



BERKSHIRE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION TEAM

20 Chapel St.
Pittsfield, MA 01201
www.thebeatnews.org

Resilient Housatonic: Community-Centered Climate Planning at Old Maid's Park

COMMUNITY OUTREACH FINAL REPORT



June 30, 2026



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Old Maid's Park Community Engagement Project began with a simple goal: to gather community input before making decisions about the future of this important public space. Through the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Community Engagement Grant, Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT), in partnership with the Town of Great Barrington, has facilitated conversations around stewardship, accessibility, ecological health, climate resilience, and long-term public use of the site.

The resulting input highlights community interest in stewarding the park in keeping with local ecological values and community priorities, which include improving water quality, removing the dam and supporting other ecological restoration efforts like invasive plant removal, increasing active mobility and public transportation access to the park, providing updates for E. Coli testing on-site, and honoring visitors' desire to experience moments of calm in some areas of the park while still providing opportunities for gathering with family members and neighbors in others.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations to inform the landscape design choices made in accordance with the community's values and vision for the green space.



OVERVIEW OF OUTREACH METHODS

BEAT employed a range of outreach methods and activities to gather community input about their vision for the future of Old Maid's Park. These efforts aimed to collect quantitative and qualitative data, information from small group discussions, and input from those who enjoy large-group settings, small group settings, written communication methods, arts and illustration methods, and more.

These efforts sought to place the needs and voices of community members most affected by environmental injustice at the center of the planning process, rather than at its periphery.

While not comprehensive, these diverse approaches engaged numerous parts of the Housatonic community to solicit their ideas and perspectives on the future of Old Maid's Park.

Attendance at Community Meetings and Events

BEAT staff attended various meetings and events where community members were already gathered, including (1) the Parks Commission, (2) Housatonic Improvement Committee, (3) Housatonic the Beautiful, and (4) Party in the Park.

Stakeholder Listening Session

Local business and nonprofit leaders, MassWildlife staff, and other key stakeholders participated in a semi-structured focus group at Pleasant & Main over lunch.

One-on-One Interviews

BEAT staff prioritized one-on-one conversations throughout the project, meeting with elected representatives, and engaged community members and stakeholders whenever opportunities arose for long-form, semi-structured interviews.

Open House

BEAT organized a celebratory open house to introduce community members to the park, particularly those who had never previously visited. The event featured food and face painting by Cocineras Latinas, a Pittsfield-based cooperative. It also included festive live music, a native plant walk with simultaneous Spanish-English interpretation, macroinvertebrate identification, posterboards for community feedback on the park, and children's activities.

Partner Visits

BEAT commissioned three other nonprofits to engage their respective constituencies in sharing observations and visions for the park. These partnerships included Extra Special Teas, a tea shop and community for adults with special needs. Other partnerships included a collaboration with Berkshire Pulse to craft an on-site dance performance at the park, as well as Greenagers, who led a program of activities for Spanish-speaking high school youth.

Survey

Sociologist Silke Aisenbrey worked with BEAT to develop a survey that would meaningfully inform design choices that support community desires for using the park. The survey was distributed at events, when tabling, and by hand to each residence in Housatonic. Respondents delivered their completed surveys to the post office, library, or BEAT's Center in Pittsfield. The survey received 72 responses; 86% of respondents live in Housatonic (ages 10-85).

Language Justice

At all community events and outreach opportunities, BEAT partnered with Language Justice Solutions (LJS) to provide Spanish-English translations of printed materials (including event advertisements) as well as simultaneous interpretation for in-person offerings. LJS also conducted outreach to personally invite Spanish-speaking neighbors to the events.

Charrette: The Dam Atlas

Using the Dam Atlas, BEAT staff facilitated a community dinner and iterative listening session. Participants identified their core objectives and values for the future of Old Maid's, reviewed case studies of other communities addressing aging dam infrastructure, and proposed solutions that felt viable for the local context.

Meetings with Town Staff

BEAT staff met with Town staff and the Town's Continuity Coordinator on a bi-weekly basis. BEAT coordinated with the Town's Health Agent to promote the Interactive Water Quality Dashboard where community members may learn about the current condition of water for recreational purposes.

Environmental Justice Outreach Outcomes

Consistent with the goals of the MVP Community Engagement Grant, BEAT sought to reduce barriers to participation and engage residents who are often underrepresented in public planning processes. Because Old Maid's Park serves as an important community resource, BEAT worked to ensure that the planning process reflected a broad range of experiences and perspectives.

