

# **CARSON CITY OPEN SPACE PLAN**

**An Element of the Carson City Master Plan  
Carson City, Nevada**



**Carson City Open Space Advisory Committee**

**Carson City Departments of Parks and Recreation  
and Community Development**

June 2000

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### Special Thanks to:

- Cable Access TV (CAT10) for thorough, thoughtful coverage to inform the citizens of Carson City
- David Morgan, Nevada Video Productions, for a variety of video productions used extensively for public information
- Larry Taylor, The Roving Eye, for custom photographic work for the Open Space Master Plan and assistance in providing photographs for a number of articles in the Capital City Focus
- The many citizens who attended community meetings and filled out opinion surveys
- Survey Tabulation by Karen Hinton, Nevada Cooperative Extension Service
- James Henry, Bicycle Advocate, Former Member of the Open Space Advisory Committee.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1996, the citizens of Carson City approved ballot question #18, the Quality of Life Initiative that authorized a ¼ of 1% (.25%) increase in the sales tax to raise funds for Open Space, parks and trails. This tax will raise approximately \$1,700,000 per year initially, with 40% allocated to Open Space, 40% allocated to Parks/Trails<sup>1</sup> and 20% to Maintenance of new parks projects. This Master Plan is intended to guide the use of the Open Space funds as well as other means to preserve Open Space for Carson City.

Ballot Question #18 defined Open Space as “undeveloped land having significant natural resources important to the quality of life in our community.” This definition has been refined by the Open Space Advisory Committee to include land that:

- Is in a natural, or primarily natural state;
- contains significant natural, visual or cultural features that warrant protection;
- is permanently protected.

By this definition, Open Space in Carson City is intended mainly to preserve the natural landscape and to accommodate certain types of passive recreation, such as hiking, running, bicycling and horseback riding. Open Space in Carson City is not intended to be used for traditional active recreation facilities such as parks, playground equipment, baseball diamonds, soccer fields, and swimming pools. However, under certain circumstances, the only physical facilities to be located in Open Space areas are trails and supporting picnic areas, interpretive facilities, restrooms, and parking lots. Open Space lands may be converted to parks through an easement purchase or land exchange with the Parks and Recreation Department.

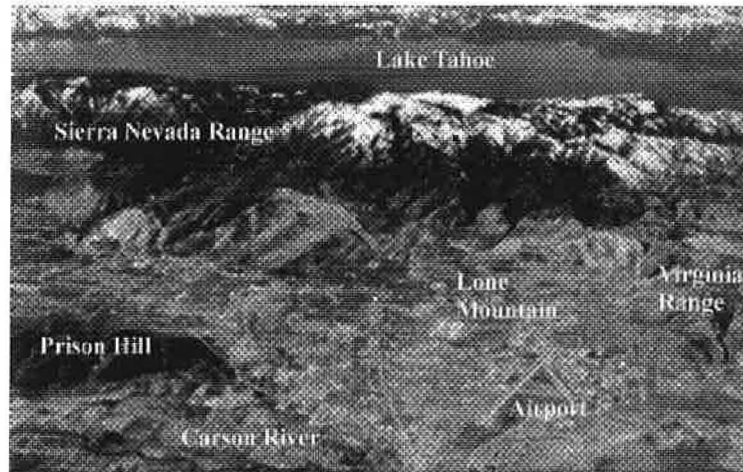
### CARSON CITY’S OPEN SPACE SETTING

Open Space plays an important role in the quality of life of Carson City. Entering Eagle Valley from any one of the four dramatic gateways, one is struck by the visually compact Carson community surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges. From any location in town one can see close, surrounding mountains in almost every direction: the forested Sierra Nevada Range on the west, the Virginia Range on the north and the Pine Nut Range on the east. Within the valley are several prominent topographic features such as Lone Mountain, Rattlesnake Mountain and Prison Hill. In and near town there are still a number of pastures and open meadows that give an immediate connection with rural character and Carson City’s agricultural past. On the east edge of the valley the Carson River meanders south-to-north through a corridor lined with tall cottonwoods, creating a shady respite from the openness of the valley.

