

SZEGDA FARM MANAGEMENT PLAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Szegda Farm Management Committee, in preparing this management plan, has sought to comply with the three main goals of the Town of Columbia's Open Space Plan: continued agricultural use of prime agricultural soils, protection of priority habitat, and protection of priority wetland areas. Providing passive recreational opportunities was another important goal.

The overall management goal for this plan is: To manage the Szegda Farm property in a manner that maintains the agricultural history of the property, conserves and enhances the diverse natural resources of the property, and allows for recreational opportunities for the general public.

This management plan promotes agriculture in a number of ways. Commercial farming, community gardens, and agricultural outreach and education are included as activities to be encouraged.

The goal of the Conservation portion of this management plan is to manage the property to protect, and where deemed prudent, enhance its natural resources, and educate the public in the value and methods of such conservation practices. This would include protecting wetland areas, minimizing spread of invasive plants, and maintaining grassland habitat for wildlife, as well as encouraging regular environmental education and conservation activities for the public.

Recreation, by the terms of the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant used to purchase this property, must be passive and without significant impact on the natural resources. A network of hiking trails, a sledding slope, and a picnic area provide passive recreation opportunities.

Goals of the Safety and Maintenance portion of the plan include developing a management strategy for operations and maintenance that ensures all capital improvement to the existing infrastructure, along with new initiatives and safety requirements, are compatible with the environment, and require minimal maintenance.

INTRODUCTION

This 133-acre portion of the Szegda Farm was acquired by the Town of Columbia on May 12, 2008 after several years of cooperative effort by the Szegda family, the town's Board of Selectmen, the Open Space Committee, and the State of Connecticut. It was the goal of all involved to see this land dedicated as open space so that the town's agricultural heritage could be honored, its natural resources protected, and citizens given an additional area for passive recreation.

This parcel lies between Szegda Road to the north and Route 87 to the south. It includes about 800 feet of shoreline on Gifford's Brook, and encompasses about forty-five acres of quality wetlands that contribute to the lower Gifford's Brook watershed. In addition to four types of wetland habitat – riparian, swamp, marsh and wet meadow, it also has two other fairly uncommon habitats – early successional cedar-dominated areas, and a series of large bedrock outcrops. These wetlands and diverse habitats had already identified this parcel as a priority one based on the town's Open Space Plan.

The Szegda Farm also includes about 25 acres of prime agricultural soils which gives it the potential to contribute to another Open Space Goal – the continued agricultural use of such prime soils. Since Columbia's founding, this area has provided cropland on the prime soils, and pasture on the poorer soils and steeper areas. From the town's first settlement up to the 1860's, it was home to the Collins family. For the last hundred years, it has been farmed by the Szegda family.

Funding for the purchase of this property was made possible by a 50% matching grant from the state of Connecticut's Open Space Grant Program. A condition of that grant is a conservation easement deeded to the State which states that the land "shall be preserved in perpetuity predominately in its natural, scenic, forested and/or open space condition," and "shall provide opportunities for limited public recreation as long as it can be provided without significant impact to the natural resources."

The Szegda Farm Management Committee wishes to maintain the reference to the Szegda family in the name of the property. In that spirit, the Committee endorses the name of Szegda Farm for this property. Keeping the town's Open Space Goals, the terms of the conservation easement, and the heritage of the property conveyed to us by the Szegda family all in mind, the Szegda Farm Management Committee offers the following management plan to the Town.

HISTORY

Szegda is a name that goes back five generations in Columbia, and has been vitally important in the economics, politics, and aesthetics of our town.

In the 1890's John Szegda emigrated from Poland to Hartford, and worked in the machine shop at the Colt Factory. He met and married Karolina, another Polish immigrant. Around 1900 they bought 100 acres of land in Columbia and started a chicken farm.

John and Karolina Szegda raised four children. Joseph, the oldest, and his wife Laura, followed in his father's footsteps and continued farming. Chicken farming was becoming unprofitable, so it was Joe who began phasing out the chickens and building a dairy herd of 160 cows. Joe also added acreage to the farm, adding the land around Gifford's Brook and about 60 acres on Chestnut Hill.

Ron Szegda has continued the Szegda family tradition of farming in Columbia. He added more acreage to the farm in the 1970's by purchasing the Robinson Farm on Post Hill, bringing the total acreage to more than triple what his grandfather originally had.