Throughout outreach activities, residents repeatedly highlighted the importance of having public spaces that feel welcoming, safe, and accessible. Access to healthy green space emerged not only as an environmental issue, but also as a matter of community well-being and social connection.

The use of Spanish-English simultaneous interpretation at the community Open House and June charrette demonstrated the value of multilingual access in public engagement. BEAT hopes these practices continue as a standard component of future Town-led community events.

BEAT distributed surveys by hand to residences throughout Housatonic. To ensure broad access, paper surveys were also available at the Housatonic Post Office and Ramsdell Public Library. BEAT also attended existing community gatherings to meet residents where they already gather. Partnerships with Greenagers and Extra Special Teas expanded participation by Spanish-speaking and immigrant youth and adults with disabilities.

During a field visit led by Greenagers, Spanish-speaking and immigrant high school students from Monument Mountain Regional High School participated in activities focused on nature observation, plant identification using iNaturalist, water quality testing, and reflection.

RESERVE LA FECHA



**UNA CONVERSACIÓN COMUNITARIA
SOBRE EL FUTURO DE OLD MAID'S PARK**

JUEVES 18 DE JUNIO, 6-8 PM

IGLESIA UNITARIA UNIVERSALISTA

- 🍃 Se ofrecerá cena
- 🍃 Habrá servicio de cuidado infantil disponible
- 🍃 Se requiere inscripción



**¡ESCANEE EL CÓDIGO QR
PARA REGISTRARSE!**



HOUSATONIC RESILIENTE:

**PLANIFICACIÓN CLIMÁTICA CON ENFOQUE
COMUNITARIO EN OLD MAID'S PARK**

Estimado/a vecino/a:

El municipio de Great Barrington, en colaboración con Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT), está trabajando para dar forma al futuro de Old Maid's Park en Housatonic, asegurándose de que este espacio refleje las necesidades, prioridades y deseos de quienes forman parte de la comunidad del pueblo. Old Maid's Park está ubicado en el 30 de Wyantenuck Street, en Housatonic, a orillas del río Williams. El municipio es propietario de 3.9 acres de terreno distribuidos a ambos lados del río.

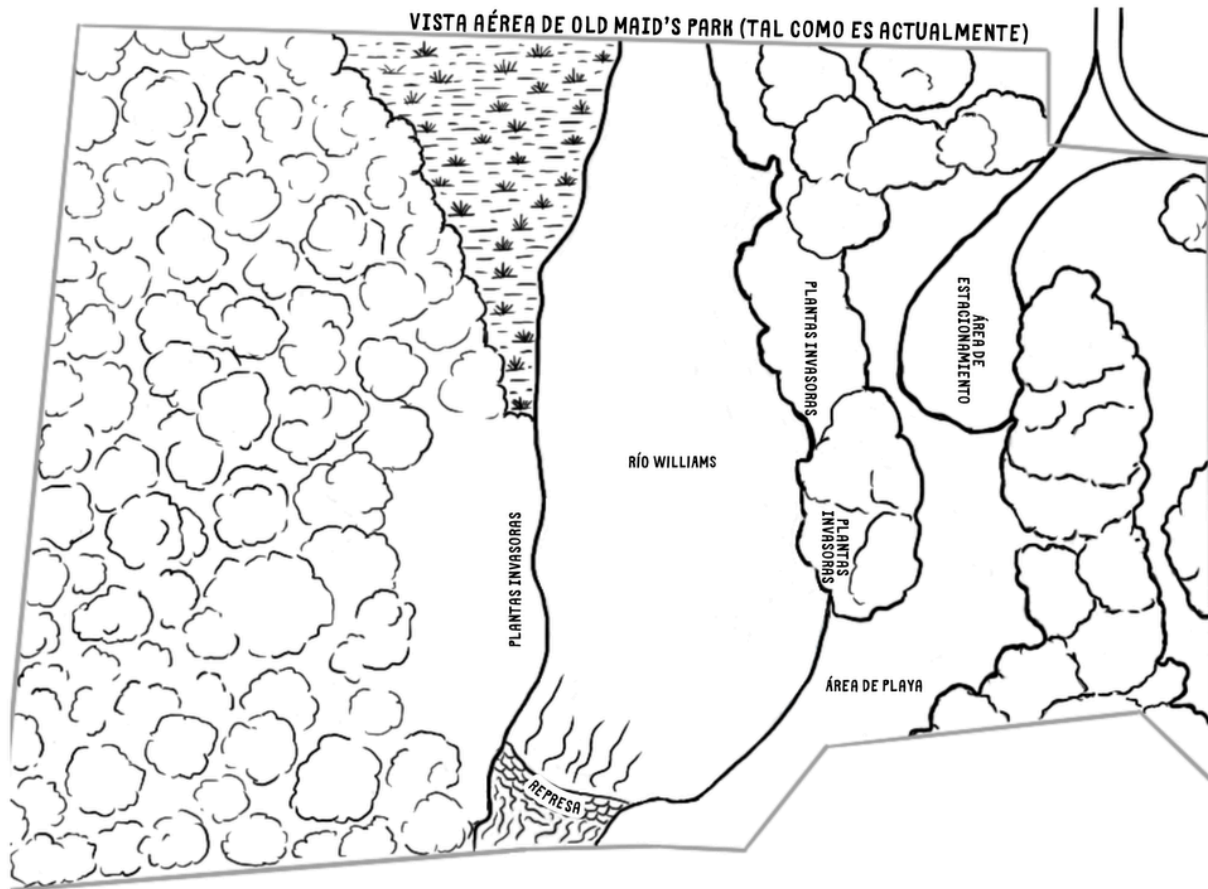
Los resultados de esta encuesta y de otras actividades de participación comunitaria ayudarán al municipio a invertir en mejoras para este espacio que reflejen las prioridades de la comunidad local. Si decide responder esta encuesta, sus respuestas serán confidenciales y anónimas. Si lo desea, puede identificarse voluntariamente para participar en el sorteo de una tarjeta de regalo de \$100 para Berkshire Food Co-Op y cuatro tarjetas de regalo de \$25 para negocios de Housatonic. Los resultados de la encuesta estarán disponibles en thebeatnews.org.

