

Outdoor Recreation and Open Space

Introduction

Open space and outdoor recreation are essential to Bristol's character, environmental and public health, and quality of life. The Town's parks, conservation lands, waterfront, trails, and recreational facilities provide opportunities for active and passive recreation while protecting natural resources, preserving scenic landscapes, supporting the local economy, and strengthening community resilience.

Bristol's location on a peninsula bordered by Narragansett Bay, Mount Hope Bay, the Kickemuit River, and Bristol Harbor provides exceptional access to the shoreline and distinguishes its recreation system from most Rhode Island communities. Residents enjoy a diverse network of neighborhood parks, athletic facilities, playgrounds, public beaches, conservation areas, trails, public shoreline access points, and waterfront destinations. State-owned resources, including Colt State Park and the East Bay Bike Path, are complemented by Mount Hope Farm, Blithewold Manor, Gardens and Arboretum, Audubon properties, and Bristol Land Conservation Trust preserves. Together, these public and private lands provide year-round recreational opportunities while protecting wildlife habitat, improving water quality, reducing flooding, preserving scenic views, and increasing resilience to climate change.

Since adoption of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan, the Town has continued to invest in parks, waterfront facilities, bicycle and pedestrian improvements, recreational programming, and environmental stewardship. At the same time, changing recreational preferences, an aging population, continued demand for youth sports, and the impacts of climate change highlight the need for continued investment and long-term stewardship.

This element builds on the 2016 Comprehensive Plan, the Open Space Plan, Harbor Management Plan, Tree Canopy Plan, Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan, and other planning efforts. It establishes goals, policies, and actions to protect open space, expand recreational opportunities, improve public access, and guide future investments.

Goals and Policies

Goal 1. Protect Bristol's open space, natural resources, and scenic landscapes.

Policies

A. Protect significant open space, wetlands, forests, agricultural lands, coastal resources, and other environmentally sensitive areas.

B. Expand and connect protected open space where it supports conservation, recreation, and climate resilience.

C. Support the preservation of working farms, coastal landscapes, and other undeveloped lands that contribute to Bristol's character.

D. Encourage redevelopment and reuse of previously developed or underutilized properties to reduce development pressure on open space and environmentally sensitive lands.

E. Work with land trusts, state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private landowners to protect and manage open space.

Goal 2. Maintain a high-quality system of parks and recreational facilities that serves residents of all ages and abilities.

Policies

A. Maintain and improve existing parks, athletic fields, playgrounds, trails, waterfront facilities, and other recreational amenities.

B. Provide a balance of active and passive recreational opportunities throughout the community.

C. Improve accessibility through ADA upgrades and universal design where practical.

D. Support recreational programs that promote healthy, year-round participation.

Goal 3. Preserve and improve public access to Bristol's shoreline, parks, and open spaces.

Policies

A. Maintain and improve public access to Bristol Harbor, Narragansett Bay, Mount Hope Bay, and the Kickemuit River.

B. Protect and enhance public shoreline rights-of-way and waterfront access points.

C. Improve connections between neighborhoods, schools, parks, downtown, and waterfront destinations through sidewalks, bicycle facilities, greenways, and trails.

D. Improve signage, wayfinding, bicycle parking, and other amenities that make recreational resources easier to find and use.

Goal 4. Steward Bristol's parks and open space system through planning, investment, partnerships, and responsible management to meet the community's current and future needs.

Policies

A. Coordinate open space and recreation planning with land use, natural resource protection, climate resilience, harbor management, and capital improvement planning.

B. Pursue grants, partnerships, conservation easements, and strategic land acquisition to protect open space, improve recreational facilities, and expand public access.

C. Prioritize maintenance, rehabilitation, and long-term management of existing parks and recreational facilities.

D. Periodically evaluate community recreation needs, facility conditions, and recreational trends to guide future investments and improvements.

Accomplishments Since 2016 Comprehensive Plan

Since adoption of the 2016 Comprehensive Plan, Bristol has completed or advanced numerous projects that have expanded recreational opportunities, improved recreational facilities, and strengthened stewardship of the Town's open space and waterfront resources.

- Replacement of aging playground equipment and improvements to neighborhood parks throughout the community.
- Conversion of the Town Common tennis courts to dedicated pickleball courts, reflecting changing recreational interests and increasing demand for pickleball.
- Completion of the Independence Park boat ramp replacement project, including a new ADA-accessible boat ramp, parking improvements, stormwater management, and related waterfront enhancements.
- Completion of the Bristol Tree Canopy Plan, establishing a long-term strategy for expanding tree canopy, improving shade in parks and public spaces, and strengthening climate resilience.
- Improvements to public shoreline access, waterfront facilities, and harbor infrastructure through implementation of the Harbor Management Plan.
- Expansion of bicycle and pedestrian improvements, including implementation of recommendations from the Bicycle Connectivity Study and improvements that strengthen connections between neighborhoods, parks, downtown, and the waterfront.
- Implementation of green infrastructure and watershed restoration projects, particularly within the Silver Creek watershed, improving water quality while enhancing recreational and environmental resources.
- Expansion of recreational programming offered by the Parks and Recreation Department for residents of all ages.