But Open Space is important to Carson City for reasons other than just visual: Carson City’s water supply comes from wells that are replenished by rain and snowfall that falls on open land and infiltrates the ground. The hillsides are used extensively for walking and biking. Several areas are used intensively for motor bikes and off-road vehicles. The Carson River corridor is a popular retreat for strolling, fishing and picnicking.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Space funds may be used to acquire lands for trails and the park/trail funds may be used for trail construction.



*Figure 1: Carson City in the foreground separated from Lake Tahoe by the Carson Range*

Because Carson City is almost completely surrounded by public land (owned by federal and state agencies) many residents take the area's Open Space for granted, assuming that all the open land is protected. Yet one can see recent development beginning to encroach on the hillsides, slowly filling in the meadows and pastures. Areas for walking, jogging and biking are becoming harder to find and more difficult to reach. Even the public land is not assured to remain open – it can be subject to land exchanges and/or certain kinds of development. As Carson City continues to grow, pressure to develop the remaining open land will only increase. Thus, in recent years there has been a growing community awareness of the need to preserve Open Space.

#### **WHY WE NEED A PLAN**

At today's land prices, the funds generated by the Ballot Question #18 Sales Tax will only allow the acquisition of a limited amount of land. What key parcels of land should be acquired or protected? What should be the priorities? Are there other ways to protect Open Space? These are questions that an Open Space Plan can help answer.

The purchase of land is just one of many different ways Open Space can be preserved. Thus, this plan will not only guide the acquisition of Open Space, but also will provide a strategic framework for the use of other, complementary tools to preserve Open Space. In Carson City there are a number of public agencies that have jurisdiction over land. They can play a strong role in Open Space preservation. There are also many ways private citizens can contribute to the preservation of Open Space (over and above donating land or money). This Open Space Plan is intended to help coordinate various public and private efforts, and assure that resources of the community are used most effectively in the preservation of Open Space.

The plan generally identifies desired Open Space, establishes priorities and suggests potential tools for preservation. It also outlines a variety of ways to work with potential partners to achieve multiple Open Space objectives (such as ground water recharge, stormwater management, protection of wildlife habitat, preserving visual relief from development, and air quality improvement, to name a few).

## HOW THE PLAN WAS CREATED

### Public Input and Review

This plan was created under the direction of the Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC), comprised of seven members and two alternate members representing a cross-section of community interests and public agencies. The staff of the City's Departments of Parks and Recreation and Community Development provided day-to-day coordination.



*Figure 2: An OSAC committee worksession*

In addition to many public OSAC meetings, there were many other opportunities for individual citizens to share their suggestions and concerns about Open Space. These included:

- the distribution of over 1,600 mail-back questionnaires with informational brochures;
- the return of over 500 completed questionnaire responses;
- extensive coverage by CATV
- updates in 10 issues of the Carson City Capitol City Focus newsletter;
- four neighborhood meetings;
- a city-wide open house;
- the printing and distribution of more than 60 copies of a draft plan for public review and comment;
- numerous presentations by OSAC members to community groups and local organizations; and,
- public hearings before the City Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors.

Many suggestions and comments received were incorporated in the plan.

### Analysis Methodology

Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping and modeling were used to portray the opportunities and constraints of potential Open Space areas. Environmental data

from various sources<sup>2</sup> were combined to create a composite map of areas with high Open Space values. Areas that are protected from development by existing regulations were also portrayed. Combining these two maps identified the *land that has high Open Space values, but is not protected through existing regulations*. This is the focus of the Open Space program. Within these focus areas, Open Space that is valued and not protected by existing regulation, specific parcels will be identified and evaluated on a case-by-case basis, according to several criteria: relative value as Open Space, ability to link with trails, and ability to be acquired/protected.

