

INSIGHTS INSIDER



Protected Land in Worcester County

Bureau Brief Series on Worcester County Insights April 2026

Although Massachusetts is the **third most densely populated state** in the United States, it has a significant amount of protected green space for its more than seven million residents: **more than a quarter of its total acreage is considered “protected land.”**

The same applies to Worcester County—more than a quarter of its total acreage (nearly 270,000 acres) is protected. Of that, **more than half is fully publicly accessible**, according to the Massachusetts GIS (MassGIS) Protected and Recreational Open Space data set.

This Insights Insider explores the protected land in Worcester County: publicly accessible land, open space, and how the amount of protected land has changed over time.



The Research Bureau



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Where is it?

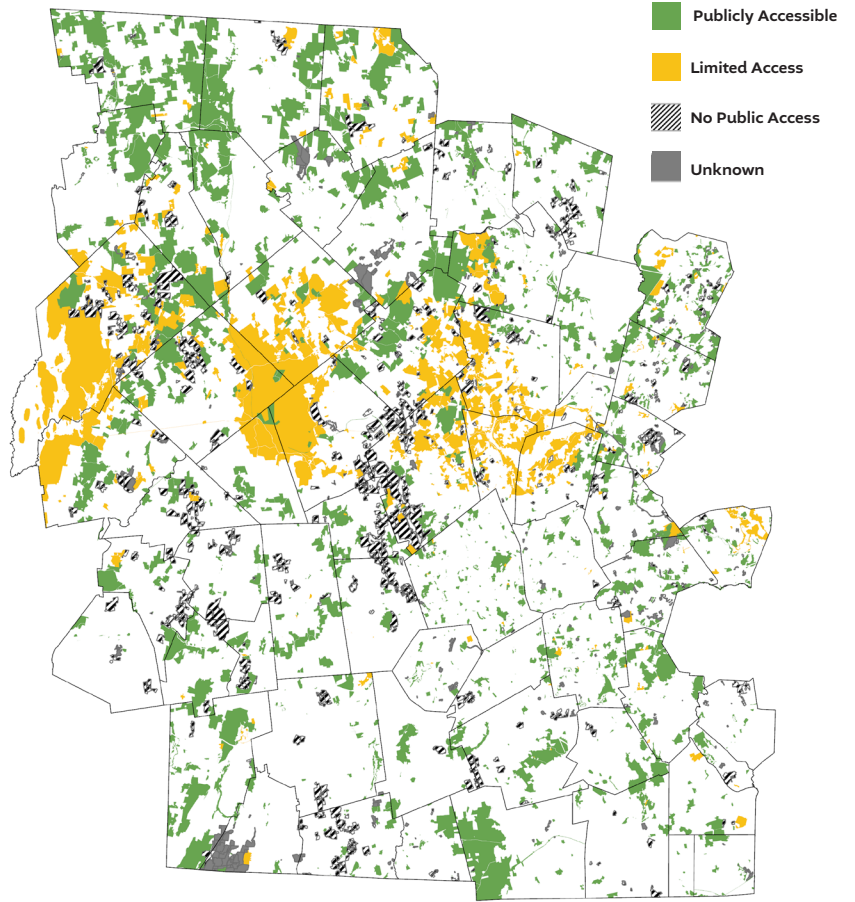
Protected land is spread throughout the county, with most concentrated in the northern and western parts of the county, especially around the Quabbin Reservoir. **Map 1** shows the extent of land protected “in perpetuity” across the county (with municipal outlines shown for reference).

According to MassGIS, “land is considered protected in perpetuity if it is owned by a town’s conservation commission, or sometimes by the water department; if a town has a conservation restriction on the property in perpetuity; if it is owned by one of the state’s conservation agencies [...]; if it is owned by a non-profit land trust; or if the town received federal or state assistance for the purchase or improvement of the property.”

