

DEVENS REGIONAL TRAILS INITIATIVE

Report on Trail Connections Between Devens and Surrounding Communities



Prepared for:

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Abstract

The Devens Regional Trails Initiative is a project of the Devens Enterprise Commission, supported through the Greenways and Trails Demonstration Grant program of the Department of Environmental Management. Its purpose is to identify connections between existing and proposed trail networks in Devens and surrounding communities.

This report describes trails found throughout the region, and outlines links to housing, schools, recreation facilities, public transportation, businesses, and conservation areas. It also considers safety issues, land use restrictions, conflicting uses, and obstacles like roads, rivers, and wetlands, which limit opportunities for trail development. It assesses obstacles for linked trails and suggests measures to overcome barriers.

Alteration of existing gates and development of new access points will provide clear, efficient entrances to Devens. The Regional Trails Initiative will ensure that recreational trail users from surrounding towns benefit from extensive natural areas on the Main and North Posts, and that trails planning will also consider historical contexts, landmarks, and views.

The report presents a conceptual regional trails design and proposes an action plan, based on the recommendations of the 1994 Reuse Plan and the 1995 Open Space and Recreation Plan. This project will help preserve options as development on Devens proceeds by laying out a regional blueprint of trail networks and showing their relevance to trails on the Main and North Posts.



Playing field on Devens

Acknowledgements

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The Devens Open Space Committee provided guidance throughout this project. In addition to time the committee devoted to discussing the project, members Heidi Roddis of MassAudubon, Tim Prior of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and Charles Duval of Devens Public Works each contributed individually. Their assistance helped provide the background information and resources needed to complete the report.

We would also like to thank Alan Delaney, Richard St. Pierre and Jonathan Brady of the Devens Engineering Department for their assistance in preparing and printing maps. MassGIS provided baseline regional mapping information, but more detailed maps within Devens borders provided important information about existing conditions and redevelopment plans.

The bulk of this report concerns trail activity in towns surrounding Devens, so input from residents of these towns provided invaluable information. We appreciate the strong turnout at the public forum at the Devens Conference Center on September 7, and the interest that meeting generated. Thanks also to Shaun Suhoski, Director of the Town of Ayer Office of Community & Economic Development; Chris Rodstrom, Land Protection Specialist at The Trustees of Reservations; Al Futterman of the Nashua River Watershed Association; Danny O'Brien, Rails to Trails Coordinator for the Department of Environmental Management; Graham Claydon of the Shirley Greenways Committee; Michael Volmar, Curator of the Fruitlands Museum; George Snow, George Kahale, and Laurie Connors of the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission; Anne Gagnon of the Shirley Conservation Commission; Peter Zopes of the Shirley Greenway Committee; the Harvard Conservation Commission; the Nashoba Valley Horse Council; Phil Kingman and David Fink of Guilford Transportation Industries; Rick Muehlke of the Groton Conservation Trust; Chuck Bell, District Wildlife Manager of the Northeast Wildlife District, Massachusetts Division of Fish and Wildlife; Lisa Dove of Ice House Partners; and to Jim Lee, Pam Durrant, Jack Whelan, Rona Balco, Kate and Hermann Field, Lauren McCarthy, Lucy Wallace, Laurie Love, Janice Perry, Diane Borton, and Dessa Dancy.

We are grateful to the communities of Shirley, Ayer, Harvard and Lancaster, and to the Joint Boards of Selectmen of these towns, for their ongoing support for regional trails planning.

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Ayer's MBTA stop stands near downtown shopping, residential areas, and the Nashua River Rail Trail.

Project History and Scope

This report is a project of the Devens Enterprise Commission, with funding provided by the Greenways and Trails Demonstration Grant program of the Department of Environmental Management. The Devens Regional Trails Initiative will serve two primary purposes: it will guide development within Devens to create effective connections with surrounding trail networks, and contribute to statewide greenways planning by surrounding communities and the Department of Environmental Management.

Camp Devens was established in 1917 as a temporary Army base on land purchased from the surrounding towns of Harvard, Shirley, Ayer, and Lancaster. By 1931 it became a permanent post that served as an induction center and training area. Since the closing of the fort in the mid 1990s, the Army has released most of the land on the Main and North Posts to civilian use. MassDevelopment, a state agency, is currently redeveloping a major portion of the site for commercial, recreational, and residential use. Over one third of this area will be devoted to open space and recreation. Approximately 1,300 acres will be managed as conservation land, including a corridor along the Nashua River managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a portion of the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, and areas around Mirror Lake which will be protected by conservation easements held by the Trustees of Reservations.

The Army sited the fort near a hub of rail lines and roads to provide links to metropolitan areas, while Devens' rural setting provided over 10,000 acres for military use within 35 miles of Boston. Though Fort Devens was designed to control access and keep people out, its location ensures that today many visitors can make use of its trails and recreation facilities. This large expanse of open land so close to major population centers has great potential for trail use. Development pressures increase the need for careful planning, however, to create efficient and well-organized trail networks while protecting sensitive ecological habitats.

Today, 150,000 visitors use recreational facilities at Devens each year for sporting events, swimming, hiking, boating, bicycling, tennis, canoeing, and cross-country skiing. With a growing regional population and construction of new recreation facilities, including a golf course, these numbers should increase substantially in the years ahead.

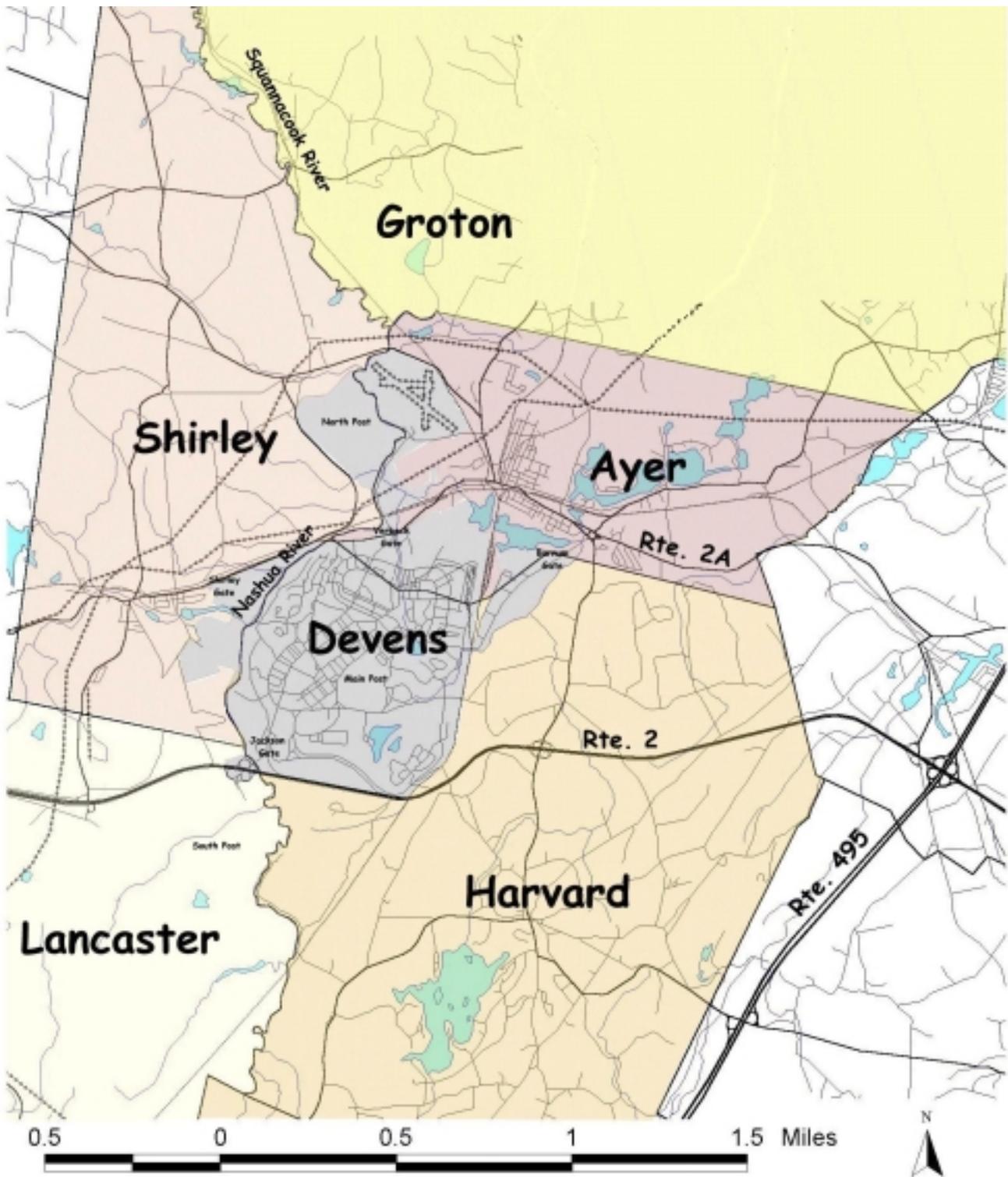
Access to Devens from Surrounding Towns

The boundaries of Devens encompass land within the towns of Ayer, Shirley, Harvard, and Lancaster. Lancaster's jurisdiction does not extend beyond the South Post, however, which the Army continues to use for training grounds. This report will consider connections between land managed by MassDevelopment on the Main and North Posts to surrounding towns and open space areas. It will identify links to help local communities make use of trails and recreation areas within Devens. The importance of identifying these connections is described in the 1995 Recreation and Open Space and Recreation Plan.