The Szegda family, five generations of civic-minded people, have added much to the rural character of Columbia by preserving their large land holdings in agriculture.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of this management plan is:

To manage the Szegda Farm property in a manner that maintains the agricultural heritage of the property, conserves and enhances the diverse natural resources of the property, and allows for recreational opportunities for the general public.

The Szegda Farm property is a very diverse piece of property, containing excellent wildlife habitat and supporting productive farmland. These aspects of the property should be maintained, and where appropriate, enhanced. Being the first piece of property that the Town of Columbia has purchased for open space in thirty years, it is important that the general public have the opportunity to enjoy the property through a number of different avenues. Public use of the property, however, should be in congruence with the maintenance of the ecological integrity of the property. Accordingly, objectives and strategies are presented for each of the following guidelines.

AGRICULTURE

OBJECTIVE A:

To continue farming as a way to promote the long agricultural history of the town and the Szedga Farm and to demonstrate that farming can be part of a land management tool to preserve and protect open space. Through the use of farming, we can encourage agricultural income to benefit the town, in a partnership with participating farmers. More importantly, Columbia's citizens can gain knowledge through educational and cooperative programs.

Strategy A-1. To encourage a partnership between the town and local farmers for continued use of the property in designated commercial farming areas to grow sustainable agricultural crops. Areas of the property located on the park map that are identified as Areas A-1, A-5, and A-6 are the recommended areas available for commercial farming initiatives. **See Figure 1, Szedga Farm – Management Units.**

Rationale: The Szedga Farm Management committee recommends that the Board of Selectmen (BOS) lease to interested local farmers Agricultural Areas A-1, A-5, & A-6. Rated as prime agricultural land, these areas are considered a priority for sustainable agriculture.

Recommendation 1: Properties identified on Map locations as A-1, A-5, and A-6 are areas available for commercial farming initiatives.

Responsibility: Columbia Board of Selectmen (BOS) will be responsible for entering into agreements for commercial farming initiatives in A-1. The Szedga Farm Management Committee also recommends the following strategy to the BOS relating to A-5 & A-6; Execute a 5-year contract with a farmer to improve fields A-5 & A-6 to make them profitable hay lots, following recommendations in Appendix A.
Timetable: early spring 2021 for the contract to be finalized.

Strategy A-2. Maintain a working cooperative farming initiative that educates citizens on the value of incorporating agriculture as a means to preserve open space and to allow citizens hands on experiences to enjoy the benefits of farming through demonstrations, cooperative projects and organic growing practices. A “cooperative agricultural zone” in accordance with the land use agreement is located within all of Agricultural A-4 that borders Szedga Road. This strategy forever preserves a section of the property for cooperative and educational agricultural use.

Rationale: Community efforts can help preserve agricultural land, encourage sustainable agricultural practices, and facilitate the production and distribution of locally-produced food through farmer's markets and cooperative food buying programs. The objective is to utilize the Szedga Farm as an educational resource to teach citizens backyard sustainable farming and gardening techniques through community gardens, cooperative agriculture

projects, and wildlife management which will preserve and protect our land to feed and sustain us.

Recommendation 1: Maintain a community garden area open to citizens for growing crops for private consumption and local food production initiatives.

Responsibility: SFMC, Conservation/Agriculture Commission and subcommittees, and a community garden association.

Recommendation 2: Establish an orchard area.

Responsibility: SFMC, Conservation/Agriculture Commission and its subcommittees, and a cooperative orchard association.

Timetable: ongoing

Recommendation 3: Develop agricultural education projects and arrange demonstrations of interest to citizens for both land management use of Szedga Farm and for home use.

Responsibility: Conservation/Agriculture Commission, Community Garden Members, SFMC, and interested stakeholders.

Timetable: Ongoing

Recommendation 4: Set aside a quiet area for those interested in starting and maintaining an apiary.

Responsibility: Conservation/Agriculture Commission, SFMC, Community Garden Members, and interested stakeholders.

Timetable: Ongoing

Recommendation 5: Determine public interest and develop, as appropriate, other plantings in regard to other possible citizen hobbies related to planting berry crops, ornamental trees and shrubs, flowers, etc. Such areas will contribute to the development of special interest and destination spots within the property.

Responsibility: SFMC, Conservation/Agriculture Commission, Community Garden Members, and interested stakeholders.

Timetable: Ongoing

Recommendation 6: Create a plot within the Community Garden that is accessible for the handicapped and elderly.

Responsibility: SFMC, DPW, interested stakeholders.

Timetable: Spring 2021

Recommendation 7: Create a safe place for small children to play while the parents or grandparents work in the Community Garden.