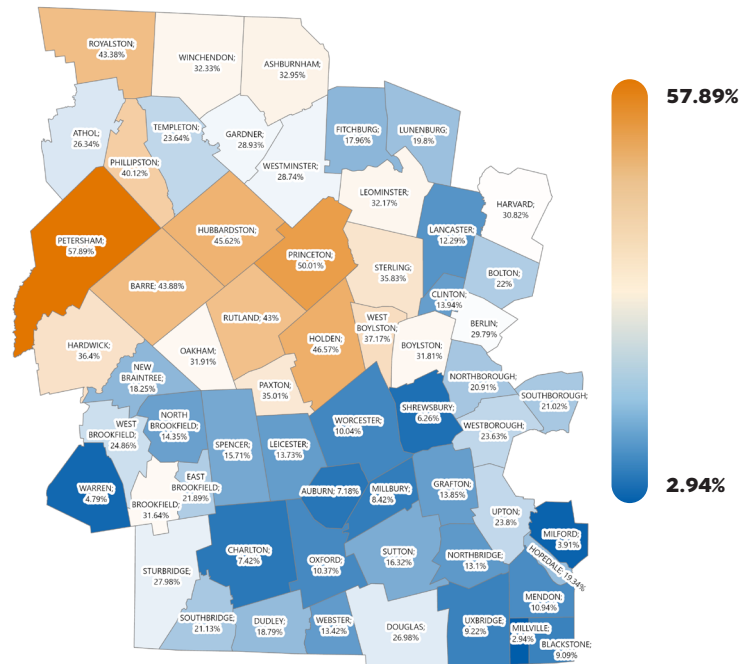
A much smaller percentage of land is protected in other ways. For example, cemeteries and playgrounds are also protected land, but as they are protected through other means they are not included in Maps 1, 2, or 3 (**Map 4** in the Appendix shows where these 9,352 acres are located).

MassGIS also includes data, where known, on the public accessibility of land in Worcester County. In addition to showing the extent of protected land in Worcester County, **Map 1** shows the public accessibility of land in Worcester County, where known by MassGIS. There are four classifications. First, “**publicly accessible**” shows land that is just that. “**Limited access**” is generally land that is publicly accessible, but may require some kind of membership. “**No public access**” represents watersheds or other land where there is no public access. Finally, “**unknown**” simply represents land that is protected but without classification data.

MAP 1 *Publicly Accessible Land in Worcester County*



MAP 2 *Percent of Total Acreage that is Protected (2025)*



Open Space Acreage by Community

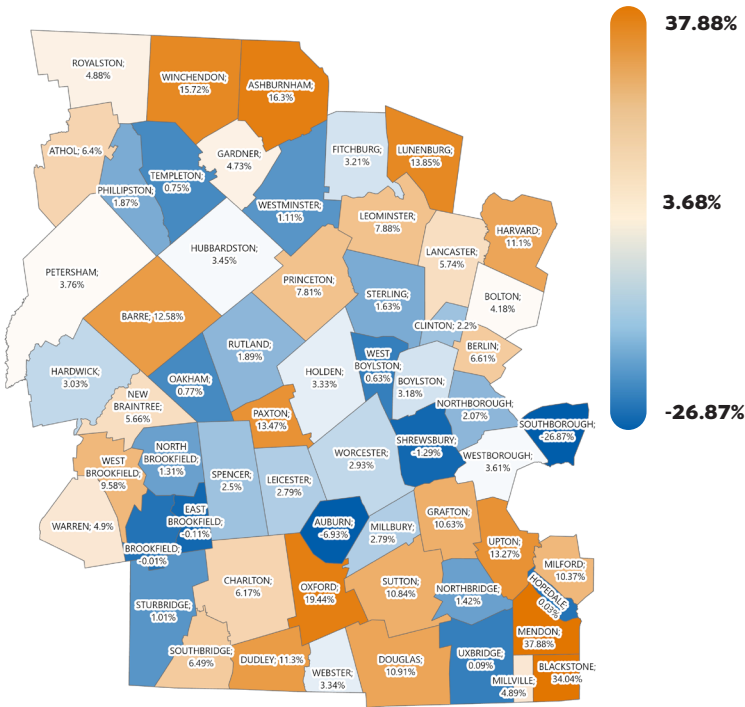
The amount of acreage dedicated to protected land in communities in the northwestern part of the county is striking. **One community, Petersham, has more than 50% of its acreage dedicated to open space**, by far the most in the county. Much of that is dedicated to the Quabbin Reservoir within its borders.