Las encuestas completadas pueden entregarse en la Biblioteca Ramsdell o en la oficina de correos de Housatonic. También pueden enviarse por correo a BEAT (20 Chapel Street, Pittsfield, MA 01201).

Le invitamos a participar en una conversación comunitaria sobre el futuro de Old Maid's Park el jueves 18 de junio, de 6:00 a 8:00 p. m., en la Iglesia Unitaria Universalista de Housatonic. Se ofrecerá cena y habrá servicio de cuidado infantil disponible. Para registrarse y obtener más información, consulte la tarjeta "Reserve la Fecha" incluida.

1) ¿Está familiarizado/a con Old Maid's Park?

- ☐ Sí
- ☐ No - por favor pase a la pregunta 6



Students discussed the importance of parks in both their home countries and their current community, identifying green spaces as places for social connection, shade, recreation, and environmental protection. Many expressed interest in returning to Old Maid's Park with family and friends to picnic, relax, and spend time near the water, while some noted that transportation barriers may prevent future visits. Their observations reinforced the importance of ensuring that public green spaces are welcoming and accessible to all residents, regardless of age, language, ability, income, or access to transportation.

Community events included food, childcare, and accessible engagement activities to support broad participation. At the community Open House, BEAT contracted with Cocineras Latinas, a Latina-led cooperative based in Pittsfield, to provide food and cultural programming. The partnership helped create a welcoming atmosphere while supporting a local cooperative led by immigrant women. BEAT hopes the relationships established through this project create opportunities for continued collaboration between Cocineras Latinas and the Town of Great Barrington at future community events.

These efforts helped ensure that community input reflected a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and priorities related to the future of Old Maid's Park. The outreach process also reinforced that resilient communities depend upon public spaces where residents feel welcomed, represented, and able to participate fully in both civic life and stewardship of the local environment.

Water Quality and Environmental Testing

In almost every outreach setting, community members expressed concerns about water quality and the process for obtaining up-to-date, clear information about recreational safety on the Williams River at Old Maid's. Water quality sampling of identified upstream stormwater outfalls resulted in negative E. coli tests, suggesting that these persistent water quality issues may instead be attributable to wildlife, such as geese or beavers, upstream. Given the slowed water velocity created by the dam, water quality issues are unlikely to resolve on their own.

