

**ELEMENT 155: A GREENER PATH  
GREENSPACE AND GREENWAYS FOR RHODE ISLAND'S FUTURE**

**01 INTRODUCTION**

Prepared by the Rhode Island Division of Planning and adopted by the State Planning Council on November 10, 1994, *A Greener Path...Greenspace and Greenways for Rhode Island's Future* offers a vision of an integrated, statewide greenway network, and provides strategies to advance protection of valuable resource lands, encourage transportation alternatives, and expand recreation opportunities for Rhode Island.

**02 ISSUES ADDRESSED**

*A Greener Path* begins with the presumption, in Part 155-1, that critically important public values inherently reside in the state's landscape. It documents key natural and cultural values that Rhode Island's landscape provides to society and asserts that they are worth defending. Parts 155-2 and 155-3 provide an historical and contemporary review of human interaction with the Rhode Island landscape and define three land usage trends--consumption, fragmentation and resource endangerment--that threaten the integrity, resource security, and public availability of the future landscape. Part 155-4 introduces the possibility that an alternative to the *status quo* exists and sets an expansive goal to move the state in a new direction.

Part 155-5 documents the analytical examination of the state's resources performed in the planning process and describes the method used to produce the recommended greenspace and greenways systems plan. The Rhode Island Geographic Information System (RIGIS) is used to map and integrate critical areas for six important resource factors—water, forests, agriculture, rare species, natural hazards, and recreation and culture. Based upon the principle of preserving lands which perform multiple values for the citizens of Rhode Island, areas with at least three of the six values are designated at the core of the statewide greenspace system. Greenway connections—following rivers, coastlines, farmbelts, and rail and utility lines—are delineated to link the priority greenspace areas to each other, to existing parkland, and to centers of population.

Part 155-6 presents the plan's **State Greenspace and Greenway System**, which would encompass up to one-third of the state's land area, and provide 500 miles of natural greenways, 200 miles of bikeways, and 65 miles of trail corridors for Rhode Island's future. A broad *mid-state greenbelt* is proposed to provide a distinct break between urban areas and those that should retain a more rural character in the future. Part 155-6 also includes the **Local Greenspace and Greenway System**--a comprehensive inventory of state and local greenway proposals for natural, bikeway, and trail greenways. Policies to guide state, local and private efforts to preserve greenspace and create greenways within Rhode Island are set forth in Part 155-7. The concluding Part 155-8 establishes a 25 year program for implementing the plan.

**03 GOAL**

Part 155-4 of *A Greener Path* establishes the following goal:

**“Rhode Island will create a statewide network of greenspaces and greenways to serve as the central organizing element for the state’s 21st century growth and physical development.”**

The plan's goal calls for Rhode Island's protected greenspace network to encompass one-third of the state's land area and embrace every Rhode Island community by 2020, and for natural greenways to course throughout the state following major rivers, farmland belts, island spines, and coastal barriers. The goal also states that an extensive bikeway and trail system will link Rhode Island's natural and cultural features to its people, and that no Rhode Islander will live more than 15 minutes from a greenway.

**04 POLICIES**

Part 155-7 presents policies designed to support creation of the systems recommended in the plan. Policies are grouped under a general category and four topical themes:

(Note: Policy numbering is for reference only, and does not connote differential priority or importance.)

❖ *General Policies for Greenspace and Greenways*

- G-1 Promote compact development patterns, urban/suburban infill and reuse, and clustered, village-centered rural growth. Foster a land conservation ethic by stressing space- and resource-efficient designs in order to minimize unnecessary fragmentation of greenspace.
- G-2 Emphasize creation of the greenspace system in state land protection and acquisition investments. Give priority to projects that directly advance realization of the greenspace system.

**The Vision**

*Imagine...*

... a Rhode Island in 2020: vibrant, confident, and green. A state focused on its traditional strengths, while vigorously embracing the future. It has protected its strategic natural resources, and preserved key links to its past. Places and landscapes, special to generations of Rhode Islanders, have been secured.

Common greenspace—park, promenade, riverway or garden—forms the core of revitalized urban neighborhoods. Suburban village centers are connected to the urban mosaic by greenway trails and bikeways. Greenways have become new avenues of social, cultural and economic intercourse, bringing people of all backgrounds together in common purpose.

In coming to peace with their landscape, Rhode Islanders have shown it possible to move ahead economically, while healing and nurturing the land; to build connections among people by linking them to common ground; and to embrace the future without losing the past.

