

Walking The Berkshires

The Berkshires area is an amazing place, full of complex ecosystems, great folk music, and plenty of land management issues. This blog is my daily conversation with you about my walks through the mountains here and how we can preserve such an amazing American treasure.

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April 19, 2006

Community Character

[Connecticut Windows on the Natural World](#), Brendan Hanrahan's highly informative blog about Connecticut's natural history and its environmental resources, has been posting a series of conservation-focused articles entitled "The Search for the Magic Bullet." The sixth in this series is "Preserving the Spirit of Place" and well worth a read.

Defining community character is one of the more difficult tasks facing those involved with open space and development planning. Hanrahan observes this challenge when writing about one Connecticut town's inspiring effort to maintain what it most values;

Like many in Connecticut, Granby is a town where residents share a strong "spirit of place," one that has developed over the past two centuries, since colonial days. It isn't something that towns usually put into words or write into official documents, at least before people such as the residents of Granby saw it as essential in their effort to preserve what is special about their town well into the future.

...Last year, the Granby Planning and Zoning Commission appointed a subcommittee to draft a new Plan of Conservation and Development for the town. (The state requires towns update plans every ten years.) The subcommittee reviewed Granby's 1993 plan, held public workshops and facilitated an agreement about things that made Granby special and reasons residents chose to live there. The result was a statement of the Town's Fundamental Values, a new 10 Year Vision for conservation, preservation and development, and recommendations for implementation.

...The plan begins with a "Statement of Granby's Fundamental Values" that is refreshingly easy to read and understand and highly evocative: "Agricultural: Our Town's rural character has its roots in...the small farm...Viewing the livestock, smelling manure, experiencing the changing scenery of the fields...is a treasure that will be missed if it is allowed to disappear. Residents: The residents of Granby apply a broad definition to the term "neighbor." They show concern and offer help to one

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another during times of sickness, grief, unemployment or other difficulty...Granby residents cherish the natural environment and are willing to work for its preservation. Wildlife: We look to the sky when we hear the chatter of the geese and we quickly spot the familiar V pattern of their flight. We stop and listen to the chant of the morning dove, the hoot of the owl and the melodies of the songbirds...We catch and release, turn rocks in search of salamanders and shriek at the sudden movement of a snake. We choose to make our home among the wildlife and we are the better for it."

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[Granby, Connecticut](#) lies in an area of rapidly expanding growth pushing out from Hartford and nearby Bradley International Airport. I drive through Granby along Rte 20 on my way to the airport, through farmland with centuries old stone houses as well as shopping centers. There is extensive forest to the west of Granby where the Litchfield Hills rise beyond the open lands of the Connecticut Valley. A thumb of Massachusetts juts down from Southwick to the north. [Old New-gate Prison](#), a colonial mineshaft and hellhole for Tory sympathizers during the Revolution, lies in East Granby on the way to the airport.



There is no question that growth and change are coming to this area. The difference may be that in Granby, a participatory process of community visioning has identified those key qualities that are essential to the character of this place and which residents and their municipal leaders have the opportunity to work to maintain over time. If Granby uses the plan to guide development, incorporates its values in local zoning and municipal regulations, and makes a commitment to investing in land protection to preserve its "Spirit of Place", it will be well served by the efforts that it has already made to define its community character.

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