

Community Forest Case Study:

Barre Town Forest

The Vermont Land Trust (VLT) holds the conservation easement on a number of community-owned properties for which a management plan is required by the easement. This plan is an important guide for how multiple uses of the property will be balanced. We interviewed people in seven towns who were involved in the creation of their community forest plan. The following case study focuses on the Barre Town Forest.

History and background

Little John Road, which bisects the property, was built over the Coos Indian Trail, one of the few east–west Native American trails known in Vermont. It became the pathway that Barre’s original settlers followed to get to land they had purchased sight unseen. Until the 1870s, the land was used for farming, but when the “Sky Route” railroad was completed, granite quarrying took off. By 1900 there were 70 quarry operations in Barre and virtually every tree was removed from the property. Over time, much of the land was reconsolidated into one large parcel, the quarries were abandoned, and the forest regenerated. The 25 quarries each have their own story as explained by signs created with funding from the Vermont Recreation Trails Grant Program.

Many of the grout piles and quarries offer views of the Green Mountains, Camel’s Hump, and Barre City. The trail network is a regional destination for mountain biking and other hu-

Property Snapshot

Size: 381 acres (355 are conserved with the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board).

Uses: Walking, hunting, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, disc golf, and snowmobiling. Two non-conserved parcels supply water for the Village of Websterville.

Description: The land was strongly impacted by granite quarrying, resulting in ponds, soil and bedrock removal, and rocky slopes. These activities ended over 100 years ago. Except for 25 old quarries and a few open acres, the property is now forested. Natural communities include a wetland area, a hemlock-northern hardwood forest, and three vernal pools. The forest is primarily made up of yellow birch, sugar maple, and white ash. A portion of the property has the headwaters of the Jail Branch, which eventually runs into the Winooski River and Lake Champlain. The property is a “stepping stone” of habitat between 43,000 protected acres around Groton State Forest and an 8,000-acre biodiversity hotspot in Williamstown and Brookfield.

Special protections: The wetlands, streams, and vernal pools all received special protections in the conservation easement. Activities in these areas must be in the management plan and approved by VLT staff, who will ensure consistency with the conservation easement.

man-powered recreation; this provides an economic boost and recreation opportunities to the area. The property has 20 miles of the 70-mile Millstone Hill Trail Network, with trails accessible year-round. A nonprofit snowmobiling club has maintained trails there since 1971.

In 2013 The Trust for Public Land (TPL) helped the Town of Barre obtain 355 acres. Combined with 26 acres already owned by the town, the land became the new town forest. This project was completed as part of TPL's Community Forest Program and the Vermont Town Forest Project. Funding was provided by the Town of Barre, the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB), the Vermont Recreation Trails Grant Program, the Open Space Institute, the federal Community Forest Program, the Millstone Trails Association, and other foundations and private donors. A conservation easement on 355 acres was conveyed to VLT and VHCB to protect the property from development and ensure it always remains open for public use. VLT staff work with landowners to ensure the purposes of the conservation easement are upheld and share resources to assist landowners in achieving their land management goals.

Management planning process

Completion of a Community Forest Plan is a requirement of the federal Community Forest Program and the conservation easement. A management plan committee was created in April 2011 and assisted by Kate Wanner of TPL. Two neighbors, plus members of the town recreation committee, selectboard, and Millstone Trails Association were on the committee. The group worked with residents, town staff, the county forester, the easement holders, and elected officials to make decisions about the forest. The plan was drafted in the summer, 2011 and submitted to the selectboard in fall, 2012.

The committee used plans from other properties as a model, in addition to the following:

Natural Communities Assessment

A graduate student with UVM's Ecological Planning Program documented wetland, vernal pools, significant natural communities and other important wildlife habitat. These kinds of assessments are a great service learning opportunity for college students.

Forest Stewardship Plan (FSP)

The Washington County Forester developed the FSP at the same time the management plan was being developed. The FSP describes goals, current conditions, and stand-by-stand objectives for timber management. This service is provided pro bono to municipalities by the county forester.

Audubon Forest Bird Habitat Assessment

Audubon Vermont looked at habitat available for breeding birds of conservation concern and recommended improvements. These assessments are done at no cost to the landowner.