- G-3 Utilize the diverse array of land protection techniques available (i.e., creative development, regulation, private-public partnerships, purchase of easements and other less-than-fee-simple instruments, and full acquisition) to best advantage in safeguarding the values of greenspace in the most effective and cost-efficient manner.
  - G-4 Manage the public portions of the greenspace system to realize multiple values and social benefits, wherever possible. Avoid restricting public lands to an exclusive use, except where warranted by public safety, or resource protection and sustainability concerns (e.g., certain water supply resources, rare species habitats, and other fragile areas).
  - G-5 Encourage local promotion of creative development techniques that conserve land, respect natural and cultural landscape features, provide publicly-usable open space, and produce aesthetically and environmentally harmonious communities.
  - G-6 Use the local comprehensive planning process to insure local cognizance of state goals and policies for the greenspace and greenway system, and to provide for effective and consistent municipal participation in creating the system.
  - G-7 Provide a sustainable revenue source affording dependable and adequate funding for a public greenspace purchase program.
  - G-8 Direct new growth and development to areas and locations that minimize the potential for negative impacts upon the greenspace system.
  - G-9 Incorporate a greenspace buffer within major new developments whenever the potential for discordance exists between the type, scale, or effects of the new facility and existing or planned adjacent land uses.
  - G-10 Nurture partnerships with private sector greenspace protectors and others who have a stake in the greenspace system.
- ❖ *Greenspace's ecological functions*
- E-1 Protect the physical and biological integrity of ecological systems and natural landscape units. Where possible, protect large, contiguous tracts of greenspace to meet the needs of certain wildlife species. Establish greenway corridors linking discrete parcels where such connections would not jeopardize management objectives for rare, endangered, or other species or communities of concern.
  - E-2 Restore or re-establish natural greenspace values where they have been disturbed by development, especially within urban and suburban areas.
  - E-3 Maximize reliance upon greenspace and greenways as *natural infrastructure* for non-structural solutions to water management problems, including: public water supply/demand management, water quality maintenance and restoration, and stormwater runoff and flood control.

- E-4 In state natural resource regulatory programs, apply a high standard of protection to greenspace and greenway areas.
- E-5 Actively assert and fulfill the state's duty under the Public Trust Doctrine to protect public trust interests in areas historically subject to the ebb and flow of the tides, navigable freshwaters, and areas that influence these resources.
- E-6 Develop a greenspace monitoring system to quantify and track vital parameters of the state's environment.
- E-7 Encourage localities to develop and adopt woodland and street tree management ordinances and programs.

❖ *Greenspace and people*

- P-1 Particularly within urban areas where it is lacking, make retention, enhancement, or re-establishment of greenspace a priority consideration in all physical development and revitalization projects. Make provision or expansion of public access to greenspace and greenways a fundamental aspect of community and economic revitalization efforts.
- P-2 Promote public access to and usage of the greenspace system, wherever feasible and consistent with protection of the system's resource values.
- P-3 Use various aspects of greenspace and greenway projects as vehicles for advancing public environmental education, promoting public service and volunteerism, and providing job training/creation endeavors.
- P-4 Encourage Rhode Islanders to play a pro-active role in defining the future of their landscape through participation in land use planning and decision-making, support of "watchdog" and advocacy groups concerned with land use issues, and self-education in land use and environmental issues.
- P-5 Emphasize, in public health and social service programs, the connections between active public recreational use and aesthetic enjoyment of greenspace and personal health and vigor and social well-being.

❖ *Greenspace and the economy*

- EC-1 Develop a statewide or regional, cooperative approach to the siting of new large-scale developments, which benefits all participants and reduces potential for duplicative and environmentally wasteful local "competition" for industrial and other growth. Seek ways to minimize the pressure that the existing property taxation system creates for conversion of open space to "higher value," developed land uses.
- EC-2 Avoid direct and indirect public subsidization or support of projects which would significantly and negatively affect greenspace areas or greenways. The federal Coastal Barrier Resources Act provides a statutory model for how such a limitation could work.

- EC-3 Encourage a "green as you grow" approach that links expansion of the greenspace and greenway system to community growth and development.
- EC-4 Recognize the connection between greenspace system resources and a vibrant tourism sector by making greenspace protection a vital *plank* of state economic development policy. Protect and promote, consistent with their sustainability, Rhode Island's natural areas and features as eco-tourism resources, and insure that tourism-associated impacts upon greenspace resources are avoided or minimized.
- EC-5 Encourage private sector investment in the provision and maintenance of public greenspace and greenway amenities, as a corporate/civic responsibility.
- EC-6 Where appropriate, link the granting of tax credits/holidays and other public subsidies to private enterprises to the avoidance of adverse impacts on greenspace, and/or creation of public greenspace or greenway amenities.

