

# Open Space Adds Value to Your Community



Open spaces provide many benefits to communities:

- Fresh air
- Clean water
- Storm water control
- Shade
- Recreation
- Scenic quality
- Stress relief
- Wildlife habitat
- Sense of community
- Economic value

Neighborhoods and communities with sufficient amounts of quality open space are desirable places to live.

## Open Space Creates Urban Form

Open space is defined as public and private land or water purposely conserved for environmental and economic benefits. Open space may include agricultural uses, but it does not include intensive development, such as roads, commercial areas, and residential housing.

The more vibrant public places and open spaces there are in a community, the more desirable a community becomes. The more desirable a community becomes, the more likely it is for property values to increase. The need for adequate open space is often overlooked until it is too late. Understanding the value of open space helps communities maintain a balance between urban development and access to the benefits of open space.

## Urbanization and Livability

The Mississippi-Alabama Gulf Coast provides an excellent example of a rapidly growing area that must balance open space with urbanization. Pressures of development often lead to conflicting land uses. Decision-makers need information on the value of open spaces so

they can recognize their importance to local communities and use this knowledge to appropriately plan land use and economic development.

One recent study found 71 percent of respondents believed commercial development was the major growth issue in their community. Respondents thought this development threatened local identity and environmental quality. When asked about the value of open space, a majority of residents were willing to support preservation through an average single payment of \$163 per household added to their water bill. This payment came to \$19.4 million across the study area. Willingness to preserve open space depended on residents' age, income, duration of residency, and affiliation with a conservation group.

Another study demonstrated the economic value of open space through a price comparison of homes. Residents paid higher prices for houses with visual and physical access to waterfront open spaces (for example, along lakeshores and riverfronts). As proximity to waterfront increased per mile, the value of the home increased, holding all other factors (for example, size of home, amenities, and schools) constant. This resulted in a \$4,000 to \$25,000 increase in home value, depending on the neighborhood. In short, research suggests residents place a high level of importance on open space and waterfront preservation as a function of coastal community identity, sense of place, and individual well-being.

## The Value of Place-Making

Conversion of open spaces, such as wetlands and woodlands, to other land uses continues to be widespread, especially in places experiencing rapid population growth. In terms of forestland alone, approximately 10 million acres of land in the U.S. were developed from 1982 to 1997, and an additional 26 million acres are projected to be developed by 2030. Disturbances caused by sprawl cause ecosystems to function differently, resulting in changes in the system's capacity to provide goods, services, and resilience.

Green and blue areas bring character, charm, and definition to neighborhoods, whether urban, suburban, exurban (outside the suburbs), or rural. Open spaces also define the outer borders of an urban area, helping to contain sprawl. Open space provides a welcome contrast from dense urban development. Through place-making, or the deliberate shaping of place to facilitate social interaction, open space becomes a form of green infrastructure, influencing the form and character of a neighborhood, community, or metropolitan region.

## What You Can Do

Open spaces are socially valued public and private landscapes and waterscapes in a community. Talk to your neighbors about your community's identity. Discuss the importance of open space as it relates to quality of life, as well as collective needs and opportunities. The conversation should focus on immediate versus future needs, including the production of economic capital versus cultural and environmental capital.

Ask community members how they feel about the pace and intensity of development. Ask if parents desire more open places for their children to play and experience nature. Find out if people think there is enough open space, if it is sufficiently dispersed relative to where residents live, and if it is of acceptable quality.

After hearing from the community, speak with elected officials and city planners. Use social media and open channels of communication to bring the issue to the table. Remind decision-makers of the importance of open space to the community. Ask them to seriously consider increasing open space preservation mechanisms such as conservation easements, zoning, landscape/tree ordinances, green communities, land banking, and green corridors. Planning is a necessity if the community wants open space.



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