



Westford Town Forest 2016, Photo Courtesy of Bob Heiser, VLT

# Governance of Town Forests

REPORT TO THE VERMONT DEPARTMENT OF FORESTS, PARKS, & RECREATION

SUBMITTED BY THE NORTHERN FOREST CENTER

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# Governance of Town Forests

Report to the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation

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## Project Description

Community governance and leadership in town forests is of growing interest and need in urban and community forestry work. The VT Urban & Community Forestry Program (VT UCF) and VT Forestry Division, as well as other technical service providers, support municipal commissions and volunteer groups in managing town forests. The State seeks to develop and provide resources to these groups but has foundational questions about what governance models exist, what skills are required of these volunteers to best serve in their roles, and what major challenges face these committees and commissions on an operational level. The goal of this project was to assess existing governance models and to better understand challenges in governance through interviews, surveys, and practitioner engagement. Specifically, the scope of work included four phases:

1. Convene Advisory Group for project guidance
2. Discovery effort through surveys and focus groups
3. Summary of findings for both funder and practitioner audiences
4. Information transfer through one presentation



Richmond Town Forest (Andrews Community Forest), *Photo Courtesy of Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, & Recreation*

## Scope of Work - Methodology

### Methodology - Phase I: Advisory Group

The six person Vermont Town Forest Advisory Committee was formed in April 2021 to guide the appropriate outreach for sufficient data collection regarding governance structures in managing town-owned lands across the state.

The Committee was composed of these members:

**Elise Schadler** - Program Manager

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation - VT Urban & Community Forestry Program

**Kate Forrer** - Community Forestry Outreach Specialist

VT Urban & Community Forestry Program - UVM Extension

**Bob Heiser** - Regional Director of Land Conservation

Vermont Land Trust

**Caitlyn Cusack** - Regional Stewardship Manager

Vermont Land Trust

**Keith Thompson** - Private Lands Program Manager

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation

**Gwen Kozlowski** - Outreach & Education Coordinator

VT Urban & Community Forestry Program - UVM Extension

The committee met seven times beginning in April and ending in September 2021, all virtual via zoom.

Discussions included these topics:

1. Collection of existing lists of contacts for outreach
  - County Foresters
  - Natural Resource consultants
  - Towns with Conservation Commissions
  - Invitations/Attendees at 2019 Town Forest Summit
  - Town participants in Recreation Planning project
  - List of municipal contacts from Association of Vermont Conservation Commission
2. Development of survey questions for three online surveys. The draft survey questions went through four revisions with the final Community Survey having forty-nine questions, and both the County Forester and Consultant surveys having fifteen questions. The Community Survey is in Appendix A, and the Consultant Survey is in Appendix B.
3. Confirmation of report expectations, valuable discussion to include, and formatting.
4. Identification of practitioners to be included in final presentation of project results.

These meetings were facilitated by project lead consultant Julie Renaud Evans of the Northern Forest Center.

## Methodology - Phase II: Discovery

1. Three online surveys regarding Town Forest governance issues were administered through Survey Monkey by staff at the Northern Forest Center. The survey questions are in Appendices A-B.

- a. Community Members

*Distribution* - In developing contacts for the community survey, town officials that were likely to have knowledge of town forests, its management, and its governance were targeted. The distribution list was generated through compiling existing lists and searching for contact information on town websites. For the towns that had Conservation Commissions, contacts on the Commission were prioritized. For the towns without a Conservation Commission, or the commissioners' emails were not listed on the website, the contact information for other town officials that were relevant to town forest management including Town Managers, Town Administrators, Town Planners, members of the Selectboard, and others were used. Occasionally, towns would have a committee that managed their Town Forests, and when possible, members of that committee were identified and contacted. Additional contacts were added through lists from previous events, specifically the 2017 Town Forest Recreation Summit and the 2019 Town Forest Summit. The final distribution list for the community survey totaled 301 emails.

*Focus* – The forty-nine question survey covered many topics relative to town forest governance. The questions were designed to sort out a variety of governance models and to ascertain the multiple possible bodies working on many likely tasks. High level categories of questions included:

- What are the many tasks that are needed to govern a town forest?
- Who are the people completing those tasks?
- What are the budget, revenue, and cost practices?
- Is the town getting sufficient professional assistance?
- Is community involvement encouraged? Is it done well?
- What are the barriers to good governance?
- What are educational areas that could improve governance?

- b. Consultants

*Distribution* - A list of forester consultants is maintained by the Vermont Woodland Owners Association. An early email was sent to thirty-four professionals confirming that they were interested in participating. Five of these opted out, likely due to their minimal work with towns. The survey was then distributed to twenty-nine consultants.

