

Chapter 11: Recreation & Open Space

INTRODUCTION

Recreation is an important component of the lifestyle and livelihoods of many of the Region's residents. Much of the recreation that is available in the Region is the direct result of the geographic landscape—hiking, skiing, hunting and snowmobiling in the Green Mountains, fishing, boating and swimming in the many lakes and rivers. The recreational opportunities in the Region are available to and appreciated by residents and visitors of the Region alike.

This section is focused on the link between recreation and the use of land, economic development, transportation and natural resources, and looks at the provision and use of the Region's recreational resources, for town officials, nonprofits, developers, and individuals.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

The provision of recreation throughout the Region varies depending on the size of the town and the role it plays in the Region.

Rutland City

Rutland City hosts a concentration of developed recreation opportunities. Multiple city parks provide recreation fields, tennis and basketball courts, hiking and mountain biking trails, swimming facilities and areas in which to skateboard and ice skate. The City's Recreation Department is able to pursue many recreational opportunities that require initial monetary input for construction or acquisition of property. The highest number of private recreation providers and facilities also occur in the City.



FAST FACT

Vermont is less than a day's drive from tens of millions of people and tourism to Vermont continues to grow. Many of these visitors come to Vermont specifically for recreational purposes.



RRPC Staff, Lucas Somers, RRPC Staff, www.killington.com (clockwise from top right)

The Rutland Region is home to a wide range of recreation opportunities: active, passive, individual, and family



DEFINITIONS

Undeveloped Recreation:

Undeveloped recreation occurs in areas lacking infrastructure or programs. This type of recreation often occurs on privately owned land. Examples include the use of land for hiking, wildlife viewing, picnicking and hunting and the use of water bodies for swimming, boating and fishing.

Developed Recreation:

Recreation programs and facilities specifically created for a recreational purpose. Examples include: swimming pools, parks, picnic areas, playgrounds, ball fields, fitness centers, golf courses, riding and hiking trails and ice skating facilities, as well as programs such as sports leagues, summer camps, concerts, swimming and fitness classes, art classes.

Sub-Regional Centers

Larger towns in the Region depend on a combination of town owned and private recreation facilities. These towns often have populations concentrated in their village centers, but serve nearby rural residents as well.

Partnerships between these village hubs and surrounding rural towns help make facilities and programs available to more of the Region's residents and visitors. An example of this is participation of Middletown Springs' residents on Poultney sports leagues. Public recreation facilities are available at schoolyards, as well as public parks and recreational areas. Trail systems are made possible through partnerships with private landowners. Private recreational opportunities such as guide services, equestrian stables, golf courses and other activities dependent on more rural environments are also found in these areas.

An important recreation oriented sub-regional center serves Killington and Pico ski mountains. This area also hosts snowmobile and mountain biking trails, and numerous private recreation providers.

Rural Communities

Much of the recreation available in rural towns in the Region occurs on privately owned lands. Open space preservation and continued public access to these land and water resources can help counter the lack of town owned, developed, recreational activities and facilities. In rural communities that are unable to provide developed recreational options, private landowners as well as state and federal agencies are critical recreation providers. Developed recreation facilities found in the Region's rural towns are often indirect benefits of other infrastructure projects, such as school ball fields and playgrounds, and class 4 roads.

National Forest

The Green Mountain National Forest (GMNF) covers much of the eastern border of Rutland County. The GMNF is managed for a variety of uses, including recreation. Recreational opportunities in the forest range widely, from highly developed facilities with amenities and services, to primitive camping and hiking experiences in Wilderness Areas. In the Region, the GMNF is in the best position to provide dispersed recreation (recreation not occurring on a developed recreation site) due to its large, contiguous land base.

The United States Department of Agriculture, through the Forest Service, manages the Green Mountain National Forest. Large areas of the forest have been preserved for primitive and semi-primitive uses. The National Fish Hatchery in Pittsford is managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

State Forests and Parks

The Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation is responsible for overall management of state lands, and administers the State Park and Forest System.



A portion of the Appalachian Trail winds its way through Rutland County. Route 4 and other local roads provide easy access for both day hikes and long treks.

Coolidge, Aiken, West Rutland, the Lower Clarendon Gorge State Forests represent over 20,000 acres of land in the County open to undeveloped recreation. The Lower Clarendon Gorge State Forest provides day use access to an important natural water feature and scenic area. These forests also host hiking trails and some link together other important conserved lands. Coolidge Forest connects the north and south sections of the Green Mountain National Forest.

Rutland County has four state parks. On the western side of the County, three parks provide camping and water access to Lakes Bomoseen and St. Catherine as well as Half Moon Pond. In the Green Mountains, Gifford Woods State Park provides camping and picnicking opportunities adjacent to one of Vermont's best known old growth hardwood stands. The Appalachian Trail runs through the park and joins the Long Trail in the vicinity. Many State Parks have large acreage open to undeveloped recreation as well.

