



SECTION II. OPEN SPACE

Open Space is a defining element to the character of the Town of LaFayette and to the quality of life of its residents. “Open Space” is land that has not been exhaustively developed for residential, commercial, industrial, or institutional purposes. It comes in many forms such as vacant land, parks, forests, and farmland, and is both privately and publicly owned. Over half of LaFayette’s land is undeveloped or farmland, and another quarter is residential lots with ten or more acres, making open space a dominant feature in the Town’s landscape. During visioning sessions for this plan, Town residents made it clear how important this open space is to them. Some of the major themes that came from these sessions include:

- Protect and preserve open space, views, and agricultural landscapes
- Concentrate development in the hamlet area
- Retain the “small town” character and sense of community while building upon assets

These sentiments are not new to the Town, as they were discussed in other planning documents over the years. In the Town’s *1988 Land Use Plan*, the author noted a pattern of lots along existing highways being developed, and noted some issues with this type of development. In the *Focus 2010 Strategic Plan* completed in 2005, one of the four recommendations is to “develop a Master Plan that works hand-in-hand with Town businesses and land owners to protect LaFayette’s rural character while addressing the Town’s current and future needs and concerns”. The plan states that the community appreciates and encourages controlled residential growth, but that uncontrolled development may diminish the town’s rural character and their desire to preserve farmland and open space.

EXISTING OPEN SPACE

Fifty-four percent (54%) of land in LaFayette is farmland, forested, parkland, cemeteries, or vacant (see Map __: Existing Open Space). Another 25% of land in the Town is residential lots with ten or more acres. The remaining 21% is nearly open, or open space. Most of this land, however, is not protected. Approximately 25% of land in the Town is somewhat protected from development due to environmental constraints. This includes large portions of land that have relatively steep slopes (over 15%), and floodplains along Butternut and Onondaga Creeks and some of their tributaries. However, these areas can still be developed to varying degrees. Only approximately 6% of Town land is actually protected as permanent open space. This land includes two land trusts, Town and County parks, cemeteries, and wetlands. Additionally there are approximately six miles of Public Fishing Rights (PFR’s) in the Town along Butternut Creek, with four parking areas for anglers.

There are no Wildlife Management Areas, State Parks, or State Forests in the Town, leaving no public land for hunting. No part of Town has been designated a Critical Environmental Area (CEA). Local agencies can designate CEAs, which are areas with



exceptional or unique character including: a benefit or threat to human health; a natural setting; agricultural, social, cultural, historic, recreational, or educational values; or an inherent ecological, geological, or hydrological sensitivity to change. And finally, no farm in the Town has sold their development rights through New York State's Purchase of Development Rights program.

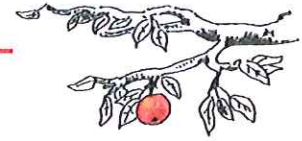
Topography and Scenic Views- The Town of LaFayette is home to a rolling landscape, with several areas of steep terrain including Bare Mountain, Irish Hill, Mason Hill, Meeker Hill, and the east sides of the Tully and Butternut Valleys. Many of these areas are valuable to the Town from a scenic standpoint. One or more of these hills can be seen at various points along each of the major roads and highways in Town. These viewsheds play a critical role in contributing to the rural character of the Town and providing natural scenic beauty for residents and those traveling through.

Many of the areas described above have slopes that average over 15% according to soils data. Slopes this steep can only be developed at great expense to developers, adjoining property owners, the Town, and the environment. While costly, they can still be developed to varying degrees, however, developing steep slopes can cause safety and environmental issues, such as increased erosion and sedimentation, increased risk of landslides, increased fire hazard, and septic systems can be unreliable. Even slopes averaging 8 to 15 percent can provide development problems, especially with driveway and road construction, road maintenance and snow plowing, stormwater runoff difficulties, soil erosion, and higher construction costs. Protecting these slopes, on the other hand, can preserve natural beauty, add value to properties, and provide educational and recreational opportunities. Careful planning is needed for construction on such sites.