❖ *Greenspace and transportation*

- T-1 Give high priority to transportation system investments that expand modal choice, offer potential for reducing pollution and energy consumption, and have minimal impacts upon greenspace.
- T-2 Accelerate development of the statewide bikeway network component of the greenspace system to provide a low-energy-use, low-polluting transportation option for Rhode Island.
- T-3 Plan and develop a statewide, interconnected system of state, local, and/or private walkways.
- T-4 Encourage community and volunteer efforts in planning, designing, constructing, and operating/maintaining trails and bikeways as a means to reduce cost and accelerate completion of the statewide bikeway/trail network.
- T-5 Promote bicycling, walking and other non-polluting, energy conserving travel choices by providing information, constructing or subsidizing facilities and services, and encouraging employers' support and advocacy of such mode choices.
- T-6 Require all major new developments to provide for alternative transportation features and facilities (bikeways, trails, bike parking/storage), wherever appropriate, as a supplement to, or (in certain instances) replacements for automobile facilities (roads, parking areas).
- T-7 Discourage municipal abandonment of minimum maintenance (e.g., dirt) rural roads or public ways that now or could function as components of a municipal or statewide trail network. Similarly, discourage the unnecessary paving and upgrading of such facilities that would decrease their utility or desirability for non-motorized travel modes, unless non-motorized usage is provided for.

- T-8 Consider the relationship of roads to the greenspace system as a favorable criterion in the designation of scenic highways.
- T-9 Develop and instill a greenspace ethic in design and engineering of the transportation system. Avoid transportation infrastructure projects that would directly or indirectly significantly harm, diminish, or destroy the identified resource values embodied in the greenspace system. Require the preservation or protection of important natural and cultural resources embedded in the greenspace system, the mitigation of detrimental impacts upon them, and the replacement of any resource values destroyed or irretrievably damaged by transportation infrastructure.
- T-10 Manage utility corridors to enhance their value as greenspace and to capture their potential, wherever possible, for linear recreational opportunities.
- T-11 Avoid disposal of state-owned highway corridor land that affords open space value to the community, or which absorbs pollutants and buffers adjoining land uses from the highway-related impacts.

## 05 PROGRAM INITIATIVES AND ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS

Part 155-8 of *A Greener Path* presents an Implementation Program outlining three broad programmatic initiatives to support creation of the Greenspace and Greenway system during the coming 25-year period:

- ❖ ***Green As We Grow-Greenspace Protection for a Sustainable Landscape***, including regulatory vigilance for the 50,000 system acres subject to state wetlands and coastal laws, focused acquisition for the 35,000 most vulnerable acres of the system, detailed corridor planning, protection partnerships, and creative development.
- ❖ ***Reweaving the Web-Greenspace Reclamation***, recommending re-greening the city, restoring waterways for people, nurturing neighborhood greenspace and community involvement, wetland restoration, and anti-degradation measures.
- ❖ ***Pedaling Mobility-Greening the Path from Here to There***, encompassing accelerated bikeway and trail construction, and greenspace transportation enhancements such as Main Street revival, urban boulevard, and scenic byway programs.

Over 30 action recommendations are also presented. Designed to support the plan's major initiatives, action strategies are grouped under seven headings:

### Leadership and Coordination

1. Establish a state Greenspace & Greenways Council to lead and coordinate public and private efforts in creating the Greenspace and Greenways System. The Council should be multi-disciplinary, comprised of federal, state, local, and private entities with interests in resource protection and development of the System.

2. Work closely with private non-profit organizations and grassroots citizens' groups advocating greenways at the community level. Insure that these groups are aware of the state Greenspace and Greenways Plan, and encourage efforts that relate to its implementation.
3. Build partnerships between Rhode Island's land preservation interests and the economic development community (e.g., Chambers of Commerce, builders, realtors, and designers groups) grounded on the common interest implicit in the System.

### **Funding**

4. Develop a Greenspace Investment Program providing dependable funding sources capable of implementing the greenspace program. This will include insuring that existing revenue sources are used to full advantage, and instituting new sources of revenue. A combination of existing and new sources in a dedicated Greenspace Trust Fund should also be explored.
5. Encourage the federal government to become a full partner with the states in preserving greenspace and building greenway systems for 21st century America. Congress should consider consolidating the numerous (under-funded) land resource protection programs under a (more fully-funded) umbrella program, which would allow states flexibility in administration and direction of funds to priority areas and would offer funding incentives to states that have adopted integrated, multiple-objective greenways plans. In the meantime, seek increased funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Forest Legacy Program, Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, and similar categorical protection /system development programs.
6. Direct available land acquisition/protection resources to projects supporting protection and sound management of vulnerable portions of the Greenspace and Greenway System. Where needed, modify program guidelines and criteria to give priority to projects in the System. Encourage private land protection partners to give similar emphasis to the system in projects they fund.
7. Provide sustainable funding and continuity in state land protection grant and loan programs to encourage and maintain participation by local government and private non-profit conservation groups in projects which support the Greenspace System.

