

OPEN SPACE PLAN FOR OLD SAYBROOK, CONNECTICUT  
... and other recommendations for environmental improvement

Presented  
to the  
Planning Commission  
and to  
The Town of Old Saybrook  
by the  
Conservation Commission  
November 3, 1969

## OPEN SPACE PLAN FOR OLD SAYBROOK

### WHY THIS PLAN IS BEING PRESENTED ...

The proposals offered here by the Old Saybrook Conservation Commission comprise a sensible set of recommendations by a group of reasonable people whose loyalties lie with the whole Town, not with any one part of it. They have only the respect of this and future generations to gain; their principal hope and expectation is to keep Old Saybrook as livable as possible now and in the future.

Our proposals may, in the short view, appear to run counter to some ill-defined notions about "progress" or the outdated and discredited belief that "science" can repair the damage such "progress" has incurred. But in the longer view, history and science can and do indicate that strenuous efforts and perhaps even a measure of self-denial are called for before more irreparable damage is done to our environment through thoughtless misuse and deliberate exploitation alike.

There is an added dimension. We in Old Saybrook belong to a larger physical environment, just as we are part of a larger social and political one. We are accountable for this small piece of our planet home. "Never send to know," said John Donne, "for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." The proposals we adopt here will affect us, our neighbors, our children, and our children's children. No town, any more than a man, is an island. We claim no magical gift for foretelling the future, but what we do know will be made public. We are hopeful that the environment of Old Saybrook can and will be saved by prompt community action as the result of public knowledge.

While we may not know how to predict precisely the effect of all current uses of our natural resources, we do know that destroying water-retaining plant life leads to erosion and flooding; that pollution of a stream not only destroys the plant and animal life in it but breaks the food chain on which animals far beyond the immediate area depend. Dredging or filling a few feet of salt marsh can easily have the same effect or worse, for once destroyed such terrain cannot be restored by man.

Only half, at most, of the original acreage of the salt marsh along our Connecticut shores remains more or less intact. Now its teeming life is threatened, its future is uncertain. Will this and our other land and water resources be destroyed by private speculators or by public default, or will good planning and community responsibility for the environment prevail?

Both the certainties and the uncertainties, then, bespeak care, caution, restraint. The overwhelming conviction of the Conservation Commission is that all the areas to be proposed as permanent open space, assuring marsh and watershed protection, are vital to Old Saybrook. These open areas have a great deal to do with the life of the Town, both the literal survival of the animal and plant life we so often take for granted and the quality of the lives of the people who reside, work, and play here.

The Commission believes that the facts, once understood by the Town, will argue in favor of the conservation measures which we herewith respectfully submit for your consideration.

### WHAT IS OPEN SPACE?

In the plan, we recommend the preservation of three types of open space and make further suggestions for protecting and enhancing the environment of Old Saybrook. Specific areas will be suggested and justifications will be made for preserving them as open space in terms of maintaining a healthful and pleasant environment.

In its broadest sense, "open space" is all land on which there is no house, building, garage, gasoline station, parking lot, marina, etc. It includes farmlands, woodlands, wetlands, beaches, cemeteries, parks, playgrounds. In this report we are concerned with all kinds of open space. Some of the areas to be recommended will offer future sites for active recreation; most will provide places for "passive" recreation--walking, bird-watching, viewing woods and streams, studying the wildlife of the marshes. All of the areas are important for conservation of natural and scenic resources--our water, our wildlife, our soil, and our own health and happiness.

## I. SALT WATER MARSHES

The Conservation Commission recommends that all tidal marshes be designated as permanent open space in the Town Plan, and that the Town pass an ordinance prohibiting the dredging, filling, or polluting of any tidal wetlands.

Why do we want to save the marshes as they are? Certainly, they are not suitable for ball parks or playgrounds. Filled, they could be used for cottage sites, parking lots, or gasoline stations. Dredged, they could offer areas for marinas and docking facilities.

The answer is that our tidal marshes provide the beauty that makes Old Saybrook distinctive--a town we like to live in, and a town visitors come to enjoy. The value of our own homes is greater because of our marshes; our businesses make higher profits because of them.

There are other, related reasons that the marshes should not be dredged or filled. Marshlands are the spawning and nursery grounds for fish. They provide breeding and nesting areas for many kinds of waterfowl, birds, animals, shellfish. Fishing for sport depends on the marshes; the marine fish industry depends on them. They also provide a buffer against violent storms and high tides, acting as a sponge to soak up and retain flood waters--thus protecting homes and cottages.

Moreover, in Old Saybrook, many of our tidal marshes are near beaches where people swim. The development of these marshes as marinas can result in high pollution of the tidal rivers which flow into the sound, making the nearby beaches unsafe for swimming.

Only time and tide can create a marsh. Geologists estimate that the process takes 5,000 years. Each acre is irreplaceable within our lifetime and within the lifetimes of hundreds of generations unborn. Yet a sizable marsh can be destroyed in a few days of dredging and filling.