Devens boundaries are open to the public, but a variety of natural and man-made obstacles continue to restrict access to a few key points. Route 2 divides the Main Post from Army Reserve training grounds to the south. The Jackson Gate exit from this busy state highway is the only street access to the Main Post from the south. The Nashua River runs along the western boundary, restricting access from that direction to the Hospital Road Bridge near the Shirley Gate. Busy commuter and freight rail lines run along the northern and eastern boundaries of the Main Post. Verbeck Gate off West Main Street in Ayer and Barnum Gate at the Harvard/Ayer town line near Route 2A provide primary access along these borders. Most legal pedestrian and bicycle access to the Main Post also passes through these same four entrance gates due to obstacles posed by the river, roads, and rail lines.

The boundaries of the North Post are less confined by physical constraints. The Nashua River divides this part of Devens instead of restricting access from one side. Hikers may in the future enjoy natural areas and trails on either side of the river and cross at a bridge located near MacPherson Road. Cyclists can enter the North Base along MacPherson Road from the Verbeck Gate or Bishop Road from Route 2A. Surrounding roads offer opportunities to park and enter trails or gain access to the river at several key points. U.S. Fish and Wildlife planning under the Refuge Comprehensive Plan process now underway will determine much of the trail usage in this area.

Population centers in the area include dense housing clusters in downtown Ayer and Shirley adjacent to the Main Post. Harvard has a more rural population linked to Devens by a network of rural roads. Regional trail design should focus on creating connections between population centers and recreation areas on Devens while considering links to other trail networks. It should also consider access from public transportation, particularly the MBTA train stops in Shirley and Ayer and any future stations in the area. Successful regional trail networks will connect population centers to trails linking Devens and surrounding open space.



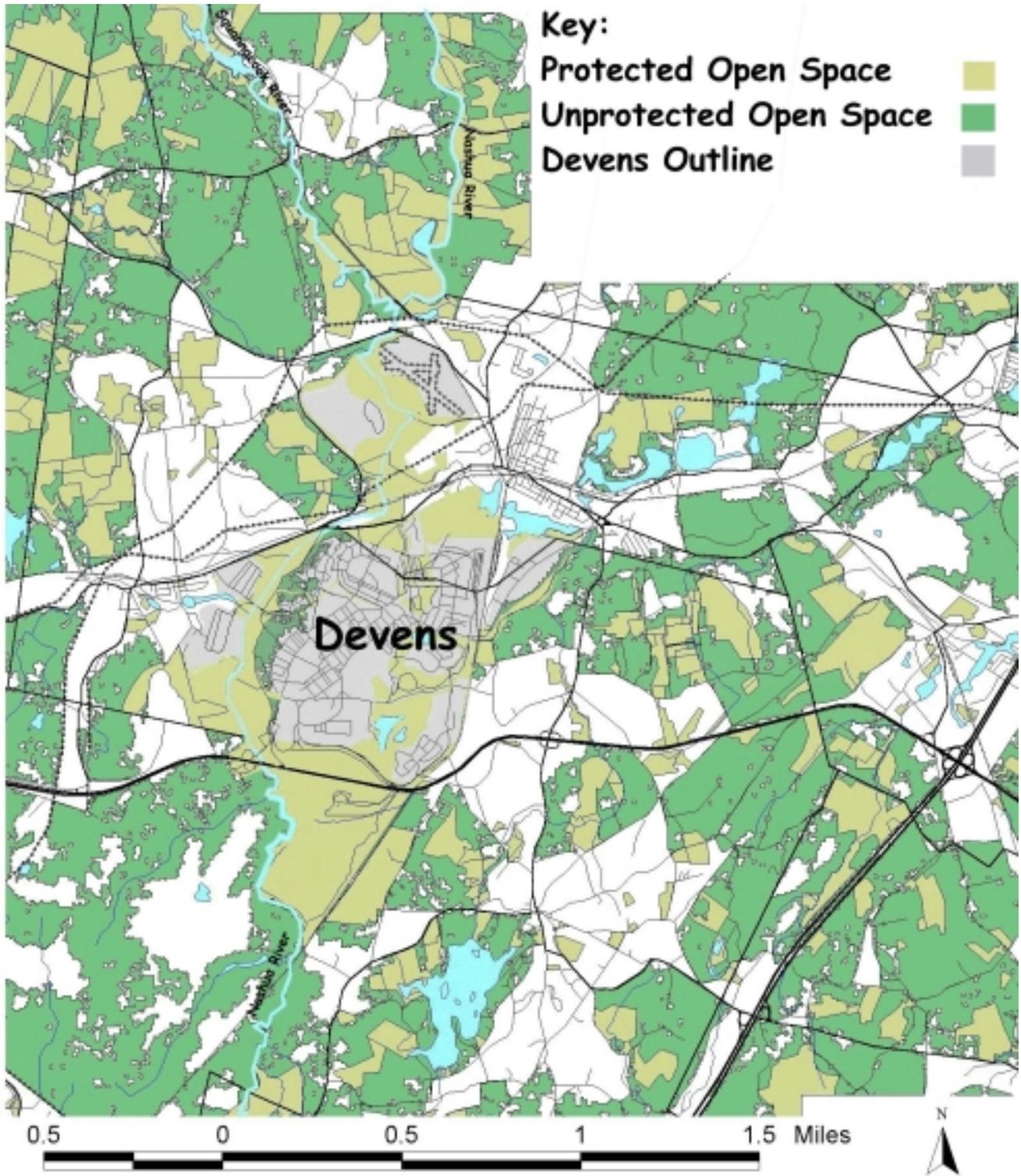
Devens and Surrounding Towns

Open Space

Large parcels of undeveloped land surround Devens, particularly along the north-south corridor formed by the Nashua River. Conservation areas to the north in Groton are especially relevant for trails planning within Devens. Conservation easements and management by state and federal agencies protect parts of this open space network. Conservation commissions in Shirley, Harvard, Ayer, and Groton take active roles in preserving undeveloped land within their towns. They also seek to create greenspace networks as corridors for wildlife habitat, which in some cases also serve low-impact trail networks.

Nashua River conservation areas create a north-south greenway along Devens' western border. The Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge manages most of the land in this buffer, from its original holdings south of Route 2 through the North Post. Protection and management of wildlife and their habitats are the primary goals of the Refuge, but hiking trails provide access from Harvard, Shirley, and Devens. This river corridor connects to thousands of acres of conservation land to the north and south. In addition to the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, the greenway corridor along the river includes the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area to the south; the Groton Town Forest at the confluence of the Squannacook and Nashua Rivers; the Rich State Forest along the Nashua River in Groton; and the Squannacook Wildlife Management Area and Squannacook State Forest along the Squannacook River. Though these protected lands do not all connect to form regional trail linkages, they offer access to the river for boating and fishing and provide a number of trail networks for recreation.

Numerous smaller parcels of conservation land surround Devens, particularly in Shirley and Harvard. Local conservation commissions manage most of the protected parcels. Efforts to link these holdings to form wildlife corridors through conservation easements or property acquisition could expand trail networks and help link trails within Devens to surrounding properties.



