also explored connectivity options linking Sholan Farm to Sterling Town Center.

Equestrians in town who responded to the 2002 survey indicated a need for preserving the trail systems they use for horseback riding. The Town has a need to identify their current trail system and provide mapping and protection assistance. As development pressure increases and protected lands are restricted for animals, these residents have found their trail riding opportunities diminishing. The Wekepeke Watershed Lands (Town of Clinton) have impressive trails and some property owners do permit access to their lands to equestrians, though as owners transfer their ownership of these lands, new landowners may not welcome this access.

³ The landowners agreed to extend the pending easement to Wachusett Greenways (which is intended to pass through privately owned parcels) contingent upon the Town of Sterling's willingness to rezone the property to Light Industrial Use. The rezoning took place at the 2007 Annual Town Meeting.

⁴ Chocksett Road is a state-owned "cutoff" connecting the Exit 6 interchange to Route 62, Leominster and Clinton.

⁵ Comprised of representatives of the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART), the MRPC, the Massachusetts Highway Department (MassHighway), and the Executive Office of Transportation (EOT).

The public survey and the community forum revealed interest in development of a skateboard park. Conservation commission is looking into creating a dog park. OSIC sees the need to include access to open spaces and outdoor social environments as the Town considers its siting of a senior center. The planned analysis of protection priorities could facilitate a targeted approach to owners of farmlands and inform the siting process for the senior center.

2. Conservation Needs

Numerous surveys collected from the 1980's through the fall of 2007, have expressed a common theme focusing on the preservation and positive aspects on the quality of life of Sterling's "rural character." However, other than the Town Common, respondents identified few specific places or vistas, but rather expressed an overall desire to preserve the rural character and limit development. Current concerns include the undeveloped lands surrounding the Sterling Airport, which the town is attempting to preserve from development, and the Wekepeke Watershed lands. Scenic landscapes at the Kristoff Farms, Justice Hill, Hy-Crest Farm, Davis Farm, areas around the Waushacum lakes and the intersection near Rte 62 and Rte 140 are priority areas for protection. In the latest 2007 survey, residents strongly expressed their concern to preserve agricultural lands and farming, as well as to restrict development in open lands. The DCR, in its review of the Draft OSRP, stated that the purchase of land for water quality protection assists the town in the preservation of its rural character.

The Conservation Commission has identified opportunities to protect upland reaches surrounding East Lake Waushacum to mitigate non-point source pollution and development pressure; and plans to create trail linkages for public access between Waushacum Overlook and other conservation properties, such as the Mudgett property. The proposed trail development expands upon recently completed trails created as part of an Eagle Scout project. The trail permits hiking (with leashed dogs), cross-country skiing, and mountain bikes, but prohibits the use of all terrain vehicles. An easement off North Cove Road provides a connection to Mudgett Orchard from Sholan Park.

The proposed project entails clearing a trail, building a footbridge, improving trailheads, developing a website, and printing a map and trail guide. It includes reclaiming an overgrown trail at Bartlett Pond Drive and removing poison ivy, which will facilitate environmental education programs offered through the Recreation Department. It also includes construction of a trail facility at a vantage point over East Lake Waushacum, at the request of the landowners who granted the conservation. The design of the level terrace facility is complete and ready for construction. The site requires grading, and the project will include landscape plantings, and construction of a stone wall.

Unmarked trails throughout the conservation property require signage at all major intersections and trail blazes. The properties require installation of perimeter markers. Volunteers will install the signage and the Town will install boulders at access points on Tara Lane and North Cove Road to prevent access by off-road vehicles. Volunteers will construct a 15-foot wooden footbridge over North Cove seasonal stream to replace the existing bridge, which is in a state of disrepair. The trail developers plan to create a map and guide of Waushacum Overlook for public distribution and promotion of the property on the Town website. The guide will incorporate an educational overview of the link between watershed conservation and water quality protection.

Completion of these projects will set the foundation for creating a connection to a large DCR/DWSP owned parcel in the Wachusett Reservoir Watershed to the west of Waushacum Overlook and a possible future connection to the Sterling Spur of the Wachusett Greenways Rail Trail; considered a vital link in the regional trails network. The DCR is open to discussions regarding trails, as stated in its letter of review of the Draft OSRP.

