

Lowell Lake State Park Master Plan

Process Summary

Lowell Lake State Park was established in 1977 when the former Lowell Lake Lodge property was acquired by the State of Vermont, Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation for recreational access to Lowell Lake. The White parcel was acquired in 1996 to protect more recreational access and natural resources with the assistance of the Vermont Land Trust after a private home development on the western shore of the lake received Act 250 permitting but was never constructed. Lowell Lake State Park presently encompasses 356 acres and provides opportunities for fishing, picnicking, hiking, swimming and nature observation.

Following the White parcel acquisition, a two-year long-range planning process was undertaken to complete a General Management Plan, which was adopted in 1999. This process used a Steering Committee made up of local residents to present information and gather feedback at 14 public meetings. The main goals of the 1999 General Management Plan mainly revolved around recreation - enhance public access to the property for trail and dispersed use, and to restore the cabins and lodge on the property for overnight use and staff housing.

It is felt that the best way to meet the goals of the park operating philosophy will be to limit use to an extent. Overall use will be controlled by the number of parking spaces available for park visitors. Given the natural and recreational resources currently present, the reasons behind acquisition of the property, and the historic significance and value of the property to the community, it is felt that the best use of the park will be quite similar to what it has been in the past. However, use will not approach the level of activity that was seen at the lake before it gained “quiet lake” designation and when both Lowell Lake Lodge and Lowell Lake Camps were operating. Activities available will include overnight cabin rentals, boat launching, fishing, hiking, and nature study. Recreational use will be concentrated in the western portion of the park at the day use parking area, boat launch, and overnight area where the lodge and cabins are now located. – *Lowell Lake State Park 1999 General Management Plan Executive Summary*

In 2014, FPR began a process to add natural resource information to the General Management Plan and re-evaluate the original goals. In addition to re-evaluating the original goals, forest management and resource protection were added through an Addendum process. In response to public feedback, FPR committed to studying public access, facilities and overnight use in more detail through a master planning process for the portion of Intensive Use Area on the southwestern side of Lowell Lake. This is approximately 6% (about 21 acres) of the land area of the 365.5-acre park.

As the result of a competitive bidding process in the summer of 2018, FPR selected SE Group and partners Cushman Design Group, Engineering Ventures and CHM Government Services to complete the Master Plan. Master Planning was undertaken to investigate options for improving visitor safety, visitor experience, resource protection, and to explore alternatives for reutilization of cabins that came with the 1996 acquisition.

Goals of the Master Plan process were:

- The property as a whole shall function to provide both dispersed recreational activities via trails and waters, and overnight use in sheltered facilities (cabins and/or cottages, as Vermont State Parks defines these types of structures) within the limits of the existing historical areas of this use. A cabin is a one-room enclosed building with sleeping and gathering space with electric service and no plumbing. A cottage is a building with separate sleeping, bathing, gathering and cooking quarters that has electric service and plumbing.
- The historical character, rustic nature and low-impact feel shall be retained and incorporated into all design elements.
- All applicable local, state, federal laws, rules and regulations including but not limited to shore land development, local zoning, and life safety, utility and health codes must be met.
- Renovated and new structures shall meet minimum LEED Silver Certification (however actual certification may not be obtained)
- The property as a whole shall achieve a Net Zero energy footprint. The use of passive design to allow for maximum daylight infiltration and active measures such as renewable energy technologies for energy generation, heating and cooling shall be applied. Minimizing the use of active mechanical HVAC and other energy intensive systems is preferred. Heating fuels shall be renewable and locally sourced where practical and possible.
- The project shall meet the goals of Vermont's voluntary Lake Wise Program.
- Local building materials shall be incorporated into renovations and new construction whenever possible.
- All structures, building materials and surfaces shall be of highest practical durability with lowest practical maintenance intervals.
- Renovations, new construction and trail construction shall be designed to be constructed as simply as possible.
- Design shall be accomplished through phases, if necessary, for funding reasons.
- Structures shall blend in with natural surroundings.
- All facilities, and all trails connecting overnight facilities and parking, shall meet ADA Acceptable Guidelines.
- An analysis of, and options shall be presented for, the "island cabin" for its re-use as an overnight rental, shelter, nature center, some other use, or its removal.

Following several site visits, the Planning Team completed detailed assessments on existing buildings, ground conditions, permits required, and day use facility needs. A public meeting was held in the middle of the assessment phase to introduce the master planning project. The assessments and initial public feedback were used to create 3 concept plans – one for day use, and two alternatives for overnight use. Public concern throughout the process centered around impacts of overnight use on natural resources and overcrowding.

After the introductory public meeting, a group of area residents formed the Lowell Lake Concerned Citizens. This group widely opposed many aspects of the master planning project and demanded that FPR halt planning until environmental reviews took place. FPR initiated conversations with the group and hosted several meetings with group leadership. FPR shared the same goals and concerns about the property which led to the master planning project.