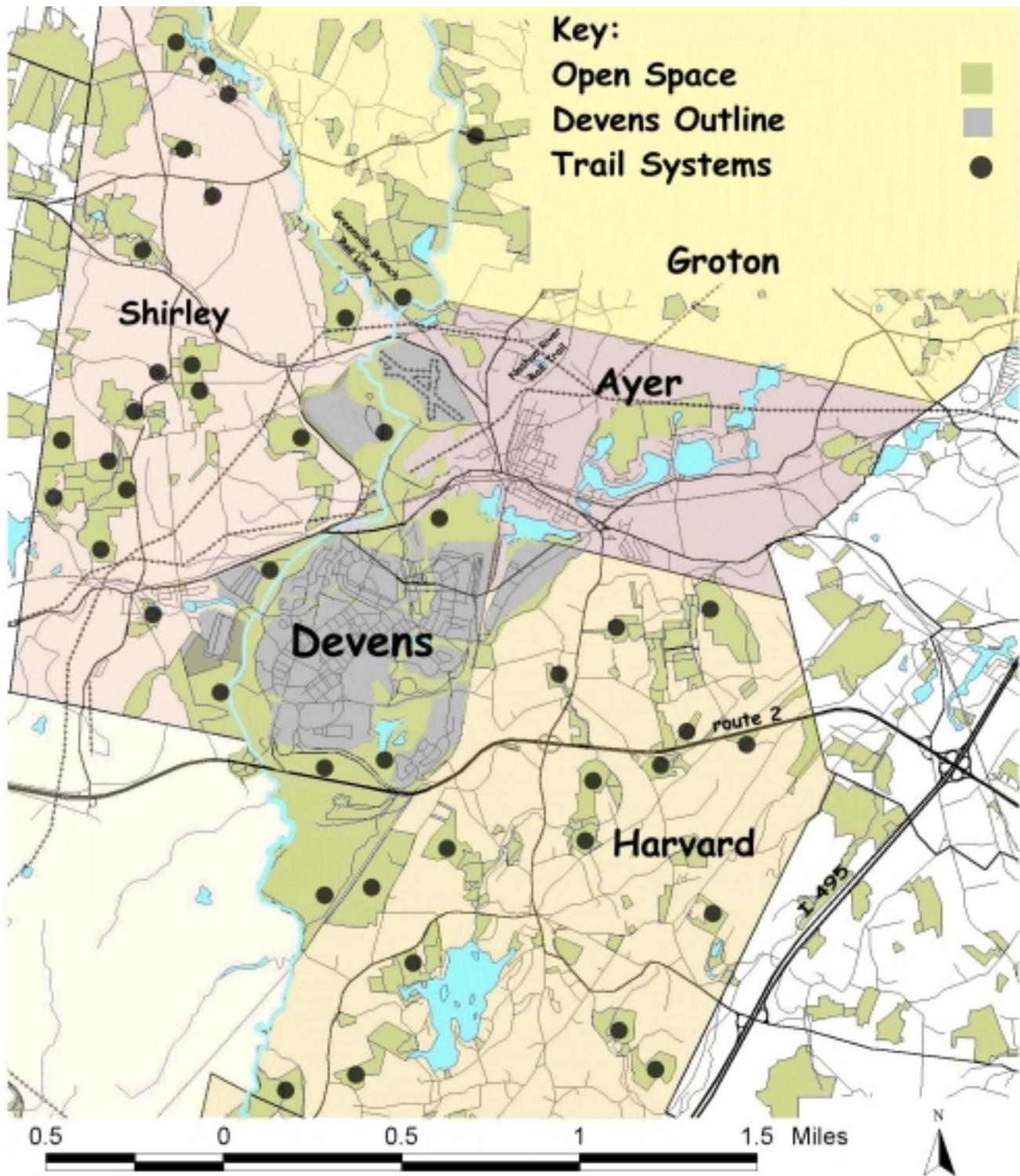
Open Space

Regional Trails

Diverse habitats, vegetation, and land use patterns create a wide variety of trails in and around Devens. Planning for regional access should recognize the mixed uses of surrounding trails, including hiking, bicycling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, hunting, fishing, and riding snowmobiles to ensure compatibility between uses.

One of the most significant trails near Devens is the proposed Nashua River Rail Trail, which will connect downtown Ayer to Nashua, New Hampshire and surrounding conservation areas such as the Beaver Brook Reservation. This project of the Department of Environmental Management will accommodate horses, pedestrians, and bicyclists. Planning successful regional connections will consider routes to link this trail to other networks around Devens such as the designated bicycle route along roadways in Harvard. It will also consider potential use of unused sections of another rail line, the Greenville Branch, which runs northwest from Ayer through Groton to the New Hampshire border.

The towns surrounding Devens have a number of small, unconnected trail systems on conservation lands. These trails support hiking, bird watching, hunting, fishing, and other activities such as nature studies. Sometimes these local networks provide links to trails on large conservation areas along the Nashua River, including the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area, the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, the Groton Town Forest, and the Squannacook Wildlife Area. Usually, however, they offer short walking trails for local residents. Many of these properties are open for public use, and publicized in maps printed by conservation commissions or non-profit organizations like the Nashua River Watershed Association. Developing links between these local trails and establishing connections to Devens can support conservation efforts by creating awareness that there is a strong greenways network in the region that needs ongoing management and protection.



Regional Trails

Design criteria and goals

The regional trail network will provide a wide variety of options to meet the needs of visitors and local residents.

- Permanent, designated trails will replace informal networks, ensure continued access, reduce usage conflicts and preserve environmentally-sensitive areas.
- Trails planning will provide clear, efficient links between housing, schools, recreation facilities, conservation areas, shops, workplaces, parking areas, and public transportation stops.
- Paved bike paths near roads will offer transportation alternatives as well as recreation.
- Smooth-surfaced trail loops around historical sites and recreation areas will provide universal access and manage high traffic volume.
- Hiking trails through natural areas will offer quiet retreats and places for studying natural history.
- River access at regular intervals will help canoeists and kayakers enjoy the Nashua and Squannacook Rivers.
- Trails constructed specifically for horseback riding or mountain biking will help avoid usage conflicts and trail damage through erosion.
- All trail planning needs to include universal accessibility in accordance with the American Disabilities Act.



An existing underpass at Old Mill Road in Harvard offers safe designated trail access to Devens.



Historic buildings line the edge of Rogers Field, an active recreation area.

Nashua River Corridor Existing Conditions

The Nashua River forms a north-south riparian corridor along the western boundary of Devens. The river serves as a wildlife corridor, recreation area, and natural link, connecting waterways and riparian corridors within the region, but also restricts access to Devens. Pedestrians are limited to existing bridge crossings on West Main Street in Ayer near the Ice House Dam, Hospital Road Bridge in Shirley, and along a closed military bridge within the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge on the former North Post. Current canoe launching sites offer varied access to the river at regular intervals. Designated canoe access points to the river are located at the existing entrance to the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge and the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area, the Ice House Dam, and along Route 117 in Lancaster.

The Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge includes 1,547 acres of wildlife habitat, with several miles along the Nashua River. Approximately 55,000 people visit each year to canoe the river and enjoy adjacent wetlands and oxbow ponds. The site is also popular for birding and hiking. Shorebirds can be observed near Fish and Wildlife land at the public works infiltration beds on the North Post during July and August, and endangered habitats are protected throughout the Refuge. Historically, the Oxbow NWR has been restricted to pedestrian traffic, though there is public pressure to open areas for equestrian and bicycle traffic. In a recent land transaction, 836 acres on the former Main and North Posts were transferred to U.S. Fish and Wildlife to expand the Oxbow NWR. The newly acquired military land includes trails developed by the Army, but these paths need to be improved and are not currently linked to other trails on Devens.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently in the process of producing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Oxbow NWR under the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997. This document will outline appropriate uses, access points, and trails. The primary mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System is to conserve, manage, and where appropriate, restore fish, wildlife and their habitats for current and future generations of Americans. Its new fifteen-year management plan will discuss activities such as walking, fishing, hunting, interpretive programs, environmental education, photography, and birding. It will also focus on areas for land acquisition, improvement of trails and parking, and possible construction of a visitor center near Jackson Gate. The Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Oxbow NWR is expected to be ready for public review and comment in the middle of 2001.

Proposed Trail Connections along the Nashua River

The Nashua River has extensive open space corridors that provide opportunities for expanded trail networks. Improving canoe launches at regular intervals along the river with well-marked ramps, parking areas, and portage points for dams could increase access. Existing trail networks and bike paths should connect to the canoe launches and along the river corridor to provide additional hiking opportunities.

Towns should work to link fragmented greenways in the region to the Nashua River. This will create connections that merge with the major north-south riparian corridor. The completion of these greenways will enlarge wildlife habitats and connect pedestrians to trails and other natural resources located along the river. Joint parking areas for canoeists and hikers will create recreation centers and lessen the need for multiple parking areas. The Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge can provide bike racks for cyclists at trailheads restricted to walking to help enforce limited use within sensitive areas.

Trail construction should respect rare and endangered species, fish and wildlife habitat and wetland boundaries to limit erosion and disturbance to existing habitats. Devens should continue to work with the Nashua River Watershed Association to preserve and protect the river corridor.

Ayer Existing Conditions

Ayer has the most clearly defined center and the greatest population density of the towns surrounding Devens. This is due in part to its active rail lines and roads, which play a major role in shaping circulation patterns. Main Street forms a section of Route 2A, and freight and commuter trains converge at the transit stop downtown. Main Street is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its nineteenth-century vernacular styles, including Second Empire and Italianate architecture. Recent revitalization attracts people to its shops, offices, and restaurants. The result is an active, thriving town center.