Parks and Recreation Department

The Bristol Parks and Recreation Department maintains the Town's parks, athletic fields, playgrounds, recreational facilities, waterfront amenities, and public beaches while providing year-round recreational programming for residents of all ages. Programs include youth sports, summer camp, fitness and wellness classes, seasonal activities, special events, and senior programming. The Department also coordinates facility reservations, athletic field scheduling, and community use of Town recreational facilities.

Open Space and Recreation Inventory

Bristol's recreation system includes Town-owned parks, athletic fields, playgrounds, conservation lands, beaches, trails, shoreline access points, and recreational facilities, as well as significant state-owned and privately owned open space. Maps NR5 and R1 and the accompanying inventory tables identify the location, ownership, and primary use of these resources.

The Town owns and maintains many of the community's parks, playgrounds, athletic fields, and recreational facilities. State-owned resources, including Colt State Park and the East Bay Bike Path, provide regionally significant recreational opportunities and attract residents and visitors from throughout Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts.

Privately owned properties also play an important role in Bristol's open space system. Mount Hope Farm, Blithewold Manor, Gardens and Arboretum, Audubon properties, and lands protected by the Bristol Land Conservation Trust provide opportunities for walking, nature observation, environmental education, agricultural programming, and public events.

Major recreational resources include:

- Community and neighborhood parks
- Athletic fields and courts
- Playgrounds
- School recreational facilities
- Walking trails and the East Bay Bike Path
- Waterfront parks and public beaches
- Public boat ramps, kayak launches, and fishing access
- Conservation lands and nature preserves
- Public shoreline rights-of-way and water access sites

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programming offered throughout the year. The Department also coordinates facility reservations, athletic field scheduling, and community use of Town recreational facilities, helping ensure that Bristol's parks and open spaces remain active community assets year-round.

Geographic Distribution of Recreation

Overall, Bristol has a well-distributed system of parks and recreational resources. Larger community facilities, including Colt State Park, the East Bay Bike Path, Bristol Town Beach and Sports Complex, and waterfront parks serve residents throughout the community, while neighborhood parks provide recreational opportunities within residential areas.

Bristol's compact development pattern and extensive shoreline provide residents with convenient access to parks, recreational facilities, conservation lands, and the waterfront. Overall, Bristol's parks and recreational resources are well distributed throughout the community. Future investments should focus on improving accessibility, strengthening connections between existing resources, enhancing waterfront access, and modernizing aging recreational facilities.

Public Input

Public input emphasized the importance of preserving Bristol's open space, waterfront, and recreational resources while expanding opportunities for recreation and environmental stewardship. Protection of wetlands, water quality, and wildlife habitat emerged as recurring priorities, particularly in the Silver Creek watershed and other flood-prone areas. Residents also supported continued protection of open space through acquisition, conservation, and redevelopment of previously developed properties to reduce development pressure on undeveloped land.

Improving public access to the shoreline was another consistent theme. Residents supported maintaining and improving public shoreline rights-of-way, preparing a comprehensive inventory and map of shoreline access points, improving wayfinding and signage, and expanding waterfront access while protecting sensitive coastal resources. Additional waterfront recommendations included enhanced docks and boating facilities, improved public seating and gathering areas, additional kayak and boating opportunities, and continued monitoring of Bristol Harbor water quality.

Participants also identified opportunities to improve Bristol's parks and recreation system through continued investment in athletic fields, playgrounds, trails, and recreational facilities. Frequently mentioned priorities included additional youth recreation opportunities, expanded indoor recreation, modernization of play equipment, improved bicycle and pedestrian connections, more benches and seating areas, increased tree planting, pollinator habitat, and improved maintenance of parks, public spaces, and shoreline access sites. Residents also

supported expanding environmental education through partnerships with local organizations and educational institutions to promote tree stewardship, native landscaping, fertilizer reduction, and water conservation.

The goals, policies, and implementation actions in this element respond to these priorities by emphasizing open space protection, shoreline access, environmental stewardship, park and trail improvements, climate resilience, and continued investment in Bristol's parks and recreational resources.

Condition of Existing Facilities

Overall, Bristol's parks and recreational facilities are well maintained. Future capital improvements should focus on replacing aging infrastructure, improving accessibility, modernizing recreational amenities, and maintaining waterfront facilities, trails, boardwalks, and other recreational infrastructure.

Climate Resilience

Many of Bristol's most heavily used recreational resources are located along the shoreline. Waterfront parks, public shoreline rights-of-way, boat ramps, beaches, and coastal trails are increasingly vulnerable to coastal flooding, erosion, storm surge, and sea level rise.