During a site visit with Greenagers, high school students participated in a pH water test, finding high levels. One lifelong Housatonic resident who grew up along the banks of the Williams lamented "safety issues with fish hooks, smells, E. Coli exposure, and more" but still reminisced about using the river to cool off downstream.



During the community stakeholder session, a representative from Berkshire Natural Resources Council (BNRC) noted that the Williams River could pose an opportunity for engaging residents in citizen science efforts to collect water quality information. When residents learned about the state's Interactive Water Quality Dashboard, they appreciated the effort to regularly test the water but felt that information should also be available on-site that reflects the date of last testing for E. Coli and the water's status for recreation.

Some community members remarked that they find it difficult to navigate the use of QR codes to access digital resources. Furthermore, numerous families expressed that their teenagers like to spend time at the park independently, suggesting that the public would benefit from highly accessible, up-to-date materials provided on-site about the state of water quality.

Survey responses reflect a "restoration-first" prioritization. Respondents expressed a desire for a clean, naturally restored river surrounded by modest amenities.

Accessibility and Transportation

Community partner visits to the park with Extra Special Teas and Greenagers opened conversations about the challenges of navigating the park for those with mobility challenges, as well as for those seeking sensory calm or a sense of safety.

Community members from Extra Special Teas described a desire for “nooks” of calm space to look out over the park, such as a gazebo. Student field trip visitors in a session led by Greenagers linked arms to make a human chain across the river upon learning that the other side could, in theory, become accessible one day through design changes to the park. Their curiosity drew them to explore the other side of this wooded, overgrown area of the park.

Numerous community members echoed a desire for accessibility for those unable to navigate the steep slope down to the water. They also emphasized an interest in a flat area of the park, potentially for yoga or other recreational activities, or simply to look out over the green space. Some visitors expressed interest in a dock or other accessible platform to sit along the water or traverse to the other side if accessible trails were made available.

A few visitors noted that parking at the site takes up a large amount of space, impeding the flow of events and potentially making it difficult for accessible vehicles to access handicap spots.



Several visitors described transportation as a barrier to visiting Old Maid’s. Some student participants in Greenagers’ field trip mentioned that they may never be able to come again because of the lack of public transit to the park.

A representative from Berkshire Pulse noted the importance to young people of access to open space that is bikeable from residential areas, especially if they are to feel a sense of ownership over the community where they live. An attendee from BNRC noted, “[Old Maid’s] is a test case for natural resource pedestrian access to the Williams,” suggesting that its location could present an opportunity to connect pedestrians to village activities, businesses, and communities.

