

# Planning & Sustainability • City of Northampton

resilience | regeneration | design | conservation | placemaking | mobility | accessibility | community development | historic | zoning | GIS | agriculture

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## Increasing Water-Based Recreation in Northampton Preliminary Assessment

**Challenge:** There is a clear demonstrated demand for more swimming opportunities, both at informal and managed swimming areas.

- Heavy recreation use at informal swimming areas demonstrate strong user needs of desire lines.
- Recreational use has increased dramatically, driven by increasing periods of summer heat, by word-of-mouth and social media awareness of these swimming opportunities, and, in 2020, with Covid-19 restrictions on alternative recreation opportunities.
- Sites are being loved to death, with trash, human waste, noise, and traffic problems.
- Neighborhood complaints and conflicts have increased dramatically with increased use and abuse.
- Private property owners, where some of these swimming areas are located, are unable to address all of the issues.
- The City has limited resources to manage existing recreation and conservation areas and resources to support increased use and new recreation needs are limited.
- Public or private enforcement (nuisance, parking, trash, waste, and noise) cannot extinguish desire lines or address all issues.
- Because recreation users are disproportionately populations of color, enforcement actions would disproportionately affect populations of color.
- The City and the community needs to explore improving formal or informal swimming and whether resources (from grant funds, user fees, other public funds, and/or other sources) can be made available to address these needs
- Immediate operational changes for private landowners and public agencies may be needed. Increased recreation opportunities, however, will take multiple years.

The city has performed this **preliminary assessment** to open the conversation. All findings are preliminary only and subject to change.

Our next major step will be apply for CPA funds to conduct a technical assessment and develop cost estimates, while combining that effort with a community engagement process. Depending on the outcomes of that process, we will prepare the necessary grant applications for implementation.

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### Existing Formal Swimming Areas

**Summary:** All five of the existing public and quasi-public area are popular and serve the public well. There are limited opportunities for expansion. These sites cannot fully meet the desire lines seen at informal recreation on the Connecticut River for low cost, outdoor swimming and picnicking areas.

**Opportunities:** The clearest opportunity is to identify funding to underwrite memberships, parking, and picnic fees.

**Action agenda:** These sites are not in need of major improvements or future study as part of this project. The primary opportunity is to explore new funding streams to lower the costs at Musante Beach.

Area	Ownership	Management
YMCA pool Massasoit St.	YMCA	Day use and membership
Northampton Country Club pool Spring St.	Country Club	Membership only
Aquatic Center pool at JFK Bridge Rd.	City	Day use and membership
Musante Beach Reservoir Rd.	City	Day use only (pre-covid-membership)
Look Park Spray Pool North Main St	Look Park/ City	Fee for parking and picnic tables. Entry is free

## Informal Swimming Areas with Opportunities for Improvement

**Summary:** All six of these sites are heavily used for swimming, meet a very strong public need. All of these sites, however, also have overuse and abuse challenges.

**Opportunities:** There are opportunities to:

1. Reduce abuse and reduce use at some sites
2. Make modest physical and management improvements at some sites.
3. Make significant physical (e.g., sanitary facilities) and management improvements at a key site(s). Grants funds are probably available for physical improvements at public sites, but addressing long term management needs will not be grant covered and resources must be identified.

**Action agenda:** Apply for CPA funds in September 2020. Engage the community to analyze these sites in more detail. Consider which sites should have modest investment for improvements and which sites, if any, should receive more major investments.

Any area actively managed by the City needs City ownership, easement, or lease. All sites need to address noise, trash, parking, and user conflicts. Management models can include:

1. Free access, with a part-time or work-study river steward coordinating management.
2. User fee or significant funding staffing. This allows better self-sustaining management but makes it harder to either keep sites affordable.
3. Parking fees (or residents-only parking with paid parking non-residents) to cover management costs.
4. Privately run sites or partnerships.

