

# Gurski Homestead Concept Plan

June 2017





# 1. Introduction

Located at 26 Obtuse Hill Road, the Gurski Homestead is an 18.4-acre former dairy farm in Brookfield, CT. It is bordered to the south by Obtuse Hill Road and to the north by the Town-owned Williams Park. The Brookfield Nature Center, a 16-acre parcel owned and operated by the Brookfield Conservation Commission, lies to the southeast across Obtuse Hill Road (see Figure 1). Comprised of a barn, Victorian-era farmhouse, a blacksmith shop, a second residence, a root cellar, a cemetery, and several small outbuildings, the Homestead an important remnant of the Town’s agricultural heritage.

The Gurski Homestead is owned and managed by the Town of Brookfield. The Connecticut State Historic Office (CT SHPO) has a preservation easement on the property because of grant funding that was provided to the Town over time for preservation of the Homestead. As such, the barn, houses and outbuildings on the Homestead must be preserved. Rehabilitation of the buildings must be undertaken in consultation with the CT SHPO.

In January 2017, the Town of Brookfield, with the assistance of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation and Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc. (FHI), undertook a planning process to develop a concept plan for the future preservation and use of the Gurski property. The resulting concept was informed by a robust public outreach effort that engaged the community in the planning process. The concept plan below outlines the history of the property and current conditions, the planning process, and the phased concept plan.



Figure 1: Gurski Homestead site location

## 2. History and Current Conditions

The Victorian farmhouse on the property was constructed c. 1890 by Henry Foote and then was subsequently owned by Warren Washburn. Frank and Eva Gurski purchased the homestead and dairy farm from Washburn in 1918. Most of the tilled acreage of the farm was devoted to growing hay and corn to feed the cows, however broadleaf tobacco was also grown and dried on the Gurski Farm. In 1968, the Gurskis sold the northern 80 acres to the Town of Brookfield for open space. In 2002, the remaining acreage, homestead, and farm buildings were purchased by the Town from Stanley Gurski and Frank Gurski, Jr.

The Victorian-era farmhouse fronts on Obtuse Hill Road. The wood-frame building is two stories high with a side-gable roof and an open porch with a shed roof, turned posts, and a simple balustrade. There is a small one-story shed-roofed addition which spans the rear of the house, and the house is clad in cedar shingles. The house is currently vacant and not suitable for occupancy.

The dairy barn lies to the east of the house. It's a two-and-one-half-story three-bay gambrel-roof bank barn. The gable roofline runs north-south and the west façade includes the building's main entrance. A louvered cupola is centered along the roof's ridge line. A silo was once located on the north side of the barn, and a shed used for wagon storage was located on the south side of the barn, however neither are extant. The barn was stabilized in 2007-2008 but additional rehabilitation is required before it can be used.



Photo 1: Marion Washburn in front of the Gurski barn, c. 1918



Photo 2: Gurski Homestead, c. 1955



Other buildings on the property include a small one-story shed to the north of the farmhouse, a one-story blacksmith forge to the north of the barn, and a 1-1/2-story gable-roofed residence up the hill to the north of the shed. This house dates to c. 1940 and is currently rented to a Town employee. The Merwin Brook Cemetery lies on the east side of the property, north of the barn. A community garden run by the Brookfield Lions Club is located at the northwest end of the property, while an open field comprises the northeast corner of the property. A vehicular drive runs north-south through the property providing access to the houses, barn, field and community garden. This drive also provides pedestrian access to the Town-owned Williams Park to the north. The locations of each of these features, as well as photos, are provided in Figure 2. A tobacco barn, privy and several other small outbuildings are no longer extant.

In addition to the rental of the smaller of the two houses and the use of the community garden by the Lions Club, the property is the site of the Farmfest each year, a celebration of the Town's agricultural heritage.



Photo 3: Gurski fields and farm, undated



Photo 4: Farmfest



Photo 5: Gurski Farmhouse viewed from the southeast





Figure 2: Gurski Homestead site features





Photo 5: Gurski Farmhouse as viewed from Obtuse Hill Road



Photo 6: West Elevation of the Gurski Barn



Photo 7: View south from the north end of the Homestead across the open field



In 2014, a Structural Assessment and Stabilization Plan was undertaken by the Town through a grant from the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development. Completed by Conlon Engineering, the assessment included the following findings:

Farmhouse: Overall, the farmhouse was determined to be in fair condition. There is a depression in the north side of the gable roof, corresponding to a failed timber. A second failed timber was observed around the chimney. The windows require scraping, painting and reglazing, and some of the trim is rotten and requires replacement. The flashing between the low roof on the north side and the clearstory wall requires replacement. The chimney should be repointed and the shingle siding is deteriorated and in need of replacement. Finally, the interior finishes are in poor condition.



