

Town of Northborough

Scenery

The Assabet River enters Northborough from Westborough and forms the town boundary for a distance of approximately 6,000 feet. The river in this area flows through Indian Meadow Golf Course. Adjacent to the golf course is a large parcel of Town-owned property that is mostly wetland. The portion of the river on the east side of South Street flows along Ellsworth McAfee Park in Northborough and a wildlife management area owned by the State. After crossing under School Street the river flows through Juniper Hill Golf Course. Downstream of Juniper Hill Golf Course, the river is largely hidden from general view, as it provides the rear boundary of residential property on its banks.

Before it flows under the Wachusett Aqueduct, the Assabet River widens and flows along the roadway, providing a reflecting pool for the Aqueduct. The Aqueduct itself, with its stone arched construction, is also quite scenic. A dam at Allen Street, site of the Woodside Mill, forms the pool. The river meanders through state-owned land purchased in the early 1960s as part of a statewide flood control program. This area is mostly flood plain and contains extensive wetlands throughout, providing excellent diverse habitat.

History

Starting in the late 1600s early settlers developed an agricultural community and began to operate mills along the Assabet and its tributaries. Sawmills were soon followed by gristmills. These industries provided services to the Northborough residents throughout the 19th century. The town's mills were smaller than those in other Assabet communities due to the lack of waterpower in the river and its tributaries in Northborough.

Route 20, the old Connecticut Road, was the first designated postal road in the United States. A scheduled mail service began on this road between Boston and New York in 1673. An agricultural branch of the Boston and Worcester Railway was established in the 19th century. Trolley service to Worcester was available to residents, followed by bus service to Marlborough and Boston. Following World War II, the town began its transition from an agricultural town to a suburban community. The construction of Interstate 290 through Northborough connected the community to the state's highway system and contributed greatly to its desirability as a place to live. Since 1950 the population has more than quadrupled, from 3,122 to more than 14,000 in 2001.

Recreation

There is currently very little river-related recreation in Northborough, with only public golf courses along the river. No public canoe put-ins exist, although numerous abutting residents launch small boats from their properties. There are a couple of informal canoe landings, one at the Old Sawmill Dam on Route 20 and the other at the Woodside Dam on Allen Street.¹ The state recently dedicated a portion of the SuAsCo flood control area in memory of Mike Yellick, a local fisherman, so that others can enjoy the sport along the river.

The Northborough Trails Committee has proposed the creation of a walking trail that parallels the Assabet River in several locations. The trail would use a sewer easement from the Westborough/Northborough town line to School Street.

Biodiversity

Extending from the Westborough town line, the Town-owned parcel on the north side of the river provides diverse wildlife habitat. This area was targeted for a river trail several years ago, but the project was abandoned due to concern that such a trail would harm wildlife habitat. The state-owned parcel bordering the Assabet River on the Northborough/Westborough town line has a large woodland area directly on the river, also providing excellent wildlife habitat. The stretch of river from Juniper Hill Golf course through the center of town is urbanized, however, and therefore has little habitat value. The area adjacent to the river, north of Woodside, contains a considerable wetland and is a prized habitat.

The land owned by the Town on the upper reaches of the river consists of a wet meadow acquired in 2000 and Ellsworth McAfee Park acquired in 1975. The Town uses the park for organized sports such as soccer. Across the river from this park is a state-owned and -operated property designated as a Wildlife Management Area. The town owns several small parcels along the river and holds conservation easements on other properties that provide a protected riverfront corridor. One tree farm abuts the river and is contiguous with public property. The other public land is the SuAsCo flood control area that leads to the Tyler Dam in Marlborough.

The 2000 Biodiversity Protection and Stewardship Plan for the SuAsCo Watershed² identifies biodiversity areas that are significant on the watershed scale and makes recommendations for their future protection. Three of the Biodiversity Protection and Stewardship Plan's biodiversity areas fall within Northborough. They are each partially protected (see map 6).

Crane Swamp, which also extends into Westborough, Marlborough and Southborough, is made up of several important communities: large red maple swamp, successional shrub habitat, three connected water bodies, and extensive agricultural fields. The wetlands and upland habitats of Crane Swamp connect corridors to other protected areas. Crane Swamp has been identified by the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) as habitat for rare species. Almost all of Crane Swamp is protected and managed by the State Department of Fisheries and Wildlife or Metropolitan District Commission.

