UNH Study Finds Huge Support For Preserving New Hampshires Open Space

Sharon Keeler

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/news

Recommended Citation
https://scholars.unh.edu/news/1694

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Administrative Offices at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Media Relations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.
DURHAM, N.H. -- Rapid growth and loss of open space may be the number one problem facing New Hampshire towns, topping taxes and schools/quality of education.

This is what the University of New Hampshire’s Center for Integrative Regional Problem Solving (CIRPS) found when it surveyed voters in communities across the state that had considered major bond issues to finance land conservation projects in 2003.

Voters in 29 communities across the state that spring considered proposals and, according to the Center for Land Conservation Assistance, 13 envisioned borrowing at least $1 million to preserve undeveloped land.

Proposals failed to gain a majority in a few towns, Barrington and Hampton, for example, but most communities approved their land conservation proposals by large majorities.

“The survey results suggest that open space is perceived by many voters as a source of benefits broadly shared within the community,” says Richard England, UNH professor of economics. “Open space seems to be a good example of what economists call a ‘local public good.’”

In an effort to learn why New Hampshire citizens support or oppose local initiatives to preserve open space, the UNH research team of England, Mark Ducey, associate professor of natural resources, and Andrew Smith, director of the UNH Survey Center, conducted a phone survey of nearly 500 voters who actually participated in their community’s balloting or meeting during March 2003.

People surveyed were randomly selected from the voter lists in the towns of Auburn, Brentwood, East Kingston, Exeter, Hollis, Newington, Barrington, Durham, Errol, Greenland, Hopkington and Rye. Preservation bond proposals ranged from $500,000 in Newington to $5 million each in Hollis, Hopkinton and Rye.

“What we found was striking,” Ducey says. “There was broad support for spending on land conservation and this crossed political lines, age and financial situation. It dispels the belief some might have that only wealthy liberals see land preservation as a priority.”

In fact, when voters where asked what they like most about their town, nearly half (47 percent)
mentioned the open space, historical character, or natural beauty. More than a quarter (27 percent) mentioned the sense of community.

Schools/quality of education was mentioned third (12 percent), close to job or family ranked fourth (8 percent) and affordable taxes or housing ranked fifth (3 percent).

When asked what they liked least about their town, growth, sprawl and lack of space tied with unaffordable taxes or housing (18 percent).

“In fact, growth, sprawl and lack of open space was cited as the number one issue facing towns, followed by taxes and schools/quality of education,” Ducey says. “This supports CIRPS’ recent analysis of the top 10 issues facing rapidly growing communities in the state. Preserving New England character, including a sense of community, growth management and conserving open space were cited by many citizens as top priorities.”

Between 1982 and 1997, the Granite State’s population grew by nearly a quarter, from 951,000 to 1,173,000, according to the N.H. Office of State Planning. During the same period, the state’s developed land area grew by more than half, from 379,000 to 589,000 acres and forested acreage from 1983 to 1997 declined by 134,000 acres.

Those who opposed the land conservation proposal in their town fell into two groups: those who believed the money could be used for other purposes, and those who felt they could not afford additional property taxes to fund open space preservation.

Other important findings of the study: a majority of voters feel their towns have grown too fast; almost two-thirds of voters believe preserving open space is not an individual responsibility; and a large majority of all voters, whether they supported or opposed their towns’ land conservation proposals, agreed that environmental issues are important at the town level.

The Samuel P. Pardoe Foundation, the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the Whittemore School of Business and Economics, and the Greater Piscataqua Charitable Foundation providing funding for this study.

To get a copy of “A Summary of Voter Attitudes About Preserving Open Space,” go to the CIRPS Web site: http://www.unh.edu/cirps