Photo 9: Farmhouse interior



Photo 10: Farmhouse interior

Barn: The barn was stabilized and partially repaired in 2007/2008. This included lines of temporary shoring throughout the lower level for support of the first-floor framing. The timber decking is in extremely poor condition and isn't shored, and the framing isn't engaged with the west side foundation wall. The roof was recently repaired and is in fair condition, and the roof framing is stable and in fair condition.

Shed: The sill is exposed to the earth and as a result is in poor condition. The rafter tails are rotted and some of the siding requires replacement.

The smaller house and the Forge are both in stable condition.



Photo 11: Interior lower level of Gurski Barn



Photo 12: Gurski Barn framing



### 3. Planning Process

A Steering Committee was established at the outset of the planning process to inform and guide the planning effort. The Committee was made up of representatives from the Brookfield Land Use Department, the Brookfield Conservation Commission, the Brookfield Department of Economic and Community Development, the Connecticut Trust, and a member of the Gurski family. Meetings were held at key milestones in the planning effort. Minutes of each of the meetings are included in Appendix A.

FHI initiated the process by conducting an existing conditions review of the property, using a combination of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping, field visits, and historic photographs. An online survey was then developed to garner feedback from the public about existing and potential future uses. A charrette was also held to gather additional input from the community. The resulting findings are noted below.

#### Online Survey

The online survey was open between February and May 2017, and received over 350 responses. Most responders, nearly 75%, live within a five-minute drive of the Gurski Homestead and have lived, worked, or owned a business in Brookfield for over ten years. As such, they have the potential to be invested in the future of the Gurski property. Over 50% of survey respondents said that the Gurski Homestead was very significant to Brookfield’s history and/or identity. When asked what concerns them about the homestead, the most popular answers included potential future uses and the condition of the buildings. Other popular choices included the lack of active uses and the condition of the grounds.

When asked about how often they visit the Gurski Homestead, nearly half of survey respondents indicated that they rarely, if ever, visit the homestead. Another 30% responded that they visit a few times per year or less. When they do visit the Gurski site, the vast majority (over 70%) said they visit for walking, hiking or running, while nearly 30% said they attend Farmfest (see Figure 3). Note that survey respondents could choose more than one answer.