Municipal Forests

Most Municipal Forests were created in the early 1900's through legislation authorizing the establishment of "endowment forests." Seventeen towns in the region have at least one, ranging in size from 15 to over 1,000 acres. Municipal forests account for close to 10,000 total acres in Rutland county.

In a 1931 report from the Vermont Commission on Country Life, the value of these resources was described as, "a source of public education. Schools as well as the general public can here secure first hand information that often is obtainable in no other way. Such a forest area may well be the recreational center for the community, and when properly managed and administered, should become a source for revenue."

In Rutland, municipal forests were historically managed for timber revenue. While this is still the case in many

instances, there has also been a shift to management of these forests for recreational and educational uses as well. Many town's maintain signed hiking trails and wildlife viewing areas as well as other recreation opportunities, and encourage use of the forests by residents and school groups.

Currently, many towns are recognizing the public benefit municipal forests can provide, and are working with Rutland County's Forester (an employee of the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation), to create management plans that identifies the variety of values and uses for the forest as identified by town residents.

Wildlife Management Areas

Plymbsbury, Shrewsbury/Plymouth, Otter Creek, Whipple Hollow and Buzkeck Wildlife Management Areas are also open to the public for nature watching and hunting and represent additional acreage appropriate for recreational use in the County.



Access to recreation facilities is a transportation issue for residents dependent on public transportation to reach recreational opportunities. The condition of highways and trails to reach recreation areas affects their accessibility as well.



Lucas Somers

The Rutland Region Fieldhouse, opened in 2004, offers a playing surface for hockey, indoor soccer, and other events years round.

CASE STUDY: RUTLAND COUNTY RECREATION DISTRICT

Progress towards a regional recreational facility has been a long time coming. The idea began circulating when Rutland City identified a need for an indoor recreation facility that was well beyond its taxpayers' means in the late 1990s.

Realizing that a collaboration between neighboring towns could potentially provide the resources needed to realize the type of facility, a joint survey committee was convened to look into the idea.

On Town Meeting Day 2005, Mendon, Rutland City, Rutland Town, and West Rutland joined together to form the Rutland County Recreation District. A consultant was hired to conduct a needs assessment and feasibility study to further guide the process.

A survey of residents in seven communities in 2004 identified desires to have indoor swimming and aquatics center, indoor track, weight facilities, aerobics and dance space, and a gymnasium for basketball and volleyball facilities in the area, among others.

The Districts goals include:

- Planning for the strengthening of local governments,
- Promoting plans for more efficient and economical operation of local recreational services,
- Development of a Regional Recreation Center and leisure opportunities designed to enhance the quality of life, provide multigenerational programming, activities and spaces, contribute to the overall health and

wellness of the region's constituents, provide quality recreation opportunities for area families, promote positive lifestyle habits, foster new level of regionalism through cooperation and partnering

➤ Contributing to the economic health of the region by creating jobs, purchasing local goods and services and supplementing the tourism trade.

The project has focused on many different impact areas. The District has stayed committed to determining how to provide transportation and access to the facility, by focusing on locating the facility in a location central to the district's member towns, to exploring ways of adding the facility as a stop on current bus routes, involving the schools in bussing students to the facility after classes, and looking into providing shuttle services to and from the facility.

While Rutland City and adjacent towns contain the population to support formal recreation facilities, many of the outlying rural towns of the region have limited recreational options.

This project will provide residents of outlying towns access to a state-of-the-art facility that could not be provided by any one town independent of the other partners in the project.

The collaborative nature of this effort has assisted in funding the project. Project support from legislators, clubs, private corporations, community agencies and public donations has been levied because of the multiplicity of involved towns. Municipal support is much more effective, because they are able to pool limited resources to create a facility better able to meet residents' varied needs.

Trail Networks

The Department of the Interior, through the National Park Service, along with The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, a volunteer-based, private nonprofit organization dedicated to the conservation of the trail, manage the 2,175-mile Appalachian National Scenic Trail, a 250,000-acre greenway extending from Maine to Georgia. The trail enters Rutland County in Mt. Tabor, and makes its way north through the Town of Killington. There are many access points to the trail within the County.

The Long Trail is known as Vermont's "footpath in the wilderness." Built by the Green Mountain Club between 1910 and 1930, the Long Trail is the oldest long-distance trail in the United States. The Long Trail follows the main ridge of the Green Mountains from the Massachusetts-Vermont line to the Canadian border as it crosses Vermont's highest peaks. It was the inspiration for the Appalachian Trail, which coincides with it for one hundred miles in the southern third of the state. The Appalachian and Long Trails are one and the same from the southern border of the county until they cross Rte. 4 in Killington where they split off from one another.