### **Landowner Incentives**

8. Develop a Greenspace Stewardship program giving recognition and incentives to cooperating private owners of undeveloped land with Greenspace value. Owners who entered the program and agreed to preserve their land for an extended period would be rewarded with a comprehensive package of services and incentives (might include: public recognition; resource management/reclamation technical assistance; estate planning, automatic qualification for Farm, Forest, Open Space tax assessments; priority for future acquisition; state-guaranteed loans for development of *green*, resource protection-oriented economic development ventures, etc.).

9. Study changes to the Farm, Forest and Open Space Act that would give greater impetus to private conservation of the Greenspace System. These could include requiring automatic certification of privately-owned unimproved land within the System as farm, forest or open space (as appropriate) for tax purposes; establishing uniform statewide valuations for farm, forest, and open space categories; linking the program to the phased purchase of key parcels (or of development rights) over time, and stiffening penalties for early withdrawal from the program.
10. Work to provide estate planning assistance for large-tract private landowners (especially in the Greenspace System), to ensure that landowners are aware of the possible financial benefits of conservation donations, and encourage land protection via donations.

### **Planning & Technical Assistance**

11. Provide greenway planning, land protection, and design advice to local governments and greenway groups.
12. Develop detailed plans for implementing Greenspace Program initiatives. Greenway Corridor Conservation, Restoration, and Management Plans would be produced in a partnership program between the Greenways Council and consortiums of local and private partners (cities and towns, watershed organizations, land trusts, etc.). Plans would examine, using a multiple-objective methodology and RIGIS data, resource management and reclamation needs; implementation possibilities for trails, bikeways, and transportation enhancements; and threats to greenspace resources. Protection priorities, resource management recommendations, and facility development schedules unique to each corridor would be produced.
13. Revise and update the *State Land Use Plan* (map) using current geographic data and analysis tools available via the RIGIS. This update should incorporate the results of the Greenspace and Greenways Plan and should designate areas for preservation or development based upon a land capability and infrastructure analysis utilizing the most recent natural resource, cultural resource, and public services and facilities datasets and information from local comprehensive plans.
14. Revise the guidance documents provided to local governments concerning the comprehensive planning process and local recreation planning to include information on the Greenspace and Greenways Plan, encourage local planning that reflects state greenspace goals, and encourage local projects and activities that support creation of the system.
15. Review local comprehensive plans to insure recognition of, and support for, the Greenspace Plan's goal, policies, and recommendations.
16. Develop a *State of the State's Land* report to accompany the annual *State of the State's Waters*, presenting a statistical portrait of the status of key greenspace resources and tracking implementation of the Greenspace Program. Develop new environmental indicators, such as forestland cleared, wetlands modified, land covered by impervious surfaces, acreage preserved, etc. Investigate the use of data sources such as

development permit records and satellite imagery to provide better real-time tracking of key indicators.

17. Assess vacant land in urban areas for relationship to the greenspace system or as neighborhood greenspace. Identify high priority sites for acquisition as public greenspace.
18. Work with local governments and greenway groups to identify priority sites for greenspace reclamation efforts, including wetland restoration, reforestation, runoff and erosion control, flood storage/conveyance restoration, and containment or removal of degrading land uses.

