

PE7 Action: Conserve Natural Areas

1 – 21 Points

A. Why is this action important?

Conserving natural areas and open spaces is a vital component of a climate resilience and adaptation strategy. These areas purify our air and water, moderate local temperatures, store carbon, reduce stormwater runoff, control flooding, and provide habitat, among other benefits. Replicating these ecosystem benefits is often expensive and sometimes impossible. Natural areas can also provide recreation opportunities and scenic beauty for the community. Maintaining large natural areas and connections between them is also essential for the survival and adaptation of many plant and animal species in a rapidly warming climate. However, many natural areas are vulnerable to development, and financial resources to protect them are limited. Conservation of areas with the greatest climate resilience and adaptation benefits requires a clear understanding of a community's natural resources, establishing conservation goals and priorities, and identifying strategies to achieve them.

A natural resources inventory identifies a community's important natural assets and is the foundation for conservation or open space planning. An open space plan identifies priority areas and goals for conservation along with specific objectives and strategies to achieve them through the acquisition of land, conservation easements, land use regulation, site design, or stewardship. A community preservation plan is similar to an open space plan, but contains elements specific to establishing a local real estate transfer tax. Implementation of open space and community preservation plans often depends on passage of associated conservation finance mechanisms such as open space bonds or community preservation funds. By establishing conservation plans and finance measures, communities can take action to protect the natural areas that contribute the most to climate resilience and adaptation.

B. How to implement this action

Implementation of this Climate Smart Communities (CSC) action includes the following components:

Develop an open space plan, community preservation plan, or similar conservation plan that identifies priorities for conservation of natural areas and open spaces, including areas important for climate resilience and adaptation. The plan may include an inventory component (eligible for points under PE6 Action: Natural Resources Inventory), or draw upon a prior natural resources or open space inventory or community plan (such as PE6 Action: Comprehensive Plan with Sustainability Elements). Examples of conservation targets for climate resilience and adaptation include the following:

- coastal shorelines and areas where dunes, beaches, and tidal wetlands will migrate as sea levels rise
- stream buffers, floodplains, wetlands, and wetland buffers
- large natural areas such as intact forests, wetland complexes, and grasslands
- local and regional corridors connecting larger natural areas
- areas with diverse physical settings, e.g., varying geology and topography, which are predicted to support high biodiversity into the future

Establish an inclusive open space planning process that meaningfully engages diverse stakeholders including under-represented groups. Engage the public in setting priorities to foster community buy-in and support. Ensure that social equity is considered in planning for new parks and protection of natural areas.

To be eligible for points under this CSC action, the adopted plan must cover the entire community, identify priorities for conservation of natural areas that contribute to climate resilience and adaptation, and outline strategies and implementation actions for conservation of those areas. The plan must have been completed within ten years of the

application date. In addition, the plan must describe the public outreach process including information on the variety of communication channels used, how stakeholders were meaningfully involved in the plan’s development, and how their involvement is reflected in the implementation of the strategies.

Conduct a conservation finance feasibility study to explore public funding options available for natural areas and open space protection. Given the substantial investment of time and resources required for a successful conservation finance initiative, preliminary research is essential to determine the feasibility of such an effort. A feasibility study provides a fact-based reference for evaluating financing mechanisms. Research may include community surveys or professional polling to gauge public support and priorities for conservation finance mechanism. Under this CSC action, the study must have been completed within ten years of the application date

Establish a conservation finance mechanism that creates a dedicated local fund and source of revenue for land conservation. Examples include open space bonds, property taxes, or real estate transfer taxes.

Protect a natural area through land acquisition or conservation easement. Land conservation efforts may be undertaken with non-government partners, such as local land trusts, but must be partially funded by the municipality to be eligible for points under this CSC action. The financial contribution can have taken place any time in the past to be eligible for points under this CSC action. Protected natural areas may be dedicated to create parks or preserves with public access, or may remain in private ownership under a conservation easement. Conservation easements are recommended for public parks and preserves and other dedicated conservation land to ensure that municipal investments in land protection will last in perpetuity. Municipalities are strongly encouraged to use a natural resources inventory, open space plan, or similar inventory or plan to guide land protection efforts.