Below is a list of the salt water marshes in Old Saybrook. Some of these are in immediate danger of filling and dredging to accommodate marinas, docking facilities, and other forms of development. Marshes known to be endangered as of November, 1969, are indicated so that the Town can act to protect them.

1. Ayers Point marsh. This is endangered by a plan to dredge Hyde Point Creek and fill marshland for elaborate docking facilities.
2. Oyster River marsh. This is endangered by: (a) a plan to develop a commercial marina north of Oyster River bridge; (b) the limited commercial zoning of the east side of river below bridge; (c) the planned relocation of Oyster River bridge.
3. Ragged Rock Creek marsh. This may be endangered by a proposal to locate a new Town dump in area north of railroad tracks near the headwaters of the creek. Because of possible pollution of the marsh from ground water from a dump, an expert hydrology report should be obtained before this land is acquired.
4. Beamon Creek marsh
5. Fenwood marsh
6. Hagar-Mud Creek marsh
7. Back River marsh
8. Plum Bank marsh
9. Smaller tidal marshes in areas of Chalker Beach, Fenwick, Saybrook Point, South and North Coves, Ferry Point, Otter Cove.

The State of Connecticut owns 462 acres of tidal marshland in Old Saybrook. The rest--some 1200 acres--is owned by individuals. These marshes are of little commercial value to the owner unless they are filled or dredged and then developed. But they are highly valuable to all the people of Old Saybrook just the way they are. For this reason, the Commission will also urge the Town to buy marshland. In addition, the Commission will work with individual marsh owners to help them preserve their marshes under existing Connecticut legislation and through other arrangements.

## II. STREAMS AND WATERSHEDS

The Conservation Commission recommends the protection of all streams and their watersheds through the following measures: (1) a Town ordinance against draining, diverting, and polluting streams; (2) a Town ordinance against septic tanks and leaching fields within 50 feet of streams; (3) a Town ordinance against erecting structures, destroying timber or other vegetation within 50 feet of streams.

The people of Old Saybrook need and want clean water flowing in their streams--Oyster River, Back River, Plum Bank, Ragged Rock Creek, to mention a few. Clean water is essential to the wildlife in the streams. And it is essential that the water discharged by these streams near swimming areas be pure. Moreover, the small streams of Old Saybrook, the ponds and lakes, contribute to the pleasant setting for living that makes our town what it is. If streams are polluted, ponds and lakes destroyed, the entire community suffers.

A stream, of course, is only as clean as the water that flows into it. Water purifies as it seeps through the ground or flows on top of it--given distance. But a septic tank or leaching field located too close to a stream can allow effluent to seep into the flowing stream. It can pollute water downstream in other areas. Draining or diverting a stream deprives those downstream of its use and enjoyment. Cutting timber or destroying vegetation at the stream side invites erosion, reduces the natural filtering capacity of the bank, and results in a stream shorn of its natural beauty.

All of the streams in Old Saybrook are small. The largest is Oyster River. Its watershed begins well up beyond the Turnpike and includes diverse branches and ponds. Below is a list of our principal streams:

1. Cold Spring Brook
2. Hagar Creek-Mud Creek
3. Oyster River (flows from Fishing Brook, other contributory branches, Crystal Lake, Chalker's Millpond and Ingham Ponds)
4. Back River
5. Plum Bank Creek
6. Beamon Creek
7. Ragged Rock Creek
8. Hyde Point Creek
9. Small streams in Fenwick, Fenwood, South and North Cove, and Otter Cove areas.

The Commission urges that the Town act to obtain Town easements on land for open space bordering the sides of streams, lakes, and ponds for a distance of at least 50 feet from the water. This would assure the owner of enjoyment and proprietary control of the land, relieve him of a tax burden for land that he could not build on, and at the same time provide narrow belts and patches of green throughout the Town. Land bordering on Fishing Brook, one of the most scenic streams in Old Saybrook, is suggested as a first priority.

### III. SPECIAL OPEN SPACE AREAS

The Commission also recommends designation in the Town Plan of certain special areas as permanent open space. These areas include some of special scenic value to the entire community; areas of open space in built-up and crowded neighborhoods; areas of open space in all new subdivisions. Specific recommendations follow.

(A) Certain ridges, high points, ponds, wooded areas offer scenic pleasure to all who view them. Rocky hills and ledges are not suitable for any intensive development; they are useful as open space areas for wildlife and for certain recreational purposes. The Commission recommends that the Town designate the following high areas as open space and, through municipal regulations, greatly limit development in them:

1. Beacon Hill
2. Jacob's Peak
3. Prospect Hill
4. Ferry Hill
5. Fox Hill
6. High points above Pequot Swamp

It is also recommended that the Town seek to acquire some of this high area as permanent open space, and to acquire Chalker's Pond for its special scenic value.