Draft concept plans were reviewed by the Agency of Natural Resources District Stewardship Team (Forestry, Recreation, Wildlife Habitat, Fisheries Resources and Aquatic Resources), DEC Wetlands and Shoreland Protection Programs, The Division for Historic Preservation, Natural Resources Board and the Vermont Land Trust. These reviews confirmed that draft concepts were aligned with regulatory compliance, environmental permitting, Agency and Department mission, and an easement that covers the White parcel.

In June, 2019, the Division for Historic Preservation created the Lowell Lake Camps Historic District. This District recognizes the unique historic recreational experience that the Lowell Lake Camps provided from the 1940's through the 1980's and encompasses the remaining structures from that time.

Draft concepts were revised and presented at a July, 2019 open house in Londonderry. Background information on the park, parcel history, the planning process, and concept plans were reviewed at the open house by 117 attendees. The concepts presented were one for Day Use and an overnight concept using existing buildings (Concept A) and one using all new structures (Concept B). Feedback boards gave attendees a chance to provide snapshot reactions on feedback boards by placing dots on a sliding scale from "don't like it" to "love it" on a range of elements of each Concept.

Following the open house, a 60 day public comment period presented the same information in a StoryMap® format with an online survey that followed the same pattern and used the same questions as the open house feedback boards. Postcards were mailed to every tax payer in Londonderry and seven surrounding towns with the open house information and survey link. There were 406 responses to the survey.

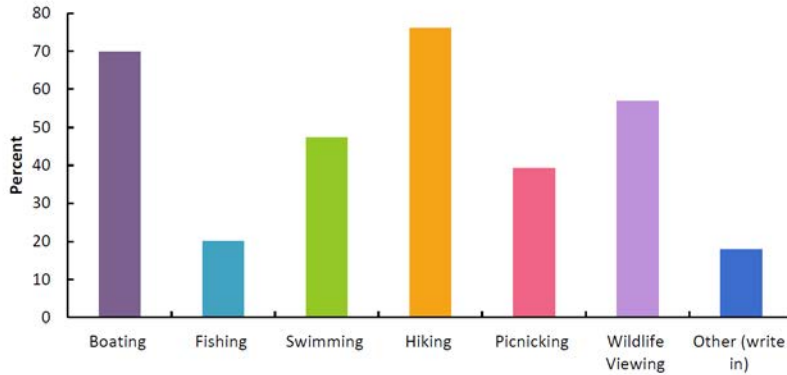
While not all survey respondents answered all of the questions, the data that was provided in these partial responses is included in the results and analysis. Our analysis attempts to understand the variety of perspectives that were communicated through the survey by separating responses by survey group. By filtering the responses, we are able to see how the answers to certain questions vary between group and identify any areas of convergence or alignment. Many questions asked respondents to rate a concept on a scale from 1-10, 1 being "don't like it" and 10 being "like it".

Survey respondents tended to be local, and regular park users. This is inferred from the frequency and days of week of their visits.

- 23% of respondents attended the Open House event for Lowell Lake State Park.
- 97% of respondents had visited Lowell Lake in the past year.
- 33% of respondents stated they typically visit Lowell Lake more than 10 times a year.
- 32% of respondents stated they typically visit Lowell Lake 0-3 times a year.
- 24% of respondents stated they typically visit Lowell Lake 4-10 times a year.
- 40% of respondents visit more frequently during weekends.
- 60% of respondents visit more frequently during weekdays.

The most popular activities among survey respondents are hiking, boating, wildlife viewing and swimming. 75% of respondents have visited other state parks in the last five years and enjoyed many of the same activities at those parks.

What activities do you enjoy doing at Lowell Lake State Park?



Feedback on the Day Use Area Concept was generally positive, with respondents favoring improved parking, traffic circulation, shoreline revegetation and improved walking paths. Also included in this concept was renovating the lodge for day use (if overnight use is not pursued) and improving accessibility to the water near the lodge; this was also favorably received.

What do you think of the proposed parking reconfiguration and capacity (including management to prevent parking outside the lot)?

Survey group	Total Responses	Score									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Primarily visits on weekdays	156	15%	2%	6%	2%	10%	13%	6%	10%	8%	28%
Attended the open house	65	17%	3%	5%	0%	20%	6%	8%	8%	6%	28%
Primarily visits on weekends	98	7%	3%	3%	2%	13%	14%	10%	12%	4%	31%
Visits 0-3 times a year	79	6%	4%	5%	3%	8%	13%	10%	13%	4%	35%

There was no clear preference for what to do with the island cabin.

Like the open house feedback, overnight use was generally viewed unfavorably, both Overnight Concept A (utilizing existing structures) and Overnight Concept B (removing existing structures and building a new cottage loop). Concept B was opposed more strongly than Concept A. It is likely that locals that visit the park frequently are more opposed to overnight use than those that visit less frequently who are more supportive of such recreational opportunities.

OVERNIGHT USE

Would you like to see overnight use (cabins/cottages) incorporated into the park?

