



## VISION

Block Island will offer a variety of recreational activities that encourage healthy lifestyles and provide attractive and accessible places for the recreational pursuits of its residents and many visitors. The island's unparalleled network of conservation areas will continue to promote a strong sense of community and inspire responsible stewardship.

# 4. RECREATION & CONSERVATION AREAS

New Shoreham 2016 Draft Comprehensive Plan

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# RECREATION & CONSERVATION AREAS

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## SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

*Ocean State Outdoors*, State Guide Plan Element 152. Rhode Island Department of Administration, Division of Planning and Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. Adopted 2003, Amended in 2009.

The Town of New Shoreham Harbor Management Plan, Revised January 18, 2012.

The Town of New Shoreham Shoreline Access Working Group Report. December, 2015.

## BACKGROUND

With an extensive network of conserved lands and trails, 17 miles of beaches and two harbors, Block Island serves the recreational needs not only of its residents but also the tens of thousands of vacationers who visit the island annually to access them.

The following chapter provides an inventory of Block Island's recreational assets along with an assessment of current and future recreational needs. These recreational resources are critically important to the local economy and the quality of life of residents. Providing recreational opportunities is an important means of promoting public health and wellness for a community. On Block Island in particular, the availability of year-round recreational offerings is essential for residents to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

The New Shoreham Recreation Department, has the primary responsibility for providing recreational offerings on the island. Since the Department was instituted in 1996, the Town has seen a demand for additional and varied recreational opportunities on the part of both residents and visitors.

For all these reasons and more, planning for the development and maintenance of recreational facilities and the acquisition and stewardship of conserved lands is of prime importance to the island. *Coming to a consensus as a community as to what additional recreational facilities or offerings can or should be provided is a great challenge that may require additional planning and analysis.*

## Inventory of Recreation Facilities and Lands

Shown on Map RCI *Recreational Assets* and described below are existing recreational facilities on Block Island. The first two municipal facilities, Heinz Field and Ball O'Brien Park, are administered by the New Shoreham Recreation Department.

### *Heinz Field*

Heinz Field is a multipurpose facility that includes a soccer field, baseball diamond, softball diamond and a walking path. The field is within a beautiful landscaped area and has ample parking. In the summer, it is heavily used by various town leagues. The ballfields are also utilized by the School Department, residents, and tourists.

### *Ball O'Brien Park*

Ball O'Brien Park contains a playground, a skate park, a basketball court, two tennis courts, a picnic shelter and public restrooms. It is used heavily by residents year-round and for leagues in the summer. The property is located adjacent to the Great Salt Pond and there is a path which provides shorelines access.

### *Block Island School*

Block Island School is the primary indoor facility utilized by the Recreation Department. The gymnasium is used for some after-school and evening activities including youth programs and a town basketball league. It is also regularly used during the summer to host a variety of programming including a children's camp and basketball and volleyball leagues.

### *Recreation Center*

The Recreation Center, a municipal program for middle and high school students, is located in the basement of the Harbor Baptist Church. The facility is open for this program weekend evenings between late fall and early spring. It serves principally as an activity and social center. The Recreation Center also serves an important role of a foreign student center for seasonal workers during the summer.

### *Fred Benson Town Beach*

The Town Beach facility consists of a seasonally operated pavilion, parking accommodations for vehicles and bicycles and 400 feet of life guarded beach. The building includes restrooms and changing rooms, a concession stand and pay showers. An upgrade to the building is expected in 2016 to increase the number of showers and restroom capacity, and to allow access to these facilities when the building is closed (at the end of the day during the summer season, and during the shoulder season). The parking area was also recently expanded in response to beach parking alongside Corn Neck Road, which often leads to congestion and unsafe conditions. Further parking lot improvements are currently planned for including additional capacity. The Recreation Department has managed the Town Beach facility since 2010.

### *Other Parks*

There are a number of other parks and properties which are publicly-owned or available for public use, as listed below and identified on MAP RCI *Recreational Assets*. Some of these are planned for, or could be subject to, further physical improvements or enhancement.