Ayer's downtown lies nearly adjacent to Devens, while less populated areas lie to the east and north. West Main Street runs from Verbeck Gate to a railroad overpass where it becomes Main Street and enters the town center. Dense residential areas are within easy walking distance of Devens, but a variety of obstacles make trail access difficult. Constraints include active rail lines, busy traffic, wetlands, ponds, and limited public land or space for easements. Plow Shop Pond and Grove Pond form two of downtown Ayer's most distinctive natural features, but they also limit movement. They cut off playing fields at Pirone Park from Devens and isolate the rest of the town center from the Main Post.

Downtown Ayer will become a hub for one of the area's most important trail links when the Nashua River Rail Trail is complete. This trail, a project of the Department of Environmental Management, will offer a track for foot traffic and equestrians and another for bicycles. It will lead from a point on Main Street across from the MBTA commuter station to Nashua, NH. One of the greatest challenges for regional trail planning will involve connecting this trail to Devens, the Nashua River, and nearby conservation areas like the State Game Farm and the Groton Town Forest.



Ayer Existing Conditions

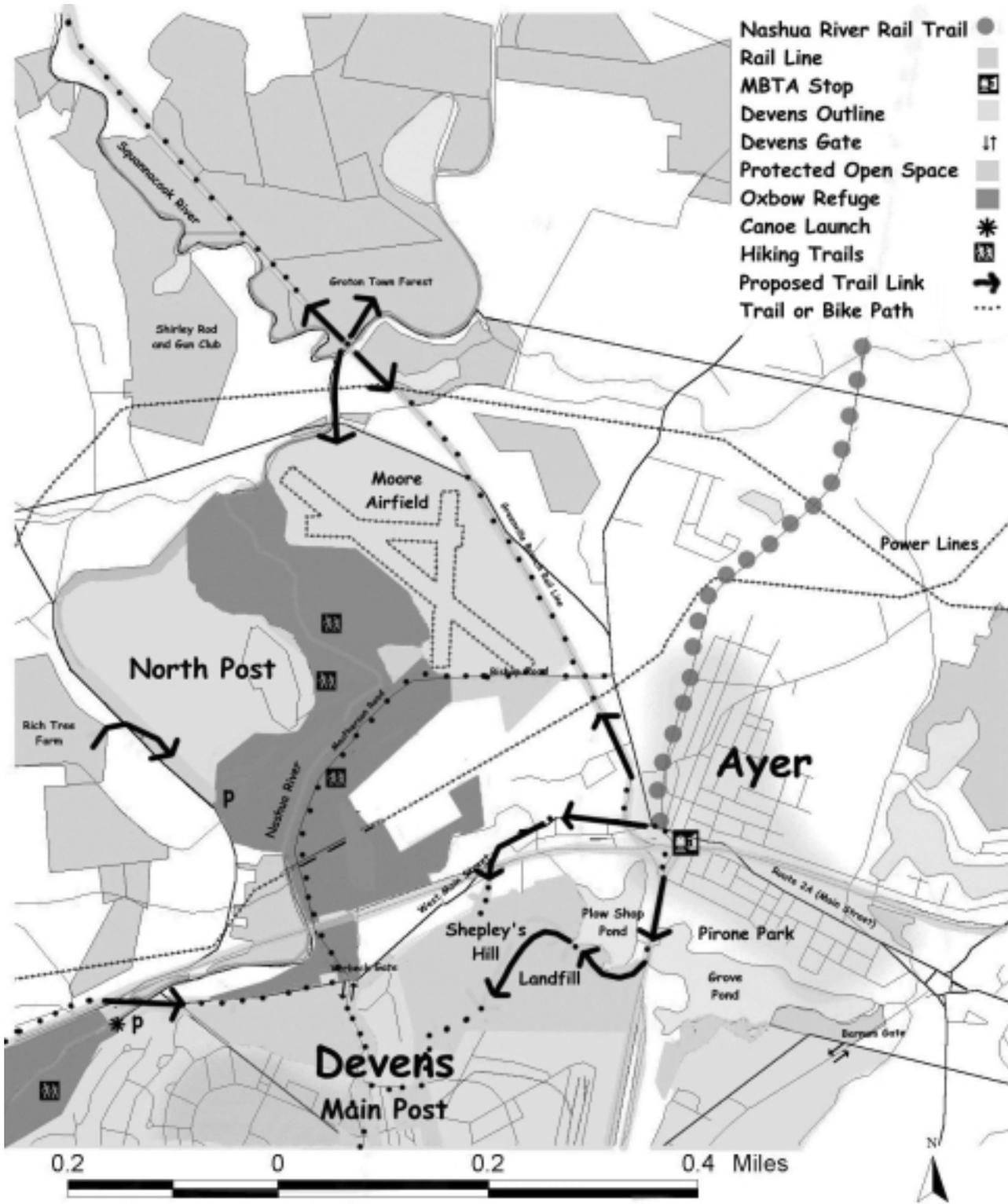
Proposed Trail Connections in Ayer

Open space within Devens will be a substantial asset to Ayer once connections are established. Bicycle and walking links to the large, attractive natural areas that lie close to the town center will encourage a thriving downtown. Successful connections will link the rail station, shopping, schools, parks and housing to playing fields, natural areas like Shepley's Hill, and the Parker Charter School.

Two alternatives could connect Ayer to the Main Post. The first will require an easement along the railroad track running south from the town center between Plow Shop and Grove Ponds. It would cross the main commuter rail tracks at the MBTA stop, then head south across a side track on a crossing used by maintenance vehicles. It would also require sharing a right of way along the west edge of the track for about ¼ mile. Despite the trains, this spot provides good views of Ayer and the ponds. The trail would enter Devens across the former landfill and connect to Shepley's Hill before reaching MacArthur Road. The Base Closure Team, which includes representatives from MassDevelopment, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the Army, and the Environmental Protection Agency, confirms that trails across the landfill are feasible. Design constraints will include maintenance of the integrity of the cap and protection of nesting habitat for endangered grassland bird species. The site could offer good cross-country skiing as well as hiking and bicycling, and provide a quiet, desirable link between the Nashua River Rail Trail and the Main Post.

The second option for access from Ayer to the Main Post requires travel along West Main Street. Although side streets could provide alternatives part of the way, only West Main Street has a bridge that crosses the railroad tracks. The trail could cross into the Main Post at Shepley's Hill immediately after the bridge through a property easement, or it could continue along the road to enter by Verbeck Gate. A designated bicycle lane along this road would help commuters reach businesses on Devens and link to major trail corridors on the Main Post.

The Greenville Branch rail line travels from Ayer to New Hampshire, passing through large natural areas in West Groton and along the Squannacook River. The line is unused from Route 2A northward, so it could provide significant connections between the North Post and conservation areas like the Groton Town Forest. The lower end of the line would provide an alternative to Bishop Road for access to the North Post if it could be converted to trail use, since it passes along the eastern edge of the base near the airstrip. An easement could connect to parking on Bishop or MacPherson Roads to serve the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge lands on the North Post. Additional access from the Nashua River Rail Trail to the Oxbow NWR could occur along the transmission line easement, if necessary, though wetland boundaries will restrict trail development along that corridor.



Proposed Trail Connections in Ayer

Shirley Existing Conditions

Shirley is a primarily rural community with a great deal of open space, much of it unprotected. The Conservation Commission holds parcels throughout town, and the Greenways Committee is working actively to preserve additional land. Connections between conservation areas for wildlife corridors and trail networks are limited, however, and barriers such as the commuter rail line and the Nashua River limit access to Devens.

Shirley's trail systems are scattered throughout its open space parcels, with most of the protected land located to the north and west and less open space adjacent to Devens. Recreational trail use includes horseback riding, hiking, mountain biking, road biking, and cross-country skiing. Areas of conservation land to the west of the river are disconnected from open space along the Nashua River such as the MCI Shirley Greenway and the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. Significant conservation areas with trail networks include the Squannacook State Wildlife Management Area in north Shirley and the Rich Tree Farm. The Division of Fish and Wildlife, which manages the Squannacook State Wildlife Management Area, focuses on wetlands with extensive river frontage for wildlife corridors and habitat preservation. Public access on these lands is minimal, though existing trails offer beautiful, secluded hikes. The Shirley Greenways Committee would like to link a trail from this area at Pumpkin Brook through Hunting Hill to reach the Lunenberg town line.

Opportunities to connect existing trail systems to Devens are limited by residential and commercial development clustered near the Shirley Gate. Since the town has relocated its town offices, police station and library, it needs to provide safe pedestrian and bike access to the Main Post to reach these amenities. Residential neighborhoods near Devens have only a few ways to enter. Currently, access is limited to Hospital Road and along Front Street, but a closed gate at the transitional Army area south of Hospital Road could offer an additional entrance for residents.