Survey group	Total Responses	Score									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Primarily visits on weekdays	114	41%	4%	6%	1%	7%	10%	5%	8%	4%	13%
Attended the open house	43	49%	0%	9%	0%	5%	9%	2%	7%	5%	14%
Primarily visits on weekends	61	32%	2%	5%	7%	8%	7%	5%	2%	7%	26%
Visits 0-3 times a year	54	19%	4%	4%	7%	9%	13%	7%	7%	9%	20%

OVERNIGHT USE CONCEPT A

What do you think of renovating the historic cabins for overnight use (with accessibility upgrades)?

Survey group	Total Responses	Score									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Primarily visits on weekdays	125	42%	5%	1%	2%	6%	7%	6%	7%	2%	22%
Attended the open house	43	51%	2%	2%	2%	2%	5%	0%	7%	2%	26%
Primarily visits on weekends	65	32%	2%	6%	0%	14%	2%	5%	6%	0%	33%
Visits 0-3 times a year	61	21%	5%	2%	0%	11%	7%	11%	5%	3%	34%

OVERNIGHT USE CONCEPT B

What do you think of the concept of new one or two-bedroom cottages with kitchens and baths?

Survey group	Total Responses	Score									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Primarily visits on weekdays	112	50%	5%	9%	2%	9%	5%	2%	0%	5%	13%
Attended the open house	42	57%	2%	14%	0%	0%	5%	2%	0%	2%	17%
Primarily visits on weekends	62	37%	2%	10%	0%	8%	3%	8%	7%	3%	22%
Visits 0-3 times a year	57	28%	2%	12%	4%	7%	7%	7%	4%	7%	23%

Feedback on renovating a storage barn into an event space for small weddings, reunions and gatherings in a manner consistent with picnic shelters in other state parks was split, with local visitors opposed, and those from farther away (inferred by frequency and time of visits) supportive.

What do you think of renovating the historic shed to serve as an event space?

Survey group	Total Responses	Score									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Primarily visits on weekdays	128	38%	2%	2%	2%	14%	4%	7%	7%	5%	19%
Attended the open house	47	43%	0%	6%	2%	11%	4%	2%	9%	4%	19%
Primarily visits on weekends	76	24%	1%	2%	3%	11%	9%	5%	7%	5%	33%
Visits 0-3 times a year	66	20%	0%	2%	3%	14%	11%	9%	5%	9%	29%

Many written comments were received on all aspects of day use and overnight concepts and specific elements therein. These comments covered the range of supportive to unsupportive of every concept and element.

Conclusion and Recommendations

FPR and Parks Division Leadership reviewed each Concept Plan and the detailed visitor feedback from the public meeting and online survey to make final decisions on Concepts and elements.

The review took many factors into consideration, including:

- Natural resource protection
- Visitor accommodation
- Need for control and access to day use parking and traffic
- Shoreline impacts
- Wildlife habitat
- Rare, threatened and endangered species
- Compliance with local and state regulations
- Local opposition, or support
- Lake and parking capacity
- Implementation cost
- Historic Preservation
- Accessible recreation opportunities
- Preserving the unique rustic experience
- Improved stormwater control
- Water quality protection
- Market demand
- Uniqueness and availability of recreational opportunity

FPR Leadership concluded that the Day Use Area Concept made sense to adopt and prioritize for many reasons. Primarily, the park frequently reaches or exceeds existing parking capacity on nice weather

days in the summer and fall. There is an immediate need to provide intentionally designed parking and traffic flow to improve existing condition while keeping capacity roughly equal to existing conditions, integrate green stormwater technology, provide suitable public toilet facilities, provide accessible facilities and paths to users with physical disabilities, and improve shoreline protection through revegetation and increased management.

Overnight use is more complicated, particularly due to local opposition. While this is a historical use of the property, it has not been offered in several decades and many park visitors and survey respondents feared that overnight accommodation would lead to overcrowding and experiential degradation. In reviewing the two Overnight Concepts, both the District Stewardship Team and FPR Leadership eliminated Concept B. Concept B, while containing overnight use within a footprint outside of local shoreline zoning and state shoreland protection impact areas, would eliminate the historic significance of the existing buildings and historical use. This would have a drastic and permanent impact on the Lowell Lake Camps Historic District. It would also effectively create a third area of human disturbance; even if existing structures were removed, it would not be possible to completely curtail visitor entry and use of the area – people will continue to recreate in the existing open spaces around existing structures whether they are there or not.

Due to limited availability of capital resources and market analysis, overnight use will be deferred until a future time when it makes more sense. FPR Leadership determined that Overnight Concept A is the most feasible for future action if and when it is appropriate to move forward. The Concept retains the historic character and reuses many of the original Lowell Lake Camps buildings, respecting the character and intended use. Capacity and parking limitations would keep occupancy at levels that would not unreasonably interfere with day use experience. All necessary infrastructure could be located within existing structures and comply with local zoning regulations and state permits. A preservation plan will be developed for structures identified for re-use, and removal of those no longer needed. An alternate option of renovating the log cabin lodge for day activity is also possible.

Emphasis in the near term will be placed on designing and constructing the Day Use Area Concept.