*Focus* – The focus of the survey distributed to consulting foresters was much shorter, with only fifteen questions. Professionals providing services to a town have an important objective perspective on the town's operations and quality of governance. The survey focused on:

- Who is doing what tasks?
- Is the governance effective?
- What challenges have been observed?
- What are the gaps in knowledge, and subsequent educational needs?

c. County Foresters

*Distribution* - County Foresters are employed by the State of Vermont and their contact information was available from the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation. Twelve surveys were distributed to the County Foresters listed there.

*Focus* – This survey was identical to that given to the consulting foresters. County Foresters are the most often used and trusted resource for town forest management in Vermont. Their objective perspective and vast experience were critical to this project.

2. Focus groups and interviews

a. Focus group 1 – County Foresters

On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021, five County Foresters participated in a ninety-minute zoom meeting to discuss their collective experience in assisting towns in managing town forests.

*Participants*

- Keith Thompson – Program Manager
- Ethan Tapper – Chittenden County Forester
- Matt Langlais – Caledonia and Essex County Forester
- Cory Creagan – Bennington County Forester
- Dave Paganelli – Orange County Forester

Together these foresters represent a combined sixty years of experience and currently serve forty-three towns. Discussion was focused on:

- How are towns handling governance?
- What challenges do towns face?
- What are the educational or support needs for effective governance?
- What are other issues to consider?

Notes from the discussion are presented in Appendix C.

b. Focus group 2 – Other professionals who work with Towns

On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021, nine natural resource professionals who work with Towns participated in a ninety-minute zoom meeting to discuss their collective observations in town forest governance across the state. *Participants*

- Caitlyn Cusack – Vermont Land Trust
- Katherine Forrer – UVM Extension
- Bob Heiser – Vermont Land Trust
- Dan Kilburn – Vermont Land Trust
- Cara Montgomery – Vermont Land Trust
- Elise Schadler – Vermont Forest, Parks, and Recreation
- Liza Walker – Vermont Land Trust
- Kate Wanner – Trust for Public Land



Westford Town Forest, Photo Courtesy of Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, & Recreation

Together these professionals assist towns in acquisition, management planning, recreation and trail planning, and easement monitoring. Their perspective provides a complementary view to that of the County Foresters. Discussion was focused on:

- Models of governance, particularly role of Conservation Commissions and Selectboards
- Challenges of governance in small towns
- Education and support needs for effective governance
- Other issues to consider

Discussion notes can be found in Appendix D.

c. Focus group 3 – Wildlife professionals who work with Towns

On Sept 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021, three wildlife professionals who work with Towns participated in a sixty-minute zoom meeting to discuss their collective observations in town forest governance across the state. *Participants*

- Jens Hilke – Community Wildlife Program, State of Vermont
- Andy Wood – Community Wildlife Program, State of Vermont
- Andrea Shortsleeve – UVM Extension
- Katherine Forrer – UVM Extension

These professionals provide municipal planners and non-governmental organizations with information and resources for implementing conservation projects. Specifically, they help towns identify important wildlife habitat and incorporate appropriate actions for its protection into town forest plans. Discussion largely focused on:

- Volunteer capacity
- Heavy recreational focus
- Educational needs for boards

Discussion notes are in Appendix E.

## Methodology - Phase III: Summary of Findings

This report shall act as the final report, a Summary of Phase I planning activities and findings from Phase II provided to the State.

A subsequent report specifically for partners and practitioners was created and is included in this Appendix F.

## Methodology - Phase IV: Information Transfer

A webinar was held on September 30, 2021 to present the findings of this project. Thirty-five people attended (attendance list in Appendix G). Results were presented by the Northern Forest Center, and facilitated discussions followed. Notes from the discussion are in the Appendix H.



Cooperative Invasive Species Management Areas Discussion in Hinesburg 2013, *Photo Courtesy of Keith Thompson*

## Findings – Results of Surveys Distributed to Communities and Professional Advisors

### A. Survey responses (Full survey results in Appendix I)

The Community Survey was distributed to 301 town officials across the state. Using the method described above, the final distribution list covered many officials within town government from members of the Selectboard to recreation committees. The town roles of survey participants included:

- 23 leaders who self-identified as members of special committees - forest committees, recreation committees, etc.
- 28 town staff such as town clerks, managers, planners, or zoning administrators
- 41 Conservation Commission members
- 11 Members of the Selectboard
- 4 Planning Board members

People in these positions had an average tenure of ten years, with a range of under a year to over forty years!