Open to the public in the winter, the 300-mile Catamount Trail is North America's longest cross-country ski trail. Starting in Readsboro on the Massachusetts border, this winter-use only trail winds its way for 300 miles through the heart of the Green Mountains to North Troy on the Canadian border. The trail runs through Rutland County, generally following along the spine of the Green Mountains. Cross country ski trails are also maintained by private businesses, and can be found on the Green Mountain National Forest and the Coolidge State Forest.

The Vermont Association of Snow Travelers responsible for the maintenance and grooming of an extensive snowmobile network across the state. One of the oldest snowmobiling organizations in the

U.S., VAST is a non-profit, private group that includes over 140 clubs statewide, with over 45,000 members combined. Eighty percent of VAST's trail system is on private land and permitted by agreement with each landowner. Nearly every town in Rutland County has VAST maintained snowmobile trails.

Many local hiking trail networks are used extensively for day hikes and wildlife viewing and can be found in many Municipal Forests and some State Forests and Parks. The D&H Rail Trail is ~20 miles long and connects Granville NY to Castleton through the town of Poultney. This trail is used by pedestrians, bicyclists and snowmobilers during the winter.

Trail Networks specifically designed for mountain biking existing in Pine Hill Park in Rutland City as well as at Killington Peak.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Recreation opportunities best provided and planned for at a regional level: inter municipal sports leagues, hiking, biking and ATV/Snowmobile trail networks, state and county wide bike routes, rail trail projects, water resources—rivers and lakes...

UNMET NEEDS

Recreational planning capacity and resources

Low or non-existent recreation budgets in most towns limit the ability of localities



Lucas Somers

Providing a range of recreation opportunities, like those in Wallingford, is important for people of all ages and interests to use facilities.



The quality of many outdoor recreational experiences is dependent upon the health of the natural environment, continuance of open space, provision of aesthetically pleasing landscapes and the degree to which the environment has been altered by human activity.

Land development patterns affect recreation. The fragmentation of large open tracts of land into smaller, often residential, lots decreases hunting opportunities in the county. Stormwater runoff, clearing of riparian vegetation and other affects of development affect fish populations.

to adequately plan and provide recreation options. Only half the towns in the Region have a recreation commission, recreation department or recreation director.

The capacity of many groups to identify recreational needs, organize sports leagues, conduct feasibility studies for proposed recreation facilities and plan for facility maintenance and enhancement, on top of seeking out new recreational opportunities, is often insufficient. Towns with no recreation director or commission are at an even greater disadvantage and often depend on neighboring town's recreation facilities and programs.

Facility Needs

Many municipalities have cited vandalism, high maintenance costs of historic and public facilities, over use of recreational facilities and loss of scenic views and open areas to development as potential threats to the Region's recreational resources. Often, needs for increased staff training, better informational signs, and more extensive budgeting activities are necessary for current facilities to adequately meet users needs.

Even while municipalities are having trouble maintaining the facilities they have, there is a recognized need for additional basic facilities such as ball fields and trail networks to meet recreational needs at the local level.

New recreation programs

While children's recreation programs and sports opportunities are available to almost every child in the Region, there are few facilities and programs meeting the needs of adult, elderly and disabled users. The need for greater recreational opportunities for youth not interested in traditional sports leagues has also been identified.

Access to recreation opportunities

Udeveloped recreation areas—sledding hills, swimming holes, hunting lands, etc.—serve important recreational needs in almost every town in the Region. Loss of access to private lands is increasing due to liability concerns and the reluctance of landowners to keep their land open to unknown users. Loss of these private lands threaten to eliminate many of the recreational opportunities available across the Region, especially in smaller towns that do not have the resources to provide municipal recreational facilities. Part of the issue is the lack of homeowners' knowledge on the various forms of liability protection available to them.

Loss of access to water resources is also a concern, and towns with important water resources recognize the need to maintain public access points to these resources for those not owning shoreline property.

Conflicts between types of recreation and the desired characteristics of the experience can also affect the enjoyment of recreation in the region. Recreation takes many forms in the region, ranging from motorized ATV and snowmobile touring to activities requiring greater solitude, such as wildlife viewing and backcountry hiking and camping.

Limited transportation to recreation facilities

The distribution of recreation areas and facilities is concentrated in larger population centers, making access difficult to residents of the Region without transportation. Because of the nature of recreation, trailheads, lake access points and other opportunities are often outside of the Region's public transportation system and generally inaccessible to residents who do not have their own transportation.

Automobile dependence could be decreased by better access to facilities by

bike or foot travel. Currently there are few biking or pedestrian connecting frequently used recreation facilities to users.