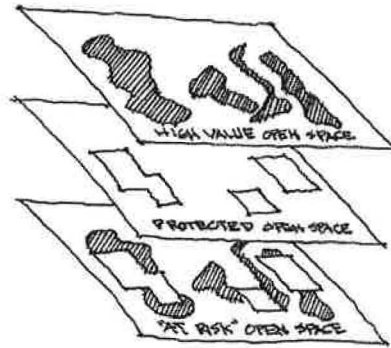


Figure 3: Diagram of analysis methodology

When using the maps in this report as a guide for Open Space conservation, there are four important points to keep in mind:

- A. ***The maps show general patterns, not exact locations.***  
The lines on the maps do not represent exact boundaries. Only the general locations of characteristics are indicated, and the boundaries shown are relative. It is expected that, over time, specific parcels will be identified within the general areas identified in the maps.
- B. ***The maps are dynamic.***  
The data maps are the result of today's information and technology. They will need to be periodically updated as new information is desired and/or becomes available.
- C. ***Onsite analysis and field verification are absolutely necessary.***  
When evaluating and prioritizing specific parcels of land for Open Space preservation detailed site analysis and field verification must be conducted.
- D. ***The maps are just part of the decision-making process.***  
The maps are not an absolute determinant for decision-making. Rather, they are tools that, in combination with common sense and good judgment, can be used to enhance decisions for Open Space preservation and to communicate the basis for those decisions. Final decisions about specific Open Space parcels and their relative priority, will be made by the Board of Supervisors, with input from the public, City staff and the Open Space Advisory Committee.

In the end, the usefulness of the maps is not that they depict exactly what to preserve, but that they indicate where to look, what questions to ask, and what connections (trail) can be made. They are a tool in making Open Space decisions.

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information about the data sources used, see Appendix A3.



## PUBLIC INPUT

### FOCUS GROUPS AND NEIGHBORHOOD MEETINGS

Focus Group interviews were held to gain insights into general public perceptions about Open Space, to guide preparations for the Neighborhood Meetings, and to help formulate meaningful questions for the opinion survey. Two separate Focus Groups were formed to represent a cross-section of the community. Each group had approximately 12 attendees. Most of the attendees had lived in Carson City for over 10 years. The discussions were informal, to allow follow-up on specific questions.

Subsequently, four Neighborhood Meetings were held in separate locations, two each evening on two consecutive evenings. Although attendance varied, approximately 25 people attended each of the Neighborhood Meetings. After a brief presentation about the purpose and the general intent of the Open Space Plan process, the audience was asked to comment on questions similar to those presented in the Focus Groups. Key discussion points and a synopsis of comments from both the Focus Groups and Neighborhood meetings are summarized below:

*Question 1: Why did you support the Open Space ballot question?*

- The Open Space sales tax was a means of preserving land from development, without disadvantaging the landowner. We need to be sensitive to the rights of landowners, but still there are lands that should be set aside for the public. The Open Space tax was a means to resolve this inherent conflict.
- Open areas are important to Carson City's quality of life. For some, they are the reason they moved here, or have grown to love the area. Key Open Space includes empty parcels of land within town, and the Carson River corridor. The Open Space Tax was a possible way to save these areas.
- The Open Space Tax was a way to "give something back" to the community, to leave a legacy for future generations.
- Open Space was a means to stop growth.
- Open Space programs have been initiated in other communities and we liked the result.

*Question 2: What does the term "Open Space" signify to you?*

- Any space that doesn't have a structure on it
- Parks, but not intensively developed ones.
- Land in a fairly natural condition, with minimal change.
- Facilities that people can come and enjoy, such as a golf course, or recreation facility
- (Most felt) Open Space should be usable (as with trails)
- Uses incompatible with Open Space (such as moto cross and four-wheel drive areas) should have separate, designated areas
- Open Space generally has to be a significant size.