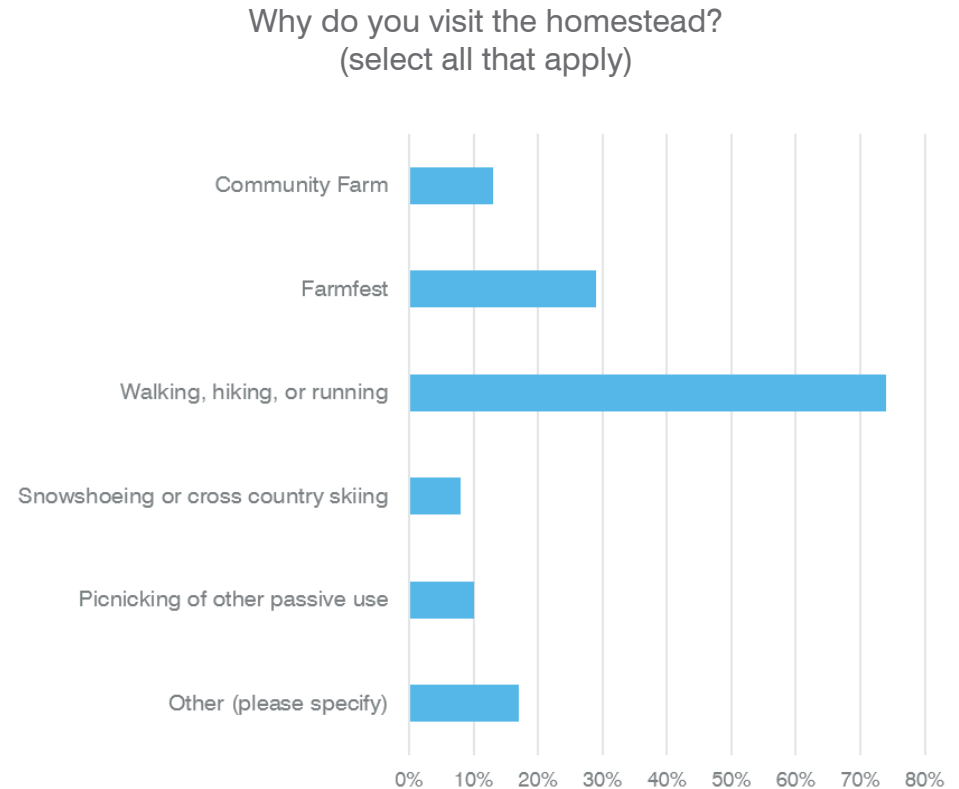


Figure 3: Why do you visit the homestead?



When asked how they think the Gurski Homestead should be reused (survey respondents could select all answer choices that apply), nearly 90% of respondents selected passive recreation such as picnic areas and nature trails. Other popular choices included a farm stand or farmers’ market (70%), Town sponsored educational/recreational activities (55%), active farming (38%) and event space for Town use or rental (35%). Just over 20% of respondents thought that the Gurski Homestead should be reused as space for active recreation (see Figure 4).

These responses highlight that residents wish the property to remain open to public/community uses and that recreational activities and events should continue to be held on the property. Closing the property to the public and converting to private use was not favored.

When asked what the Town should do with the Gurski Homestead (survey respondents could select all answer choices that apply), nearly 70% of people answered that the Town should make necessary investments for its preservation and/or reuse, over 60% answered that the Town should create a use residents could enjoy and benefit from, and only 7% said the buildings should be kept “mothballed” (see Figure 5).

How do you think the Gurski Homestead should be reused?  
(select all that apply)

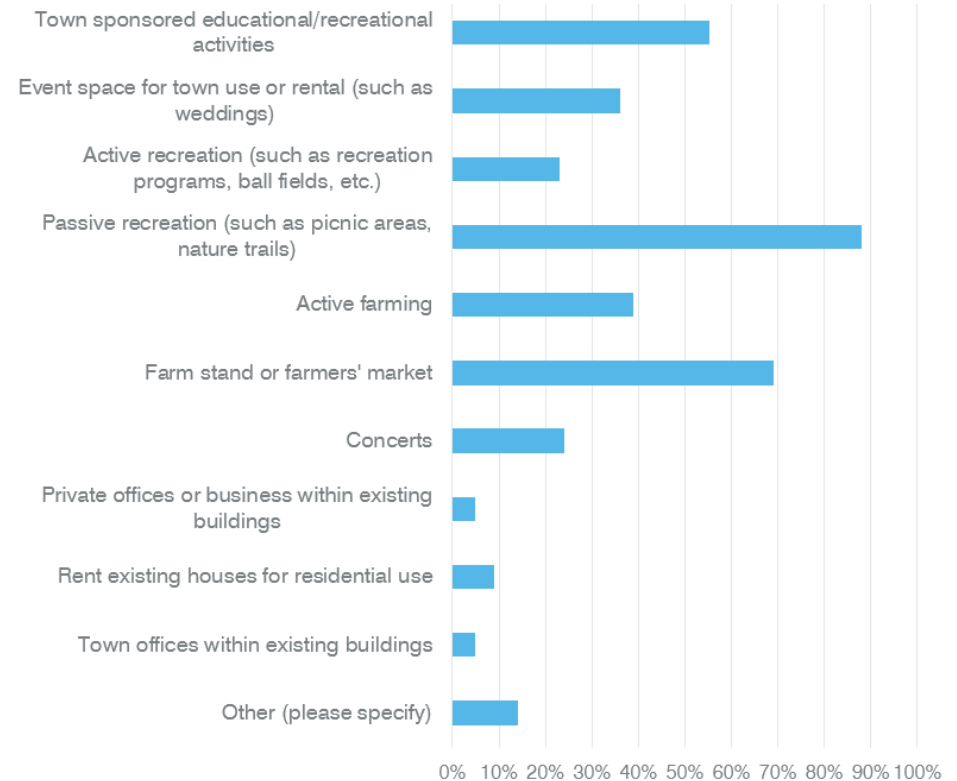
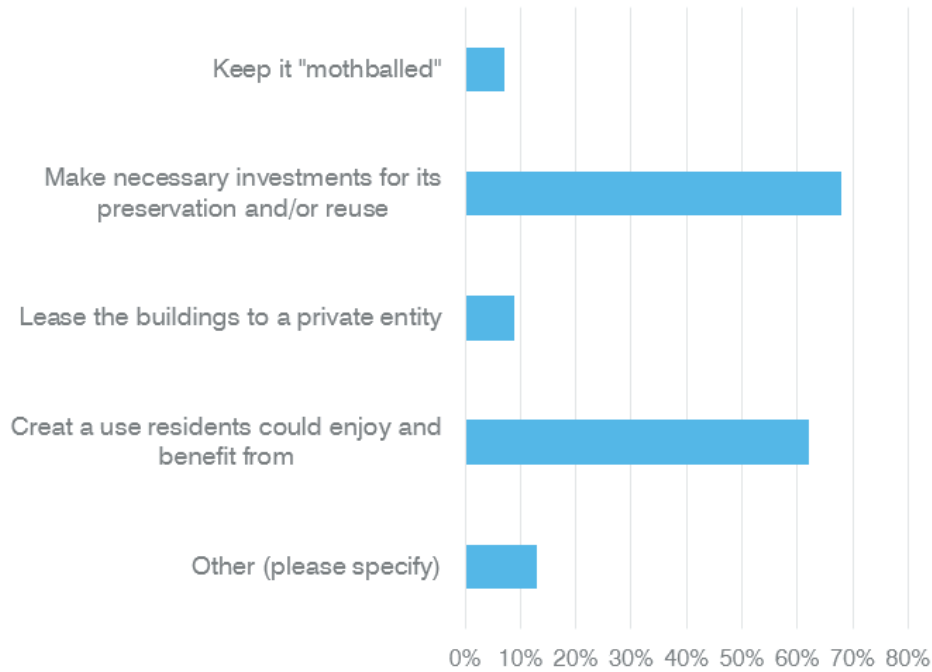