Lack of marketing of recreation opportunities

Recreational resources that are open to the public are not fully marketed to the Region’s residents or its visitors. Resources that the Region does have should be meeting the needs of both populations, as well as identifying the recreational resources of the Region that make it a unique place to live and visit. Recreation resources could be more widely used if there was more publicity of opportunities, structured and informal.

While a greater awareness of the recreational opportunities would satisfy users looking for new adventures, this could also increase the use of facilities that may already be overused or in need of maintenance a separate, but related need..

FUTURE TRENDS

- Continued loss of access to recreation opportunities on private land.
- Pressure on rural towns to provide increased recreational opportunities and facilities as the Region’s population continues to shift from current population centers (Rutland City, Poultney, Brandon, etc) to outlying towns (Benson, Hubbardton, Killington, Middletown Springs, Tinmouth, and Wells) where populations have all increased more than 20% in the last 10 years.
- Potential loss of recreational opportunities and related tourism associated with open space development and fragmentation.
- Nature-based recreational activities will need increased planning attention as they are recognized as an important

component of economic and community development.

- Increased number and types of water related activities will strain the already limited number of public access points.
- Increased demand for motorized recreation such as snowmobiles and off road vehicles, leading to identification and creation of appropriate areas and support infrastructure.
- Increased management of recreational facilities for a variety of potentially conflicting uses to accommodate increased demand for motorized recreation as well as wildlife viewing and hiking opportunities.
- Increased demand for non-competitive recreation infrastructure (biking/hiking/walking trails, dog parks, etc.) as recreation’s role in quality of life, general health and well-being becomes more recognized. Lifestyle shifts and increasing obesity throughout the country emphasize the need for communities that support active lifestyles.
- As the Region’s population continues to age, the need for well-maintained sidewalks and walking paths, as well as recreation programs focused on meeting the needs of this population, will become an important component of recreation provision.

MEETING CURRENT AND FUTURE NEEDS

Given that financial resources for recreation are limited throughout the county, communities and organizations should sustain and expand recreation resources. Sharing of resources at the local, State, and Federal level, and with the private sector, is equally important.

Local, regional, state and federal agencies in Vermont should coordinate growth management planning and policies to determine the best places for



FAST FACT

The Rutland Area Physical Activity Coalition (RAPAC) is a group of businesses, organizations, and individuals that promote walking, cycling and other fun activities to promote physical and mental well-being. This organization works to make Rutland County more pedestrian and bike friendly. RAPAC also develops trail systems for walking, running and cycling. www.rapac.info



Recreation plays a large role in the tourism economy of the Region—economic activity element.

growth to occur. Public agencies should work with private businesses to ensure that recreational services complement and do not compete with each other.

Agencies, businesses and organizations providing recreation should work to share feedback from users with each other, so that services can be adjusted and coordinated to most effectively meet user needs.

Additional continued funding for public facilities upgrades and maintenance will be necessary. Smaller, more rural towns, should group resources when applying for recreation related grants and when forming recreation commissions. Community endowments and other private support is also an important component to municipal recreation programs.

Changes to the tax code at the State level that provide tax relief to landowners who allow recreational use of their property could also help keep access to privately owned recreation opportunities open.

officials to understand the tax and economic benefits and consequences of conserving land in their town.

- Ensure coordinated efforts between the Commission, other agencies, and area towns in planning for and managing outdoor recreation facilities and opportunities.
- Work with public transportation organizations to identify and serve recreation sites.
- Work with interested towns to modify subdivision regulations to require recreation facilities and easements as part of large subdivision applications
- Support recreation infrastructure projects that are designed for multiple types of users
- Work with municipalities to identify the location of future recreation areas on official map.
- Assist towns in the creation of recreation commissions.
- Identify opportunities for resource sharing between towns for recreation provision.
- Support the connection of trail networks throughout the Region.
- Work with town Conservation Commissions and Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation to increase local awareness of Municipal Forests and facilitate public conversations on the values and potential uses of these resources.

RUTLAND RPC ACTIONS

Specific steps that can be taken to implement the solutions above:

- Create a Regional Open Space Plan
- Create a Regional Bicycling Plan
- Assist communities to conserve outdoor space and natural areas for outdoor recreation in or near areas of population concentrations. Help town

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- "Trails and Landowner Liability in Vermont" Handout, Vermont Trails and Greenways Council, June 2003.
- "2003 Rutland Region Recreation Report," Prepared by the Rutland Regional Planning Commission for the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, September 2003
- Vt. Stat. Ann. tit. 12, § 5791-5795 (1997)
- "Small Town Recreation Checklist," Vermont Recreation and Park Association
- Info on insurance extensions, municipal liability and their insurance policies etc.
- Vermont Recreation & Parks Association- Small Town Recreation Checklist