Note: Restricting development on high areas will also conserve woodlands. With the cutting of "Town Woods" (a privately owned area) on the Old Route 9, one favorite woodland of Old Saybrook residents has been lost to bulldozers. This short stretch of woods from Bokum Road to the Middlesex Turnpike had previously offered the most satisfying views to be found in the Town during the fall foliage or early on a snowy evening. Without specific plans for conserving woodlands, Old Saybrook can be stripped bare of its trees.

(B) Many areas in Old Saybrook are built up to the point where they have no open space left.

These include beach areas where cottages are on substandard lots--that is, lots too small for proper sewage disposal. Yet the "feeling" of open space is offered by the expanse of beach and water. The Commission recommends that the Town look forward to relieving congestion

in such areas as Saybrook Manor, Cornfield Point, Chalker Beach by enacting and enforcing tighter restrictions against rebuilding, remodeling, and enlarging dwellings on substandard lots.

Other crowded areas are not near beaches and neither have, nor "have the feeling of," open space. Of these, Cornfield Park is the most crowded. The Commission strongly recommends that the Town immediately secure open space in Cornfield Park through condemnation and purchase.

(C) Present subdivision regulations are ambiguous as to requirements for open space and requirements for recreational space. Frequently the area set aside by developers as open space is not fit for recreation.

The Commission recommends that subdividers be required to set aside adequate land suitable for playground-type recreation. Marshland, swamp, ponds, streams, rock ledges within the developed area should remain undisturbed as open space. These are not to be considered as part of the land set aside for recreational purposes.

OTHER WAYS TO IMPROVE THE ENVIRONMENT--LAND, AIR, WATER

Other steps need to be taken by the Town to protect and enhance the environment.

1. Each year, Old Saybrook loses more trees as one elm after another succumbs to Dutch elm disease and must be removed. We recommend a tree-planting program for Main Street and Route 1, with the program extended to other streets if possible.

2. The State has recently purchased the New Haven Railroad right-of-way from Old Saybrook to Middletown. We recommend that the Town suggest to the State that it convert the right-of-way in Old Saybrook to a walking-bicycling trail.

3. Litter lines the sides of Route 1, the main artery through Old Saybrook. With each new drive-in, the litter grows. It is blown by the wind and cast by drive-in customers in streets and lawns throughout the town. We recommend that the Town (1) set up and enforce stricter ordinances on littering; (2) require all drive-ins to police their own grounds and the curbs adjoining them for litter every hour during their hours of business; (3) require all future drive-ins to submit plans for control of litter and have them approved before receiving building permits.

4. The use of pesticides is coming under sharp scrutiny throughout the country. Michigan and Arizona have banned those that are the most dangerous and other states are considering action. As all chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides are known to be poisonous to both wildlife and people, we recommend that the Town not use them when dusting or spraying. These specifically include DDT, dieldrin, aldrin, endrin, heptachlor, chlordane, and lindane. This type of pesticide persists and accumulates in the environment. Upon entering the food chain via lower organisms, such as plankton, it travels from host to host, increasing its concentration at each level. With each additional DDT or similar spraying, our environment becomes more polluted.

5. State regulations against pollution of the air from open burning are ineffective unless enforced by local authorities. Under State regulations, permits are required for open burning by residents--except in the case of open burning of leaves and brush in towns where no provision is made for their collection. However, during "air pollution alert" declared by the State Commissioner of Health, this type--and almost all types of open burning, with or without a permit--must cease.

We recommend that the Town set up means to enforce the State's Open Burning Regulations; and that the local health officer determine on each occasion of an "air pollution alert" whether or not there should be burning at the Town dump.

6. Sanitation looms as Old Saybrook's most immediate problem. A new town dump is only a temporary solution to garbage disposal; septic tanks offer a growing threat of pollution from sewage. It may be that these two problems can only be solved satisfactorily through a Town (or regional) incinerator and through a sewer system. We recommend that solutions to these problems be written into the plan for Old Saybrook's future.

## IN CONCLUSION

The recommendations presented amplify and spell out the general plan for conservation offered by the Conservation Commission in November, 1967. This revision takes into account new knowledge of the environment and new developments in the life of the Town.

We consider it to be a realistic plan--realistic in the sense that our common future depends on what steps we take now to guarantee a suitable environment. We repeat: It calls for a measure of self-denial, some deferring of immediate gain by individuals or by the Town as a whole--just as do the education of our children and the enforcement of the law--however convenient it might now seem to dig, to fill, to build, to "progress" without a thought for the generations which will reap our mistakes. But we believe that Old Saybrook is ready to think ahead in new ways, to consider the consequences of our stewardship. One way or the other, directly or indirectly, we will all share in those consequences.

Adopted by the Conservation Commission

November 3, 1969

### Members of Commission:

Garrison N. Valentine, Chairman  
Mary S. Brodinsky  
Herbert W. Byington, Jr.  
Christian Fenger  
James T. Pearson, Sr.  
Mrs. Robert H. Sherwood  
Richard D. Tietjen