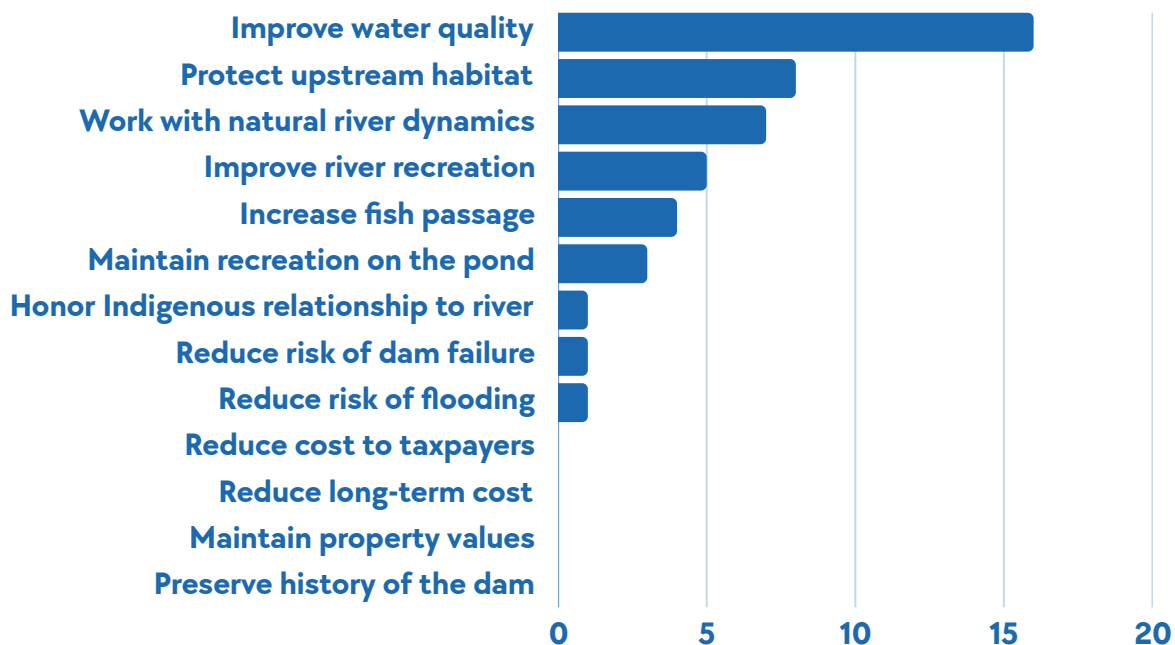
Vision for the Dam

Like many New England communities, the Williams River is home to aging dam infrastructure. Mass Wildlife secured resources for prospective dam removal, should there be sufficient community interest in river restoration. The project stands to offer significant ecological restoration potential, as tributaries to the Williams River are coldwater fisheries that support native Brook Trout, though populations decline along the Williams (owing to warmer temperatures, water stagnation, quality issues, and wildlife connectivity barriers).

A 2025 Housatonic Improvement Committee visioning session summary identifies dam removal as a community priority, citing ecological restoration, public safety, flood resilience, recreational opportunities, and maintenance costs.



A June 2026 charrette focused on the future of the dam. This session, which utilized the *Dam Atlas* facilitation guide, asked attendees to identify their priority objectives.



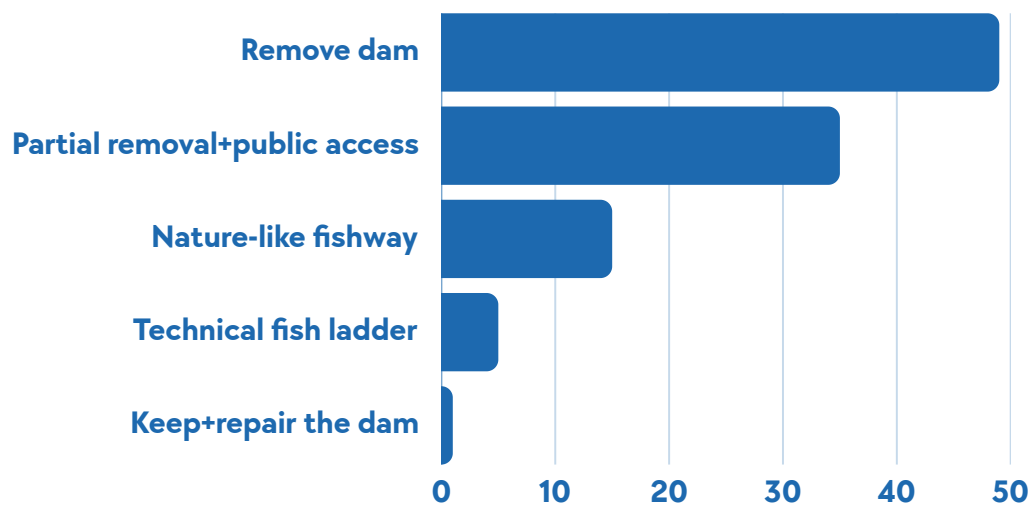
Charrette Participant Priority Objectives

Attendees then reviewed a series of case study examples that illustrated how other communities across the country have handled their aging dam infrastructure and associated complex, sometimes conflicting objectives. Participants were then asked to rank their preferred alternatives, identifying at least one option they favored and one they could accept as a compromise.



By ranked preference, attendees were asked to express their openness to five options: full dam removal, a partial removal that emphasizes public access, a nature-like fishway that keeps an impoundment but allows greater fish passage, a technical fish ladder, or a repair to the existing dam.

The clear favorite was the case study that presented full dam removal, followed by an example of a partial dam removal that emphasized increasing pedestrian and recreation access, followed by a distant third preference for a nature-like fishway.



Matrix Ranking of Case Study Alternatives to Addressing the Dam

Ecological Stewardship

Survey respondents emphasized that invasive plant removal was a priority. Participants answered the question, “if you were the director of Old Maid’s, what would you do?” by highlighting their commitment to ecological restoration through this stewardship practice.