Map 2 shows the percentage of total acreage in 2025 dedicated to perpetually protected open space across each municipality in the county. Colors range from blue to orange. The more orange a municipality is, the more total protected acreage it has compared to the other communities.

Data Sources

Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. (2026, February). *2025 Massachusetts Climate Report Card—Natural & Working Lands* | Mass.gov. Retrieved March 16, 2026, from <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/2025-massachusetts-climate-report-card-natural-working-lands-greater-worcester-community-foundation>. (2024). *Community Life: Protected Land. Worcester County Insights*. Retrieved March 4, 2026, from <http://worcestercountyinsights.org/community-life/protected-land>
 Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. *Massachusetts Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2025 and 2030* (p. 127). (2022, June). <https://www.mass.gov/doc/clean-energy-and-climate-plan-for-2025-and-2030/download>

MAP 3 *Percentage Change in the Number of Protected Acres between 2017 and 2025*



Growth Since 2017

Between 2017 and 2025, the amount of land protected in Worcester County has grown by 5.46% (from 255,571 to 269,527), while in Massachusetts it has grown by 5.69% (from 1,348,548 to 1,425,339). The median number of acres added across Worcester County’s 60 communities was 120.17—meaning about half the communities saw more growth and half saw less.

The greatest amount of protected land growth was in Barre, which added more than 1,400 acres to its total perpetually protected open space; however, while significant, that represented a growth of 12.58% of its existing total in 2017. The largest percentage change was in Mendon, which added 345.88 acres, equivalent to a growth of 37.88%, or an additional 3% of its acreage dedicated to protected space.

The largest decrease was in Southborough, with a 26.87% decrease, equivalent 767 of its acres, or 7.7% of its total land acreage. Map 3 shows these changes, with the same blue to orange scheme as Map 2—the more orange a community, the greater its percentage growth in acres. Communities in the southeastern part of the county saw some of the largest shifts, though in these communities, where the amount of protected acres are small compared to the northwest, small additions can mean big growth percentages.

Photos in this report were taken in Worcester County by Kristin Foresto and are courtesy of Mass Audubon.



Nonprofit Insights from Greater Worcester Community Foundation

The Foundation’s **Worcester County Green Fund** is a new initiative dedicated to supporting local climate action efforts across the region.

Through the fund, land trusts have gained access to resources to build their organizational capacity, and Mass Audubon is conducting research to explore opportunities to form a countywide climate coalition. These two nonprofit groups are leaders in land preservation and environmental stewardship.

LAND TRUSTS

There are 22 land trusts that serve Worcester County, including **Greater Worcester Land Trust** which serves Worcester and surrounding towns.

Land trusts work to protect forests, waterways and



wildlife habitats for the benefit of the community. Many offer opportunities to connect residents to the land through education, trails and volunteer opportunities.

MASS AUDUBON

Mass Audubon works to conserve wildlife habitat, protect water and connect people with nature. Through its wildlife sanctuaries, land stewardship and science-based advocacy, Mass Audubon protects thousands of acres of forests, wetlands and meadows while providing trails, education programs and hands-on learning for all ages.

Mass Audubon oversees **Broad Meadow Brook Conservation Center and Wildlife Sanctuary** in Worcester, which is the largest urban wildlife sanctuary in New England.

Massachusetts Executive Office of Technology Services and Security, MassGIS (Bureau of Geographic Information). (2025, October). *MassGIS Data: Protected and Recreational OpenSpace* | Mass.gov. MassGIS Data Layers. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massgis-data-protected-and-recreational-openspace>
 Mendon Land Use Committee. (2025). *Mendon Open Space and Recreation Plan, 2023-2033*. Town of Mendon. <https://www.mendonma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/351/Mendon-Open-Space-Recreation-Plan-2023-2033-PDF>
 Surpassing Our Land Protection Goal of 10,000 Acres Ahead of Schedule. (2025, August). *Mass Audubon*. Retrieved March 16, 2026, from <https://www.massaudubon.org/news/latest/surpassing-our-land-protection-goal-of-10-000-acres-ahead-of-schedule>

Finally, **Figure 1** looks at the number of acres in 2017 and 2025 in Worcester County Insights' ten sample communities. Each has seen some growth in the past decade, with Southbridge seeing the largest percentage change in its existing space. Figure 1 includes the percentage of lands in 2025 classified specifically as publicly accessible recreation and conservation land (classified as land that has activities that are facility based, or non-facility based, respectively).