As improvements are planned, the Town should incorporate resilient design strategies that reduce future damage while maintaining public access. Strategies may include elevating vulnerable infrastructure, improving drainage, restoring natural shoreline features, and using nature-based approaches to stabilize coastal areas where appropriate.

Future land acquisition should also consider climate resilience by prioritizing properties that protect coastal buffers, flood storage areas, wildlife habitat, and future public shoreline access.

Open Space and Recreation Maps and Inventory

The following maps and inventory tables provide an overview of Bristol's open space and recreational resources. Together, they identify the location, ownership, and primary use of protected open space, parks, recreational facilities, public shoreline access sites, and other recreational resources throughout the community.

Map NR5 illustrates Bristol's protected open space network, including municipal parks, conservation lands, state-owned recreation areas, institutional open space, cemeteries, and privately protected lands.

Map R1 identifies parks, recreational facilities, trails, public shoreline access sites, and other recreational resources that support active and passive recreation throughout the community.

Map R1. Outdoor Recreation Facilities and Public Access **(revising)**

No.	Facility	Owner	Primary Recreation Use
1	Hopeworth Playground	Town of Bristol	Playground
2	Mt. Hope High School Sports Fields	Bristol Warren Regional School District	Athletic Fields
3	Sherman Avenue Recreation Area	Town of Bristol	Neighborhood Park
4	Bristol Harbor Boardwalk	Town of Bristol / Private	Waterfront Walkway
5	State Street Boat Launch	Town of Bristol	Boat Launch
6	Fales Road Public Shoreline Access	Town of Bristol	Shoreline Access
7	Guiteras Field	Town of Bristol	Athletic Field
8	Veterans' Memorial Field	Town of Bristol	Athletic Fields
9	Annawanscutt Fishing and Boating Access	State of Rhode Island	Fishing and Boat Access
10	Cedar Crest Playground	Town of Bristol	Playground
11	Walley Park	Town of Bristol	Neighborhood Park / Waterfront Access
12	Sowams Playground	Town of Bristol	Playground
13	Loafers Corner	Town of Bristol	Passive Recreation
14	Leahy Pond	Town of Bristol	Passive Recreation / Nature Area
15	Waypoysset Preserve / Bristol Narrows	Bristol Land Conservation Trust	Conservation / Passive Recreation
16	Tanyard Brook Park	Town of Bristol	Neighborhood Park
17	Hopeworth Road Site	Town of Bristol	Open Space / Recreation Area

No.	Facility	Owner	Primary Recreation Use
18	Aaron Avenue Public Shoreline Access	Town of Bristol	Shoreline Access
19	Bristol Town Common	Town of Bristol	Community Park / Pickleball / Passive Recreation
20	Bristol Town Farm	Town of Bristol	Open Space / Agriculture
21	Rockwell School Recreation Area	Bristol Warren Regional School District	School Recreation
22	Rockwell Park	Town of Bristol	Neighborhood Park / Playground
23	Independence Park	Town of Bristol	Waterfront Park / Boat Ramp / Events
24	Thomas Park / Silver Creek	Town of Bristol	Neighborhood Park / Passive Recreation
25	Mount Hope Farm	Private	Agriculture, Open Space, Events
26	Gibson Road Public Shoreline Access	Town of Bristol	Shoreline Access
27	Coelho Park	Town of Bristol	Neighborhood Park / Playground
28	East Bay Bike Path	State of Rhode Island	Regional Shared-Use Path
29	Paull Park / Ramos Field	Town of Bristol	Athletic Fields
30	Mount Hope Community Forest	Town of Bristol	Conservation Area / Trails / Passive Recreation

Shoreline Access

Bristol's extensive shoreline provides numerous opportunities for public water access and is a defining feature of the Town's recreation system. Public access is available through parks, beaches, boat ramps, marinas, public shoreline rights-of-way, and other waterfront access sites located throughout the community.

The Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) currently recognizes 34 designated public shoreline rights-of-way in Bristol, providing access to Narragansett Bay, Mount Hope Bay, the Kickemuit River, and Bristol Harbor. The Town's Harbor Management Plan identifies additional public shoreline access sites, reflecting Bristol's longstanding commitment to maintaining and expanding public access to the waterfront.

Public shoreline rights-of-way and other water access sites provide opportunities for walking, fishing, boating, kayaking, wildlife observation, and passive enjoyment of the shoreline. Continued maintenance, mapping, signage, and protection of these access points will help ensure long-term public access while preserving Bristol's coastal resources.

Planning Board Discussion Questions

- Does the inventory accurately reflect Bristol's parks, recreational facilities, and open space resources? Are there any significant resources or facilities that should be added?
- Overall, are Bristol's parks, recreational facilities and programs meeting the needs of the community? Are there facilities or programs that are currently lacking?
- Are there parks, athletic fields, waterfront facilities, or recreational amenities that should receive higher priority for future capital improvements?
- Do the goals, policies, and implementation actions reflect the community's priorities for parks, recreation, and open space over the next twenty years?