Responsibility: SFMC, DPW, interested stakeholders

Timetable Spring 2021

Recommendation 8: Explore alternative power sources, such as solar and wind power, to benefit agricultural operations and educational purposes.

Responsibility: SFMC, DPW.

Recommendation 9: Special consideration should be given to the Riparian Areas abutting agriculture area A-1. These and agricultural A-2 should be managed to protect state listed species that have been found to be using these areas. (Presence of this species should not be made public) Agricultural area A-2 should be managed as a meadow with native forbs and shrubs. Once the invasives have been removed, it should be brush hogged every year between November 1 and March 31. Limited public access practices should be developed. Fishermen staying well within the riverbank area would have no impact on the agricultural operations of the plains lot.

Responsibility: SFMC, DPW

Timetable: Every November

CONSERVATION

OBJECTIVE B:

Manage the property to protect and where deemed prudent, enhance its natural resources, and educate the public in the value and methods of such conservation practices.

Strategy B-1.

Conduct an inventory of the parcel's natural resources.

Rationale: It is necessary to identify and locate the important resources before an adequate plan can be made for their protection.

Recommendation 1: Enlist the services of professional and amateur naturalists in making a property inventory.

Responsibility: Conservation/Agriculture Commission

Strategy B-2. Promote / enhance the diversity and ecological integrity of wildlife habitats.

Rationale: One goal of acquisition was the protection of priority wetlands and forest wildlife habitat.

Recommendation 1: Limit human access in sensitive areas – in particular, location of recreational trails and areas of vehicular access.

Responsibility: SFMC

Timetable: Ongoing

Recommendation 2: Tailor agricultural practices to protect wetland areas, minimize spread of invasive plants, and maintain grassland habitat for wildlife.

Responsibility: SFMC, DPW

Recommendation 3: Promote restoration of native plant species in place of alien invasives.

Responsibility: DPW, volunteers

Timetable: Year 1-2: Mow/ remove invasives in agricultural fields. Year Two: Begin control of invasives and woody growth at edges of agricultural fields and along stone walls. Year Three +: Control invasives in wetland areas.

Recommendation 4: Work with CL&P to ensure BMP's in power line corridors. Request that vehicle use within power line corridors be confined to the period between 1 November and 1 April.

Responsibility: Town of Columbia, SFMC

Timetable: ongoing

Recommendation 5: Require that all dogs on the property be on a leash.

Responsibility: Town of Columbia

Timetable: Ongoing

Recommendation 6: Plan and develop habitat enhancements such as nest boxes, brush piles, butterfly gardens.

Responsibility: Conservation/Agriculture Commission, volunteer groups

Timetable: ongoing

Recommendation 7: Using BMP's for state listed species, maintain field adjacent to Riparian area and agricultural area A-2 and across the access road from Gifford's Brook in grassland for state listed species. See Figure 1, Szegda Farm – Management Units Map.

Responsibility: DPW, volunteers

Timetable: As needed, likely every 2-3 years, November-March

Strategy B-3

Encourage regular environmental education / conservation activities for the public.

Rationale: Education will build support for the Town's Open Space Goals and protection of natural resources, as well as provide a source of enjoyment.

Recommendation 1: Hold site walks / workshops featuring subjects relating to the parcel's ecology and management.

Responsibility: Conservation/Agriculture Commission

Timetable: Ongoing

Recommendation 2: Develop interpretive exhibits / kiosk/ trail guides.

Responsibility: Conservation/Agriculture Commission, school groups, Scouts

Timetable: ongoing.

RECREATION

OBJECTIVE C:

In accordance with the conditions of the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant, the Town “shall provide opportunities for limited public recreation as long as it can be provided without significant impact to the natural resources.” Therefore, the objective is to provide passive recreation opportunities for the public.

Strategy C-1. Maintain and promote hiking trails north of the primary power line corridor.

Rationale: Hiking trails provide an environment for several forms of passive recreation: hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, letter boxing, equestrian activities, etc.

Recommendation 2: Maintain and promote a network of trails around the two ridges, avoiding, as much as possible, the wetlands and other sensitive areas.

Responsibility: Volunteers

Timetable: Annually

Strategy C-2: Create an area for winter sledding. (upper part of area A-5)

Rationale: There are few cleared slopes in town to provide a safe area to sled.

Recommendation 1: Maintain a parking lot near Szegda Road at the top of the northeast field. (A-5) Keep this lot clear of snow to accommodate sledders and winter hikers.

