

Town Commons Preservation Initiative
Massachusetts Department of
Environmental Management

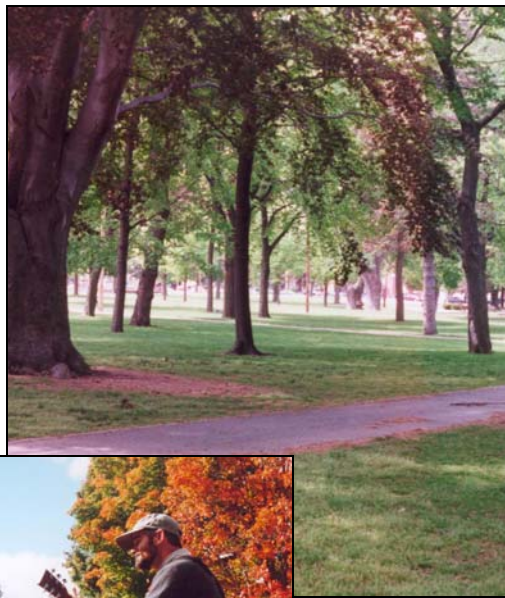
Completed January 2002

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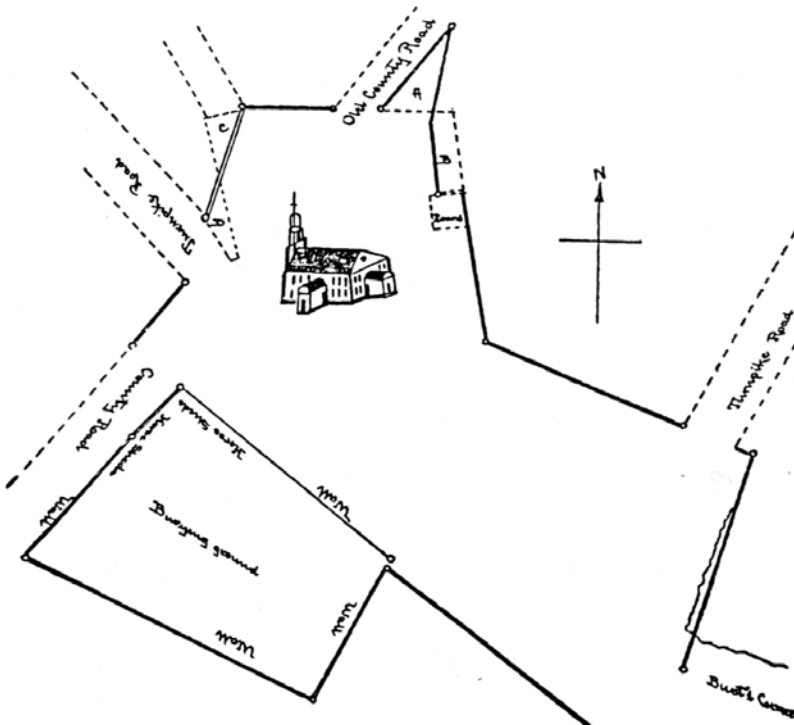
Town commons play a significant and central role in the history and contemporary life of communities across Massachusetts. Yet they are threatened by overuse, dying trees, overhead utilities, widened roads, and inadequate maintenance.

WCA led a team of ten professionals to evaluate 26 town commons and city parks. Through site reconnaissance, historic research, and public forums, preservation priorities began to emerge. The communities subsequently used this information to articulate preservation plans for their commons.

WCA then compiled the observations and research in a comprehensive citizen guidebook, *Common Wealth*, which summarizes the history of town commons in Massachusetts, identifies the key threats to them, and outlines a process by which communities can establish a preservation and maintenance master plan.



A sense of place. Due to their central location and generally open design, town commons are a favorite location for cultural, spiritual and political events. A community's identity and historic place in time are embodied in the common.



Historic research reveals a common's significance. Town commons evolved in a number of ways. Discovering the unique history of each common—meetinghouse lot, militia training ground, common agricultural land, cemetery or roadway—will provide guidelines for a preservation plan.

