



Town of
Stratham
New Hampshire

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

OPEN SPACE AND CONNECTIVITY PLAN

August 18, 2022



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I. BACKGROUND

The Town of Stratham, New Hampshire is soliciting proposals for professional services to assist the Town in the development and production of an Open Space and Connectivity Plan. A key recommendation of the Town's 2019 Master Plan Update, the Open Space and Connectivity Plan will guide the Town's efforts related to land conservation and stewardship, trail systems and facilitating connections for trails, the encouragement of non-motorized forms of transportation and recreation, and to effectively guide the ongoing management of open space resources and public education and promotion of these resources.

The plan should incorporate significant public input and involvement, including efforts to engage with under-represented communities not typically highly involved in community planning efforts or community forums. The plan should incorporate innovative infographics and other tools for public engagement. Stratham is an active community with a long history of land conservation and the Town intends to use the plan to best manage its existing conservation resources, strategically expand and build connections among existing open space parcels, and to help foster a community-wide environment oriented toward land stewardship and sustainability, recreation, walking and cycling, and engagement with natural resources.

II. COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

Stratham is a vibrant though primarily residential community located in New Hampshire's Seacoast Region. Situated along the southern edge of the tidal estuary Great Bay and along the eastern shore of the Squamscott River, Stratham features a diversity of landscapes and ecosystems. The many brooks and streams in Stratham are assets with potential value as natural and open space recreational resources.

Stratham is renowned for its exceptional soils suitable for a variety of agricultural resources. Settled primarily as an agricultural community, Stratham still retains much of its rural heritage with several active working farms contributing to the local economy and framing the natural landscape.

With a population of approximately 7,600, Stratham is known today as a suburban community with some rural characteristics. The Town is located approximately 9 miles from the Atlantic coastline, 10 miles from the regional hub of Portsmouth, and 55 miles from Downtown Boston. Stratham is known for its high quality school system and residents prize its small town community-centered feel. Though largely regarded as a family community, Stratham is increasingly home to older residents and households without children.

Spanning 108 acres of scenic land that abuts other conserved properties, Stratham Hill Park is the centerpiece of the Town's recreational assets. Dubbed one of the "best Boston area parks" by *The Boston Globe*, Stratham Hill Park is a popular regional recreation area. In recent years, the Town has focused on long-term planning of this asset to ensure its effective management, address overuse of certain park features, and to transition the park to more effectively serve the public in the future.

An important Revolutionary War era community, Stratham remained largely rural with only modest growth into the mid twentieth century. The community experienced rapid growth during the mid to late 1900s into the early 2000s owing in part to its convenient location adjacent to major employment centers and commuting corridors and its abundance of developable land. Many of its development patterns are somewhat characteristic of that period. Stratham maintains a foundational network of historic roads that retain a rural feel that significantly contributes to Stratham's community character.

III. LAND CONSERVATION, CONNECTIVITY & KEY ISSUES IN STRATHAM TODAY

Stratham has prioritized land conservation in recent decades with more than 2,000 acres of land (more than 25 percent of the Town's land area) preserved through both partnerships and financial outlays approved by taxpayers. These efforts have been largely volunteer led and managed through the Stratham Conservation Commission and the Ad Hoc Committee for Purchase of Conservation Land. In 2003, the Town of Stratham authorized a \$5 million bond at Town Meeting to support land acquisition and conservation easement efforts.

Most conservation lands in Stratham remain privately owned with the Town or another entity holding conservation or agricultural easements to the property. Many of these properties do not provide for public access. Several farms, vital to the Town's heritage, have been preserved where public access is often counter to the continued active farming of the property. However, the Town's population is largely active in nature and demand has intensified in recent years for more outdoor recreation space, including for trail systems, off-road biking areas, and for more opportunities to engage with and recreate on open spaces particularly along and in Great Bay and the Squamscott River. The Town strives to balance public access of conserved properties with the understanding that agricultural and ecologically sensitive areas require restricting or heavily controlling public access.

In recent years, access to some lands protected by conservation easements has been restricted in response to issues of vandalism or misuse of the properties. The Town endeavors to strengthen its relationship with property owners of conservation land to better diffuse issues as they arise and to promote a stronger culture of land stewardship by residents and users across the community with the goal of expanding responsible public access to conservation land.