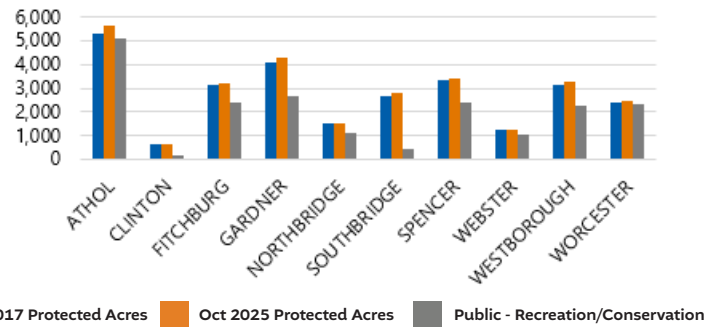
What has caused the growth since 2017? While difficult to pinpoint exactly why in each community, **a few broad trends at the state level** in the intervening years have impacted open space protection.

In 2021, the Governor signed into law "An Act Creating a Next-Generation Roadmap for Massachusetts Climate Policy," which led to the subsequent creation in 2022 of the **Massachusetts Clean Energy and Climate Plan for 2025/2050** (2025/2050 CECP). That plan recognized the important role that "natural and working lands" can play in helping Massachusetts achieve net zero emissions by 2050 (Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs 2022).

Because of that recognition, "the Commonwealth [committed] through state conservation efforts, to the **goal of increasing permanent conservation of undeveloped land and water (including wetlands) in Massachusetts to at least 28% and 30% by 2025 and 2030, respectively**" which equates to an additional 63,400 and then 167,000 acres (91). **Massachusetts met and exceeded the 2025 goal**, reaching 28.1% of its total acreage permanently protected in 2023, 28.2% in 2024, and 28.4% in 2025, showing steady growth – but the pace of that growth "will need to pick up significantly to meet 2030 ... targets" (Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs 2026). Both increases and decreases could also be due to changes in the data and classifications available to MassGIS over time.

FIG 1 Perpetually Protected Acres, Selected Communities, 2017 to 2025

includes fully publicly accessible recreation and conservation land as a comparison.



Conclusion

Individually, **towns like Mendon have regularly adopted open space plans to guide development and conservation efforts.** Indeed, Mendon's 2023-2033 Open Space and Recreation Plan shows a concerted effort to increase this type of open space (Mendon 2025). Private organizations, such as Mass Audubon, have also dedicated themselves to increasing the amount of protected acres across the state. For example, in 2021, Mass Audubon, as part of its Action Agenda, set itself a goal to work with partners "to protect 10,000 acres of land in Massachusetts over the next five years," which it exceeded (Mass Audubon 2025). The combined efforts of the state, municipalities, public, and private organizations together have served to increase the amount of protected land across the Commonwealth in the last decade.

Ultimately, more than 25% of Worcester County's 1,010,659 acres is perpetually protected land, and nearly 14% of those acres are fully publicly accessible for recreation, conservation, or both. While much of that land is concentrated in the northwestern part of the county, **with 305.85 perpetually protected acres for every 1,000 people in Worcester County, residents are bound to find somewhere they can enjoy nature.** To learn more about Worcester County's protected land, in addition to many other data points, head over to worcestercountyinsights.org.



HOW TO HELP

Donate Money: Financial contributions support land protection, stewardship, trail maintenance and the long-term care of conserved properties.

Volunteer: Many organizations rely on volunteers for land stewardship, trail work, monitoring and community programs.

Give Through GWCF: Contributions to the Foundation's Worcester County Green Fund support local nonprofits working on environmental protection and climate resilience.

Learn More: Visit worcestercountyinsights.org and greaterworcester.org for more information about land conservation in Worcester County.

Appendix

MAP 4 *Land that is Not Protected “in Perpetuity”
but through Other Means*
(for example, cemeteries and playgrounds)