Responsibility: DPW

Recommendation 2: Mow the sledding field in the fall.

Responsibility: DPW

Timetable: Annually in November

Strategy C-3: Permitted Bow Hunting, following State Regulations and Seasons

Rationale: Provides recreation for hunters with minimal risk to other users of the property. Helps to control the over-population of white tail deer.

Responsibility: Town administrator’s Office to issue permits.

Timetable: Fall 2021 and annually

SAFETY AND MAINTENANCE

OBJECTIVE D:

To develop a management strategy for operations and maintenance that ensures all capital improvement to the existing infrastructure along with new initiatives and safety requirements are compatible with the environment, and require minimal maintenance. Therefore, plans for current and future land use must evaluate the existing infrastructure for long - term sustainability and optimal use of resources for operations and maintenance services.

Strategy D-1. To develop a facility and infrastructure plan that minimizes environmental impacts and identifies safety, maintenance and practices for long term planning and use.

Rationale: It is critical after securing the property to begin to involve all stakeholder and interest groups to develop best practices and strategies for ongoing maintenance and safety at Szedga Farm in accordance with the Master Plan.

Recommendation 1: Activities and Initiatives recommended by the Szedga Farm Management Committee, Town agencies, commissions, interested stakeholders, and public citizens that involve safety and maintenance considerations will be identified so as to:

1. Review maintenance and safety practices in accordance with insurance and regulatory requirements as they apply to employees, contractors, volunteers and the public.
2. Develop a maintenance and safety evaluation review procedure. Include Town of Columbia safety and administrative agencies in a review of Szedga Farm practices and procedures to insure consistency with existing town standard's relating to emergency and routine operations.
3. Incorporate into the maintenance and safety plan details that specifically identify trail and park facility maintenance, along with recommended conservation, recreational, and agricultural activities and practices.

FUNDING AND BUDGET

OBJECTIVE E: To acquire the appropriate financial resources to meet the objectives outlined within the management plan.

Strategy E-1. To develop a partnership between the Town, SFMC, and interested stakeholders to manage a budget that meets the operating needs of the Szedga Farm Open Space.

Rationale: Enhancements for special interests, recreation pursuits, sustainable agriculture, and preservation of the intrinsic beauty of the property require planning and funding.

Recommendation 1: To have the SFMC, town government and interested stakeholders develop and update specific budget projections for inclusion in the DPW budget.

Rationale: Mowing, snow removal, and other maintenance need to be managed, and require special equipment.

Responsibility: SFMC, BOS, and appropriate Town departments and commissions such as Conservation/Agriculture, and Recreation.

Timetable: Annually

Recommendation 2: Track all in-kind services rendered by both Town employees and volunteers. These types of services will be integral for establishment of match for various grant programs.

Responsibility: SFMC, DPW

Timetable: Ongoing.

Recommendation 3: To develop an agreement with commercial farmer(s) to, have the farmer provide in-kind support with agriculture and conservation initiatives, in return for the use of the Plains Lot and/or the other hay lots.

Responsibility: BOS, SFMC, Agriculture Commission, and interested stakeholders.

Timetable: spring 2021 and ongoing.

Appendices

Appendix A.

Guidelines for Agricultural Practices

1. No brush, stumps, rocks or other waste matter shall be pushed into wetland areas or allowed to accumulate.
2. Brush from invasives shall be burned, chipped, or removed from the property.
3. No bulldozing or alteration of topography without town approval. Areas left bare of vegetation must be reseeded within three weeks or mowed at least twice a year to avoid new areas of invasives.
4. Organic practices are preferred. Use of pesticides and herbicides must be approved prior to application and with posting so that the public is informed.