Devens' North Post offers extensive recreation opportunities for Shirley residents, including horseback riding, hiking, and birdwatching. Walker Road provides trail access to natural areas on the North Post, including the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. This part of Devens includes vernal pools and valuable wildlife habitat. Portions of the North Post are designated as an environmental business district on the Devens reuse plan, but other areas will be preserved as part of the Oxbow NWR. Maintaining as much open space as possible at the North Post, and preserving an existing bridge within Oxbow NWR lands over the Nashua River for foot traffic, will significantly benefit trail users from Shirley.



Shirley Existing Conditions

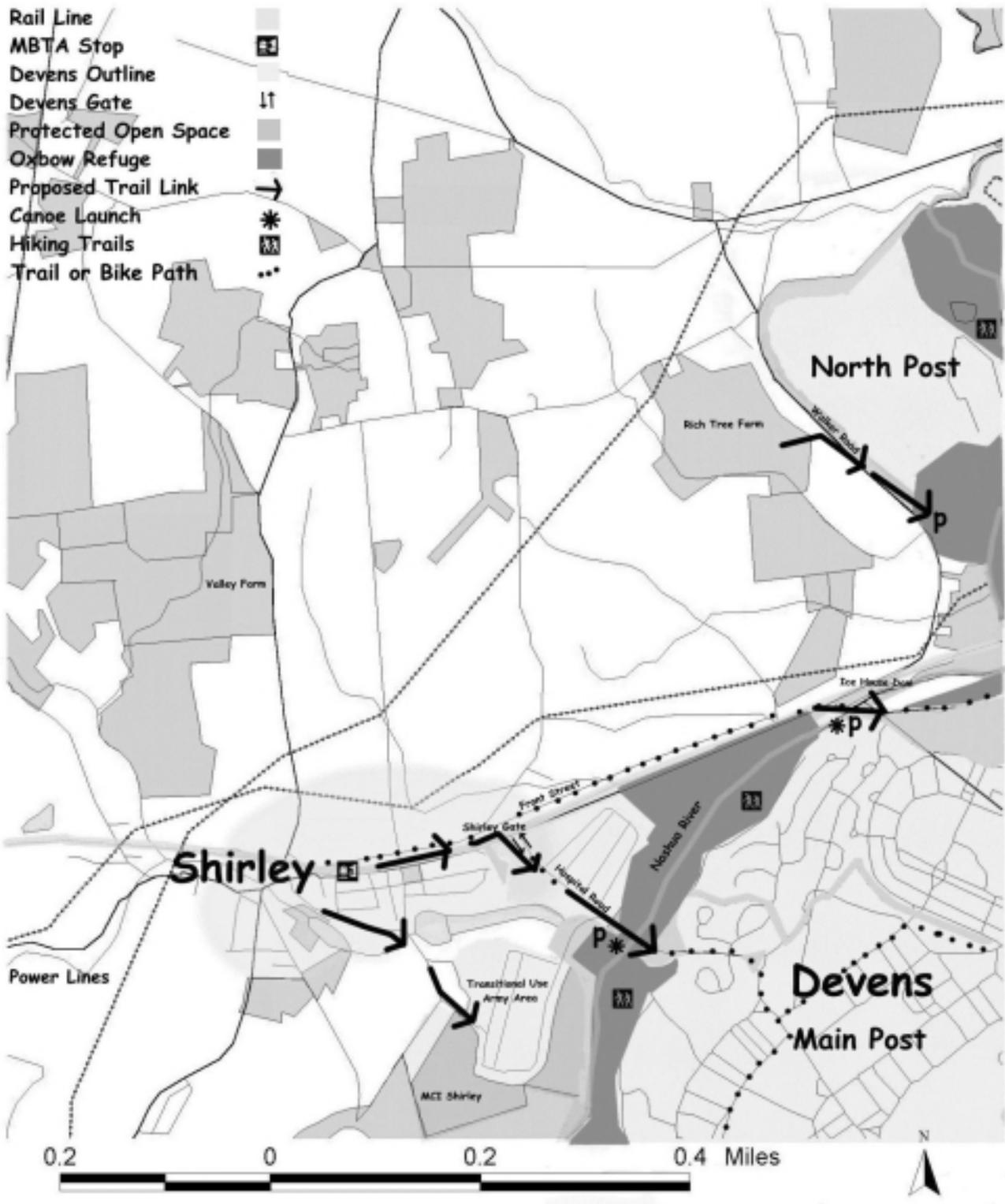
Proposed Trail Connections in Shirley

Trail connections between Shirley and Devens should focus on linking conservation parcels to access points and providing safe ways for downtown residents to cross into the Main Post. Shirley's neighborhoods, parks, schools, and the train station need to have convenient links to facilities within Devens. Improving sidewalks, creating bicycle lanes, designating road and railroad crossings, and reopening the closed gate at the transitional Army use area near Hospital Road will help join residents and commuters to Devens.

Bicycling is difficult along many of Shirley's narrow rural roads and busy Front Street. The designation of a bike lane, placement of bike racks near the train station, and labeling of bike routes will encourage safe riding for children and adults. Linking town bike paths and sidewalks to Devens would connect residents to larger networks, including the Nashua River Rail Trail. Shirley would also benefit from conversion of the abandoned Greenville Branch rail line to a rail trail (see Regional Trails Map, page 11), which would connect residents to recreation areas to the north as well as Ayer and the North Post.

The Conservation Commission maintains extensive open space, but trails on these sites rarely connect. Creating east-west greenways that intersect the Nashua and Squannacook river corridors can increase access and create linked corridors. Improving the open space system will protect wildlife habitat, particularly by linking to the extensive conservation lands held by the Division of Fish and Wildlife on the Squannacook River. Trails on the Rich Tree Farm could connect across Walker Road to reach the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. A lack of protected open space along the Devens boundaries limits opportunities, but power line corridors or easements on private property can help establish new links.

The Nashua and Squannacook Rivers are valuable scenic and natural resources for the town. Clearly designating parking areas and canoe access points at the Ice House dam, the Hospital Road Bridge, and designated trailheads could build on these resources. The Nashua River and associated corridors within the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge provide some of the most significant open space near Devens, and much of this land is accessible from Shirley. Focusing on this resource and adding multiple uses on adjacent lands will create a diversified trail network for the town.



Proposed Trail Connections in Shirley

Harvard Existing Conditions

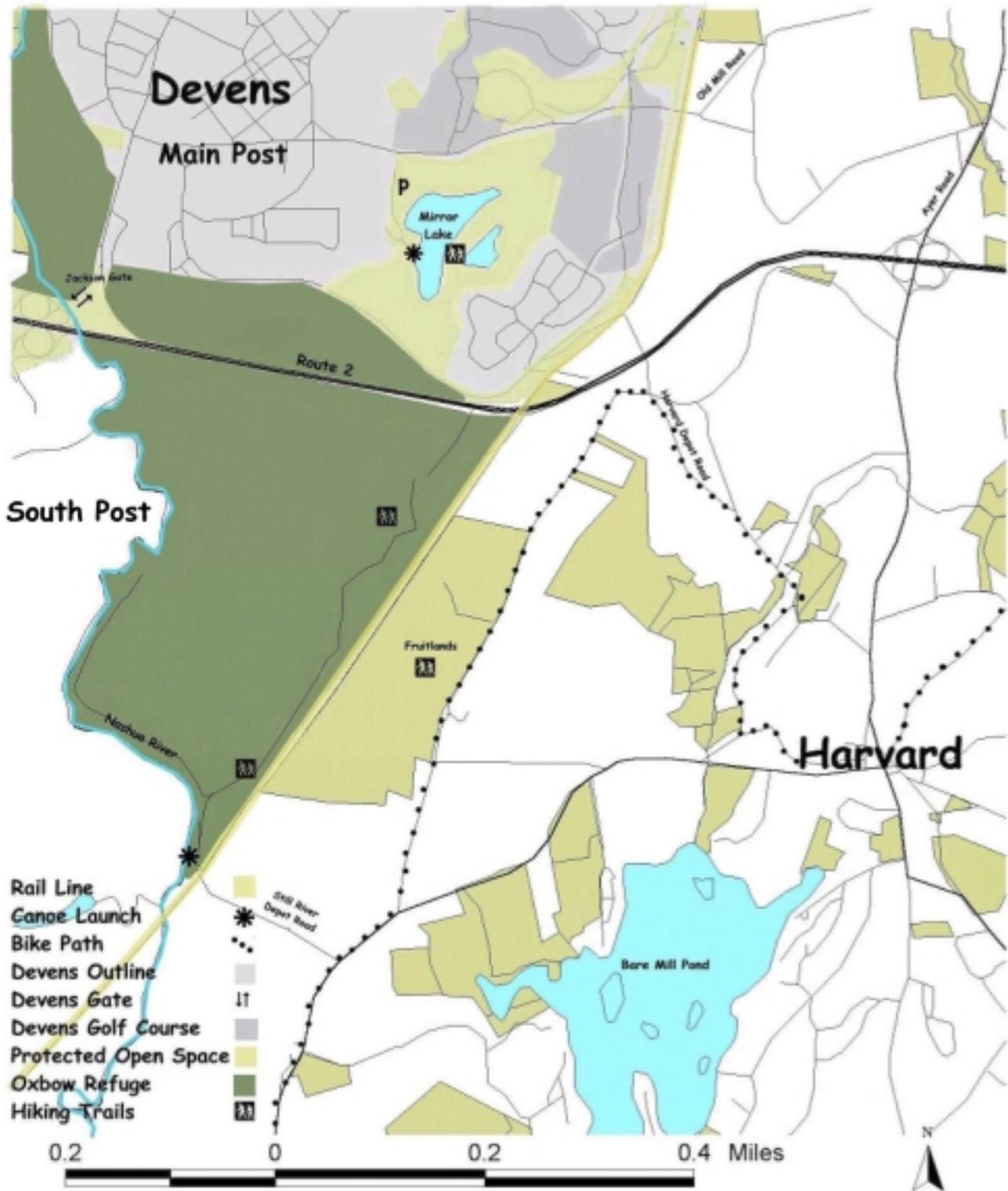
Harvard's combination of well-defined local trail networks and access to wildlife preserves offers a wide variety of trail-based activities. Trail use includes horseback riding, hiking, snowmobiling, canoeing, cross-country skiing, and bicycling, as well as studying New England landscape history at the Fruitlands Museum or natural history at the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge.

