



Community Forest Case Study:

Greenberg Headwaters Park, Bennington

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 Greenberg Headwaters Park.

History and background

The Town of Bennington had a vision for community use of a 165-acre property located a few blocks east of downtown. The town contacted VLT for help with creating a conservation plan and raising the money needed to buy and protect the property. VLT worked with the town on funding applications and ran a community fundraising drive.

In March 2015, the town purchased what would become the Greenberg Headwaters Park from the Norman and Selma Greenberg Estate. A \$122,000 grant from the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) and a little over \$100,000 in donations from individuals, businesses, nonprofits, and foundations made the purchase possible.

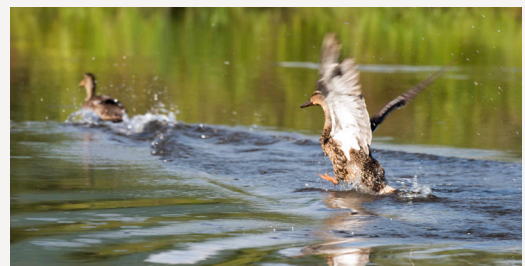
Property Snapshot

Size: 165 acres (163 are conserved with the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board.)

Uses: Walking, mountain biking, paddling, fishing, swimming.

Description: Three waterways—Jewett Brook, South Stream, and the Walloomsac River—create a mosaic of open water and shrub swamp. These wetlands are home to three types of trout: wild brook, brown, and rainbow. The wetlands transition into floodplain forest. A network of trails, including more than half a mile of old trolley line, crisscross the upland areas, which have meadows and mature forests.

Special protections: Approximately 86 acres of state-significant wetlands are covered by further conservation restrictions (e.g., limits on recreational improvements) to ensure that the aquatic habitat and water quality is protected. Activities in these areas must be in the management plan and approved by VLT staff, who will ensure consistency with the easement.



The development rights were conveyed to VLT and the VHCB to protect natural features, ecological processes and public access for walking, kayaking, birdwatching, and other types of low-impact outdoor recreation.

VLT also worked with the Bennington County Conservation District to set up a \$10,000 fund to address immediate improvements needed to open the land to public use.

VLT staff now work with the town 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

Natural and Ecological Assessments

The Town relied on many natural resource professionals in preparation for the creation of a management plan:

Bennington County Regional Planning Commission staff and a wetland scientist volunteered their time to map natural communities (group of plants and animals and their physical environment).

Bennington County Conservation District staff and a student in the Community College of Vermont's Emerging Leaders Program mapped ash trees throughout the park to help the town plan for the arrival of the emerald ash borer, a non-native invasive insect that kills ash trees.

Vermont Natural Resource Conservation Service wildlife biologist Toby Alexander and soil conservationist Philip Rivara assessed three fields and made recommendations to benefit shrubland birds, pollinators, grassland-dependent butterflies, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

Interim Management Plan

In March 2015, an interim management plan was developed by Shelly Stiles of the Bennington County Conservation District (District), with the help of other District staff and volunteers with the Friends of Headwaters Park (Friends).

The interim plan provided an outline for the comprehensive management plan. It also suggested ways to maximize the park's short-term potential given the few resources the Friends and the Town had at their disposal.