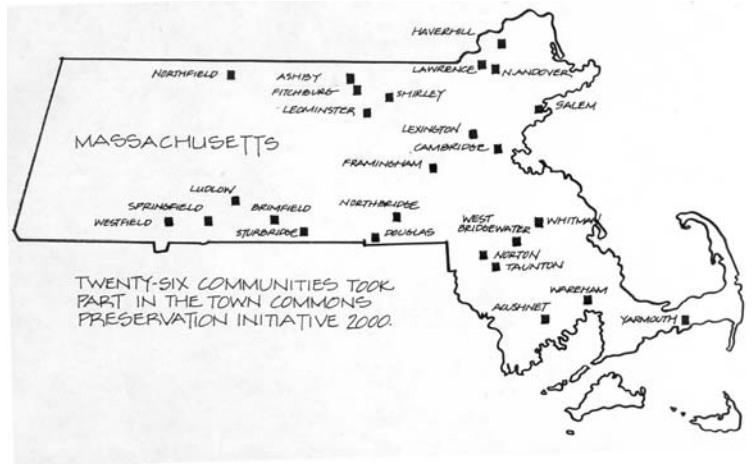


Contemporary challenges undermine the common's integrity. Incremental fragmentation, compacted soils, intensive and inappropriate uses, loss of knowledgeable care-taking, lack of overall design and changes in the surrounding physical and political context threaten the health and vitality of the common.

Site visits with town personnel provided key insights. WCA's consulting team met on-site to hear local concerns and assess current conditions at 26 town commons and parks.



Town Common Preservation Initiative, cont.



Public involvement is key. Lively community forums, facilitated by the team, generated a good understanding of the issues facing each common. Participants then "voted" their priority concerns and visions for the common. Broad-based participation lays the groundwork for public support of future improvements.



Tips for Effective Facilitation

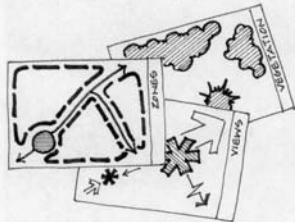
Running a public meeting can be exciting and productive. It can also be intimidating to those who have not done it before. The best person to run a meeting is someone who has good positive energy, who engages people readily, who can summarize quickly, who is strong enough to curb dominant or negative voices, and who is not necessarily identified with any one opinion or position. The following checklist provides a few basic instructions for how to run an effective public meeting.

- **Have people sign in.** A prepared sign-in sheet is helpful. Include a place for people to identify affiliations (committees, agencies, organizations, clubs), as well as contact information (address and phone number) and areas of interest.
- **Begin with introductions.** Ask participants to introduce themselves briefly. They may identify the neighborhood in which they live, their particular investment in the common, or the committee(s) on which they serve as well as their own interests. If more than 15 people introduce themselves, introduce them about expectations.
- **Be clear about accomplishments and dependencies.**
 - brainstorm
 - set goals
 - establish priorities
 - establish working relationships
 - assign work
 - ratify and resolve disputes
- **Outline the agenda.** In most cases, interest is high. Outline the time allotted for each item.
- **Explain the ground rules.** Major negative comments are allowed, but cross-talk is discouraged. Stay focused.
- **Make sure everyone has a chance to participate.** Encourage participation and shyness. If a session is long, ask a

- Ground rules for discussion**
- Speak freely
 - There are no stupid questions
 - All ideas are valid – speak them and write them
 - Disagree, but don't criticize others' ideas
 - Own your ideas with "I" not "we"
 - Follow the moderator's guidance
 - Have fun!

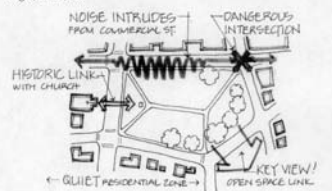
Using Overlays

Because there are so many features and characteristics of a public space such as a common, it is helpful to look at each element separately. To do this, make multiple copies of the base map, or use tracing paper which may be taped on top of the base plan. Use a separate piece of trace for each analysis drawing. Trace overlays can be very useful when combined together later to see larger patterns.



Look at the "Big Picture" First

A town common is shaped by the context in which it sits. While the immediate concerns may involve one or more objects on the common—a dying tree or a collapsing monument—it is important to study the surrounding area and the relationship of the common to it. Therefore, initiate your assessment with the bigger issues: context, character zones, edges, views, etc.



Citizen guidebook makes the process available to all communities. The guidebook, *Common Wealth*, outlines the many steps toward creating a preservation plan—site reconnaissance, historic and archaeological research, public involvement, evaluation and prioritization of issues. The appendix provides specific technical information, organizational references, and an extensive bibliography. Clearly written and amply illustrated, the guidebook is at once comprehensive and engaging.