Historically, much of the Town's focus has been on preserving ecologically sensitive lands or highly visible properties that are important to the Town's heritage. Conservation easements have been negotiated on an ad-hoc basis, can be very dependent on the needs and desires of the property owner, and permissions for public access can vary dramatically across conservation parcels. Additionally, as the Town has expanded its inventory of conservation properties, the management of these resources has become more challenging.

The Town is interesting in developing connections between open space properties, encouraging land stewardship, sustainability and the protection of ecologically sensitive, historically significant or actively farmed lands, and fostering a town-wide environment that is conducive to walking, cycling, and passive recreation use to help enhance the Town's unique character and quality of life.

IV. PROJECT SCOPE & SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Open Space and Connectivity Plan should include the following components:

1. **Executive Summary:** The plan should include an Executive Summary that could serve as a standalone product to communicate the findings and recommendations of the plan as concisely and efficiently as possible.
2. **Vision:** The plan should feature a consensus-based Vision articulating how Stratham views itself and its open space offerings and state of connectivity for recreation, preservation of natural and historical resources, and transportation purposes in the future.
3. **Inventory of Existing Conservation/Trail Assets:** The Town has acquired a significant collection of land and development rights to land over the years for parkland or conservation purposes. Permitted uses of these parcels can vary significantly based on easement terms or deeds negotiated with property owners. The Town in recent years has made efforts to centralize these documents so that they are more easily accessible (see Assessing inventory in Appendix A), but there is a need to better communicate this information to decision-makers, volunteers, and residents as concisely as possible. The plan should utilize mapping and other graphic means to communicate the Town's existing open space resources and the uses permitted on such parcels.
4. **Tools to ensure a Living Document (GIS Integration):** It is important to the town that the Open Space & Connectivity Plan is a living document that is a constant resource and reference for the community. The community also endeavors to increase awareness of open space properties and their associated restrictions and/or permissions and proposals should include creative approaches to promote public education of these resources. Examples include an ArcGIS storymap and the integration of open space information into GIS systems.
5. **Public Engagement, Board/Commission Input, and Engagement with Property Owners:** It is important to the Town that the Plan represents a general consensus of the community regarding a shared vision and goals for open space and connectivity in Stratham. It is equally important that the plan engages with community members who are not typically well represented in public forums and discussions. To that end, the plan should be preceded by an accessible public outreach process that engages with a broad cross section of the community.
6. **Criteria for Evaluating Open Space Acquisitions:** The Town is continually confronted with decisions related to the expansion of its open space resources and the most beneficial and strategic use of limited funding sources. These decisions are open to public debate and discussion. Although the Town's Conservation Commission has developed criteria in which to consider open space acquisitions, this is due for a re-evaluation in light of the recommendations of the Open Space & Connectivity Plan. The plan should include a transparent mechanism for measuring the relative value of potential land acquisitions or other uses of funds toward land conservation based on the

values articulated through public outreach and objective measures related to habitat preservation, ecological preservation or restoration, and Climate Change mitigation. ‘

7. **Easement Checklist:** The Town recognizes that properties are preserved for many different reasons. In Stratham, easements have focused on preserving sensitive ecologies and habitats, securing water rights, providing public access for recreation, and preserving actively farmed land. However, it would be helpful for the Town to consult a checklist, model easement, or other resource to ensure all community values are considered when negotiating easement terms. Such a resource should be a product of the Open Space and Connectivity Plan effort.
8. **Operations and Management Practices:** The plan should evaluate the Town’s existing practices related to management of open space properties and provide recommendations for improvement based on best management practices in similarly sized communities. These recommendations should address responsibilities and best practices for addressing violations and complaints, and the roles of town staff, town government, and volunteers to ensure responsible management of conserved lands.
9. **Goals and Recommendations:** The plan should include consensus-based goals and recommendations to implement the vision guided by community values reflected through public input and existing and forecast conditions. The Town is also pursuing other long-term goals related to infrastructure development and public services, increasing housing diversity and affordability, preservation of natural and historic resources, economic development, and transportation largely catalogued in its 2019 Master Plan Update. The Town’s open space and connectivity recommendations, as much as possible, should be supportive of and complementary to these goals.