Harvard's Conservation Commission is the designer and builder of most public trails, developed as part of its extensive greenspace networks. A trail map booklet, published in conjunction with the Harvard Conservation Trust, encourages their active use. An updated guide will soon replace the last booklet, published in 1992, to reflect recent Conservation Commission property acquisition. An update of the open space plan is also underway, and its completion will encourage additional land preservation to expand greenway corridors for wildlife habitat and trail use.

Route 2 and the rail line along Devens' eastern border form the main obstacles to access from Harvard to Devens. Rail crossing is limited to an underpass at the end of Old Mill Road and a designated crossing at the Still River Depot Road, which ends at the Oxbow NWR and the Army's South Post Training entrances. Use of this rail line has increased with business development in Devens. Points for crossing Route 2 include an underpass on a pedestrian trail within the Oxbow NWR, an underpass on Harvard Depot Road, and an overpass on Ayer Road. In addition, restricted access to the South Post Training Area, maintained by the Army for reserve training, prevents trail access to Lancaster. These restrictions offer few alternatives for access to Devens' Main Post.

The rail line separates trails at the Fruitlands Museum from the Oxbow NWR and access points to Devens, except by way of Still River Depot Road. Other trails on Bolton Flats can connect to Devens only by this designated rail crossing. Closer connections between trail systems on the Oxbow NWR and Fruitlands may pose problems if hunters stray onto Fruitlands trails, where hunting is not allowed. Only those traveling on foot can gain access to Devens through the Oxbow NWR, which restricts all other trail use.

In addition to hiking trails, Harvard has a bicycle path marked by signs, but without a designated lane. This path winds along roads from the Ayer line, through the town center, and south to Bolton. Since Harvard has a network of quiet, pretty country roads with scenic vistas, it's a good place to bicycle and it attracts events like road races. Development of access points to Devens along Harvard Depot Road and Old Mill Road will provide important connections for cyclists. They will also provide the best alternatives for all other Harvard to Devens trail access that does not pass through the Oxbow NWR.



Harvard Existing Conditions

Proposed Trail Connections in Harvard

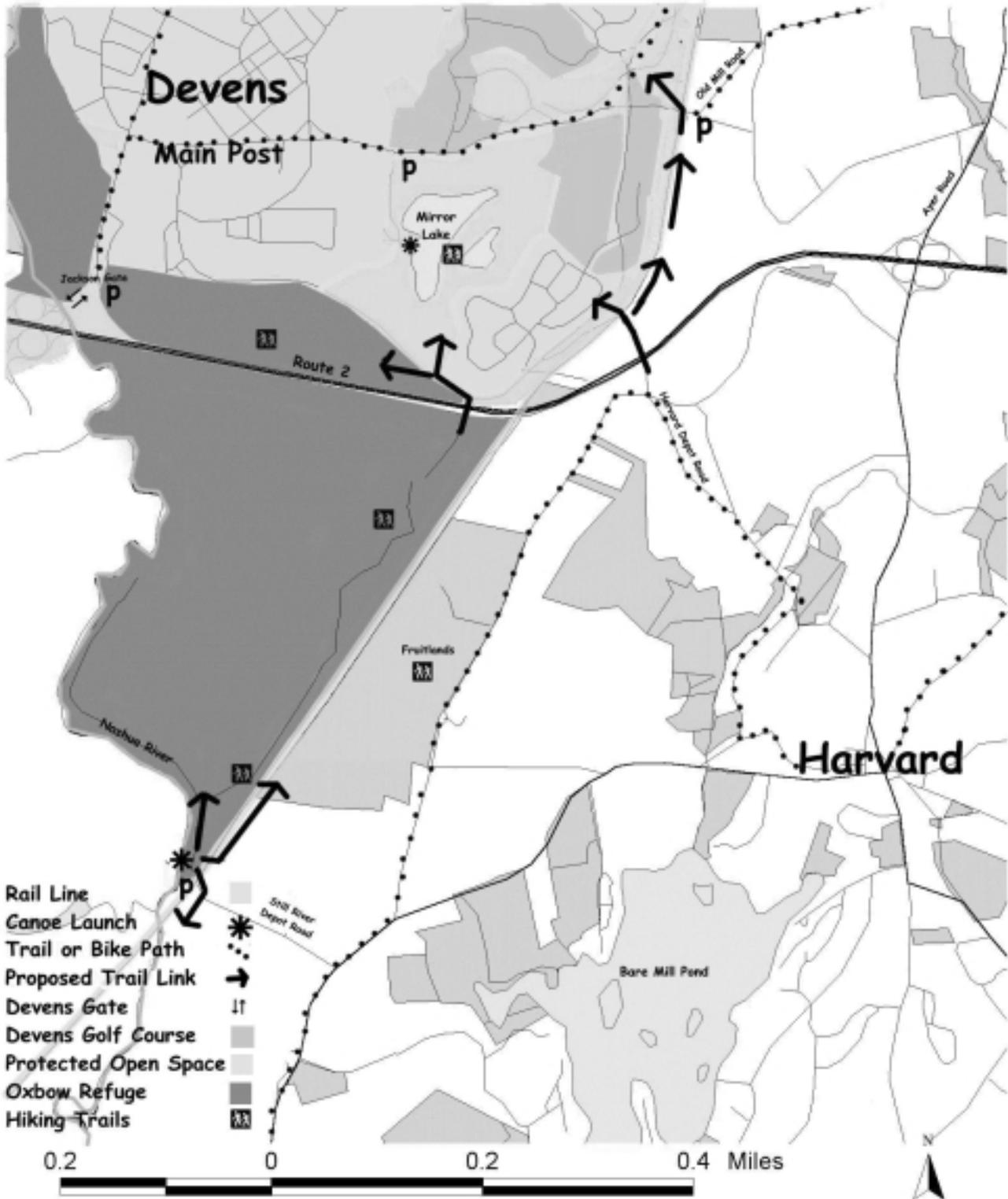
Due to the restraints created by the rail line and Route 2, trails from Harvard can connect to Devens only by three primary routes. One will pass through the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge and the others will reach the southeast corner of the Main Post from Harvard Depot Road and Old Mill Road. Since the first is restricted to foot traffic, the other routes offer the best available access for all other uses, including horseback riding and bicycling.

The first option connects hiking trails at the Fruitlands Museum, Watts Farm, the Priory, and Bolton Flats to Devens by way of the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. It uses a designated railroad crossing on the Still River Depot Road near the parking area and canoe launch for the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. Since the Oxbow NWR now extends along the river through the Main and North Posts of Devens, this parking area serves as a useful departure point for long hikes. The trail follows a former Army road through the Route 2 underpass to Devens, leading either to other Refuge land or to conservation areas at Mirror Lake. Although the trail only serves foot traffic, it offers some of the longest hikes in the region with important connections between Harvard and Devens.