The Town can begin its efforts to protect valued scenic views, and steep slopes that contribute to these views, by identifying and mapping important viewsheds and scenic views from key roads, public parks, and other locations valued by the community. After these are identified, the municipality can work with landowners and developers to minimize the impact of development on these views through careful design. There are also a variety of regulatory measures the Town can take to reduce the impact of development on steep slopes. These may include:

- Using overlay zones to limit the density of residential development, restrict incompatible land uses, or establish other specialized regulations
- Requiring conditional use permits for development on steep slopes
- Limiting the construction of streets or utility lines on steep slopes
- Establishing design guidelines that include screening to minimize the visual impact of development
- Requiring subdivisions that cluster lots outside of areas of concern

Agricultural Land as Open Space- Much of the Town's open space is agricultural land, particularly west of I-81, in the southeast part of Town, and along Eager Road. In addition to the many active agricultural lots, there are various abandoned agricultural lots which also contribute to the community's open space and have the potential to be farmed again in the future. Agriculture in the Town is discussed in more



depth in Section III: Agriculture. It is important to note the critical role agricultural land plays in contributing to the Town's open space and rural character.

DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS

During the 1990s an average of 14 building permits were issued each year, and between 2000 and 2006, that rose to an average of 26 each year. While LaFayette had less development than other parts of Onondaga County, cumulatively development has still had a dramatic impact on the landscape, particularly due to the pattern of development. Clusters of development exist in the LaFayette and Cardiff Hamlets, Jamesville Reservoir area, around the high school, and in the Meeker Hill Estates and Maple Grove subdivisions. However, environmental constraints and a lack of water and sewer infrastructure has deterred concentrated development elsewhere. Instead, much of the Town's development over the years has occurred along rural highways and major roads.

Over time many of the frontage lots have been developed along many of the Town's highways. Smaller parcels along roads have been separated from larger parcels and developed. Along portions of some highways, such as the northern sections of Coye Road and Apulia Road, nearly every frontage lot has been developed. This pattern is probably due to several factors. In some areas, lots are too steep to develop, except immediately adjacent to the roads. In other cases, farmers continue to farm their land, but sell portions of their farm to provide family members with land, or for additional income, especially for larger one-time expenses like buying a new tractor or sending a child to college. The portion sold is often along the road frontage, because there is no need to build a road to the interior of the property. This has also occurred on many vacant lots in Town, probably also to avoid the costly construction of new roads. While this type of development is understandable, there are several reasons it should be avoided. As more frontage lots are developed along these through roads and highways, more potential conflict points are created between cars traveling on the highway and cars entering the road from residential parcels. In addition, this type of development effectively hides existing picturesque open space behind a thin crust of development. For example, a road that was once lined by farms can still remain mostly open, but with houses lining the road, the farmland and open space are no longer visible.

WHY PROTECT OPEN SPACE

Open space is an important contributing feature to the rural character of the Town of LaFayette and to the quality of life of its residents. Protecting open space preserves scenic views and agricultural land, which contribute to that character. Protecting open space also protects important wildlife habitat, drinking water quality and quantity, and important water bodies such as wetlands and streams. It also provides opportunities for new trail development, passive recreation, and environmental education. Onondaga County has expressed an interest in preserving open space throughout the county in their *2001 Settlement Plan*. Specifically, they express a "desire to maintain continuous natural corridors, which are essential to wildlife and other



ecological systems”. Due to the environmental constraints to development in some areas of the Town, and the recent slowdown in development, this is an opportune time for the Town to work towards preserving open space that protects scenic views, agricultural land, and existing ecological systems.

TOOLS FOR PROTECTING OPEN SPACE

There are a variety of steps the Town can take to help protect and preserve their open space, including developing an open space plan, implementing zoning changes, or completely rewriting the zoning ordinance.