*Question 3: What land would you set aside as Open Space? (Note: these responses do not indicate any order of preference)*

- The hillside area above the college
- Clear Cree
- Andersen's ranch on Mountain Street
- V&T right-of-way above Children's Home
- Mouth of Ash Canyon
- Prison Hill
- Mexican Dam
- Duck Hill
- McClellan Peak
- Wandering Skipper habitat
- Small pieces of property that access larger ones
- Land that one can see has a higher priority than environmental land
- The hillsides – they are vulnerable to development from people who want to look out over the valley. They are the distinctive features we can see. Hills without houses all over them.
- The Carson River
- Corridors to connect the river to the foothills.
- Don't buy a parcel if there are other constraints that will preclude development anyway
- Other irrigated areas

*Question 4: How do you feel about restrictions being imposed on Open Space after it is purchased?*

- OK if related to safety (don't want people mixing with cows) or environmental reasons, view issues or erosion.
- It would be OK to have land that was purchased only for protection of views and the public wouldn't have to be able to walk on it.
- Past compromises made in approving developments caused a number of participants to worry that Open Space would not be protected permanently.

*Question 5: Should we buy as much land as we can, right away? Or buy land more slowly and develop amenities as we go?*

- General support for a balanced approach of buying land and concurrently developing amenities (such as trailheads, parking areas, trails, signage).

## **OPINION SURVEY**

Surveys were mailed to over 1,600 households that were randomly selected from motor vehicle registration lists and voter registration lists. The 503 surveys sent back yielded a response rate of 31%, which is relatively high for a mail-back survey of this complexity. The total number of returns reached a key statistical threshold that gives a 90%+ confidence level that the responses to most of the questions are representative of the attitudes of the general community (or that the responses of the sample are similar to the responses that would have been received if every household had been sampled).

### **General Characteristics of Respondents**

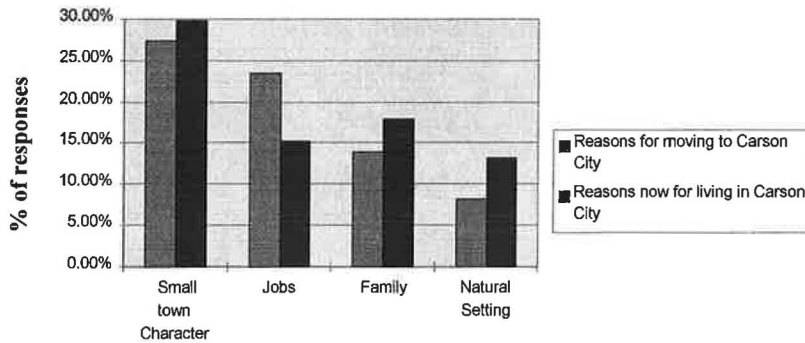
It is sometimes helpful to note the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Generally, the respondents were:

- *Middle aged* (85% were 36 years old, or more) with the largest group being ages (58%)
- *Not newcomers to Carson City* (82% have lived here six years or more)
- *Small families* (48% were two-member households).

### Reasons to live in Carson City

Carson City’s physical environment is increasingly important to residents. When asked in Questions 22 and 23 why they moved to Carson City, and why they live here now, from a list of nine possible choices, "job" declined as a reason to stay. Three reasons that *increased* in importance were: "small town character", "family", and "natural setting".

**Qs 22 & 23**  
**Reasons to live in Carson City**



### Current Use of Open Space

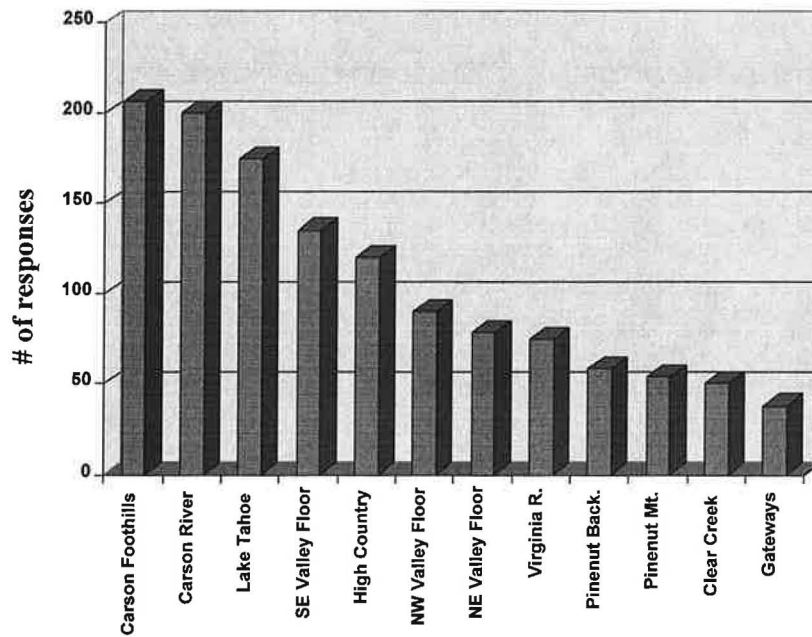
When asked how they used Open Space (Question 2), the responses indicate that the majority of Carson City residents currently use Open Space primarily for *visual and passive* purposes, as indicated by the following general ranking relative to *frequency-of-use*;

