

MORSE PARK MANAGEMENT PLAN

Monkton, Vermont
Adopted: Date TBD

I. Introduction

Morse Park parcel number 13.215.018.000, and SPAN # 399-124-10825) is owned by the Town of Monkton (the Park). The Park borders Cedar Lake (aka Monkton Pond), Monkton Central School, Monkton Road, Pond Road, and an adjacent property to the north. The Park is approximately 47.1 acres in size. It is subject to a Grant of Development Rights and Conservation Restrictions between the Town of Monkton (Town or the Grantor) and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB or the Grantee) dated March 29, 1996 (the Grant).

II. Purpose

The purpose and scope of this document is to set forth the Management Plan for Morse Park (the Plan), as required by Section I of the Grant, ensuring that uses and management of the Park are aligned with the goals and limits established by the Grant and agreed to by the Town and VHCB, including intended uses, natural resource management objectives, maintenance approaches/schedules, and compliance with applicable regulations. The Grant identifies several purposes:

- a. The primary purpose of the easement is to conserve and protect public recreation, scenic, riparian, wildlife, and open space resources and to prevent the use or development for any purpose or in any manner that would adversely affect these resources.
- b. Secondary purposes are educational activities and the construction and maintenance of trails and structures incident to appropriate public recreational use.

Prior Management Plans were dated March 6, 1996 and October 4, 2004. This document when approved supersedes and replaces all prior Management Plans for the Park. It is subject to approval by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. It is also subject to approval by the Town of Monkton Selectboard and any designees they may name, who may include the Monkton Recreation Committee (MRC) and the Monkton Conservation Commission (MCC).

III. Designation of Land Use Areas

For purposes of this Plan three zones (or primary land use areas) are designated within the Park:

- a. Recreational Areas (~13.6 acres), which currently include a community pavilion, athletic fields, dog park, ball field, volleyball court, walking trails, and parking/commuter lots.
- b. Open Field Areas (~10.8 acres)
- c. Natural Areas (~22.7 acres), largely in the form of wetland and riparian areas.

See the Primary Land Uses Map in Appendix A.

IV. Governance

The MRC is responsible for the management of the entirety of Morse Park through a transparent and consistent process, and ultimately serves in this capacity at the pleasure of the Selectboard.

Management Decisions: the MRC is responsible for proactively collaborating with all parties who would reasonably have an interest in management decisions. Examples include, but are not limited to, MCC, the Dog Park Committee, and the Monkton community. The MRC retains final decision-making authority over all management decisions once collaboration with interested parties has occurred. Any objections or appeals of the MRC's decision may be brought to the Selectboard for its consideration and resolution prior to implementation of the decision. Such resolution may involve review by the Selectboard of proposals, collaborations, and related community engagement.

Land Use Changes: Land use areas may change over time or be repurposed from one use to another with appropriate consultation between the MRC and MCC and other affected committees and entities, such as the Dog Park Committee or Monkton Central School. Areas may shift over time due to changing recreational uses, management activities, natural resource boundary shifts, climate change, etc.

Decisions about land use changes must follow a process that includes VHCB's approval (that proposed changes are compatible with the Grant) and evidence of collaboration with appropriate town committees and entities. The MRC is responsible for collaborating with VHCB, MCC, the Dog Park Committee, the community at large, and other interested partners regarding proposed management and land use changes that would affect the Open Field Areas and Natural Areas. The MRC retains final decision-making authority over all land use changes once collaboration with appropriate town committees and entities has occurred. Any objections or appeals of the MRC's decision may be brought to the Selectboard for its consideration and resolution prior to implementation of the decision. Such resolution may involve review by the Selectboard of proposals, collaborations, and related community engagement.

Nothing in this Plan should be construed to limit changes in use, changes in management activities or schedules, or the addition of recreational facilities in the non-recreational areas. In the event any such changes or additional facilities are contemplated for any non-Recreational Areas the MRC will follow the land use change process outlined above.

Management activities are described in the Management Activities and Schedule in Appendix B.

