

Town of Berlin

Scenery

Framed by wooded hills, the pastures and marshes along the Assabet River in Berlin are valuable scenic resources. The farmed portions of the river corridor in Berlin have been designated a “noteworthy” landscape according to the Scenic Inventory of Massachusetts, prepared by the Department of Environmental Management in 1982. The inventory divided landscapes into three categories: distinctive, noteworthy and common. The Berlin landscape is one of two “noteworthy” segments of the Assabet River – the other is in Concord. Below Bridge Road where the Assabet winds through rolling pastures and abandoned fields, the river is especially beautiful.

History

Several significant archaeological sites have been found in Berlin, at Forty Caves, around Gates Pond, and near the Assabet River.¹

Originally a part of the towns of Lancaster and Bolton, Berlin was incorporated in 1812. Since it was settled, Berlin has been primarily an agricultural community, with some small industries in the 19th century. The town developed with several small centers. During the last several decades, the town’s residents have sought jobs outside Berlin in Worcester, Marlborough, and other employment centers.²

Berlin’s population grew from 1,057 in 1940 to 2,099 in 1970, nearly doubling. Growth slowed over the following two decades. Berlin’s population was approximately 2300 in 1990, and is about 2400 in 2002. In 2001, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts provided buildout analyses to each community analyzing their population projections and future infrastructure needs. Under current zoning, it was estimated that the Town of Berlin would be “built out” to capacity with a population of 6,085.

Residential and commercial development has occurred slowly in Berlin compared with neighboring communities. This can partially be attributed to the town’s geologic conditions – thin, rocky soils and bedrock outcrops. These conditions make it difficult to install sewer systems (which Berlin does not have), or to site septic systems.³

The Assabet River has not played a major role in the history of Berlin, running as it does at the periphery of the population center. Historically the primary land use along the river corridor has been agriculture.

The intersection of Interstates 290 and 495 in the Assabet corridor is stimulating industrial development. In 1997, the Town of Berlin negotiated a mitigation settlement with the developers of the Solomon Pond Mall, sited on the border of Berlin and Marlborough. New England Development paid the Berlin Conservation Commission \$1.5 million when the mall was completed, and will pay \$50,000 each year for 30 years. This has provided the Conservation Commission with the opportunity to preserve a great deal of valuable habitat and natural resources within the community.

Recreation

The Wayside Rail Trail Committee has proposed another regional rail trail, Wayside Rail Trail. It would create a biking trail—and possibly a bus line—along the former Central Massachusetts Railroad right-of-way. Wayside Rail Trail would travel in an east-west direction from Belmont through Waltham, Weston, Wayland, Sudbury, Hudson and Berlin (see map 15). This project has been slowed down by opposition from the MBTA, which wants to retain the right of way. The Town of Weston has also opposed the project.

There are a couple of public informal canoe landings in Berlin, at the Kelsey/McAllistir property and the Dingley property, both on River Road.

The Town of Berlin provides many opportunities for passive recreation, especially for those who enjoy hiking or birdwatching. The Douglas Conservation Area, Cadogen property, Mount Pisgah, Tyler Conservation Area and Brewer Brook, and 40 Caves area all provide the outdoor enthusiast with great biodiversity and natural landscapes.

The Town of Berlin maintains basic trails on most of the conserved properties. The Conservation Commission seeks to balance the preservation of biodiversity and the recreational use of conserved land.

Biodiversity

Berlin's vegetation ranges from maintained agricultural lands to advanced successional forests. The upland forests have grown up from pastures and small woodlots and have mostly mixed hardwoods and local isolated stands of

conifers. Some recently abandoned agricultural lands are beginning to grow up to shrub and immature hardwoods.

The 2000 Biodiversity Protection and Stewardship Plan for the SuAsCo Watershed⁴ identifies biodiversity areas that are significant on the watershed scale and makes recommendations for their future protection. Four of the Biodiversity Protection and Stewardship Plan's Biodiversity areas fall within Berlin (see map 14).

The **Mount Pisgah** area, which extends into Northborough, is the largest tract of unprotected, roadless land in the SuAsCo watershed. Surrounded by low-density development (much of this land is still enrolled in the state's Chapter 61 program, reducing the landowner's taxes in exchange for keeping the land in recreation, forestry or agriculture), Mt. Pisgah is comprised of typical Shrewsbury Ridge habitats with interior forest focal species; black rat snakes, water thrushes, and even signs of habitation by bear. About 40 percent of this land is protected. In Berlin, the town owns 144 acres of protected land. In Northborough, the Town of Northborough owns most of the protected land, and one parcel is owned by the Massachusetts Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Law Enforcement.

Rattlesnake Hill, bordering Berlin and Boylston is a ledgy slope habitat mixed with a dry oak forest. A stream wraps around most of the hill, and the Wachusett Aqueduct runs through the property. In Berlin, more than half of this area has been conserved through funding from the Solomon Pond Mall mitigation.

Reubens Hill and **Clamshell Pond** in Clinton and Berlin is home to one of the few, if not the last, undeveloped natural ponds in the SuAsCo watershed. The Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) identified the area for particularly unusual species in watershed. This area is slated for development of a 500-unit Tall Pines Condominium Complex in Clinton.

