

Recreation Improvement Plan Guidelines

Introduction

Some Restrictions held by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) ask that landowners develop Recreational Improvement Plans before additional recreational improvements, such as trails, kiosks, or parking areas, can be permitted on the Restricted property. Other Restrictions only require permission for an individual improvement. However, if managing for recreational use of the property is a primary goal, we encourage you to consider creating a Recreational Improvement Plan even if it is not required by the Restriction.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide a framework for these plans, as well as guidance for requesting permission for an individual improvement when approval, but not a plan, is required by your Restriction. A Recreational Improvement Plan (Plan) is a document that describes what recreational goals and objectives the landowner wants to accomplish on their property and how these goals and objectives will be reached, consistent with the purposes and terms of the CR. It includes the long-term recreation vision for the property and specific actions that the landowner would like to take to achieve that vision for the time horizon of the Plan and should be designed to guide future activities in a way that ensures the continued protection of the conservation values of a particular property. While the Plan should meet the Restriction requirements for approving any proposed recreational improvement projects, it should also be viewed as a useful tool for stewarding the property.

Some key objectives for landowners to consider when developing a Recreational Improvement Plan are to:

- Determine long and short-term goals to maintain and/or improve the recreational use of the property.
- Describe and assess current recreational improvements and their conditions particularly as they relate to the conservation and recreational values of the Restriction.
- Identify current management practices and capabilities.
- Develop specific, implementable recommendations to address the highest priority needs while reducing recreational redundancies and impacts to the conservation values of the Restriction.

It is important to note that the landowner is not obligated to complete/implement the actions proposed in the Plan. Once the Plan is approved, the landowner may carry out the proposed actions but is not required to do so. Rather, the development and approval of a Recreational Improvement Plan ensures that when a landowner is ready/able to move forward with their vision for the property, there is a clear path available to achieve that vision, consistent with the purposes and terms of the Restriction.

Recreation Improvement Plan Contents

While each Plan is tailored to a specific property and Restriction, typically they include the following sections:

1. Introduction:

General description of property, ownership, location, current & historical land use. This section should be brief but highlight what makes this property unique.

2. Primary Objectives:

A concise statement explaining the big-picture goal(s) or vision for the recreational use of the property and/or the Plan and how it is consistent with the overall purposes of the Restriction. For example, this may be to continue managing and improving the property's passive recreation opportunities while reducing impacts to the natural resources on the premises. This section should also include a statement of how often the objectives and/or Plan should be reviewed and updated. Plans should be updated a minimum of once every 10 years but check your Restriction to determine whether there is a pre-determined plan period that must be met.

3. Recreational Improvement Inventory & Assessment:

All recreational resources (buildings & structures, trails, parking areas, roadways, signage, benches, overlooks, etc.) should be identified and described here. Include information on the current condition of the improvements and a description of any related issues and challenges (erosion, unauthorized motorized vehicle use, trash, flooding, access limitations, trespass use, etc.) Locations of these features should be marked on an attached site plan.

Note that this section can reference other publications or works in which resource inventories or assessments have been completed.

4. Land Management Goals and Objectives:

Description of specific recreation-based management goals and objectives for the property that will ultimately help achieve the overall vision for the property. Goals may be separated into short and long-term goals, and may include:

- Expand recreational opportunities.
- Reducing recreational redundancy.
- Enhancing accessibility.
- Enhancing or replacing existing improvements to better protect natural resources.
- Developing opportunities for a particular user group (i.e. cross country skiers, or equestrians).
- Enhancing the visitor experience.

5. Management Activity Implementation and Timing:

Description of ongoing and planned land management activities to meet goals and objectives, including actions to address any issues noted in previous sections and a timetable of when management activities will be implemented. Include any anticipated ongoing maintenance activities and identify the organization(s) or individuals involved. **Always check your Restriction language to determine whether proposed activities are permitted before developing plans.**

Examples of *ongoing* management activities that may be included:

- Walk trails annually to cut back overgrown vegetation, remove felled trees, and check stream and/or wetland crossing structure conditions, noting any urgent maintenance needs.
- Re-paint trails once every 5 years and/or annually check for trail signs which need replacing.
- Assess parking area conditions in spring and grade/repair washouts, as necessary.
- Check kiosks for the most up to date trail maps and replacing, as necessary.

Examples of *planned* management activities/actions that may be included:

- Adding recreational improvements including trails, parking areas, access roads, interpretive displays, boardwalks, bridges, stairs, accessibility features, etc.
- Enhancing or replacing existing improvements.
- Creating trails, trail loops, or sections of trails.
- Closing trails or sections of trails.
- Creating a trail map and/or brochure.
- Engaging other stakeholders in planning or implementation of improvements
- Conducting a survey to get feedback from recreators/trail users on recreational improvements
- Adding improvements specific to developing opportunities for a particular user group (i.e. cross country skiers, or equestrians).
- Installing directional or interpretive signage.
- Installing a boardwalk or other trail feature to address erosion on a specific section of trail.
- Installing gates, boulders, signage, etc. to address unauthorized motor vehicle use.