- MARY D. PARK (WATER STREET)  
A STAIRCASE TO PROVIDE ACCESS FROM WATER STREET TO DINGHY BEACH IS PLANNED.
- ESTA'S PARK (WATER STREET)  
RECENT IMPROVEMENTS INCLUDING LANDSCAPING, BENCHES, AND PATHS COMPLETED AND LED BY THE OLD HARBOR TASK FORCE. IT IS NOW AN INVITING SPACE DOWNTOWN, CONVENIENTLY LOCATED FOR THOSE ARRIVING AND DEPARTING BY FERRY.

- NEGUS PARK (OCEAN AVENUE)  
PROPERTY IS UTILIZED WEEKLY FOR FARMER’S MARKET
- SOLVIKEN PROPERTY (CORN NECK ROAD)  
CONSERVED LAND CONVENIENTLY LOCATED BETWEEN THE TOWN BEACH AND DOWNTOWN. THE PROPERTY IS OWNED BY THE BLOCK ISLAND CONSERVANCY AND THE BLOCK ISLAND LAND TRUST AND IS PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE. AMENITIES INCLUDE A FEW PICNIC BENCHES. FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS ARE CURRENTLY BEING DEVELOPED.
- TRIANGLE AT ISAAC’S CORNER
- NICHOLAS BALL PARK

### Conservation Lands

As of 2015, 2,210 of the island’s 6,076 acres (which excludes coastal ponds – the Great Salt Pond, Cormorant Cove, Trims Pond and Harbor Pond) are protected as open space through public or non-profit ownership. Another 597 acres consist of wetlands or waterbodies and cannot be developed. On that basis, 46.2% of the island’s land area is conserved, 36.4% through deeded protection and 9.8% through regulation.

The island’s robust program of land conservation began in 1972 with the establishment of the Block Island Conservancy. Leaders in the conservation movement originally established a goal of protecting 50% of the island, and previous and ongoing efforts have been extremely successful at nearing the achievement of that goal. The Town should continue to support the identification and conservation of remaining significant open space properties and encourage proper stewardship and management of the existing network of conserved lands. These ongoing efforts are essential for Block Island’s economy and quality of life for present and future generations.

### Trail System

The island’s 28 mile trail system is maintained principally through the combined efforts of the Block Island Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy. The trail system offers users passive recreational opportunities to enjoy the scenic natural beauty of the island including ocean views, coastal features, forests and meadows and provide important pedestrian connections and access to many locations throughout the island. The best trails for individuals with mobility issues are Hodge and Dickens Farm. The island’s extensive trail system is shown on Map RC1 *Recreational Assets* and is detailed in Table R1: *Block Island Trails* below. Further expansion of the trail system by The Nature Conservancy is not planned at this time, with maintenance capabilities being a limiting factor.

<b>Trail</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Level</b>
CLAY HEAD TRAIL AND THE MAZE	12 miles	Moderate
HODGE FAMILY WILDLIFE PRESERVE	1 mile	Easy
MEADOW HILL GREENWAY	.5 miles	Moderate
THE GREENWAY - GREAT SALT POND TO BEACON HILL ROAD	1 mile	Moderate
THE GREENWAY - SOUTH BEACON HILL AND NATHAN	1.3 miles	Hard

MOTT PARK TRAILS		
THE GREENWAY - TURNIP FARM AND ELAINE LOFFREDO PRESERVE TRAILS	1.7 miles	Moderate
THE GREENWAY - OLD MILL ROAD TO RODMAN'S HOLLOW AND BLACK ROCK TRAILS	2.6 miles	Moderate
FRESH POND TRAIL	.8 miles	Hard
FRESH SWAMP AND PAYNE FARM TRAIL	.9 miles	Moderate
WIN DODGE AND DICKENS FARM TRAILS	2.4 miles	Win Dodge: Hard; Dickens Farm: Easy
<i>Source: On This Island, Keith H. Lang and Scott B. Comings, Published by The Nature Conservancy, 2006.</i>		

## Water-Based Recreational Opportunities

### Shoreline Access

Block Island's 17 miles of beaches provide endless water-based recreational opportunities and attract visitors from around the globe. In addition to the Town Beach, swimming is popular and accessible, at-your-own risk, at various locations around the island.