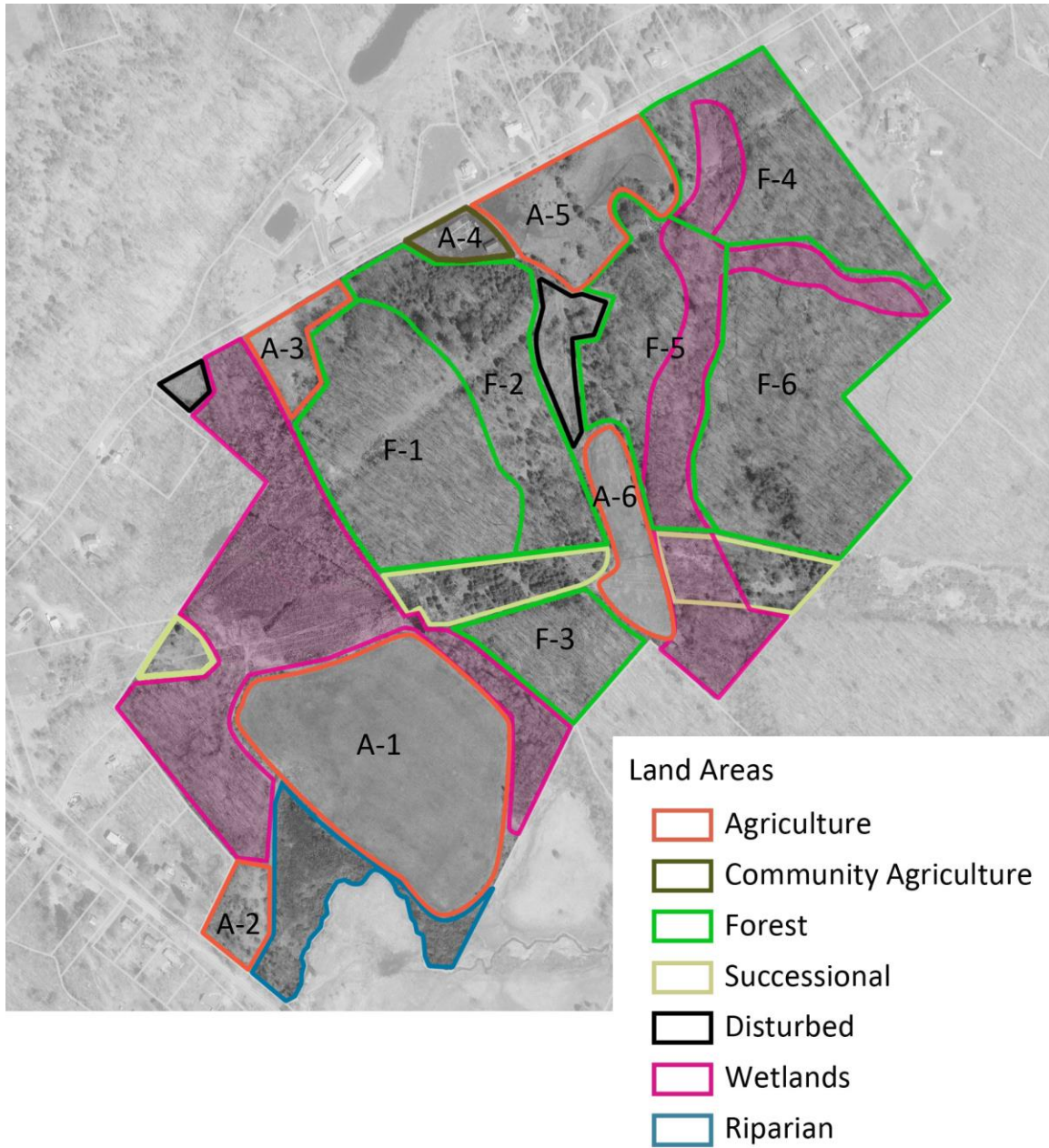
Appendix B.