Figure 4: How do you think the Gurski Homestead should be reused?



What should the Town do with the Gurski Homestead?  
(select all that apply)



The online survey revealed the following points about the current use and ultimate reuse of the property:

- Most residents come to the Gurski Homestead for passive recreation or to use the Community Garden.
- The public appears more focused on the land than on the buildings.
- Residents are most concerned about the condition of the buildings and potential future uses.
- Residents would like the property to be preserved and remain usable by the community.
- Reuse options that are most popular include passive recreation, a farm stand or farmers' market, and Town sponsored educational space.

Figure 5: What should the Town do with the Gurski Homestead?



## Earth Day Event

In addition to the online survey, FHI prepared outreach activities for an Earth Day event at the Gurski Homestead held on Saturday, April 22, 2017. Like the survey, this event aimed at gathering input and building consensus on a plan for the preservation and long-term use of the Gurski Homestead. FHI brought display boards to the event that showed historic photos of the property, and an aerial view of the entire property with connections to other town open space resources. Additionally, present day photos of the interiors of the barn and homestead were provided to show participants the condition of the structures at the homestead.

Over twenty people stopped by the booth and provided their thoughts on the future use of the property. Attendees were asked to select and rank their top three choices for the future use of the Gurski property. Answer choices included: festival and/or concert venues; passive recreation; farmstand, farmers' market, and community garden; educational use; rental of existing houses and land; space for Town committees; and meeting and/or event space. Figure 6 shows the results of the activity. There was a clear preference for continuing and expanding the community use of the space, especially with an agricultural focus such as a farmers' market, farmstand, or community garden.



Figure 6: Interactive survey board results from Earth Day outreach event

## Coordination with Town Parks and Recreation Department



Based on the public's preferences for community and recreational uses, and following the recommendation of the Project Steering Committee, members of the project team met with the Town's Director of Parks and Recreation to discuss the Parks Department's potential use of the Gurski property. The continuation of the community garden; the potential for the relocation of the farmers' market to the property; the continued use of the property for community festivals and events such as Farmfest; and passive recreation were all discussed as potential future uses that the Parks and Recreation Department could support over the short-term. The Director also revealed that within the next few years the Town will be losing several athletic fields, and that they will be looking for additional space for new fields. The use of a portion of the Gurski property was discussed as a potential option. Although active recreation was not one of the preferred uses identified in the survey findings, the community was not made aware of the impending shortage of athletic fields. Numerous Town-sponsored sports teams rely on the availability of the athletic fields. A shortage of fields would adversely impact recreational activities within Brookfield.