V. REFERENCE PLANS & DOCUMENTS

The Town has established a large number of reference documents, plans, and spreadsheets to assist in the development of the Open Space & Connectivity Plan. These resources include the community’s recently updated Master Plan, extensive long-term planning associated with the future of Stratham Hill Park, a number of resources related to the Town’s last major Open Space Initiative, and an extensive repository of easements and other documents associated with the Town’s existing open space parcels. All of these reference plans and documents are linked electronically to this RFP in **Appendix A** (Page 11). The Town hosts an interactive GIS system that is maintained by CAI Technologies. Although the Town does hold Esri licenses, GIS resources, including shape files, are not maintained locally.

VI. PROJECT REVIEW PROCESS & DELIVERABLES

The firm will be responsible for providing necessary materials including drafts of the plan and plan materials. The Town anticipates that an Open Space & Connectivity Plan Steering Committee will help guide the effort with significant involvement of Town Staff including the Town Planner, Town Administrator, and the Parks and Recreation Director. Representatives from several community boards and commissions would likely serve on the plan committee,

including from the Conservation Commission, Planning Board, Recreation Commission, Select Board, and Heritage Commission. Draft materials should be provided to the Town in electronic form and in individual sections or chapters (not to exceed 35 pages of material at one time) for review by the Town Staff and project committee. A minimum of one week should be provided to provide edits and revisions to draft materials.

The Town will be responsible for making available the Open Space and Connectivity Plan when it is finalized and adopted.

At the completion of the project, the firm shall provide the following materials:

1. At least one reproducible hard copy of the final plan and electronic copies both in Adobe PDF form and MS Word format (or similar software program) in which the narrative and graphics may be edited or expanded upon.
2. Maps and supporting map data and shape files provided in a format compatible with the current version of ArcGIS.
3. Spreadsheets and charts in MS Excel format (or similar program) where the data may be updated or revised.

VII. PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

Interested firms should submit five (5) paper bound copies of the proposal and one (1) copy of the sealed bid price with the submission along with an electronic copy of the proposal in PDF format provided via e-mail or on a USB jump drive (also known as a thumb drive). Interested firms are encouraged to submit succinct, well-organized proposals where the requirements of this RFP can be easily identified. Proposals should include the following components:

1. **Letter of Transmittal:** Printed on the firm's letterhead with contact information for the proposed project leads.
2. **Description of Firm and Project Team:** The proposal should provide a description of the firm and its experience, qualifications, and capabilities in undertaking a project of this type. An organizational profile of the project team should also be provided with a CV provided for all members of the project team. If subcontractors will be working on the project, the proposal should make clear what previous projects the firms have previously collaborated on. Ideally, the firms should have experience working together on at least three previous projects.
3. **Comparable Projects and References:** The proposal should include comparable projects the firm has led. The proposal should briefly describe the nature of the project, the public outreach mechanisms employed, and the presentation and orientation of the final product. Additionally, telephone and e-mail contact information should be provided for the client lead on the project. The Town of Stratham reserves the right to contact references.

4. **Project Understanding and Approach:** The proposal should demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the project scope and of the desired products of this project. Firms should also demonstrate some familiarity with the community, its regional context, and of its needs and desires related to open space preservation and connectivity.
5. **Description of Approach to Public Outreach and Plan Design:** The proposal should convey its approach to plan development, layout, use of mapping and infographics, and the potential for electronic integration of plan content. Additionally, the proposal should reflect how the firm will integrate innovative public outreach and engagement into the project including mechanisms to reach out to communities who are not typically well represented in community planning and decision-making.
6. **Project Schedule:** Proposals should include a schedule for completing the project with project-specific milestones and their projected dates of completion. It is the Town's goal to complete the project within a six to 12 month time period.
7. **Cost Proposal & Budget:** Proposals should include a budget estimate and typical billing rates by task (in a separate sealed envelope).

VIII. KEY DATES & DEADLINES

Event or Requirement	Date and Time
RFP posted to Town's website	Thursday, August 18, 2022
Pre-proposal video conference* (pre-registration required)	Tuesday, August 30, 2022 at 11:00 am
Deadline for submission of questions or clarifications due via e-mail to planning@strathamnh.gov	Wednesday, August 31, 2022
Responses to comments and questions posted to Town's website and distributed to all those who made inquiries	Friday, September 2, 2022
Proposals Due (complete proposals in paper and electronic form must be received by this time)	Wednesday, September 14, 2022 by 3:00 pm
Contract Execution	Late September/Early October 2022

* The pre-proposal video conference will be held over the Zoom video conference platform. Although participation is not required, it is recommended to better understand the project. Pre-registration is required by e-mailing planning@strathamnh.gov no later than the end of the day on Monday, August, 29, 2022.