Columbia's Guidelines for Trail Development and Maintenance

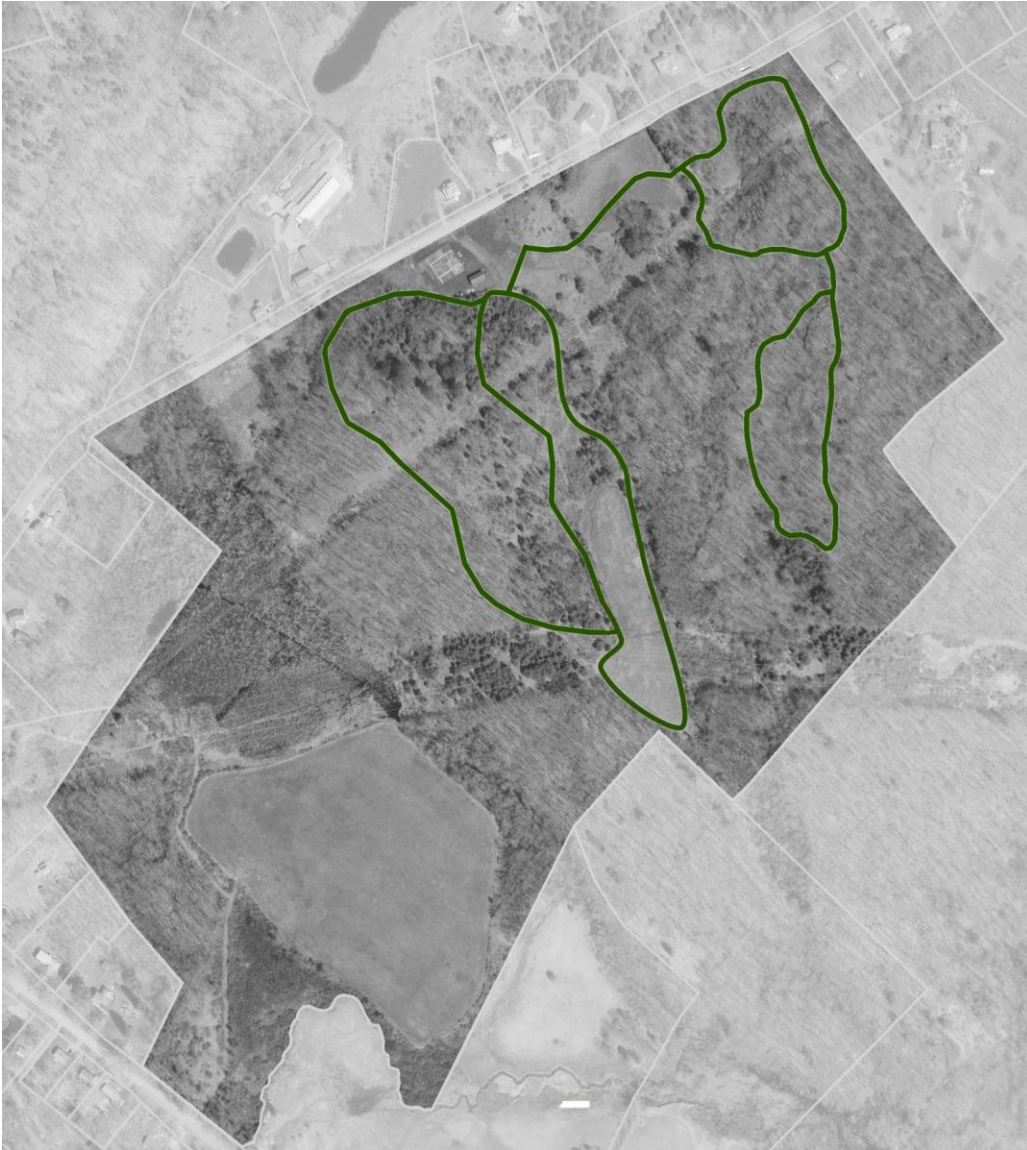
1. Trails should be suitable for a variety of ages and abilities, as well as different types of use (foot, ski, horse, etc.).
2. Trails should lead users to scenic vistas, a variety of habitats and topographies, while avoiding sensitive natural areas.
3. Trails should avoid steep slopes (too easily eroded).
4. Wetland crossings should be kept to a minimum and be as narrow as possible.
5. Trails should be blazed to guide the user.
6. Trails should be at a distance from property boundaries to reduce visual impact, and reduce chances of trespass.
7. Trails should make minimal incursion into agricultural areas.
8. At Szegda Farm, out of respect for wildlife habitat, no trails should be created in the areas to the south of the primary power line.

Figures

1. Szegda Farm Management Unit Map



2. Szegda Farm Trail Map



Annual Maintenance Schedule

Task	Timing	Responsible Party
Negotiate Farmer Leases A-1, A-6	5-yr.	Town Adm./ BOS
Update Management Plan	5 yr.	CCAG Commission
Snow Removal Upper Parking Lot	>2 inches	DPW
Mowing of MUs A-2, A-3, A-5	1x/yr. Oct/Nov	DPW
Pole Barn Maintenance	As Needed	DPW
Water Pump/Solar Maintenance	As Needed	DPW
Mowing MU A-4	Weekly	Volunteers
Supply/Maint. A-4 mowing equipmt.	As Needed	DPW
Invasive Control, Stonewalls/Trails	Annually	Volunteers
Trail Maintenance	Annually	Volunteers
Re-Blaze Trails	5 yrs.	Volunteers
Walk Boundaries	Annually	Volunteers
Complete Steward Report	Annually	Volunteers
Community Garden Open/Close	Annually	Volunteers
Community Garden Registration	Annually	Rec. Dept.
Port-a-Potty	Annually	Rec. Dept.
Litter Cleanup	As Needed	Volunteers