- |                     |                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Just look at it  | 7. Walking the dog       |
| 2. Observe wildlife | 8. Fishing               |
| 3. Walking          | 9. Mtn. Biking           |
| 4. Picnicking       | 10. In-line skating      |
| 5. Hiking           | 11. All-terrain vehicles |
| 6. Biking           | 12. Horseback riding     |

In a related question (Question 3), from a list (and map) of thirteen possible areas, the five *areas* most used for Open Space recreation (not parks) were, in order of use (the number that indicated each area is in parentheses):

1. Carson Range foothills (206)
2. Carson River Corridor (200)
3. Lake Tahoe area (174)
4. SE Valley Floor (Prison Hill area) (135)
5. Carson Range High County (120)

Q3: OS Use Areas

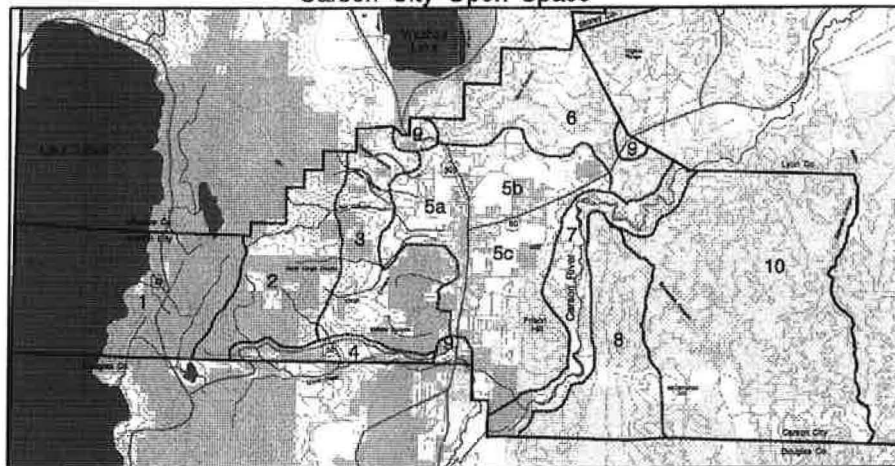


**Map Key:**

Carson Foothills -	3
Carson River -	7
Lake Tahoe -	1
SE Valley Floor	5c
High Country -	2

NW Valley Floor -	5a
NE Valley Floor -	5b
Virginia Range -	6
Pinenut Backrange -	10
Pinenut Mt. -	8
Clear Creek -	4
Gateways -	9

Carson City Open Space



## Priority Areas to Preserve for Open Space

From Question 1 the top five areas to preserve for Open Space were:

1. Carson River corridor
2. Hillsides visible from the city
3. Working, irrigated ranches
4. In-town trail corridors
5. Trail corridors outside the city