V. Management of Invasive or Toxic Species

The Park's many areas of transitional edge habitat are susceptible to invasive plant species. The entire park and all three land use areas may be managed for invasive species to the extent feasible (subject to available volunteer effort hours, etc.). Management efforts may be organized by the MCC or other committees/groups/community members in consultation with the MRC. Management approaches will minimize impact to other species, such as ground-nesting birds, to the extent practicable.

Wild Parsnip: management efforts have been on-going since the summer of 2018 to remove Wild Parsnip from the Park. Substantial progress has been made, with an estimated 90% reduction in the northern half of the park as of summer 2023. See the Management Activities and Schedule in Appendix B for specifics on methods and timing.

Other invasive species may also be managed as resources permit. Current peer-reviewed scientific literature, technical guidance from Vermont's Agency of Natural Resources or Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets, or from other reputable sources may be consulted for this purpose. The impact of various insect or animal species may also be managed, if desired, e.g. Emerald Ash Borer, Hemlock Woolly Adelgid, etc.

Other species may not be invasive or non-native but are toxic or harmful to humans and could be incompatible with human uses of the park. These should be managed where there is a conflict with likely recreational use. These would include Water Hemlock, which was discovered in the Park in June of 2022 and has since been managed near walking paths, and Poison Ivy.

VI. Recreational Areas Management

The Recreational Areas of the Park currently contain:

- A multi-use recreational path 4-6 feet wide around the perimeter and interior of Morse-Park for non-motorized use. Horse riding is also prohibited on the path.
- Athletic fields
- A pavilion and picnic area
- Volleyball court
- Storage shed for maintenance and recreational sports equipment
- Ballfield adjacent to Monkton Central School
- One 50-car parking lot adjacent to the Monkton Central School parking lot
- One 50-car parking lot located on Pond Road
- A community dog park, operated by the Monkton Dog Park Committee

The MRC is responsible for the management and maintenance of the Recreational Areas, as well as the Park in its entirety, following the Governance processes. The MRC plans to continue to seek opportunities to further develop and evolve the use of Morse Park for the benefit of the Town. These may include, but are not limited to, additional athletic fields, exercise stations, additional recreational paths, disc golf, basketball courts, tennis courts, pickleball courts, bike pump track, and other amenities that will serve the needs and desires of the Town, where compatible with the purposes and protections of the Grant and following the Governance process.

VII. Open Field Areas Management

Approximately 10.8 acres of the Park are in the form of open fields. The MRC manages the mowing/haying of these areas in consultation with the MCC.

The Open Field Areas were historically cut about twice per year for hay and to keep the land open, according to a typical schedule for first and second cut haying. There was feedback from residents and the MCC that a focus on wildlife would be preferable on this use area within the Park.

The current community priority for these areas is to improve the usefulness of the Open Fields from a wildlife perspective, particularly for ground-nesting birds and for pollinators. These Open Field acres are alone too small to be considered suitable grassland bird habitat by state guideline, but together with the adjacent open Recreational and Natural Areas, appear to form an adequate open landscape/viewscape with the long sightlines preferred by ground-nesting birds for defense against predators. The Park has demonstrated the ability to host nesting grassland birds, including Bobolink. Bobolinks have expansive requirements for their nesting habitat, as compared to most grassland birds, which indicates perhaps that the Park can support a variety of grassland bird species. There is an opportunity to maintain the existing Open Field acres in the Park as such and improve the quality of the habitat, primarily through the timing of mowing.

The prime nesting season for grassland birds is from late May through approximately August 1st, during which a first cut of hay was usually taken in the past. Haying a field during this window of time would tend to result in nest failures and high mortality of fledglings. To provide some margin for seasonal variability, mowing/haying of the Open Field Areas will typically be restricted between May 15th and August 15th. Exceptions can be made for invasive species management or other necessities, following the Governance process for management decisions. This schedule should also be of benefit to some pollinators and the wild parsnip control efforts. These dates support the early/late mowing approach. Current peer-reviewed scientific literature or technical guidance from Vermont's Agency of Natural Resources or Agency of Agricultural, Food, and Markets, or from other reputable sources may be consulted to inform this approach in the future. The MRC may explore opportunities to work with the MCC and the mowing contractor on the timing and methods for mowing outside of this excluded window of time. This will usually be one mowing before or after the dates above, but could involve experiments, mowing in phases, removing or not removing cut hay, etc., to establish a best practice that works for the multiple uses in the Park.