The second option brings trails to an existing railroad underpass from Old Mill Road. Though this underpass will lead directly to the Devens golf course, a designated trail is designed to bypass its edge and bring bicyclists, horseback riders, and hikers onto Devens trails. It will be necessary to designate lanes to keep incompatible uses separate, and to keep horses as far away from the fairways as possible. This railroad underpass does not connect with existing trails in Harvard, but Old Mill Road does provide a link to schools and new playing fields and a track. It could also connect to the end of Harvard Depot Road by an easement on an unpaved road crossing private property. Securing this easement and designating this private road as a trail would provide a link to Harvard Depot Road, which leads to residential areas, the bike trail, and the town center.

The third option would create a direct connection from the end of Depot Road to the southeastern corner of the Main Post. Construction of a pedestrian bridge over the railroad would provide a close link from conservation lands, trails, and bicycle paths in Harvard to Devens, including conservation areas around Mirror Lake and the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge.

Since the Old Mill Road underpass does not connect directly to Harvard trails, it will be important to provide convenient parking at this access point. Residents living on this quiet dead-end street may oppose use of the area as a trailhead, so they should be involved in all planning efforts. Successful development of the trail will depend on links to Devens recreation areas, including Mirror Lake and playing fields near Rogers Field. It will also require connections to larger regional trails such as the Nashua River Rail Trail in Ayer, which accommodates hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding.



Proposed Trail Connections in Harvard

Devens Existing Conditions

Public trail access to portions of the former Main and North Posts of Fort Devens began in 1995, when the Army closed portions of the base and transferred land to MassDevelopment for conversion to civilian use. Since that time, recreational use has followed abandoned patrol roads and trails in woodland training areas. The Recreation Department has mapped conservation areas around Mirror Lake for continued use, but most other trails form temporary networks that will change as development proceeds. New trails will follow guidelines laid out by the 1994 Reuse Plan and the 1995 Open Space and Recreation Plan. These describe key areas for trail development that link to recreation facilities, housing, and connections to surrounding communities identified in this report. They also describe critical habitats that will need careful monitoring and protection.

Trails are not only for hikers. Horseback riders, bicyclists, bird-watchers, and cross-country skiers also use trails on Devens, while canoeists follow its borders on the Nashua River. Most of this trail use occurs in the Mirror Lake area, around Shepley's Hill, or within MassDevelopment's portion of the North Post. Links between trails include former patrol roads that follow much of the outline of the Main Post. Remnants of these Army trail networks are disappearing as land is developed, particularly for the golf course. Quiet roadways continue to offer recreation opportunities while new trails are developed, however. Devens hosts sports teams in summer months for training and competition, and these athletes train along local roads as well as trails. Bicyclists travel to Devens for road races and training. In addition, veterans and tourists travel to Devens to visit historic sites such as Vicksburg Square, or walk the parade grounds and war memorials.

Current recreational use depends on access from the four gates to the Main Post, roadways along the North Post, and a variety of informal access points. Informal access ranges from the existing railroad underpass at Old Mill Road in Harvard to various holes in the chain link fence along Devens' property line. Some of these access points serve people who live just outside the boundaries, particularly children. Others, including canoe launches or parking near the main gates, serve visitors who arrive by car. They park near the entrances, along roadways, at recreation centers like gyms and playing fields, or near Rogers Field at Vicksburg Square.

This report focuses on major trail networks and transportation patterns to identify relevant connections to communities around Devens. For more detailed information about Devens and a comprehensive overview of proposed trail development on the Main and North Posts, please refer to the 1994 Reuse Plan and the 1995 Open Space and Recreation Plan.



Devens Existing Conditions

Proposed Trail Connections in Devens

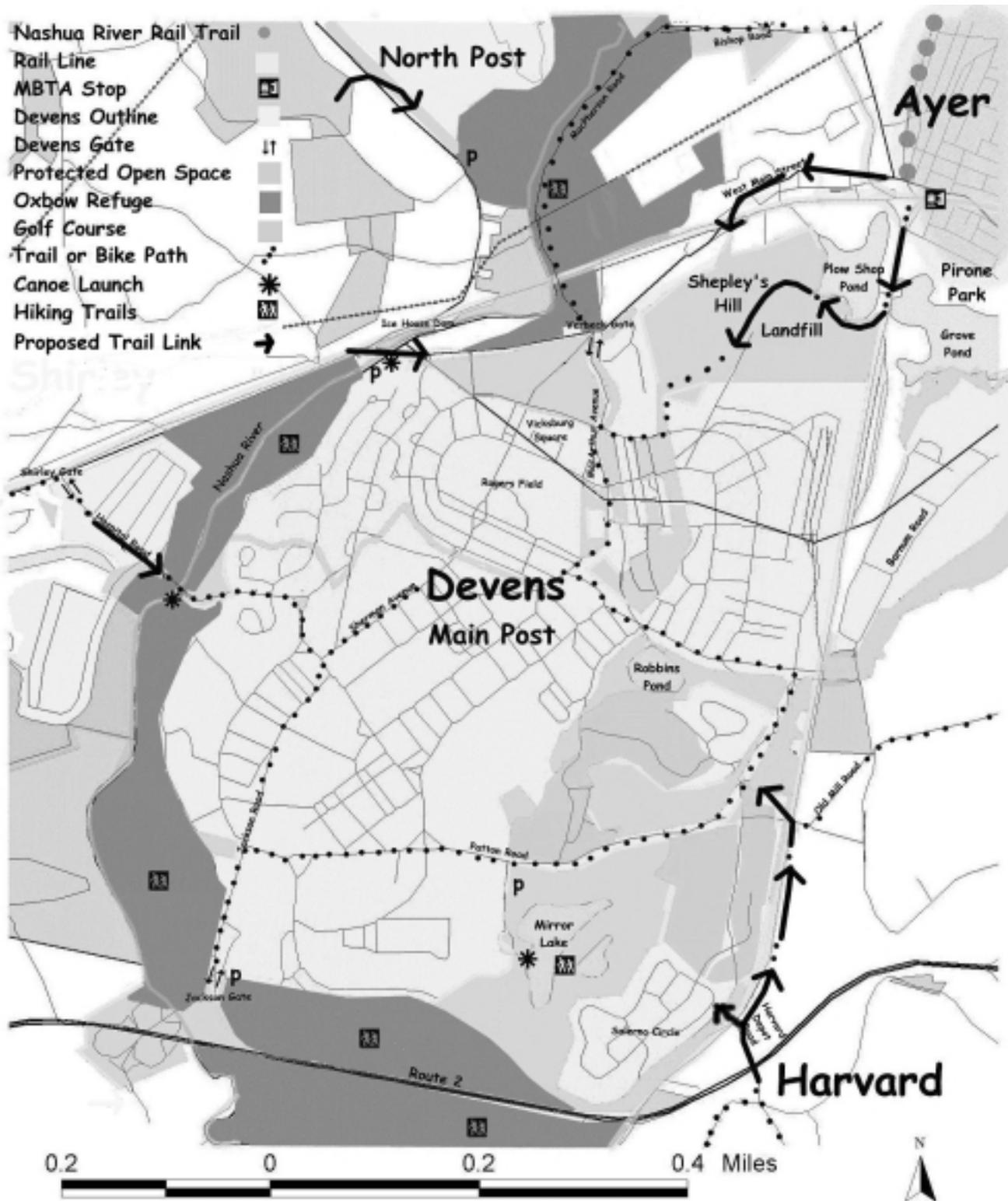
Successful connections to Devens from surrounding communities will link areas with scenic, historic, and recreational value to schools, housing, and public transportation stops. Planning will help preserve options during redevelopment, and ensure a close fit between trail use and other land management to avoid contaminated or environmentally sensitive sites while serving as many people as possible.

A central north-south trail corridor running from Jackson to Verbeck Gate will form the backbone of the network in the Main Post. This trail will fall within the 300' right-of-way along Jackson, Sherman, and MacArthur Roads, and can include lanes for bicycles as well as pedestrians. It could also include lanes for horses to help link trails in Harvard and Shirley to MassDevelopment areas within the North Post or the Nashua River Rail Trail. A second trail corridor will branch from the main axis along Patton Road, forming a loop that returns to the main corridor on Barnum Road near Rogers Field. This line provides opportunities to link to the trail systems around Mirror Lake and Harvard connection points.

The most intensive hiking trails will be at Mirror Lake, around portions of Shepley's Hill, the Nashua River corridor, and portions of the North Post. Other walking and bicycling trails can follow roads or right-of-way easements across private land in redevelopment zones to reach these natural areas. Paths and sidewalks will help central parking areas serve a wide range of uses. Designating crosswalks, clearly labeling routes, and separating incompatible uses will ensure safety and efficient trail use throughout Devens.