Q1: Open Space Preferences

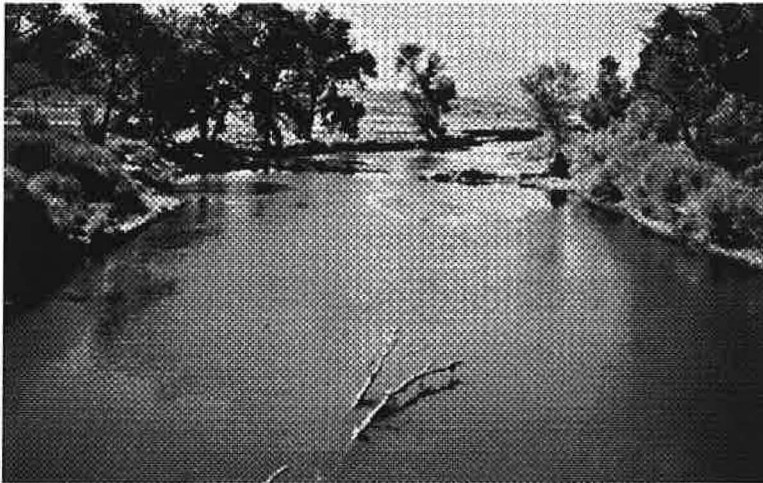
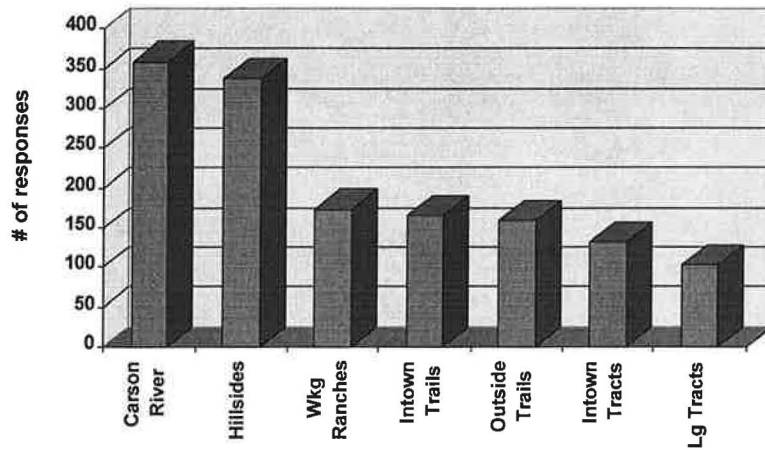


Figure 4: The Carson River Corridor was given the highest ranking for preservation

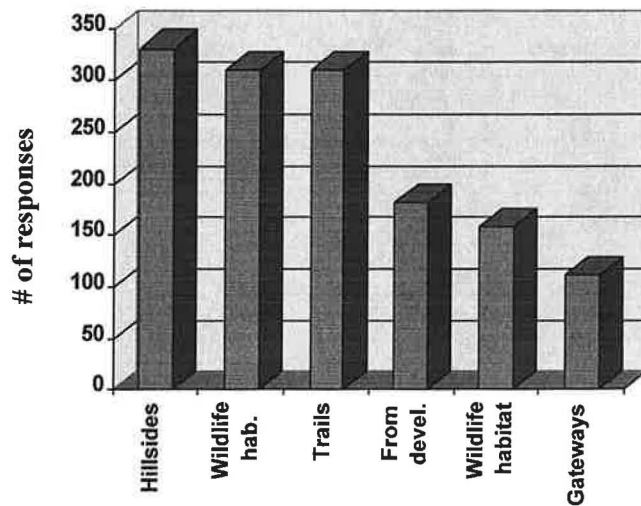
As can be seen from the graph of the responses above, it is clear that the "Carson River" and the "Hillsides Visible From The City" were the most significant *areas* to preserve.

From Question 10, the three most important *reasons* to preserve Open Space were:

- Preserve hillsides from development
- Protect wildlife habitat
- Provide trails

However, when asked specifically about acquiring Open Space "to prevent development" (Question 12), there was only a moderately strong support. This suggests that in general, the emphasis should be to preserve the Open Space for its own merits rather than to restrain development.