Furthermore, this interest was paired with curiosity about how access to the other side of the river and removal of invasive plants there could provide greater public benefit. For some, like one teenage angler, removing invasive plants is a priority directly linked to his interest in fishing (to prevent and slow erosion and promote the overall health of the river system).

Notably, several community groups expressed interest in volunteering to remove invasive plants and steward more ecologically beneficial ones in their place. Among these groups expressing volunteer interest were Extra Special Teas, a Waldorf instructor from a local school, and a local congregation.



Ecological Stewardship (continued)

Native plants observed at Old Maid's included:

- Sugar maples, a keystone and ecologically important species in the Northeast
- Serviceberry shrubs at parking area (Canadian serviceberry)
- Staghorn sumac – an emergency food source for wildlife in winter and very effective at managing erosion and stabilizing soil in disturbed areas, as it is an early-successional pioneer species
- Lots of black walnut on the perimeter of the parking area
- Purplestem Angelica – a noteworthy, flowering biennial wetland plant that can grow up to 10 ft in the right conditions, whose flower display looks like a fireworks show
- A fairly large and seemingly healthy ash tree at the park. Potentially noteworthy because scientists are finding that some individual ash trees are somewhat resistant to the emerald ash borer

Invasive plants observed included:

- Autumn olive
- Bush honeysuckle
- Bittersweet vine
- Multiflora rose
- Japanese barberry
- Common buckthorn
- Norway maple
- Burning bush
- Garlic mustard



Nearly all the plants bordering the river are invasive species and, therefore, are typically less effective at stabilizing banks because they're not adapted to the hydrology and soil conditions of the ecosystem. For this reason, they also tend not to filter sediments, nutrients, or pollutants as well as native plants, which can lower water quality in the river. Additionally, the presence of these invasives on the banks can lead to more invasives establishing themselves further downstream as seeds and plant fragments are transported.

Native riparian buffer plants present along the riverbanks at the park include silky dogwood and boxelder maple.

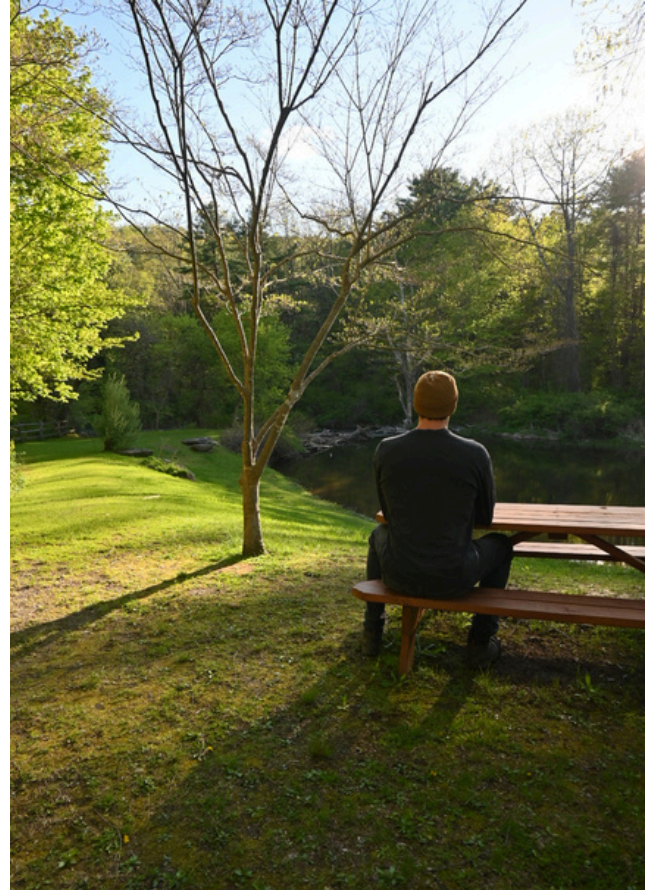
Notable wildlife observed on-site include:

- Warblers (black and white warbler)
- Water scorpions (a fully aquatic insect in the order Hemiptera, commonly referred to as "true bugs")
- Brook Trout

Values and Felt Experience at the Park

Across survey responses, in-person interviews, and focus groups, participants reported valuing the park for the sense of solitude it offers and the sense of family well-being it lends for socializing. Participants echoed the theme of relaxed socializing with neighbors and finding pockets of solitude at the park.