Comprehensive Management Plan

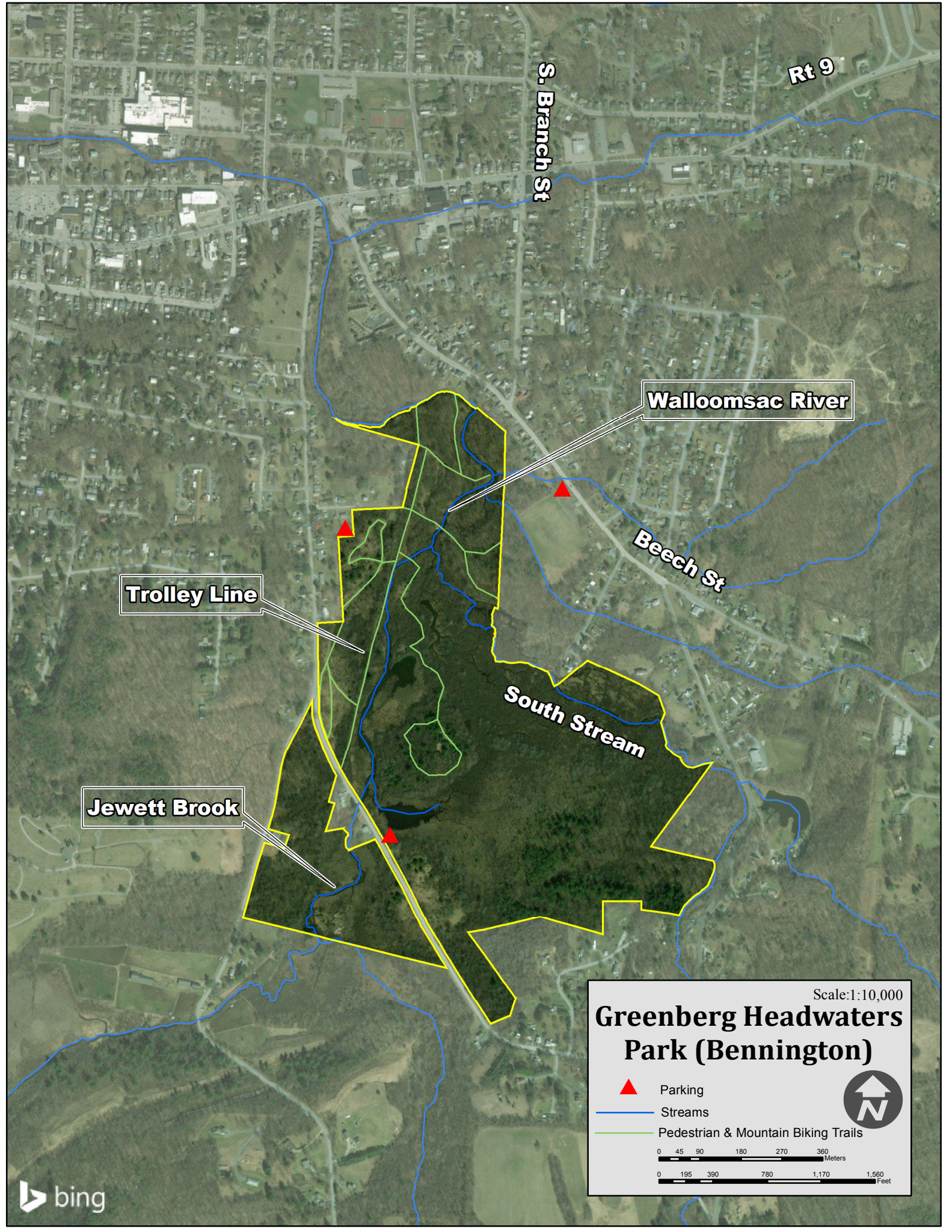
Over the course of a year the comprehensive management plan was developed.

The Town and Friends met several times to discuss maintenance issues, parking, kiosk design, trail building, and wetland permitting, as required by the interim management plan. Camping, littering and ATV use had been historic issues with the property so the Town and Friends worked with the police, town highways crew and facilities staff, and neighbors to address these issues during the planning process.

The Friends held three separate public meetings, with an average of 20 people at each meeting. The events were advertised on the District Facebook page as well as on the town website.

Shelly reflected that: "we reached out to neighbors early on and had been building a constituency all along...but I would have wanted more neighbors to come."

The Friends sponsored five outings including bird walks, trail work days, and kayaking. The outings were designed to encourage use of the park by a wide demographic, educate residents about the park's potential, and solicit feedback and recommendations for improvements and amenities.



Rt 9

S. Branch St

Walloomsac River

Beech St




Trolley Line

South Stream

Jewett Brook

Scale: 1:10,000

Greenberg Headwaters Park (Bennington)

-  Parking
-  Streams
-  Pedestrian & Mountain Biking Trails



0 45 90 180 270 360 Meters

0 195 390 780 1,170 1,560 Feet

Fishing and swimming access, viewpoints, parking, kayak pullouts, and informational signage were some of the improvements identified during the public meetings and events.

The comprehensive management plan was prepared by Shelly, with assistance from Dan Monks, the Assistant Town Manager and Planning Director for the Town of Bennington, Donald Campbell, Regional Director for VLT, and the Friends.

The main goal is to provide low-impact recreational opportunities while protecting the property's natural features and ecological health.

The Town and Friends decided to divide the park into three distinct management zones:

- 1) The ecological protection zone identified in the easement: including a class II wetland complex and the watercourses that flow through it.
- 2) The wetland buffer: a 50-foot buffer of natural vegetation located on the edge of the wetland, which mirrors the buffer required under the State of Vermont's Wetland Rule.
- 3) The active management zone: the floodplain forest; former trolley line; open, successional and disturbed uplands, and upland forests.

The plan provides a table listing suitable uses and suggested improvements for each of these zones.

The town shared the management plan on the town website and via dropbox.com while it was being drafted and after it was finished.

Plan in Action

Since the plan was completed, the Town and Friends have been busy controlling invasive plants, conducting trail maintenance, cleaning up trash, and building new trails, three kiosks,

and two parking areas. They received a VT Recreational Trails Program grant to build a boardwalk and kayak access. The boardwalk construction required a wetland permit, at some expense, because vegetation needed to be cleared.

Lessons Learned

"I like the idea of seeing the land as zones where particular uses are appropriate," Shelly said. "The plan was based on wetland mapping and field investigation, which was all information gathered during the development process, and determined what uses would be appropriate for what parts of the land."

Though, she added: "It would have been helpful to hire someone to assist with mapping. The lack of time and money was also a challenge."

A wetland scientist with the Regional Planning Commission helped map areas of ecological significance, such as wetlands and vernal pools. Planning commission staff in other parts of the state may be another resource for towns to consider.

When asked about final recommendations, Shelly commented that she would recommend "reaching out early and often" to community members. "I think outings were a good idea," she said. "[Especially a] diversity of outings designed to attract a variety of supporters." ☪

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



Vermont Land Trust

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