Area	Ownership	Issues
Conn. Riverfront Park Damon Road	City	*Could accommodate major improvements 1. Heavily used 2. No water/sewer 3. Swift currents
Mill River, Maines Field Riverside Drive	City	*Could accommodate major improvements 1. Heavily used 2. Available parking and controllable entrance 3. Bathroom needs to be upgraded 4. Flood prone
Mill River, Nonotuck Dam Cross St. & Pine St	Private	Could accommodate small improvements 1. Heavily used
Mill River, upriver Cook Dam Spring Street	City	2. Majority is private property 3. Unsafe dam
Mill River, Cook Dam Spring St	Private	4. Neighborhood conflicts 5. Very limited or no water, and sewer
Mill River, Orange Dam Florence St/Mulberry	Private	6. Water quality and need for testing 7. City maintenance resources limited

### Sites Infeasible to Provide New Swimming Opportunities

**Summary:** Other sites that area either desirable for swimming, were previously used for swimming, or have small dipping pockets are not feasible for expansion.

**Limits:** These sites either have legal and health limits (e.g., public water supply), no longer are feasible (e.g., Clear Falls), or will continue to serve as areas to get wet but don't have the capacity to serve swimming and recreation at increased rates.

Area	Ownership	Issues
Mill River at Paradise Pond, Northampton State Hospital, and Look Park	State City Private	Very small wading or dipping areas and difficult access. River steward could monitor but not room for swimming
Manhan River, Clear Falls Drury Lane	Private	Historic swimming area closed. Environmental and physical limits would prevent full restoration, although small dipping areas remain.
Conn. River Greenway at Elwell Island and at Rainbow Beach	City	Very heavily used but only accessible by boat. Vehicle access is no viable. Storm devastated beach at Elwell Island
Conn. River Greenway Rainbow Beach	City	Only accessible by boat. Road access would be extremely difficult.
Fitzgerald Lake, N. Farms	City	Mucky bottom, not desirable except for swimming from boat. Building sandy beach is not viable
Water Supply Reservoirs	City	Water supply- not viable

**Recreation User Interviews** (*August 2020 at Nonutuck Mills, Cooks Dam, and Orange Dam*)

Questions asked of recreation users	Responses (summaries)
How do you use this area (e.g., swimming, picnic, play, and barbecue)?	Family fun, recreation, cooling off, swimming, relaxing, picnic, read (when there's not a lot of noise), morning prayer, meet up with friends.
What other areas did you consider using (e.g., your backyard, Look Park, Musante Beach, parks in other towns)	None this year, Huntington because they have bathrooms and trash barrels, not a lot of other places to choose from, many parks and public pools are closed, beach (but it is far), Cape Cod, Orange Dam, Cooks Dam, Pufton pond, Connecticut river, Chapel Brook.
Why didn't use other recreation areas?	No free parking, this is closer, live nearby, many places are closed to the public, not as fun for the kids, don't know a lot of places (new to the area), this one is my favorite. Many expressed frustration that other options are not open.
Where do you live?	Northampton, Holyoke, Springfield, Worcester (one group at Cooks Dam), Florence, Easthampton, Westfield. (From random sample majority came from nearby towns.)
How did you learn about this site	Friends, grew up here, family, word of mouth
Would you use the site if that required following rules (e.g., carry out trash, user fees)?	Yes, just about everywhere you go you have to carry your own trash out, It's common sense, That would work, We would pay to enter, Need restrooms, Need trash receptacles, Parking, Not really...we've been coming here all of our lives – we don't want to pay a fee now, We keep it clean when we come, Yes of course!
Who would influence your use of the site (e.g., signs, group norms, enforcement, friends, family, a river steward)?	River steward would be nice, opening and closing hours to alleviate traffic / noise for neighbors, signs, family, friends, more structure and facilities, My girlfriend. Many people expressed frustration with the amount of trash left behind.
Where do people go relieve themselves?	Woods, river, wait to get home, don't go except at home
Do you worry about Covid?	Yes, no because we're outside, I try to wear a mask around other people, a little bit, not really.
Are you aware that you're supposed to wear a mask when in large crowds or in the bike trail?	Yes, no, didn't know about the bike trail mask rule, I am aware and I try to.