One participant recalled his childhood memories of visiting the park, saying, “Old Maid’s felt cavernous, like Disney World. How could we bring that feeling back?” A parent who raised her children visiting the park shared this tone, recalling fondly the deeper pools where her children would jump into the water and play independently, hunting crayfish and exploring together. Yet these community members agreed that they see the park as a quiet, not a primarily “active” place: “It has an intimacy, a feeling of sanctuary. A place for people to return to and feel like it’s just ours,” she continued.



Among survey respondents, most of the participants who answered the question, “what do you like most about the park?” cited its peace and quiet, lack of crowding, and recreational opportunities. When asked about the type of activity they prefer to do at the park, community members described enjoying time spent with others, alone, swimming, picnicking, fishing, visiting with their dogs, reading and relaxing, and bird watching. One respondent voiced that swimming at the park offers a feeling of privacy in itself, that it has “always offered a feeling of being ‘away,’ different from the social atmosphere of the rail trail, for instance.”

One community leader voiced the importance of feeling that the space continues to provide a sense of refuge, especially for immigrant families. She expressed the core value of “supporting immigrants’ mental health and making people feel part of the community.”

The survey suggested community openness to modest additions to support free play like playground equipment or other child-friendly amenities. Others suggested that signage and public art might draw on Housatonic’s rich network of artists. “Old Maid’s presents an opportunity for creative place-making. There’s an amphitheater environment and a way that artistic perspective could be introduced to the space,” even more so if there were opportunities to imagine public use of the other side of the Williams River.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide transparent, current, and easily comprehensible information about water quality status (E. Coli) on-site. Results should indicate the date of most recent water test and should be multi-lingual. While visitors may be directed to the state Interactive Water Quality Portal for more information, visitors should not be required to navigate with a smartphone to access health and safety information.
- Integrate the park into other recreational and economic connectivity efforts in the region, such as through paddling guide maps, pedestrian trails like the High Road, and bicycling-pedestrian paths in the southern Berkshires. Connect the park to local businesses with safe cycling infrastructure.



- Continue investing in outreach and communication to the local community throughout the design and implementation process. A common sentiment expressed throughout outreach activities was the feeling of receiving a decision from an external center of decision-making, rather than being included in the decision-making process itself.



- Keep alive the sentiment of community interest in volunteer participation in invasive plant removal and native plant stewardship.
- Continue investing in one of the hallmarks of resilience and self-governance in Housatonic: its social bonds. Offering community gathering opportunities with food, childcare offerings, and language justice services supports these ends.

- Consider reflecting the artistic talents of the community in the site's care and stewardship, such as through locally designed signage and public art.
- Improve transportation access to the site through ongoing investment in sidewalks, separate-use bicycle paths, and promotion of access to green spaces like Old Maid's via the Tri-Town Connector. Consider developing and promoting a map of green spaces accessible via the Tri-Town Connector.
- Work with the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA) to evaluate the feasibility of adding a fixed route bus stop in Housatonic near Old Maid's Park and the Prosperity Way neighborhood. Improved transit access could expand access to the park for residents without personal vehicles, older adults, youth, and future residents of the new housing development.
- Invest in accessibility improvements to the site which may include (but are not limited to), reducing the slope of access points to the water, increasing the parking lot flow for those with mobility challenges and other users, adding an ADA-compliant bridge to the other side of the river, and creating accessible trails following invasive removal on the forested side.



- Remove the dilapidated dam and connect its removal to investment in public access offerings. These may include public access to the other side of the river, a canoe and kayaking launch, and/or seating areas like a dock or benches along the water. While charrette participants expressed a clear preference for dam removal, they also highly favored a case study example (Head Tide Dam) that illustrated the installation of an accessible pedestrian walkway to view the river, cross to the other side, and access multiple recreation points along the river.
- Avoid the use of asphalt where possible and incorporate greenscaping and rain gardens where appropriate.
- Use biodegradable, non-plastic erosion control methods and conduct outreach to property owners about behaviors that contribute to nutrient loading, pesticide pollution, and erosion.
- Design the park such that visitors may experience moments of solitude in “nooks” throughout the park while others socialize and enjoy recreating on the river.
- Consider the addition of simple amenities such as bike racks, a water fountain, or child-friendly amenities.
- Pair the removal of invasive plants with introduction of native shade trees, bank-stabilizing shrubs, grasses, and pollinator-supportive plants.

