

Citizen Attitudes about Preserving Open Space: Results from Surveys in Twelve New Hampshire Towns

During recent years, elected officials and voters have expressed growing concern about the rapid development of farms, forests and other rural lands in the United States and New Hampshire is no different: the preservation of rural lands is of major concern. According to the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (2002), New Hampshire is losing 12,000 to 15,000 acres of open land per year to development. Some towns are trying to stop that trend by buying up open space through public taxpayer dollars and some are succeeding.

This was evident last spring when voters in 29 communities across the state considered proposals for bond issues to finance land conservation projects. While some were modest in amount, thirteen envisioned borrowing at least \$1 million to preserve undeveloped parcels of land (Center for Land Conservation Assistance). Most of the 29 communities approved their land conservation proposals, often by large majorities.

Voter Survey

Dr. Mark Ducey and Dr. Richard England with the UNH Center for Integrative Regional Problem Solving (CIRPS) and Dr. Andrew Smith with the UNH Survey Center conducted a study in the summer of 2003 to examine why NH voters in 12 of those 29 communities supported or opposed local initiatives to preserve open space. The towns surveyed included:

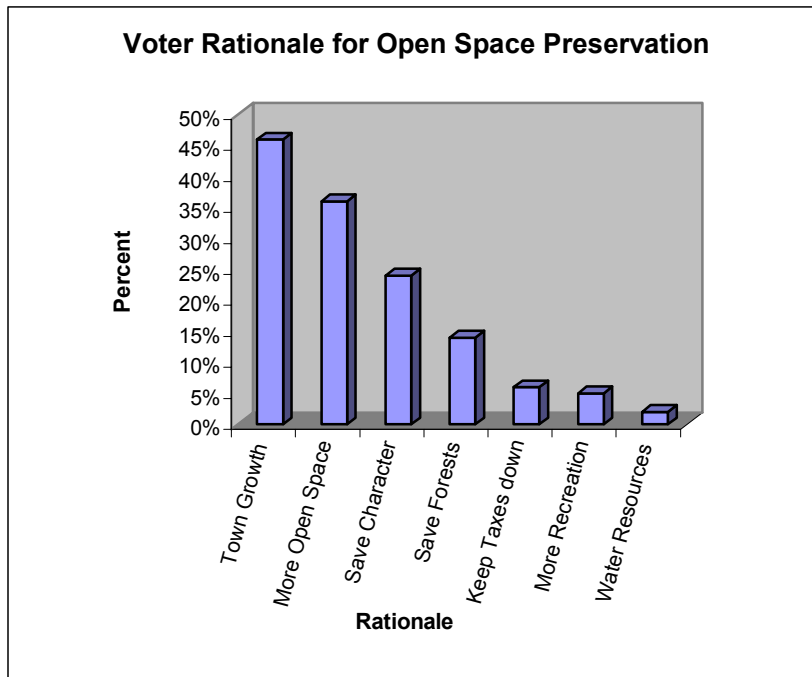
Auburn	Exeter
Barrington	Greenland
Brentwood	Hollis
Durham	Hopkinton
East Kingston	Newington
Errol	Rye

The 500 voters surveyed were randomly selected from voter lists in these towns. The dollar amounts under consideration ranged from \$500,000 in Newington to \$5 million each in Hollis, Hopkinton and Rye.

When asked what they felt was the biggest issue or problem facing their town, out of the possible choices, most reported growth/sprawl/open space at the top, with taxes coming in second and schools/quality of education coming in third for priorities. Almost two-thirds of respondents believe preservation of open space is not an individual responsibility, but a community responsibility.

The majority of those voting in favor of the proposals reported themselves politically liberal or moderate and having better than a high school diploma. Support was strong across all income levels with the highest income (\$150,000 or more) being the most likely to vote in favor.

Respondents were also asked why they had voted in favor of the proposal. Their responses were:



Those who opposed the land conservation proposal cited they thought the money would be better used for other purposes. They were also more likely to state they could not afford any additional property taxes to fund open space preservation.

This study was funded by the Samuel P. Pardoe Foundation, NH Charitable Foundation, Whittemore School of Business and Economics and the Greater Piscataqua Charitable Foundation.