It is estimated that the town has over 27 public access to the shore locations including seven CRMC designated right-of-ways to the shore. The Town Council established an informal working group, the Shoreline Access Working Group (SAWG), to inventory public right-of-ways and shoreline access points around the island. The group was tasked with assessing the condition and accessibility of each right-of-way and shoreline access point and to provide recommendations. Their final report is included in [Appendix X](#) and should be considered and incorporated into future projects including the production of a waterfront access guide for the public. The project should also be built upon in the future to include an inventory of public access points to the island's fresh waterbodies. For a recent description of identified public right-of-ways to the shore see the New Shoreham Harbor Management Plan, adopted in 2012 and the Shoreline Access Working Group Report, adopted in 2015 ([Appendix X](#)).

### Recreational Boating

The majority of recreational boating activity takes place at New Harbor (Great Salt Pond), with services and boat slips provided by commercial marinas. The Town has 90 rental moorings in the Great Salt Pond. In addition to the town-owned moorings, and commercial slips there are 289 private, permit moorings. There is also a large anchorage area in the eastern portion of the pond. Please refer the Great Salt Pond Chapter for additional discussion.

Old Harbor provides a small anchorage area to the west of the ferry docking area, a town-operated marina with two docks providing 80 slips, and one private marina. Some of the slips at the town-owned Old Harbor Dock are leased to commercial fishing and charter boat operators, but most are available for public use by transient boaters.

Block Island has a number of private companies offering water-related recreational services. These include sailing and fishing charters, as well as parasailing, kayaking and canoeing tours and rentals, and surf and paddle board lessons and rentals.

For additional discussion on the island's harbors refer to the Town's Harbor Management Plan.

## Recreational Programs Offered by the Town

The Recreation Department organizes, manages, and supports a number of programs throughout the year. There are numerous programs for all ages in the off-season, including many activities for children and teens, a basketball league, and trips to the mainland for cultural events. Little League and tennis are offered in the spring. Soccer, lacrosse, baseball, basketball and volleyball are offered in the summer along with nature and arts camps. The island also hosts popular athletic events including a 10K race in the spring, a triathlon in the summer, and a 15K run in the fall.

### RECREATIONAL NEEDS SURVEY

In 2015, the Recreation Department undertook a survey of residents and visitors to gauge satisfaction with existing facilities and to determine the need for additional outdoor and indoor recreational facilities. Given that the distribution of the survey was not controlled, the results cannot be considered statistically significant and should not be solely relied upon. However, the information can assist decision-makers in identifying additional recreational facilities and programs that should be explored.

Of the 369 responses, 43% self-identified as year-round residents and the rest were evenly split between seasonal residents or visitors. There were generally high satisfaction rates with the various recreational facilities, with a couple exceptions. Development of additional outdoor recreational facilities was supported by just 36% of the respondents who identified themselves as year-round residents, but by 50% of all respondents who answered the question. Development of an indoor recreation space was supported by 80% of year-round residents, and by 67% of all respondents. For the indoor facility, the overwhelming demand was for a fitness and wellness center and a swimming pool, or more generally, a multi-use facility that serves all ages.

The Recreation Department should continue to monitor demand for facilities and programs in order to effectively provide for the recreational needs of the community.

## RECREATIONAL NEEDS IDENTIFIED

In providing for recreation, the town's first priority must be to ensure safe and clean facilities through proper management and maintenance. The Town must also encourage stewardship of the lands already set aside for conservation. In addition, the Town should plan for the expansion of its recreational inventory in response to the needs of the community. However, consideration must be made for the costs to the community associated with the development and ongoing maintenance of any additional parks and ballfields. A Recreation Master Plan including financial analyses can assist the island in establishing a realistic long-range plan for the development and maintenance of recreational assets and can be used to guide implementation

efforts. The following section describes the limitations of existing recreation facilities and future needs for additional recreational offerings.

### *Fred Benson Town Beach*

As a top attraction and recreational asset of the island, support and demand will always exist for additional improvements and amenities at the Town Beach. However, given the vulnerability of the building's location to high winds and storm surges, and the damages it incurred during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, the Town must balance the expense of improvements with the risk of future damage from severe storms.

### *Athletic Fields*

Expansion of athletic fields has been identified as necessary to respond to the demands of multiple user groups, particularly in the summer. Heinz Field is not large enough to accommodate the programming needs of both the Recreation Department and the School Department.