The Conservation Commission inventoried forests on 9 out of 10 of its parcels to determine forest types and timber values. The Town needs to develop a management and protection strategy for current holdings and all future parcels. The Conservation Commission identified a need to ensure application of consistent boundary markers as well. Furthermore, the Conservation Commission is interested in pursuing a grant to fund formal identification of rare and invasive vegetation on its properties. The Conservation Commission also intends to seek funding to address management of invasive species at East Lake Waushacum stemming from boating activity.

The Town Forest properties require similar efforts toward developing strategies and setting goals. The Town Forest Committee was supposed to have completed an inventory by June 2009. As of this writing (July 2009), OSIC does not know the status of that effort, though the Town Forest Committee is on track toward developing a management strategy.

The Conservation Commission has also expressed interest in protecting the quality of the water resources in the Wekepeke Watershed, and plans to create public access opportunities at its Hardscrabble Road property. The Division of Fisheries & Wildlife has identified lands between Hycrest Pond and Heywood Reservoir in the Wekepeke Brook

watershed as Biomap core habitats. Much of this land is currently unprotected and abuts the Hycrest DCR-DWSP CR and the MassWildlife Wekepeke CR.

Furthermore, Sterling needs to strike a balance between its conservation interests and its affordable housing production requirements, since the Town has not met the state's 10% threshold for availability of low and moderate-income housing and is subject to challenges to its local zoning enabled through the Comprehensive Permit Law (Chapter 40B). The law gives qualified developers (nonprofit organizations or limited dividend companies) the right to appeal local permitting decisions to the State Housing Appeals Committee (HAC) in communities that do not meet the threshold. Currently, Sterling has 66 qualified units of affordable housing and would need to construct approximately 20 affordable units annually to qualify for a moratorium on 40b developments. The Town recently completed an affordable housing plan, which proposed three Town-owned properties for consideration as sites for Town developed affordable housing; however, these recommendations may be incompatible with goals and objectives of the Open Space and Recreation Plan as they could preclude trail network development.

3. Infrastructure Needs

The 2002 OSRP had an action to develop a wastewater management plan to update the Anderson Nichols study and reevaluate the need for sewer connections in selected areas of Sterling in light of improved technologies. Throughout the town, wastewater management is comprised entirely of septic systems, except at the Waushacum Village campground site, the Chocksett Crossing 40b development, and the nursing home in Performance Zone One. Although the Town needs to identify a means to address the problem at the East Lake Waushacum, and the downtown area has a temporary interim mitigation, which the Town may need to address for the businesses and homes there in the near future, there are no plans at this time. The Board of Health, the Conservation Commission, and the DCR-DWSP would need to be involved in these discussions, as would other entities.

Currently, the Town operates one well field on Route 140. The wellfield across from Pandolph Perkins, on Route 12, is not operating due to perchlorate concerns, and there is a need to update the Town's SWAP report. These parcels are at risk for surface contamination.⁶ The Town has some possible options to evaluate for feasibility or impact: pumping water up hill, tapping the MWRA resource, or using the Wekepeke resources. Tapping the aquifer would likely require partnership with neighboring communities to ensure that the volume of water extraction by all users does not place stress on the aquifer or the Wekepeke Brook. The dams at the Clinton-owned Wekepeke surface waters have problems and need repair. The Board of Selectmen and the DCR have corresponded with the Town of Clinton pertaining to the plan for the Clinton water reserves, but at this time, the intent is unknown.

C. MANAGEMENT NEEDS, POTENTIAL CHANGE OF USE

There is a need to foster and enhance communication and coordination between boards that oversee town properties—formalizing a process for inter-board communication would be helpful for all concerned parties. Issues persist regarding conservation easements, and there is a need for a mechanism to follow up on agreements and conditions to ensure implementation and to protect the resources in question. Similarly, there is a need to provide current information to residents and landowners interested in land protection strategies. The town could employ a multi-media approach with printed, electronic, and person-to-person options, and could use the OSIC website as an education venue, with links to the Sterling Land Trust, the Trustees of Reservations, state agencies, and existing electronic documents.

The 2002 OSR Plan identified a need to formalize procedures for a Town Chapter 61A sign-off process, which the Town has lacked for many years. OSIC has also prioritized in this plan development of an accurate and accessible method to determine all parcels in town enrolled in the Chapter 61 programs at any given time. Currently, there are some difficulties with this in the Assessor's Office, which members of the Open Space Implementation Committee encountered while conducting an inventory and mapping project in conjunction with updating this plan. Lack of consistency in the recording of land information leads to confusion in determining the status of properties and appropriateness of acquisition strategies related to promoting recreation and conservation goals and objectives.