Trails on Devens will serve a wide variety of interests and activity levels, and ensure universal accessibility by linking main corridors with smaller networks designed for special use. Designated bicycle trails will offer recreation and transportation and link to off-road trails in areas where erosion can be closely managed. Mountain bike courses can encourage cyclists to stay away from sensitive terrain, and an equestrian trail system with a management plan will help prevent erosion. Riders could support intensive uses by contributing to maintenance and erosion control efforts. Equestrian trails are not permitted in Preservation Areas, and are restricted from most Conservation Areas, but they are appropriate in Intensive use Areas (see the 1995 Open Space Plan). Trails that have been lost to golf course development could be replaced around Salerno Circle for intensive uses, though to ensure safety horse trails should stay as far away from the golf course as possible.

Portions of the former North Post offer extensive open space for recreation. Preservation of wetlands and vernal pools should be a top priority, but open space conservation can work with trail development in this area. Open space preservation on the North Post will particularly benefit residents of Shirley and Ayer. Trails on Shepley's Hill will benefit residents of downtown Ayer. Any trail development on Shepley's Hill, the adjacent landfill, and the North Post will have to consider habitat preservation and contamination issues, but these areas offer significant potential for a variety of low-impact recreational uses.



Proposed Trail Connections in Devens

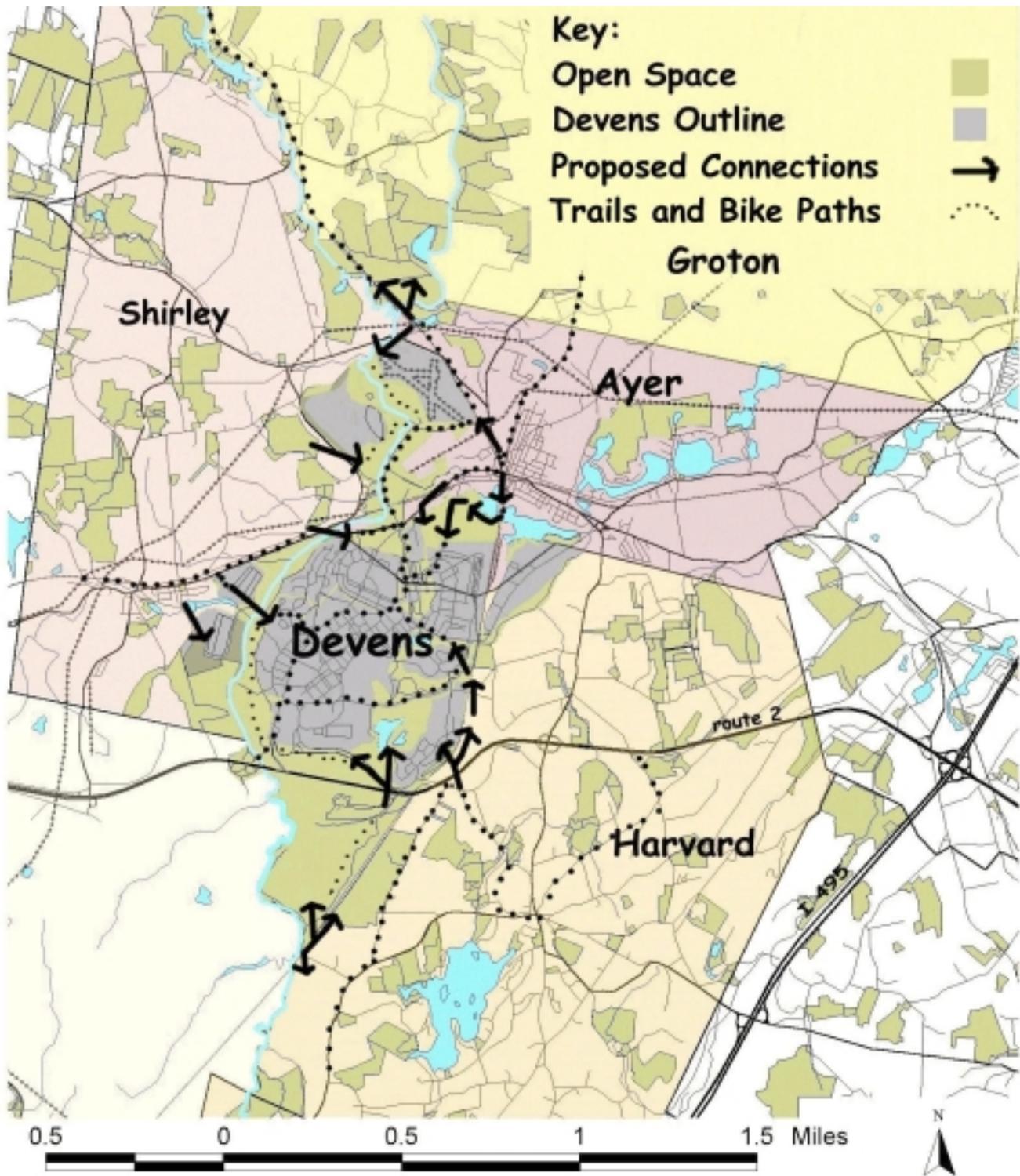
Draft Regional Design Plan

The conceptual regional design plan shows where major trail corridors can connect through Devens's Main and North Posts. It demonstrates how the development recommendations of the Reuse Plan and the Open Space and Recreation Plan will link to open space and trails in surrounding communities.

Trails running along major roads in the Main Post create arterial corridors through Devens. These branch into smaller networks in natural, scenic, recreational, or historic areas, ensuring mixed use and accessibility. They cross Ayer's West Main Street to reach Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge lands on the North Post along MacPherson Road, and connect to surrounding communities across easements as well as through major gates. These easements use existing bridges and road or railroad crossings wherever possible to reach greenways and conservation lands in surrounding towns. Trails converge at parking areas, MBTA stops, and population centers to ensure broad use by people of all ages and abilities. Signs and maps designate trails clearly for safety and convenience.

The regional plan focuses on several major networks within reach of Devens. The Nashua River Rail Trail will become a significant recreational asset to Ayer and Groton, which could become a major link to conservation lands northwest of Devens with the conversion of the Greenville Branch rail line. Construction of a visitors center for the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge near the Jackson Gate at the Main Post would create a central point of departure for a large network of hiking trails. Other parking areas along the rivers provide access to canoe launches and sections of the Oxbow NWR trails. The Nashua and Squannacook Rivers are major natural resources that add greatly to the region's appeal. Trails should strive to link preservation areas along these corridors to make the most of the greenways.

Devens was developed as a fort because of available transportation and land. These same resources ensure that today it can become a hub for conservation and recreation networks. Redevelopment creates a challenge because it requires adaptive reuse of the existing infrastructure, but it provides an opportunity to preserve large tracts of land, particularly along north-south river networks. The regional trails system will help visitors and local residents appreciate their open space and work actively to preserve and expand it.



Draft Regional Design Plan

Action Plan Overview

Implementation of Regional Trails Initiative recommendations will depend first on the successful development of trails on the Main and North Posts, in accordance with the Open Space and Recreation Plan.

- All existing trails within open space districts on the Main and North Posts should be mapped to provide the detailed information needed to design an expanded trails network.
- Signs designating trails and outlining restrictions in sensitive areas will encourage stewardship and set precedents about appropriate use.
- Completion of design plans for major corridors through Devens will support the preservation of land for trails in redevelopment districts.
- The upcoming five-year Devens review process should ensure that trails planning on Devens remains on track. All trail connections will depend on preservation of natural areas in accordance with existing open space plans.
- Management of the planning process will be key to its success. The Devens Open Space and Recreation Committee should continue to work with the Devens Enterprise Commission, the Devens Recreation Department, the Devens Department of Public Works, and the Joint Boards of Selectmen, as well as public and private parties in surrounding towns, to build regional connections.

Local conservation commissions and non-profit organizations should continue to preserve greenway corridors, including easements across private property, for wildlife habitat and recreational use. These corridors will be most effective if they connect to large regional networks such as preservation land along the Nashua River. Greenways that link to the east and west from this major north-south corridor will be particularly valuable.

Devens should focus on developing new access points at key areas, particularly Old Mill Road and Depot Road in Harvard, Shepley's Hill in Ayer, and Hospital Road in Shirley. MassDevelopment should work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife to create clearly designated trail connections within the former North Post. Existing gates should be reconfigured to become more inviting, and include secondary access for non-motorized use. Additional access points identified in this report should be developed, mapped, and publicized.

Clear designation of parking areas for trails at key access points will ensure the most efficient use of existing resources.

Working with railroads to secure safe designated crossings and pursue possible rail trail construction will help overcome some of the obstacles to connected trail systems.

Publicity is the key to successful trail development; detailed information will ensure that these networks are used and maintained. Minor trail networks in conservation areas such as Shepley's Hill and portions of the North Post should be mapped and condensed into a single easy-to-read brochure showing broad regional connections.

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