Several town meetings were held to get public input on the management plan. They were advertised through the local newspaper and town website. "We had several public meetings where parties could come and comment on the management plan," recalled Kate Wanner of the Trust for Public Land. She also commented that there was a "general level of mistrust that we had to overcome" due to issues among town officials, residents, and Millstone Trails Association. It took a lot of edits to the plan before the public felt their needs were met. Neighbors were primarily concerned that people, particularly mountain bikers, would trespass on their property, teenagers would party and leave trash, dogs would be off-leash, parking issues would cause traffic congestion, and that dangerous objects in the quarries would lead to injuries if swimming were allowed.

The management committee allocated funds for two parking lots to address parking concerns. The Management Planning Committee and

Rock of Ages

Little John Rd

Wetland

Stream with buffer

Vernal pools with buffer

Wetland


Graniteville Rd


Town Line

Scale: 1:12,500

Barre Town Forest



 Parking

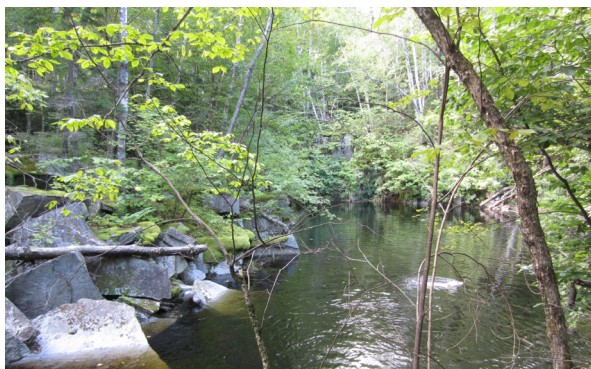
 Pedestrian & Mountain Bike Trails

0 55 110 220 330 440 Meters

0 250 500 1,000 1,500 2,000 Feet

town are looking at designating one or two of the quarries as safe places for swimming. To address neighbors' concerns about trespassing and trail use and maintenance, the Millstone Trails Association was chosen as the Trail Corridor Manager under an agreement with the town. The group will monitor trail use, ensure users abide by the rules, oversee trail repairs and improvements, and coordinate with other groups as needed. The agreement is renewed annually after evaluation by the Recreation Board and selectboard to ensure the Trail Corridor Manager is fulfilling its responsibilities.

The management plan is on the town website, and a hard copy is available at the town office.



Plan in action

Since the plan was created, the town constructed parking lots, increased trail signage, created a disc golf course, and hired a forester to administer timber sales. The town worked with the Millstone Trails Association (MTA) to close the trails during logging and got volunteers to clear brush and logging slash from trails. MTA continues to perform trail maintenance and is constructing new trails.

Lessons Learned

“Everyone felt heard,” said Kate Wanner. “And even though there were some suspicions and trust issues, since then everyone thinks it’s an amazing property and resource for the town... most people would consider it a success even though there were obstacles.”

Recommendations are:

Provide a draft plan for the public to provide feedback on. Kate reflected: “I think there were too many meetings; it was not an efficient use of everyone’s time.” She suggests scheduling public meetings after the plan has been drafted to provide the public with something to respond to.

Involve partners. Kate was grateful for the expertise and resources provided by the county forester, VLT, Audubon Vermont, the Millstone Trails Association, and others.

Organize field trips. Kate said it was frustrating for some selectboard members to be making decisions without having been to the property. She recommends a field trip at the beginning of the process to ensure that all decision makers are familiar with the land.

Designate a trail corridor manager to maintain and manage trails and monitor trail use to ensure users abide by the rules outlined in the management plan and conservation easement.

Create a clear process for considering new recreational uses. For example, there are no horseback riding trails, but the Town Recreation Board will consider proposals for their creation. The management plan specifies that single-track trails used by mountain bikers will not be considered suitable for horseback riding; horseback riding trails will be considered only on wider multi-use trails. The Town Recreation Board will coordinate with the Trail Corridor Manager and the easement holders on the creation and location of any new trails for these uses. ☞

To see other studies and learn more, visit: vlt.org/townforeststudy or contact Caitlin Cusack at (802) 861-6504 or caitlin@vlt.org.



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