A section of the Open Field Areas northeast of the Dog Park and south of the soccer fields may be used occasionally for large-event overflow parking, when other parking areas will clearly be insufficient. This section is only available for parking outside of the mowing restricted time frame of May 15th to August 15th. It is outlined on the Primary Land Uses Map (Appendix A) with a dark orange line and covers approximately 1.7 acres.

VIII. Natural Areas Management

Approximately 22.7 acres of Morse Park exist as Natural Areas, nearly all in the form of wetland, wetland buffers, and riparian areas along the one stream crossing the Park or adjacent to Cedar Lake.

Recreation has been limited in the Natural Areas to date and it seems unlikely that adequate forest will exist in coming decades to practice significant forestry. That leaves the primary uses/values on these acres as scenic, riparian, wildlife, native vegetation, and open space, as well as outdoor education. Management approaches that best address these as a group are preferable.

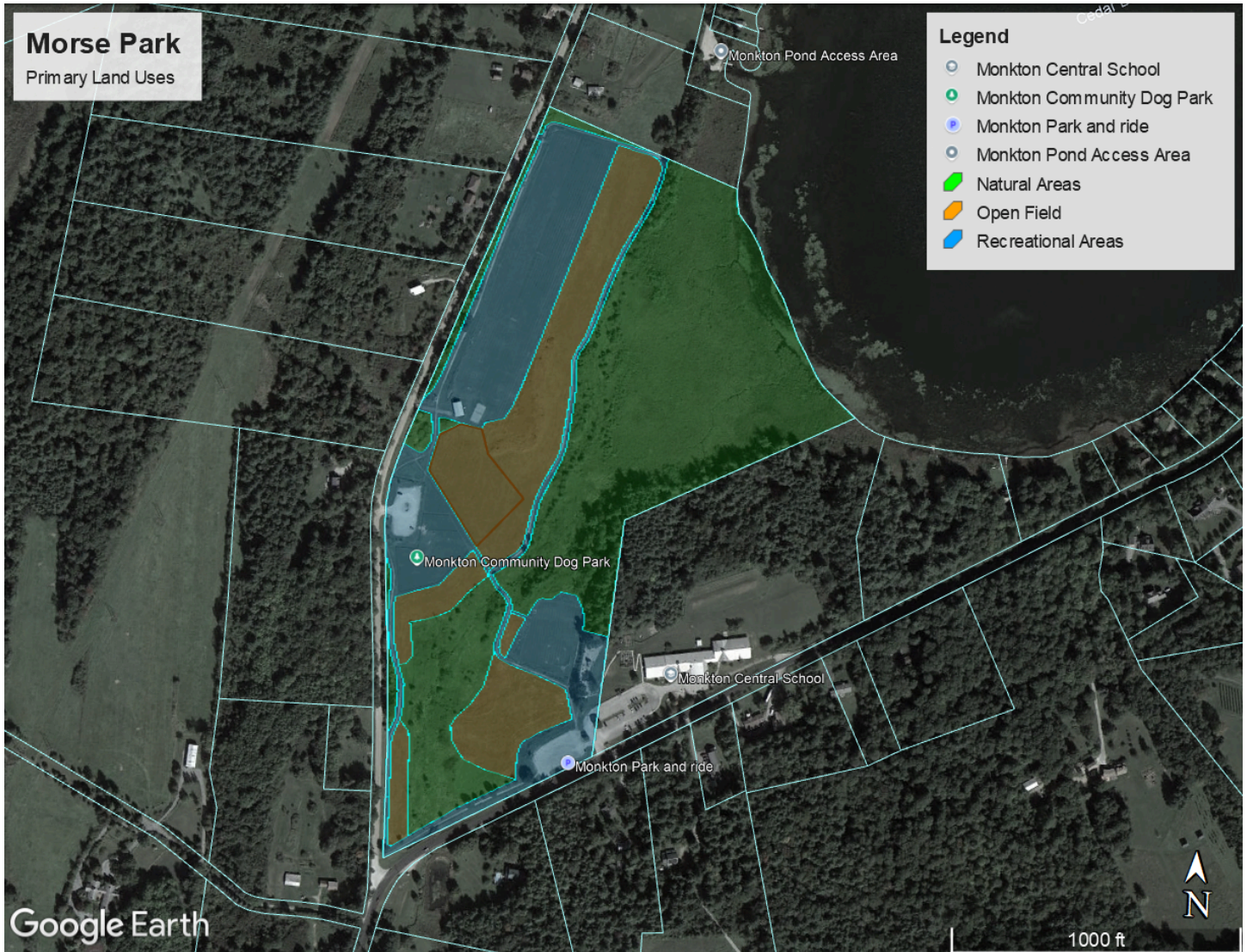
Management in wetland/riparian areas should be minimal and infrequent to allow natural ecological processes to be undisturbed, with exceptions:

- i. Low-impact invasive species management and control of species toxic to humans and animals are allowed, preferably by hand and without using chemical methods.
- ii. Maintenance of the existing recreational path or other intersecting access or educational/interpretive facilities.
- iii. Other spot-management activities as needed, with appropriate consultation, such as a damaged/dead tree removal that poses a hazard.

There is an opportunity to maintain/improve habitat connectivity across Morse Park. Connectivity is found primarily on the south end of the Park in an east-west orientation between the woods behind Monkton Central School and the woods west of Pond Road. It also follows the riparian areas across Monkton Road by the stream. This connectivity could be improved, especially by maintaining more continuous cover (woody vegetation) at the east-west connection point by Pond Road south of the Dog Park.

Scenic/open space: in recent years the Pond was visible from many locations in the Park, but taller trees and vegetation in the Natural Areas, particularly along the stream and the floodplain between Cedar Lake and the Open Field and Recreational Areas in the northern half of the Park, have partially blocked visibility to the water. This growth has not yet blocked the view of distant hills and mountains, but may eventually do so. That trend is not incompatible with the easement, as it satisfies and may improve protection of riparian and wildlife resources and is a form of open space. It does come at the expense of scenic value, however. Allowing vegetation growth to continue is the default natural and unmanaged option. However, as these Natural Area acres become less “open” they will also tend to reduce the suitability of the adjacent open fields for nesting birds, who would perceive the open landscape of the Park as shrinking. The MRC, through the Governance process, may determine that felling of trees and some vegetation in the Natural Areas to preserve scenic and open characteristics is a preferred approach, to the extent permitted by applicable wetland and water protection rules, such as the Vermont Wetland Rules and Shoreland Protection Act. In addition, spot management in these areas and throughout the Park may also be needed to resolve a safety hazard (such as a dead/dying/leaning tree). Decisions about scenic views, unless they involve a safety hazard, will not be time-sensitive in nature, so should involve robust public input.

Appendix A - Morse Park Primary Land Uses Map



Areas in blue are in use as Recreational Areas (~13.6 acres of playing fields, trails, structures, parking lots, Dog Park, etc.). Areas in orange are Open Field Areas (~10.8 acres), inclusive of approximately 1.7 acres of large event overflow parking (darker orange line). Areas in green are Natural Areas (~22.7 acres). The delineation of each area on the map is not precise or binding and is intended as a visual reference to promote consistent management.

Appendix B - Management Activities and Schedule

Areas	Description	Frequency
Recreation, Grassland, Natural	Management of invasive and toxic species is permitted, but not required.	As needed
Recreation	Mowing may occur on any schedule	As needed
Recreation	Trail and infrastructure management and maintenance	As needed
Open Field	Mowing/haying only before May 15th or after August 15th.	TBD / Annual
Natural	Felling/removal of trees and vegetation is permitted, but not required, to maintain or improve scenic/open characteristics. Continuous cover should be maintained/encouraged throughout the Area for habitat connectivity.	As needed