Conservation Commission lands and Town Forest lands do not appear to have a management strategy at this time. Inventories are underway, an important first step, but the Town needs a management philosophy and strategy agreed

⁶ The 2002 Source Water Assessment and Protection Report for the Sterling Water Department classified the Sterling wells as highly susceptible to the risk of contamination due to land uses and activities within the recharge areas of the wells. See <http://170.63.97.68/dep/water/drinking/2282000.pdf>.

upon by the managers of those properties, according to the Planning Board and the Conservation Commission. The SPARC group needs to complete a final maintenance program for Sterling Greenery Community Park, which was a condition of approval of the park, and which it has not yet accomplished. The SPARC group needs to work in cooperation with the Recreation Department, DPW, the Conservation Commission, and the Planning Board as it resolves this issue. The DPW currently maintains many of the Recreation properties, such as Sholan Park and the athletic fields.

Public access to recently completed surveys by the Building Needs and Utilization Committee (who evaluated a number of town buildings), the new Agricultural Commission (who recently completed a survey of farms) and the Historical Society (who evaluated and assessed historic buildings owned by the town) would be helpful to Town residents in prioritizing goals and objectives for Town resources. These organizations could provide public access to these surveys and assessments by posting them on the town website in addition to providing hard copy at the local library.

In the 2007 OSIC survey, residents had many comments regarding a desire for safety and access to places for walking, whether on trails or on town roads. It would be of great value to Town residents if the Town government outlined the process for public participation in planning processes for enhancing pedestrian access to transportation networks in the Town, and created a formal venue for that participation. Similarly, the current process for assessing possible locations for a dog park, a skateboard park, or other land based recreational activities is informal and lacks sufficient opportunity for public involvement in the assessments. Developing ranking criteria and assessing land parcels for priority consideration would provide a useful tool for the boards to identify and prioritize options and should be a major priority in the next five years.

OSIC sees a need for a planning consultant to take on many of the responsibilities entailed in the next update of the Open Space and Recreation plan. The effort to update the Open Space and Recreation Plan as the committee works to implement the goals and objectives of the prior plan is a taxing split in focus on volunteer resources and commitments. OSIC also requires a more robust budget to support both plan implementation efforts (public forums and educational event, publicity, trails guides, website development, land acquisition strategies, master planning activities for critical parcels, etc.), and the update work for the next plan. For both these tasks, funding is an issue. To this end, OSIC would like to request that the Town consider an increase in its annual budget, and that other boards and committees who benefit from the development of the Open Space and Recreation Plan lend their support to continued updating of the plan.

Given the planning and implementation efforts of OSIC during the past twelve years, OSIC sees a need for the Town to update the Master Plan written in 1963. Key variables for conducting a Master Plan update include identifying sufficient funding to accomplish the task and developing a comprehensive leadership structure involving as many people in the planning process as possible, through subcommittees and an oversight steering committee. The effort would likely take well over a year, and would require extensive coordination, and quite possibly professional assistance. OSIC is willing to support the Town in that effort, should that happen, although leading such an effort would severely split its focus and overly tax the volunteer commitment of the committee, and thus did not include a Master Plan update as one of its goals for this seven-year plan.

To the Town's advantage, the Open Space and Recreation Plan and the earlier Affordable Housing Plan and the EO 418 Community Development plan can all serve as a foundation for the greater effort. The town would need to update demographic data once the Census Bureau releases the 2010 Census data. At present, a legislative committee is considering a Land Use Partnership Act and/or a Community Planning Act or a hybrid of the two, under which potential exists for substantial funding for planning support, as well as incentives for growth management, such as elimination of the ANR provision for opt-in communities. The new legislation is likely to require a linkage between the Master Plan and the Town zoning, so that the program for growth and the allowed uses are consistent and compatible with the needs and resources of the Town. While passage of the legislation is at least a year away, it could provide a substantial portion of the funds needed to update the Master Plan to the current day.

OSIC encourages the Town to examine the feasibility of hiring a professional land use planner (research aspects of the position, job descriptions, contract language, salary expectations, and methods of financing a professional Town planner) and to consider hiring a professional Town planner with GIS expertise to guide planning efforts, and assist the land management boards in their work.