

Janae' Reneaud Field: Open space serves many critical purposes

By Janae' Reneaud Field / Guest columnist
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Janae' Reneaud Field - Courtesy photo

Over the past several years The Frontera Land Alliance has been working with Professor Sumner Swaner of Utah State University. He was one of the expert practitioners that we asked to participate in a webinar to share his approach to large landscape conservation.

The Franklin and Organ Mountains Conservation Cooperative hosted a webinar in June 2013 with experts from The Conservation Fund, the University of Utah Ecological Planning Center and the North Carolina Department of Natural Resources to learn about various approaches to community-based landscape conservation.

Swaner has shared a presentation that The Frontera Land Alliance feels would be of interest to all.

His findings state that there are two basic reasons that make open space so important.

On one hand, there are many advantages to conserving and protecting open spaces, including physical, psychological, economic, and ecological gains.

On the other hand, there are disadvantages to losing open spaces. Opportunities for exercise and for mental/emotional fulfillment are diminished. Aesthetic quality, habitat connectivity, and environmental conditions are degraded. Open space is important, therefore, both as a means of capitalizing on major benefits and of avoiding serious costs.

The open space connectedness survey, conducted by Swaner, consisted of 800 randomly selected people from seven states, who participated in phone or online interviews: approximately 115 participants each from California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, New York, Oregon, and West Virginia. They targeted specific counties within each, in order to reach people living in a range of urban, rural, and suburban areas.

The open space connectedness survey had three objectives.

First, to determine the opinions and feelings of Americans regarding their connection to open space in their residential communities. Second, to confirm that, in addition to deriving physical and recreational benefits, Americans have a deep psychological connection with open space. Third, to determine Americans' preferred methods of residential open space planning.

The survey had two targeted research questions: 1) Is there a preference for development with a significant proportion of open space? 2) Is this preference so important that city planners need to integrate open space into their planning and subdivision regulations?

The open space connectedness survey showed that the majority of Americans place a high value on open space.

More than 80 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements: "Open space is important to mental well-being," and "Open space is an integral part of any community." Regardless of age, geographic location, urban or rural living conditions, and even political affiliation, people across the country feel that their community cannot do without open space, and that open space is important not only for exercise and recreation, but for mental and emotional health and rejuvenation.

Americans are calling specifically for open space planning and development. Around 75 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements: "Open space should be automatically included in new community developments," and "Real estate development and land conservation should occur together."

Similarly, around 60 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements: "I would prefer to have my same residence, but in a neighborhood that has large, shared open spaces," and

"A lack of coherent planning of open space will prevent conservation." Residents quite clearly think that their cities should be taking active steps to protect the places they love.

The Frontera Land Alliance is working with a wide variety of agencies ranging from local, state and federal to achieve these very goals. If you are interested in conserving your land whether it is urban or rural, feel free to contact The Frontera Land Alliance at (915) 351-8352.

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