Open Space Plan- The Town can develop an Open Space Plan which would comprehensively plan for preserving scenic views, agricultural land, and continuous natural corridors. A plan involves a comprehensive and focused look at open space, including an inventory and analysis of development patterns, infrastructure, the regional context, existing conservation and recreation lands, and environmental conditions. The plan should analyze the Town’s needs, set a community vision for open space, prioritize areas of protection, consider the promotion of agricultural endeavors, provide suggested locations for trail systems, and provide overall goals and objectives. The plan should include a Natural and Cultural Resources Inventory, including open space and views, to better understand and map important resources and viewsheds from key roads, public parks, and other locations valued by the community. An Open Space Plan could be completed by the Town’s existing Environmental Conservation and Advisory Board, or by a separate committee appointed by the Town.

Open Space Scoring System- The plan may also include an Open Space Scoring System to help determine the value of particular properties since it is difficult to determine the value, or public benefit, of open space. A scoring system can help to alleviate some of the subjectivity involved based on individual opinions. It provides a point value to a property based on the presence or absence of certain amenities, such as wetlands, steep slopes, scenic views, or the if the location is adjacent to existing parks and preserves. A Natural and Cultural Resources Inventory should be referenced when scoring properties. The scoring system can then be used in two situations. If someone offers to donate property to the Town, or property is for sale, the Town can use the scoring system to gauge the merit of accepting or buying the property. While evaluating site plans and subdivision proposals, the scoring system can be used not to stop the development, but to reshape the proposal to protect important open space (i.e. use conservation design principles, include a buffer, etc). It should be noted, however that there is still a level of subjectivity involved in determining the value of a property, and while the scoring system can be a useful tool, it should not be the only basis for making decisions, especially if common sense and logic disagree.

Land Trusts- In the Town of LaFayette Central New York Land Trusts (CNYLT) owns two parcels, which are preserved in their natural state in perpetuity. Land Trusts are typically established by private or non-profit organizations who work to conserve land by acquiring land or conservation easements for land. CNYLT’s mission is to *“protect vital natural areas in Central New York for the health of the environment and the*



enjoyment of the public'. They typically acquire land either by donation or purchase and then keep it in its natural state. This is an important tool that can be used to preserve scenic views, unique ecological features, and contiguous stretches of land.

Purchase of Development Rights (PDR)- A PDR is where a private party (typically an organization) purchases the development potential of a property, guaranteeing its preservation such as valuable farmland or natural open space. This allows the landowner to continue to farm the land, and own all other rights to the property, except the right to develop it. In Onondaga County, the American Farmland Trust and New York Agricultural and Farmland Trust hold the conservation easements and provide easement stewardship on behalf of the County. Nine farms in Onondaga County have secured NYS grant funding to do this since 1998, however, there is limited funding and no farms in LaFayette have secured funding through this program. In LaFayette, many farmers have periodically sold off portions of their property along the road frontage for additional income, as described earlier in this section. Onondaga County has suggested a **Modified Purchase of Development Rights** program in their 2001 Settlement Plan, where instead of purchasing development rights for an entire property, organizations focus instead on the front 400 feet with their purchases. This preserves the rural highway view, while providing the landowner with the additional income they need.

Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations-There are a variety of zoning tools that can be used to preserve open space, however, instead of covering all of them, the following are tools that are most appropriate for LaFayette based on existing development patterns, environmental and community needs, and the Town's capacity to manage them. The Town of LaFayette can rewrite its Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations, carefully considering what changes can be made to protect and preserve open space. When doing so the Town should include a "Purpose and Intent" at the beginning of each document explaining their policy to preserve open space, and other land use goals they would like to achieve. General changes to the Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations is discussed further in Section XII: Land Use and Zoning.