## 4. Concept Plan

The Gurski Homestead Concept Plan seeks to balance the desires of the community for passive recreational and agricultural uses at the Gurski Homestead with the Town's future need for active recreational facilities. The Concept Plan would be phased. Phase 1 would begin in the fall of 2017 and would focus on rehabilitating the barn and shed, and stabilizing the exterior of the farmhouse. Another goal in Phase 1 would be expanding the community's use of the property, especially for agricultural focused uses and events. Phase 2 would involve the relocation of the community garden; the installation of a combined soccer/lacrosse field, baseball diamond, and parking on the north end of the property; and the interior renovation of the farmhouse to support recreational uses at the Gurski property.

The following is a prioritized list of next steps in the implementation of the Gurski Homestead Concept Plan.

### Phase 1 (Short-Term):

#### 1. Stabilize exterior of farmhouse

- This work includes residing building with cedar shingles; replacing deteriorated or missing flashing; repairing roof framing members; repairing exterior window sills; painting windows, as necessary; and repointing chimney (work detailed in 2014 Structural Assessment and Stabilization Plan)
- Approach should be coordinated with CT SHPO to ensure compliance with terms of SHPO easement

#### 2. Undertake phase 2 of barn rehabilitation

- Restore barn for agricultural and recreational storage, not for physical occupancy
- Hire an historical architect to guide the rehabilitation effort
- Work with CT SHPO to define appropriate approach to the rehabilitation to ensure compliance with CT SHPO preservation easement
- Obtain estimates from restoration builders who specialize in the restoration of post and beam structures

#### 3. Stabilize Farm Shed

- Restore barn for agricultural and recreational storage
- Work with CT SHPO to define approach to the rehabilitation to ensure compliance with CT SHPO preservation easement
- Obtain estimates from restoration builders who specialize in the restoration of post and beam structures

#### 4. Enhance pedestrian connections to adjacent open spaces

- Mark trail connection to Williams Park to the north
- Provide safer pedestrian connection to Brookfield Nature Center to the south

5. Expand use of the Gurski property for Town festivals and events
  - Focus on agricultural themed events such as Farmfest and Earth Day celebration
  - Establish volunteer committee to coordinate events
6. Continue to support the Lions Club Community Garden
  - Provide on-site storage for materials once farm shed restored
7. Relocate Town farmer's market to south end of Gurski Homestead
  - Once restored, make barn available for storage, as appropriate
8. Make open field available for community uses
  - This could include use by area Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts for programs and activities, for yoga classes, etc.
  - Activities would require relocation during Phase 2
9. Continue rental of smaller house to maintain cash flow
  - Consider rental reduction in exchange for maintenance of buildings and land

## Phase 2 (Mid-to-Long-term):

1. Relocate Community Garden to the south to accommodate recreational fields
  - Install necessary irrigation
2. Install athletic facilities, associated parking, and pathways throughout the property
  - Construct one soccer/lacrosse field and one 60' baseball diamond on the north end of the Gurski property
  - Construct required parking to support use of athletic fields
  - Install pathways to enhance pedestrian circulation through the site, including boardwalks across wetlands on the west end of the site and Merwin Brook on the east end
3. Restore interior of farmhouse
  - Undertake study to evaluate options for uses that would support recreational activities – kitchen facilities, restrooms, storage, etc.



Figure 7: Concept Plan





## 5. Funding

Over the course of planning study, the Town of Brookfield identified available funds for the implementation of Phase 1 of the Concept Plan. This includes approximately \$200,000 for the rehabilitation of the barn and shed which would be drawn from monies collected from the Conservation Commission's rental homes within the Town. In addition, approximately \$35,000 has been identified for the re-shingling and exterior stabilization of the farmhouse. These monies have already been allocated to the effort through the Capital Projects Budget. Phase 2 would be funded as a capital improvement through Brookfield Parks and Recreation.