### **Fostering Creative Development**

19. Investigate the integration of mitigation transfer and banking techniques within state regulatory programs. Under mitigation banking, state wetlands and coastal management (and possibly other) regulatory programs could allow more flexibility for creative development in non-critical areas (generally more suitable for development), while directing protection and reclamation efforts towards critical Greenspace System areas.
20. Provide technical assistance and professional education in creative development techniques. Develop a handbook providing guidelines, criteria, and models for employing creative development as a way to preserve greenspace and assemble greenways, while producing landscape-compatible, community-supportable development.
21. Investigate creation of a Community Landbanking Program to encourage creative development. Under such a program, local governments could enter the land market to shape future development of critical lands. Parcels would be purchased by a town using a capital source (perhaps revenue bonds), and conditions attached requiring reliance upon creative development techniques to safeguard sensitive portions of the site. The land would then be sold for private development, presumably at a profit if it had been "banked" for some time, or if infrastructure had been upgraded in the interim. Proceeds (after debt service) would be available to continue and expand the program.
22. Encourage communities to employ mandatory cluster/planned development, transfer of development rights, site plan review, buffer and landscaping requirements, and other inducements to creative development in their land management ordinances.
23. Study the establishment of regulatory criteria allowing carefully-controlled use of innovative community or district-operated, small-scale (package) wastewater treatment and disposal systems in order to encourage creative development in appropriate areas. At minimum, criteria should require designation of service districts and greenspace preservation areas (density receiving and sending zones) in local comprehensive plans and land management ordinances, approval by state as consistent with the State Guide Plan, and designation of a responsible municipal (or regional) entity to own, operate, manage and maintain the facilities. Explore having the R.I. Clean Water Finance Agency and the Narragansett Bay Commission collaborate in creating a village-service district program that would assist localities in establishing, funding, and operating package plant services that could gain regulatory approval.

24. Require redevelopment projects in urban greenspace areas to assess reclamation opportunities (removal of excess paving, landscaping enhancements, runoff control, wetlands restoration, etc.) and include prudent measures where feasible.
25. Encourage localities to require the identification of existing trails as part of the development review process, and to insure their protection, especially where they relate to a community or state trail proposal.
26. Encourage land development standards that promote bicycle and pedestrian mobility via inclusion of appropriate on-site facilities and amenities (storage and locking, signage, sidewalks, benches, etc.). Consider allowing reductions in parking requirements in exchange for provision of bicycle and pedestrian facilities. Insure coordination of new developments to facilitate connection of off-road bikeways and trails at property lines.

### **Community Involvement**

27. Involve conservation commissions with developing and implementing local greenspace/greenway systems. Charge commissions with coordinating implementation efforts of local agencies and private land protection partners, and with monitoring the status of greenspace in their jurisdictions. Encourage commissions to review proposed new development and provide recommendations to the local Planning Board on the effects on greenspace resources and development techniques that could lessen impacts.
28. Develop bikeway and trail construction standards that allow use of low-cost techniques, volunteer labor, and local government resources (public works equipment and labor, etc.) where feasible, to minimize costs, accelerate completion, and maximize community participation in local independent projects.
29. Develop a community farming/gardening initiative to provide technical assistance (via URI Cooperative Extension, or similar program) and small "seed" grants to community action programs, neighborhood groups, land trusts, food banks, and similar non-profit organizations for establishment of community gardening programs. Assess unused public land (excess highway right-of-way, under-used portions of parks, etc.) for potentially suitable garden plots.
30. Utilize the National Community Service Corporation's volunteer jobs program to help create the Greenspace System, while providing a learning experience. Coordinate with the Rhode Island Commission on National and Community Service to create a RI GreenCorps volunteer program involving trail construction, greenspace reclamation, and public greenspace maintenance endeavors.
31. Investigate developing a structured "Boot Camp" program for non-violent juvenile offenders involving work on greenspace reclamation or facility construction/maintenance, and offering natural resource/environmental career training.

### **Asset Management**

32. Avoid the unnecessary loss of greenspace currently within the public domain. Ensure that State surplus property disposal include an assessment of the greenspace value and relationship to the Greenspace/greenways system of all properties proposed for disposal as surplus. Such review should require *agencies proposing* surplus land to detail the public greenspace values, if any, that the land provides; to assess the need for public greenspace within the vicinity of the parcel; and to describe its potential for reclamation as beneficial greenspace and/or utility to creation of the greenway network. The assessment would also include recommendations for management and protection criteria required as restrictions upon the parcel, if disposal were approved.
33. All state and quasi-state agencies should review land that they manage for its relationship to the System and should identify conservation, restoration and management measures that advance protection and/or reclamation of parcels having high greenspace value. They should allow maximum public realization of greenspace values consistent with agency operations and missions. The review should also assess candidate areas for enrollment in the Natural Heritage Reserves Program. Public agencies managing land designated as public open space should also review their holdings to assess opportunities for sale, exchange, or jurisdictional transfer of unencumbered land having no greenspace value and no relationship to the proposed system.
34. Encourage public utilities to manage right-of-way corridors as greenways, including public trails and bikeways, where practical.



Part 155-8 also estimates the cost of creating the Greenspace and Greenway System; identifies a variety of existing and potential sources of funds, and lists regulatory and acquisition tools for land protection, as well as groups and agencies that could support realization of *A Greener Path's* vision.