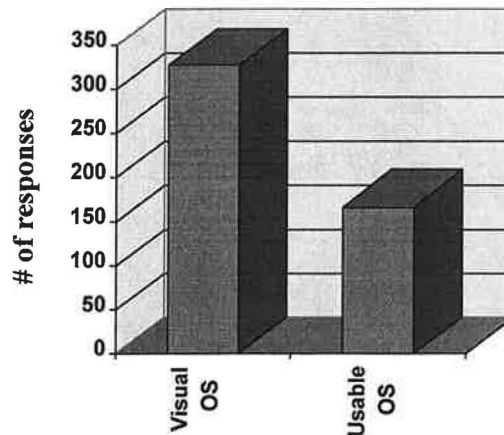
**Q10: Preserve...**



**Purposes for Open Space**

In response to Question 5, if a choice must be made between visual Open Space vs. Open Space that can be used (hike, walk, bike, etc.), the preference is clearly toward *visual* Open Space.

**Q5: OS Preference**



## Approaches to Acquisition of Open Space

In response to Question 8 about the *sequence* of acquiring vs. improving Open Space, a majority of respondents preferred buying land *and* concurrently making improvements (trails, parking, signs, and environmental restoration) – a balanced approach – rather than just buying land as quickly as possible.

When asked about means of *paying* for acquisitions (Question 9) respondents also favored a balanced approach, combining bonds *and* pay-as-you-go, rather than just using bonds (bonds would allow more land to be bought initially, but require interest payments) or just using pay-as-you-go (which would make less money available initially and result in slower acquisition).

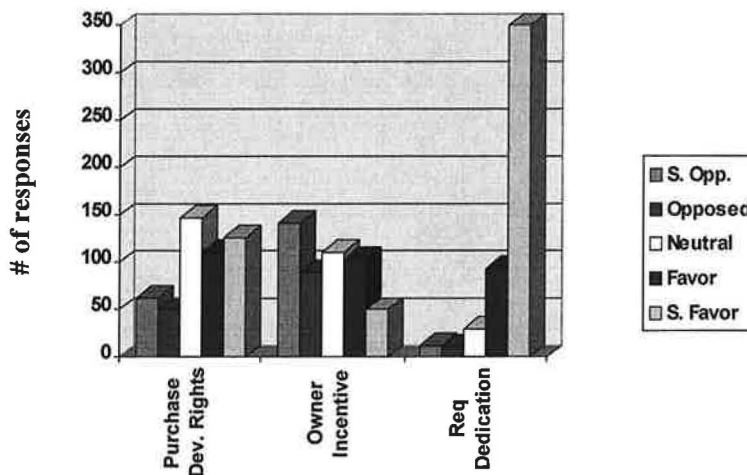
With regard to *methods* of acquisition *other than purchase* (Question 4), Respondents slightly favored purchase of development rights. They tended to oppose giving density incentives to landowners, and very strongly favored required dedications of land and trails in conjunction with new subdivisions.

## Management of Open Space

Looking ahead to management issues on Open Space, respondents were asked (Question 7) about acceptance of possible regulations and restriction on Open Space. Respondents strongly supported virtually all the potential restrictions on Open Space, if necessary for environmental reasons, including:

- Require dogs be kept on leashes
- Require people to stay on trails
- Prohibit motorized vehicles in some areas
- Make some areas off limits during certain seasons
- Prohibit bicycle access to some areas

Q4: Other Means of Acquisition

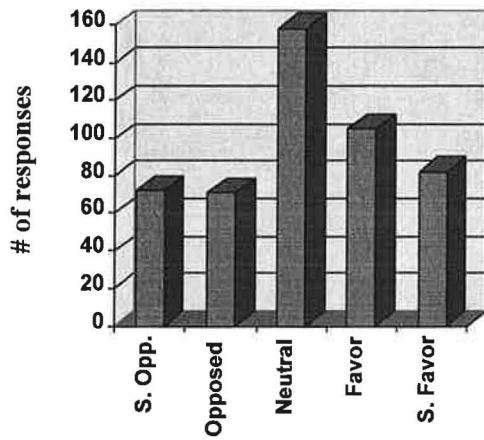


### Permanence of Open Space

Question 11 asked about the public's willingness to allow Open Space to be converted to active parks. To this question, respondents were neutral-to-favorable. However, the responses to Question 13 indicated a desire for *strong* protection of Open Space after it is acquired.

More detailed information about the survey is found in the Appendix. (A6)

Q11: Allow OS conv. to parks



Q13: Permanence of OS