### *Gymnasium*

Availability of programs offered to the general public at the Block Island School is limited by facility access and the school calendar. Opportunities to provide increased access for adult recreation programs at the Block Island School, particularly the gymnasium, when it is not being utilized by school programming should be explored.

### *Recreation Center*

The Recreation Center in the Harbor Baptist Church is not accessible to individuals with physical disabilities. The facility is limited in its use by the Harbor Baptist Church to its operating hours and length of season. For these two reasons, an alternative, more permanent location within a town-owned or controlled property should be explored.

### *Indoor Recreational Facility & Swimming Pool*

The community acknowledges the recreation and health benefits an indoor recreation and community center could provide year-round residents. This type of facility could also enhance the island's tourism industry's shoulder season. Along with exercise class space and an exercise equipment room, the facility could also serve as a youth center, senior center, and house the Recreation Department offices. It could also be a location for educational pursuits and a space for community events, enhancing the quality of life of residents and fostering community cohesion. The Town will further explore potential locations along with the financial costs and capabilities of the town to develop, operate and maintain such a facility. The feasibility of an indoor swimming pool at this recreational facility or another location should also be explored.

*Physical space for additional recreational programs discussed above could be provided by rehabilitating one or more existing and underutilized town-owned buildings.*

*The Large Capital Asset Subcommittee (LCAS) is working on surveying existing town properties where recreational activities could be offered.*

### *Recreational Programs for Seniors*

In 2015, the Town added a full-time recreation assistant to the Recreation Department to specifically assist with recreational programming. This will allow additional programs to be offered in response to need, both seasonally and year-round. In particular, there is an identified lack of recreational programs for older adults. Given the growing aging population, it is anticipated that the demand for recreational programs for seniors will increase in the future.

### *Geographically Dispersed Provision of Neighborhood Scaled Recreational Amenities*

Redevelopment in the village and harbor areas, the construction of new housing, particularly affordable, and any major subdivision of land, provide opportunities for the provision of open space and recreation amenities at no cost to the town throughout the community. These neighborhood scaled recreational assets could include pocket parks, playgrounds, community gardens, pedestrian paths, and public access to the shore. The town currently has a conservation subdivision option, known as flexible design, which encourages the set aside of land for open space in subdivisions of three or more lots. The town should consider making conservation-style subdivisions mandatory for all major subdivisions on the island and encourage varied and site appropriate recreational amenities be provided as part of any major development or redevelopment projects.

### *Expansion of the Island's Conserved Lands Inventory*

Efforts to protect all critically important lands should continue. According to a 2011 poll conducted by The Nature Conservancy on Block Island, public priorities for the acquisition of conservation lands were identified in the following order.

Properties that:

- PROTECT FRESHWATER RESOURCES / QUALITY OF DRINKING WATER
- PROTECT IMPORTANT HABITAT, PARTICULARLY OF ENDANGERED SPECIES
- PROTECT SCENIC VIEWSHEDS AND LANDSCAPES
- PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PASSIVE RECREATION
- ARE MOST VULNERABLE TO DEVELOPMENT
- PROVIDE PUBLIC PARK SPACE AND CAN BE UTILIZED FOR BALLFIELDS
- CAN ACCOMMODATE COMMUNITY GARDENS

Other important priorities of the town when identifying properties to be protected include those lands which:

- ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO HISTORIC OR ARCHEOLOGICAL RESOURCES
- ABUT EXISTING CONSERVED LANDS / PROMOTE LARGE GREENWAYS OF CONNECTED CONSERVATION AREAS
- PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXTEND EXISTING TRAIL NETWORK
- PROVIDE PUBLIC ACCESS TO THE SHORE
- ARE SUBJECT TO INUNDATION DUE TO SEA LEVEL RISE
- CAN MITIGATE THE IMPACTS OF SEA LEVEL RISE

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## Goals, Policies & Implementation Actions

### GOAL RCI: PROVIDE AN EXPANSIVE AND WELL-MAINTAINED NETWORK OF OUTDOOR RECREATIONAL AREAS INCLUDING CONSERVATION LANDS, BEACHES, TRAILS, PARKS, AND BALLFIELDS