Resident Survey

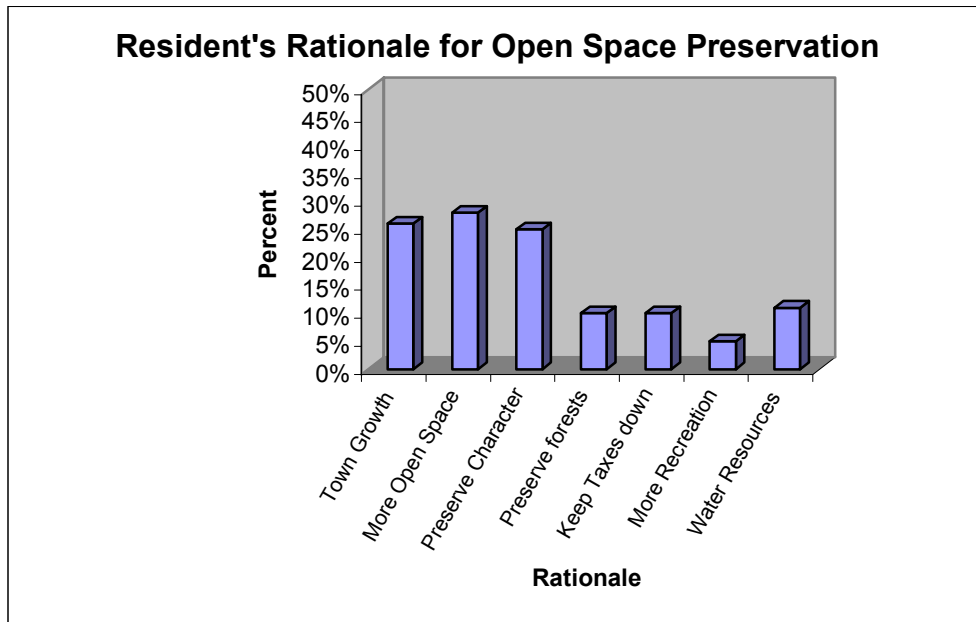
In response to the CIRPS study, Gregg Caporossi, a UNH graduate student in the Department of Resource Economics and Development, is conducting a follow-up study of the voting and non-voting residents of those same 12 communities.

Under the direction of Dr. Kelly Giraud, Assistant Professor of Resource Economics and Development, the follow-up study will attempt to determine if there are differences in the attitudes and perceptions of open space preservation between the voting and non-voting public. Utilizing a predictive economic model, the researchers hope to gain a broader understanding of residents' attitudes toward open space preservation initiatives.

The information from this study will be used primarily to provide policy makers with information to make more informed decisions about future preservation initiatives. Additionally, the study is designed to test the predictive validity of the contingent

valuation research methodology to determine if it can be used by communities to assess the value of open space to its residents prior to a general referendum.

Although the data required for this study are still being collected, preliminary results indicate that there are some differences between voters and non-voters:



In contrast to voters who did not support open space referenda on the March 2003 ballot, the resident population cited that the top three reasons for voting against such initiatives were:

1. that taxes are already too high,
2. there's a need to broaden the tax base, and
3. there's a need to foster commercial development.

What's Being Done to Help New Hampshire's Rapidly Growing Communities

The Center for Integrative Regional Problem Solving (CIRPS) has compiled a list of the top ten issues facing rapidly growing communities in New Hampshire. The list was informed by community decision-makers and active citizens across the state.

**Center for Integrative Regional Problem Solving
Top 10 Issues Facing Rapidly Growing Communities***

1. Determining economic impacts of land use choices, including cost/access to services, taxation and financing education
2. Preserving New England character, including sense of community
3. Exploring growth management strategies and model ordinances for natural resource protection: what works, what does not
4. Conserving the best open space through non-regulatory options
5. Sustaining the economic base without losing quality of life
6. Creating housing that is affordable and developer incentives
7. Creating adequate transportation services and systems
8. Ensuring surface and groundwater protection
9. Encouraging collaboration within communities and with the region
10. Participating in expedient leadership training of community decision-makers

*Compiled in conjunction with UNH Cooperative Extension

Through a partnership with UNH Cooperative Extension, an online clearinghouse is currently being developed, soon to be available on the web, to provide resources to individuals and communities in New Hampshire. The site will include:

1. academic/scientific research and papers written on the topics in the list;
2. agencies and organizations regionally and nationally who have materials and support they can provide to communities; as well as
3. links to communities around the state who have developed innovative ways of dealing with rapid growth.

For more information about these studies or about CIRPS, please contact Amy Seif at 862-4650 or amy.seif@unh.edu. Please visit the CIRPS website at <http://www.unh.edu/cirps>.

Submitted by:

Michele Gagne, is the program coordinator for the Strengthening NH Communities Initiative and coordinates the Community Profile project for UNH Cooperative Extension. She can be reached at 862-5046 or michele.gagne@unh.edu. For more information about what UNH Cooperative Extension is doing to support New Hampshire's communities, visit their website at <http://ceinfo.unh.edu>.

Thanks to Gregg Caporossi, who is a UNH graduate student in the Department of Resource Economics and Development. He is currently in the final stages of his Master's thesis examining NH's land conservation bond initiatives.