Finally, the Biodiversity Plan highlights **Sunk Meadow and Hog Swamp** in Bolton and Berlin. The area boasts a meadow and an extensive network of streams draining into Mill Brook. The NHESP has identified the area for rare species habitat.

The NHESP also identified the corridor along North Brook and Brewer Brook from Jones Road to Wheeler's Pond as habitat for rare wetlands wildlife. Much of this area is Town conservation land, with the remainder in residential use.⁵

The **Forty Caves** area features many geologic formations including steep bedrock cliffs, boulders, caves and glacial erratics up to 30 feet in diameter (glacial erratics are boulders carried by glaciers some distance from their original location). The Clinton-Newbury fault system that traverses eastern New England is also visible in several spots at Forty Caves, where rocks split under the pressure of fault movement. About 150 acres of this area has been protected in the past few years by the Berlin Conservation Commission and Sudbury Valley Trustees.

Some of the other protected areas in Berlin include the **Clark Property** (70 acres), which abuts the Department of Environmental Management SuAsCo Flood Control Property at North Brook; **Wrack Meadow** (150 acres); and land surrounding **Gates Pond**.

North Brook, which flows southeast into the Assabet River, is stocked with trout.

Hydrology

Berlin has two stream systems – the Assabet River, which flows through the southeast corner of Berlin, and North Brook, which flows mainly southeasterly into the Assabet. There are two important water bodies along North Brook: the ten-acre pool in the SuAsCo flood control project and Wheeler Pond. Several smaller streams feed into North Brook, including Brewer Brook. These streams and their tributaries are dominated by wetland communities of forested shrub swamps.

Gates Pond, one of Berlin's four major ponds, supplies water to the Town of Hudson, which owns more than three-fourths of the shoreline of the pond.

Two flood control projects (dams) were constructed in Berlin in the 1970s: the Lester Ross Flood Project on North Brook, and the Brewer Brook Project.

The Town of Berlin does not have a public water supply or sewer system.

Lands in need of protection (see map 16)

1. Mount Pisgah area. In the southwestern portion of Berlin on the Northborough town border. The Town of Berlin has already protected

about 150 acres of this area, but there are still a couple of key parcels of interest, including the Devine Farm on Linden Street.

2. Gates Pond area. The Town of Hudson owns a significant portion of the land to the east and west of Gates Pond, and the O'Brien Orchards are under a Conservation Restriction on the northern shore of the pond. A large unprotected parcel southwest of Gates Pond is a high priority.
 3. In northwest central Berlin, there are several large unprotected parcels in need of protection. They lie south of Randall Street, west of Highland Street, east of Coburn Road, and north of Route 62. About half of the land is under Chapter 61 restrictions.
 4. Forty Caves/Garfield Woods area, in northwestern Berlin. More than half of this area is protected, but there are still several parcels in need of protection.
-

Recommendations

These recommendations are specific to the Town of Berlin. Please also refer to the general recommendations at the end of the introduction.

Recreational Opportunities

1. Improve existing and create new **walking and biking trails that provide access to the Assabet River**. This includes completing the Wayside Rail Trail. Ideally trails would be linked to create a trail system in the upper Assabet.

Regulatory changes

1. **Site Plan Review** should include the following: automatic sprinkler bans, limitations on water-consumptive landscaping (grass), reduction of impervious surfaces, and tree-cutting regulations during site plan review.
2. **Site Plan Review for riverfront land** should have standard language requiring: invasive plant removal, a minimum 200-foot buffer along the river (or mitigation), consideration of the view from the river (including mitigation for any impact), planting of native plants if restoration is needed, and encouragement of conservation restrictions along the Assabet.

3. Berlin should adopt the new **DEP stormwater regulations** town-wide (not just in wetlands or within 100-200 feet) as a local policy.
4. Berlin should adopt a **Cluster Subdivision bylaw** to provide incentives for developers to use it in place of traditional subdivision plans (the current cluster bylaw has never been used). The undeveloped land should be managed by a local land trust or other conservation entity. Hopkinton, Marlborough and Westborough have good bylaws that can serve as examples.
5. Berlin should adopt a local **wetlands bylaw**. The bylaw should eliminate development on floodplains, and include the ability of the town to retain staff at the developer's expense.
6. Improve municipal operations for conservation by **providing the conservation commission with dedicated staff**.
7. The Town of Berlin should include the Assabet River and emphasize its conservation in all planning documents.
8. Berlin should adopt a **poop-scooping bylaw** to require dog owners to clean up after their pets. Supplying plastic bags and garbage cans in high-traffic areas will promote compliance. The bylaw can be enforced by police officers and animal control. Northborough has a good bylaw.
9. Berlin should adopt the **Community Preservation Act** to raise funds for land preservation.

¹ Open Space and Recreation Plan. Berlin Conservation Commission. Berlin, Massachusetts. May 1996.

² Open Space and Recreation Plan. Berlin Conservation Commission. Berlin, Massachusetts. May 1996.

³ Open Space and Recreation Plan. Berlin Conservation Commission. Berlin, Massachusetts. May 1996.

⁴ Clark, Frances. Biodiversity Protection and Stewardship Plan for the SuAsCo Watershed. Massachusetts Riverways Program, Massachusetts Watershed Initiative. August 2000.

⁵ Open Space and Recreation Plan. Berlin Conservation Commission. Berlin, Massachusetts. May 1996.