POLICY	ACTION	RESPONSIBLE PARTY	TIMEFRAME
RCI.A. Increase the inventory of conserved lands in order to protect natural resources including habitat and water quality and to preserve the island's scenic landscapes	RCI.A.1. Partner with non-profits to identify and prioritize open space lands that should be conserved	Land Trust; Conservation Commission; GIS Department; Town Manager; Town Council	Ongoing
	RCI.A.2. Collaborate with non-profits when acquiring, developing, and maintaining recreation and conservation areas	Land Trust; Conservation Commission; Town Manager; Town Council	Ongoing
	RCI.A.3. Prioritize the conservation of lands abutting conserved lands to create large protected greenways, habitat areas and opportunities for trail extensions	Land Trust; Town Council	Ongoing
RCI.B. Encourage the use of conservation-style (flexible) subdivisions over traditional subdivisions of land	RCI.B.4. Determine if conservation-style subdivisions should be mandatory for all major subdivisions	Planning Board	Short-term
RCI.C. Promote public access to the island's recreation and conservation areas	RCI.C.1. Maintain pedestrian trails including the greenway and right-of-ways to the shore so that they remain passable and have appropriate signage	Conservation Commission; Land Trust; Town Manager	Ongoing
	RCI.C.2. Inventory, document and map all public access points to the shoreline and freshwater bodies; publish and distribute a public waterfront access guide	SAWG; GIS Department; Harbors Department; Recreation Department	Short-term
	RCI.C.3. Create and disseminate a blueways map and guide to promote paddling (GSP2.B.1.)	GIS; Harbors Department; Tourism Council; Recreation Department	Short-term

RC1.D. Enhance the enjoyment and recreational potential of town-owned parks and other recreational assets through suitable upgrades, maintenance and management measures	RC1.D.1. Develop a maintenance plan for town recreational facilities that establishes roles and responsibilities of the various town departments and groups	Recreation Department; School Department; Land Trust; Town Manager	Short-term
	RC1.D.2. Add amenities and make upgrades to existing town-owned parks when possible	Town Manager; Recreation Department; Town Council	Ongoing
	RC1.D.3. Construct a staircase to provide access from Water Street to Dinghy Beach	Town Manager; Facilities Director; Building Official; Old Harbor Task Force	Short-term

**GOAL RC2: MEET THE RECREATIONAL FACILITY AND PROGRAM NEEDS OF RESIDENTS, BOTH YEAR-ROUND AND SEASONAL, OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES, AS WELL AS VISITORS**

POLICY	ACTION	RESPONSIBLE PARTY	TIMEFRAME
RC2.A. Plan for increased demand and investments in recreational facilities and programs	RC2.A.1. Develop and implement a fiscally feasible Recreation Master Plan that serves the long-term needs of residents	Building, Zoning, Land Use & Planning; LCAS; Recreation Department; Town Manager; Town Council	Medium-term
	RC2.A.2. Explore location options and financial ability of town to develop and operate an indoor recreational facility	LCAS; Town Manager; Town Council	Short-term
	RC2.A.3. Identify potential locations for the future development of playing fields to relieve issues related to over-use and scheduling conflicts	LCAS; Town Manager	Medium-term
	RC2.A.4. Add additional year-round recreational program opportunities targeted to older adults and seniors	Recreation Department	Short-term
RC2.B. Consider vulnerability to natural hazards when locating or upgrading recreational facilities			
RC2.C. Increase accessibility to town recreational facilities	RC2.C.1. Incorporate safe and convenient pedestrian and bicycle access to town recreational facilities	Building, Zoning, Land Use & Planning; Planning Board; Town Manager	Ongoing
	RC2.C.2. Retrofit existing facilities when possible to provide increased access to recreational facilities by disabled and seniors	Building, Zoning, Land Use & Planning; Planning Board; Town Manager	Ongoing
	RC2.C.3. Explore opportunities for increased access to the Block	Recreation Department; School Department	Short-term

	Island School gymnasium for adult recreation programs		
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RC2.D. Foster variety in the types and geographic locations of recreational amenities	RC2.D.1. Require that significant land development projects, including major subdivisions, incorporate open space and recreational amenities	Building, Zoning, Land Use & Planning; Planning Board	Short-term
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**Timeframes:** Short-term (1-3 years); Medium-term (4-6 years); Long-term (7-10 years)

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