IX. SELECTION CRITERIA

A selection committee will score proposals based on the following factors:

1. The proposal's responsiveness to the RFP, including the format of the proposals, capabilities of the firm, professional and technical approaches, clarity, and demonstrated ability to lead the project.
2. The ability of the firm to address the project scope and core competencies outlined in this RFP.
3. Innovation and creativity in the proposal's approach to the project.
4. A proven track record of working with clients to navigate comparable efforts, overcome impediments, and successfully complete projects on time and within budget.
5. The capabilities and experience of the Project Team.
6. Cost Proposal

Firms may be asked to participate in an interview before a finalist is selected. Interviews will likely be conducted in person at the Stratham Municipal Center. Town staff will coordinate relevant details with the selected firms or communicate with any firms who submitted proposals that do not advance in the process. The Town anticipates that contract with the selected firm will be in place no later than mid-October 2022.

X. TOWN STAFF AND BOARD/COMMISSION RESOURCES

Town Staff intend to be a helpful resource and guide for the selected firm and will be actively involved in the development of the Open Space & Connectivity Plan. However, existing professional commitments will not permit staff or others from writing significant portions of the plan, managing and conducting meetings, or conducting extensive research assignments. It is important that the firm be able to manage the project and associated tasks independently.

XI. RESERVATION OF RIGHTS

The Town of Stratham reserves the right to reject any or all proposals or accept the proposal the Town deems to be in its best interest. The Town of Stratham assumes no responsibility or liability for costs incurred by consultant teams in responding to this RFP or in responding to any further request for interviews, additional data or information, or clarification of any items included in the proposal. The Town reserves the right to request additional data or information or that the firm provide the Town a presentation in support of written proposals. The Town further reserves the right to:

- Not award a contract for the requested services;
- Waive any irregularities or informalities in any proposals;
- Accept the proposal deemed to be the most beneficial to the public and the Town;
- Negotiate and accept, without advertising, the proposal of any other respondent in the event a contract cannot be successfully negotiated with the selected firm; and
- Retain products submitted by respondents for its own use at its sole discretion.

XII. RFP INQUIRIES

The Stratham Planning Department is managing the Request for Proposals process for the Open Space and Connectivity Plan. Any inquiries or clarifications related to this RFP should be directed to the pre-proposal conference. Questions related to this process, shall be directed to the Stratham Town Planner via e-mail at the contact information provided below:

Mark Connors
Stratham Town Planner
mconnors@strathamnh.gov or
planning@strathamnh.gov
Telephone: (603) 772-7391, x. 147

APPENDIX A. REFERENCE PLANS AND DOCUMENTS

- Stratham 2019 Master Plan Update:
https://www.strathamnh.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif5051/f/uploads/2019.11.20_masterplan_adopted.pdf
- Town of Stratham GIS
<https://www.axisgis.com/StrathamNH/>
- Town of Stratham Conservation Commission
<https://www.strathamnh.gov/conservation-commission>
- Town of Stratham Conservation Commission Land Conservation Criteria
https://www.strathamnh.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif5051/f/uploads/conservation_criteria_2020.pdf
- Town of Stratham Assessors List of Easement Properties with Conservation Easements
<https://www.strathamnh.gov/assessing-department/pages/properties-conservation-easements>
- Town of Stratham Open Space Initiative, 2002
https://www.strathamnh.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif5051/f/uploads/stratham_open_space_initiative_reduced.pdf
- Town of Stratham Planning and Zoning Requirements
<https://www.strathamnh.gov/planning-zoning-department/pages/rules-regulations>
- Town of Stratham Trail Management Advisory Committee Report
https://www.strathamnh.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif5051/f/uploads/tmac_recommendations_final_2_15_22.pdf
- Town of Stratham Forestry Plan
https://www.strathamnh.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif5051/f/uploads/forest_management_plan_-_stratham_hill_park_town_forest_june_2016.pdf
- Town of Stratham Climate Risk Vulnerability Assessment:
https://www.therpc.org/application/files/2515/1561/6767/Stratham_Assessment_Report_Final_rev2.pdf
- Great Bay Bicycle Loop
<https://www.therpc.org/transportation/bicycle-and-pedestrian/rpc-bikeped-plan>