Conservation Subdivision Design (CSD)- As mentioned previously, developing a Modified Purchase of Development Rights Program can help preserve farmland along highways. However, this has limited effect when a larger lot is subdivided. In such cases, Conservation Subdivision Design should be used to help protect open space. In areas of LaFayette where there are unique, scenic, or significant natural features to be preserved, such as steep slopes, wetlands, streams, or farmland, CSD should be employed. Conservation subdivisions can be likened to "golf course communities...without the golf course". With both types of development, there is careful attention to site design, proximity to a recreational amenity, a guarantee that the view onto open space won't change, and an exclusivity to the community, all of which make the properties more desirable on the market. However, with conservation subdivision design, instead of a golf course, there is natural open space, such as a meadow or woodlands. Unique, scenic, or significant natural features are identified and the site is designed to preserve large contiguous blocks of it. Homes and lots are laid out to maximize visual and physical access to the open space, with homes clustered together on smaller lots (but with an average overall density no greater than with conventional



subdivision design). An easement or other mechanism protects the remaining open space.

Conservation Subdivision Design has many benefits for developers, the Town, homeowners, and neighboring citizens according to the *Conservation Subdivision Design Handbook* and studies completed on CSD. The review process can be smoother because usually fewer people object to preserving open space; road construction costs are reduced, and therefore road maintenance costs for the Town are lower; the open space acts as a built-in marketing strategy for the developer; and homes sell faster and appreciate faster than in conventional subdivisions, benefiting homeowners. This type of development requires several factors for it to work: the presence of a real estate market for higher-end homes, and the presence of desirable site features. Many kinds of features can be preserved, but some are more marketable than others, such as mature woodlands rather than a recently restored forest. Additionally, some types of agriculture are better suited for CSD than others. Hayfields, orchards, Christmas tree farms, and some organic farming are usually more compatible, while noise, dust, chemicals, and odors associated with some other farming may be undesirable. Ownership of the open space will vary depending on the land, but usually is held by a homeowner's association, a farmer, or the Town, with a conservation easement held by the owner, or a third party, such as a non-profit land trust. More detailed information about CSD can be found in Appendix __: Conservation Subdivision Design Handbook.

It should be noted that Conservation Subdivision Design is similar to Cluster Development however, the latter does not necessarily involve the careful protection of unique features.

In LaFayette, CSD should be used to protect steep slopes, scenic views, wetlands, floodplains, compatible agriculture, or other features as appropriate. CSD can be encouraged across the entire Town, but should be required in areas with an abundance of these features. For example, along Tully Farms Road, Route 11A, Eager Road, Apulia Road, and portions of Route 20.

Successful Conservation Subdivision Design requires innovative local government leaders. It is important that the Planning, Zoning, and Town Boards are educated in the elements involved in CSD. The Planning Board in particular will need to be more educated in the process of CSD in order to negotiate well with developers.

Steep Slope Zoning Guidelines- While Conservation Subdivision Design will help to protect steep slopes and scenic views that may be affected by larger subdivisions, they will not protect steep slopes from houses built on individual lots on hillsides. LaFayette should also add Steep Slope Guidelines to its Zoning Ordinance. Guidelines should require site plan review for any type of development on parcels with slopes greater than 15% and restrict development on slopes over 25%. Steep Slope guidelines should be applicable to all zoning districts in the Town. The guidelines should require that development proposals have sufficient detail to show site work (cut and fill), housing site location, erosion and drainage control measures, and road location. The guidelines should also include design principles such as, landscaping areas around structures to make them compatible with natural terrain, clustering residential units so



there is minimum spoilage of land, shaping the grading to complement the existing land forms, encouraging split-level building sites, and retaining outstanding natural features, such as the highest crest of a hill range or natural rock outcroppings.

GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES

GOAL 6: Preserve LaFayette's rural character and open space while allowing for controlled residential and commercial growth.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

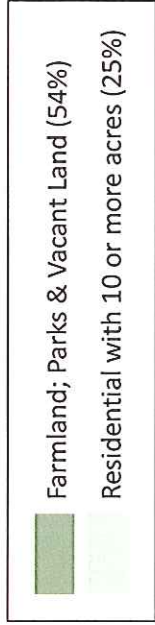
- A) Develop an Open Space Plan that identifies specific areas the Town wishes to preserve.
- B) Work with farm owners, Onondaga County, the American Farmland Trust, and the New York Agricultural and Farmland Trust to include LaFayette farms in the County's Purchase of Development Rights program and to determine the feasibility of developing a Modified Purchase of Development Rights program.
- C) Promote residential and commercial development in and around the LaFayette Hamlet area to preserve open space in the rest of the Town.