C. Timeframe, project costs, and resource needs

It should take one to two years to develop an open space plan or community preservation plan that pulls together key information (see examples linked below in section G). Costs vary; the following are coarse estimates. Hiring a consultant to develop an open space plan can cost between \$20,000-\$50,000 depending on the depth of inventory and mapping, analysis, public participation, and size of the community. A conservation finance feasibility study can cost \$10,000-\$15,000 and may take less than six months to develop. Establishing a conservation finance measure such as an open space bond or real estate transfer tax requires a public campaign (cost varies) and takes six-twelve months to develop. Costs for land conservation vary widely, and can be shared with other partners such as a local land trust.

D. Which local governments implement this action? Which departments within the local government are most likely to have responsibility for this action?

This action is applicable to all types of local governments. Planning departments and open space committees or conservation advisory councils are most likely to be responsible for this action. Parks and recreation staff may be involved. Land trusts, watershed groups, and other government agencies can be excellent partners in conservation planning, public education, conservation finance feasibility studies, and implementation of land protection projects. Other government entities that can act as partners are county governments, the New York State (NYS) Department of Agriculture and Markets, the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

E. How to obtain points for this action

	<i>POSSIBLE POINTS</i>
Develop an open space plan or similar conservation plan within the last ten years that covers the entire community, identifies priority areas, outlines implementation strategies, and describes an inclusive planning process	4
Conduct a conservation finance feasibility study	1
Establish a conservation finance mechanism to fund local land conservation (such as an open space	4

bond, property tax, or real estate transfer tax)

Protect natural areas: Make a financial contribution to protecting one or more properties in parks, preserves, and/or with conservation easements - Less than 25 acres	6
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- Between 26 and 100 acres	8
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- Greater than 100 acres	12
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F. What to submit

All actions must have been completed within the past 10 years.

For the open space plan (or similar conservation plan), submit a copy of the plan or provide the web address. Also submit a copy of the meeting minutes where the plan was formally adopted by the local governing body.

For the conservation finance feasibility study, submit a copy of the study or provide the web address.

For the conservation finance mechanism, submit a copy of ballot measure language and official election results from an open space bond, property tax, or real estate transfer tax passed.

For the finance measure, submit a description of the measure, a copy of ballot measure language and official election results from an open space bond, property tax, or real estate transfer tax passed. Show that the finance mechanism is actively in use.

For the protection of natural areas, submit a copy of the meeting minutes where the expenditure toward a land protection project was approved by the local governing body, a map showing the property protected with tax parcel ID, size of the property in acres, and a copy of the deed. Where applicable, also submit a copy of the recorded conservation easement demonstrating the acreage that is permanently protected under easement.

All CSC action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submittals should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

G. Links to additional resources or examples

- [NYS Department of Environmental Conservation \(DEC\), Conserving Natural Areas and Wildlife in Your Community](#)
- [DEC, Local Open Space Planning Guide](#)
- [DEC, Open Space](#)
- [DEC and National Wildlife Federation, Assessing the Vulnerability of Key Habitats in New York. A Foundation for Climate Adaptation Planning](#)
- [The Nature Conservancy Resilient and Connected Landscapes Project](#)
- [US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Fish, Wildlife and Plants Climate Adaptation Strategy](#)
- [Town of Red Hook: Community Preservation Plan](#)
- [Red Hook, NY, Planning for Resilient, Connected Natural Areas and Habitats: A Conservation Framework](#)
- [Rensselaer County Conservation Plan](#)
- [Ulster County Open Space Planning](#)
- [Bond Basics for Towns, Cities, and Villages in New York State](#)
- [International Union for Conservation of Nature, World Commission on Protected Areas, Best Practice Guidelines for Protected Area Managers Series](#)
- [Trust for Public Land Research Library](#)
- [DEC Hudson River Estuary Program CSC Video: Conserving Nature in Your Community: Critical Environmental Areas](#)

H. Recertification Requirements

The recertification requirements are the same as the initial certification requirements.