The **Cold Harbor Brook Impoundment** in Northborough is home to unusual shrub swamp for the SuAsCo watershed. It has been identified by NHESP as habitat for rare species. The State Department of Environmental Management has protected most of the Cold Harbor Brook Impoundment.

Finally, the **Mount Pisgah** area, which extends into Berlin, is the largest tract of unprotected, unroaded land in the SuAsCo watershed. Surrounded with low-density development (much of this land is 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 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. In Berlin, the Town owns 144 acres of protected land.

Hydrology

Northborough has four fresh water ponds. Bartlett Pond and Smith Pond are man-made ponds, located in the southeastern and southwestern parts of the town, respectively. The two Great Ponds are Little Chauncy Pond and Solomon Pond, located in the southeast and northeastern portion of the town, respectively.

Northborough has approximately 1000 acres of wetlands. Within the Assabet River watershed, these areas include: Hop Brook, Cold Harbor Brook, Howard Brook, the Assabet River, Stirrup Brook, and Bearfoot Brook. In the southeastern portion of town, Crane Swamp drains into Wachusett Aqueduct and then into the Sudbury Reservoir in Southborough.

Northborough's floodplain follows the major tributaries that flow through town. The floodplain along the Assabet is generally narrow with the exception of the portion within the SuAsCo flood control area.

Dams impound the water at two locations in town: at Route 20 (Main Street) and at Allen Street.

Northborough's population is about 14,000 people. In 2001, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, contracting with Regional Planning Agencies, provided buildout analyses to each community analyzing their population projections and future infrastructure needs. The Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) performed Northborough's analysis. The town's population is projected to increase to 16,816 at full buildout.

Of Northborough's four groundwater supplies, three are used regularly: Brigham Street, Crawford Street and Howard Street wells. The fourth, Lyman Street, has been offline since the late 1980s. All four well sites are protected by a ground water overlay district included in the zoning bylaw.

The Town of Northborough currently withdraws .74 mgd from town wells, with supplementary water from the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) for a total of 1 mgd. Total water use for the year for the town is 270.1 million gallons per year from the wells, and 365 million gallons total, including 95 million gallons from MWRA. Water use in the town is projected to increase to 415 mg per year by at full buildout. If additional withdrawals are permitted along the streams feeding the Assabet River, this will harm stream flows. Future plans for water expansion will need to take these factors into consideration.

Infiltration and inflow are a challenge facing the town. As much of the system is less than 25 years old, infiltration is less of a concern than inflow.

Northborough's sewer system currently serves about 21 percent of the town. Sewage from the Town of Northborough is transported to the City of Marlborough. Northborough is permitted to transport 800,000 gpd (gallons per day) to the Marlborough Westerly WWTP. In addition to residential and commercial users, there are numerous industrial users. The average daily flow for 1998-2000 was 336,000 gpd.

Lands in need of protection (see map 8)

The Town of Northborough and other conservation groups should work to protect lands along the Assabet River and its tributaries (including Howard Brook, Cold Harbor Brook, Hop Brook, Barefoot Brook, and Stirrup Brook). A minimum of a 200- foot protected buffer should be created on riverfront properties.

Recommendations

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

Preserve Biodiversity

1. If either of Northborough's dams (Woodside/Allen Street or Old Mill Pond at Route 20) breach, **consider not replacing the breached dams** to restore the river's natural hydrology.

Regulatory changes

1. **Site Plan Review** should include the following: automatic sprinkler bans (town-wide, not just for municipal water users), 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. Northborough should adopt the new **DEP stormwater regulations** town-wide (not just in wetlands or within 100-200 feet) as a local policy.
4. Northborough should revise its **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. The Town of Northborough should include the Assabet River and emphasize its conservation in all planning documents.
6. Northborough should adopt the **Community Preservation Act** to raise funds for land preservation.

¹ McAdow, Ron. The Concord, Sudbury and Assabet Rivers: A Guide to canoeing, wildlife and history. Bliss Publishing Company, Marlborough, Massachusetts. 1990.

² Clark, Frances. Biodiversity Protection and Stewardship Plan for the SuAsCo Watershed. Massachusetts Riverways Program, Massachusetts Watershed Initiative. August 2000.