GOAL 7: Re-examine and re-write LaFayette's Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations to include elements designed to preserve and protect open space in the Town.

IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Include Steep Slope Zoning Guidelines in the Town's Zoning Ordinance. Guidelines should apply to all zoning districts and should require site plan review for all development on slopes averaging 15% or higher.
- B) Utilize Conservation Subdivision Design to protect steep slopes, scenic views, farmland, wetlands, floodplains, and other unique or significant natural features.
- C) Provide adequate training for Planning and Zoning Board members to successfully implement new zoning and subdivision regulations.

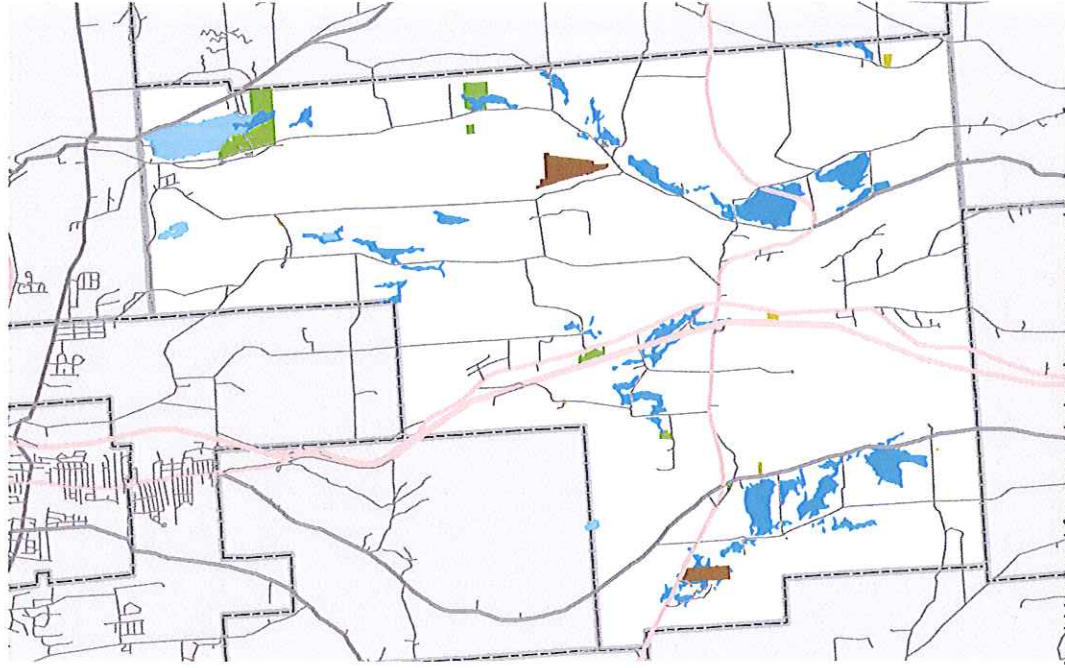
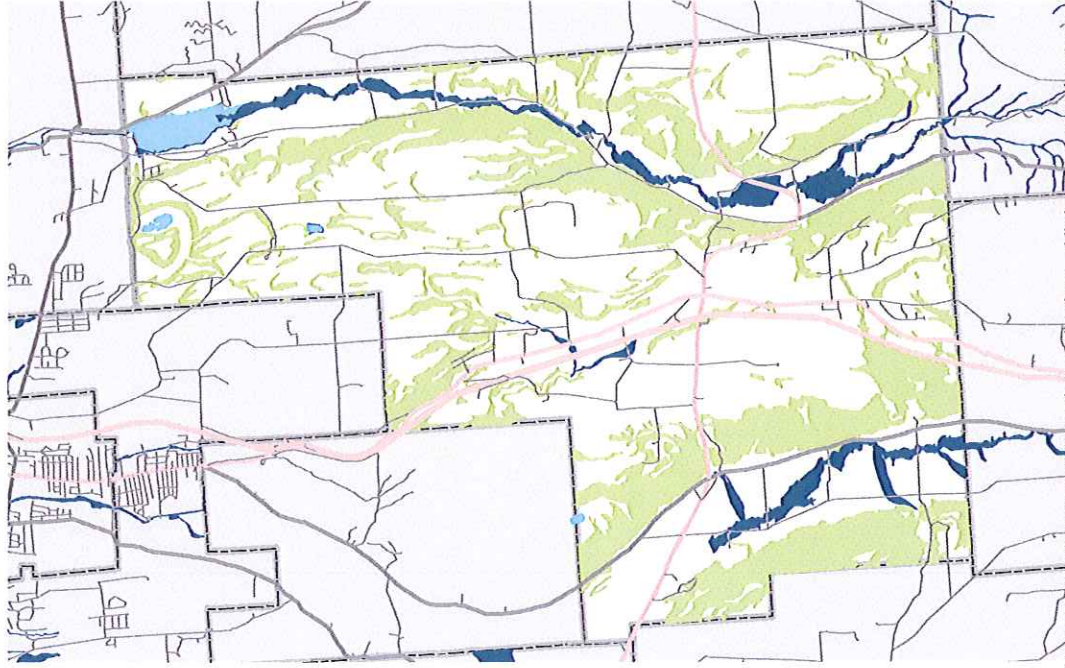
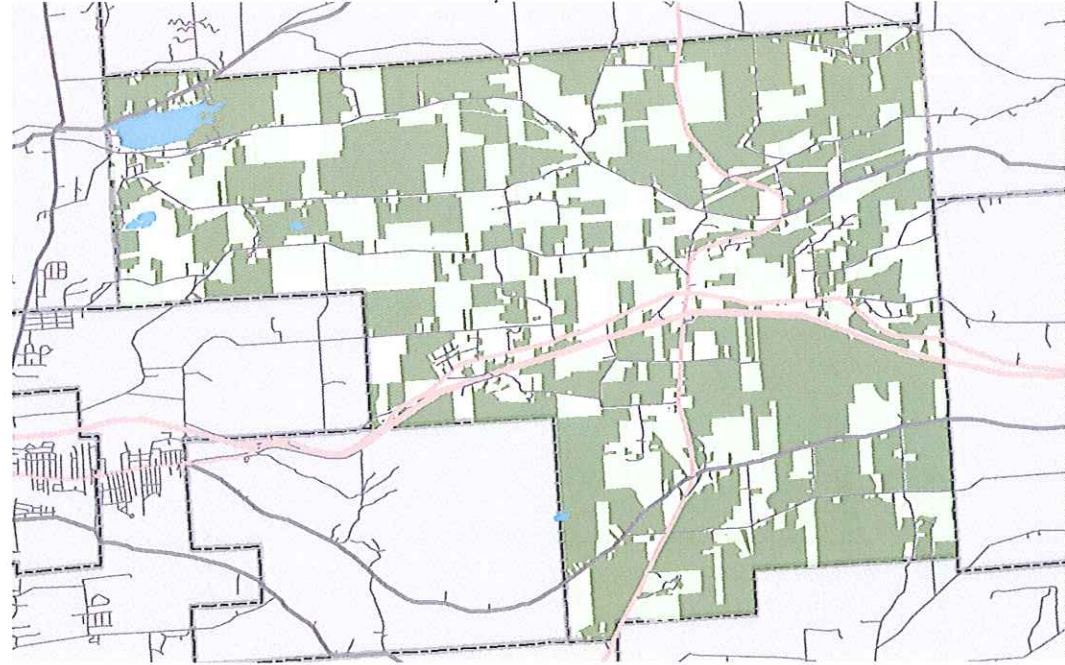
Existing Open Space (79%)



Development Constraints (~25%)



Protected Open Space (~6%)



Data provided by Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency. Steep Slopes data developed based on soils data. All data is approximate and should be used for general planning purposes only.

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