

Island remains 60 percent open, study finds

By Matt Sheley
Daily News staff

Despite the large-scale development that seems to have inundated Aquidneck Island during the past 20 years, nearly 60 percent of the island remains open space.

That's according to the first public study of its kind, released Tuesday by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission. Nearly half of all the open space on the island — 6,484 acres — is in the town of Portsmouth, with Newport and Middletown combining for the remaining 7,139 acres.

Those were some of the highlights contained in the 26-page Aquidneck Island Open Space Mapping report from the nonprofit organization, which performed a yearlong study with financial assistance provided by the van Beuren Char-

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To check out the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission's Open Space Mapping project and related reports, go to aquidneckplanning.org/openspace.cfm. Inquiries can also be directed to Chris Witt, the commission's director of planning and communications, at 845-9299 or chris@aquidneckplanning.org.

itable Foundation.

The goal of the study was to provide a tool to local municipalities to use in evaluating future development and recreational opportunities as well as habitat and watershed protec-

tion, said Chris Witt, director of planning and communications for the commission. Witt served as the lead on the open space mapping project.

"It was interesting to see how much agricultural space there still is on the island," Witt said Tuesday. "Also, it was somewhat surprising how limited the public recreational space is. While the nature preserves and Sachuest Point (National Wildlife Refuge in Middletown) could count towards the total, other than Fort Adams and Brenton (Point) State Park (in Newport), there really aren't any major protected parks."

As part of the study, a three-tier "threat assessment" was performed on the undeveloped parcels to gauge how vulnerable each site was to development. Property classified as "1"

OPEN A5



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Fort Adams State Park, known for hosting Civil War re-enactments and folk and jazz festivals, among other events, is one of the better-known open spaces on Aquidneck Island. A recent study by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission found that nearly 60 percent of the island remains open space, although much of that land is considered at risk for development.



Daily News file photos

Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge in Middletown, known for its scenic waterfront walking trails and various animal sightings, such as this young buck seen in December, is among the better-known open spaces on Aquidneck Island.

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Continued from A3

is considered the least susceptible to development and "3" the most at risk.

The report found a majority of the open space on the island is in category "3," but Witt said the classification of each site was not included in the public report due to the sensitive nature of some of the information, including private ownership. However, Witt said a detailed map and breakdown was presented to each of the municipalities for reference purposes.

For the study, open space was defined as "an area of land or water that is in its natural state, used for agriculture, or free from intensive development for recreational, residential, commercial, industrial or institutional use."

A variety of properties fall under that classification, including those used for cemeteries, farming, historic resources, natural areas, recreation, schools and utilities as well as vacant land and water resources, such as large ponds and reservoirs.

Consideration also was giv-

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director of planning and communications for the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission

en to land defined as "limited development," with 5 percent or less taken up by structures and impervious surfaces. The category of "special" was employed to cover parcels that did not fit into any other subset, such as the Old Colony rail line along the west side of the island and the Col. Robert F. Wood Airpark in Middletown.

An advisory committee helped establish the project's goals and review the accuracy of the compiled maps and data.

"We had a lot of input and I know there's been a lot of interest in the report," Witt said. "My sense is it's going to be a really useful tool and gives the communities more of a bird's

eye view of open space on the island."

All told, Aquidneck Island encompasses approximately 24,200 acres. Originally, Prudence Island and other outlying islands in Portsmouth were not going to be included in the report, but Witt said when those areas were added to the study, the open space total increased by 3,664 acres to 17,287 acres.

Agricultural uses occupied the largest amount of open space at 4,319 acres, according to the report, followed by limited development at 2,210 acres and recreation at 1,868 acres.

"It's an important document," said Tina Dolen, executive director of planning commission. "It helps highlight what a unique place the island is and how much open space is still here."

At the same time, Dolen said it also spotlighted the diversity of the island and its open spaces.

"Other than downtown Newport, where it's pretty densely developed, everywhere you look, there's open space," Dolen said. "In one place, there might be rock walls and fields and others there's forest, farms and open space."

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