Be as detailed as possible when describing proposed changes to or the addition of recreational improvements. Include why a particular improvement is necessary (i.e. what goal does adding this improvement help achieve?), any permits that must be obtained prior to beginning the project, the location which should also be shown on a map (see Section 6), and details of the improvement itself. Examples of details that should be provided for different types of improvements are included here as guidance but note that this is not necessarily an exhaustive list and details should always be tailored to the specific improvement and Restriction:

- *Trails*: surface material, tread and corridor width, vegetation removal required, important trail features (e.g., waterfall), stormwater considerations, and trail density of property.
- *Bridges, boardwalks, benches, etc.*: size, materials to be used, installation method, grading or excavation required.
- *Parking areas*: size, number of spaces, surface material, stormwater considerations, grading or excavation required.
- *Kiosks or interpretive signage*: size, type of information to be provided, installation method.
- *Structures such as a wildlife observation platform or pavilion*: size (including height), materials, installation method, grading or excavation required.
- *Impacts to natural resources*: buffers to protect ecologically sensitive areas or hydrologic features, measures to implement when improvements do overlap with ecologically sensitive areas or hydrologic features, development of improvements in areas already influenced by human activity.

For some management activities, referencing Best Management Practices (BMPs) documents may be helpful. Note that some Restrictions require that trail design, construction and maintenance follow the DCR Trails Guidelines and Best Practices Manual which is available here:

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/dcr-trails-guidelines-and-best-practices-manual/download>

The following additional recreational improvement BMPs are available at <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/best-management-practices-dcr>:

- Closing and Restoring Trails
- Trail Maintenance
- Vista Maintenance

6. Maps and Data:

Include the following maps and attachments:

- a. Locus to show the property in context of surrounding landscapes and features.
- b. Site Plan to show existing recreational improvements and general property features (boundaries, roads, overhead power lines, etc.)
- c. Conceptual future site plan (if applicable): any proposed management activities that would alter the existing property conditions should be included here.
- d. Design plans: any proposed improvements that have conceptual or engineered design plans should be included.

Note: Please reach out to Stewardship staff if you would like us to send you a printed version of the two linked documents above.

Individual Improvement Requests for Permission

Some Restrictions require prior DCR approval for individual recreational improvements including trails, structures such as bridges, signs, and kiosks. This is a separate process from the management plan approval process and the following guidelines will provide the framework for submitting such a request.

There are several important steps for landowners to take when planning to submit a request for approval as follows:

1. Find the language in your specific Restriction regarding the requirements for submitting a request for approval (feel free to ask Stewardship staff). Generally the language can be found in Section IV, V or VI, *Notice and Approval*. The language will typically specify how much advance notice is required, to whom the request should be sent, and what information should be included in a request.

2. Before submitting a request, it is recommended that you reach out to Stewardship staff to discuss the improvement you are planning and whether the project would be in compliance with the terms or purposes of the Restriction.

3. The terms of the Restriction typically require that a request include the “nature, scope, design, location, timetable and any other material aspect of the proposed activity.” Details should include the following:

- A paragraph that describes the design, nature of and reasons for the new improvement
- Dimensions (width, length and height for structures, width for trails of both tread and corridor)
- Materials that will be used
- Any alterations to the ground that will occur
- Photos and/or maps that help explain the project
- References to any Best Management Practices that will be followed
- Any permits obtained or that will be obtained for the work
- How the proposed activity is consistent with the purposes and terms of the Restriction

Note: for trail proposals it is especially helpful to include a map of the trail location, details on any ecologically sensitive or hydrological features near or at the trail location, trail grade and class, and information on pre-existing ways such as an old cart path that the new trail will follow.

4. Mail a paper copy of the request with the information above to the person and address listed in the *Notice and Approvals* section of your Restriction. Note that in 2023, the DCR Boston office moved and mail should be sent to 10 Park Plaza, Suite 6620, Boston MA 02116. To expedite the approval process, please also send a copy to Stewardship staff (email is preferable). In addition to the information describing the project detailed above, include a note or letter stating your name and contact information, the Restriction property address, and that you are requesting approval for a project on a Restriction property.

Proposal Review

After receiving the request, Stewardship staff may have additional questions about your proposal and will contact you. For some proposals, Stewardship staff will want to first conduct a site visit with you to discuss the project and view the proposed project area. Some projects will require submission of a Project Notification Form to the Massachusetts Historical Commission and/or consultation with the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program prior to beginning any work, and Stewardship staff can assess this with you.

Subsequently, you will be notified by the agency if the request is approved or denied and notified of any accompanying conditions of approval if the project is approved.