145 surveys were returned with varying degrees of completeness. Overall participation rate was good with over 50% of surveys completed sufficiently with viable data to be used. Out of the 145 submitted responses:

- 84 (58%) responses completed the survey to the end
- 88 (60%) responses partially completed the survey, but answers were sufficient to be valuable (includes the 84 complete responses)
- 52 (36%) responses only answered the first few questions
- 16 (11%) claimed the town did not have a town forest
- 3 (2%) were duplicate responses and were not counted toward final results

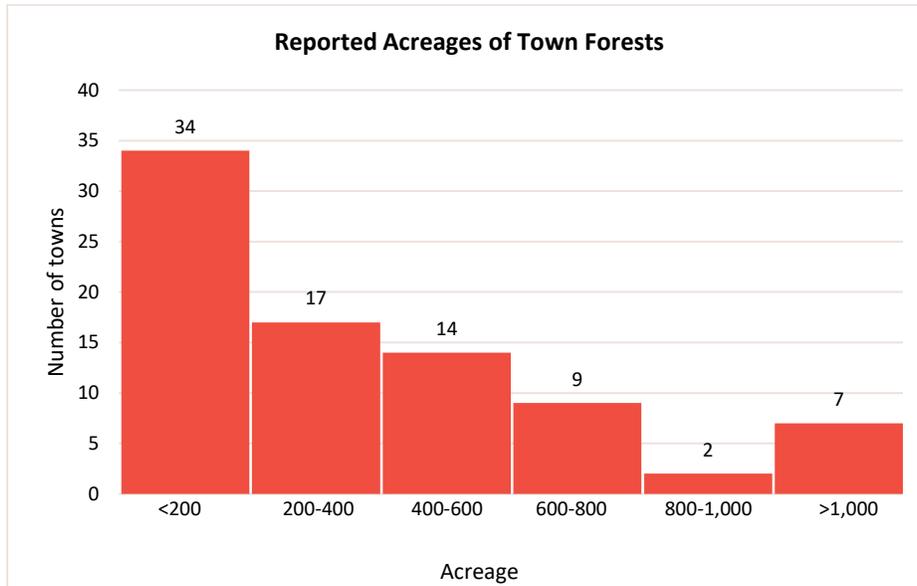
In total, seventy-seven towns contributed viable information for analysis.

Likewise, the two surveys offered to consulting and County Foresters had a good response rate at 50%, with twenty-one completed surveys returned. There were nine County Foresters and eleven consulting foresters that participated.

A combination of the surveys, the conversations and focused group discussions, resulted in 125 people contributing valuable data, observations, and opinions to the project inquiry regarding governance for Vermont Town Forests.

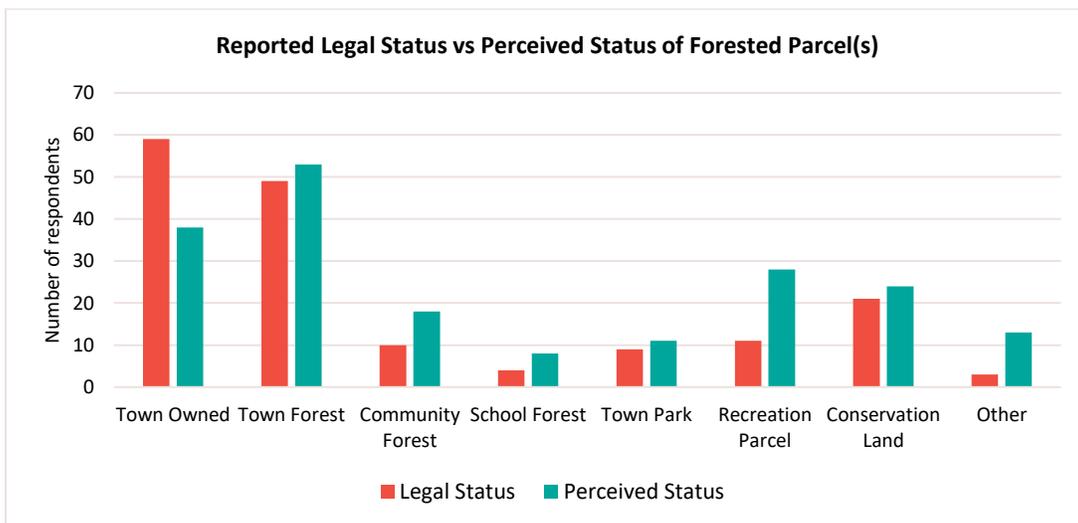
## B. The Town Lands

Town Parcel Acreages: The town parcels (or total acreage with multiple parcels) ranged in size from nineteen acres to 1,800 acres; many towns reported owning multiple parcels. About half of these were parcels ranging in size between the low of nineteen up to about 350 acres. On the high end, five respondents reported sizes between 673 and 1,000 acres; and an equal six had parcels greater than 1,000 acres.



Note: For towns with multiple respondents, an average of the reported acreages was used.

Legal status: The survey inquired about both the legal status of the property but also the perception of the town land. Results matched well:

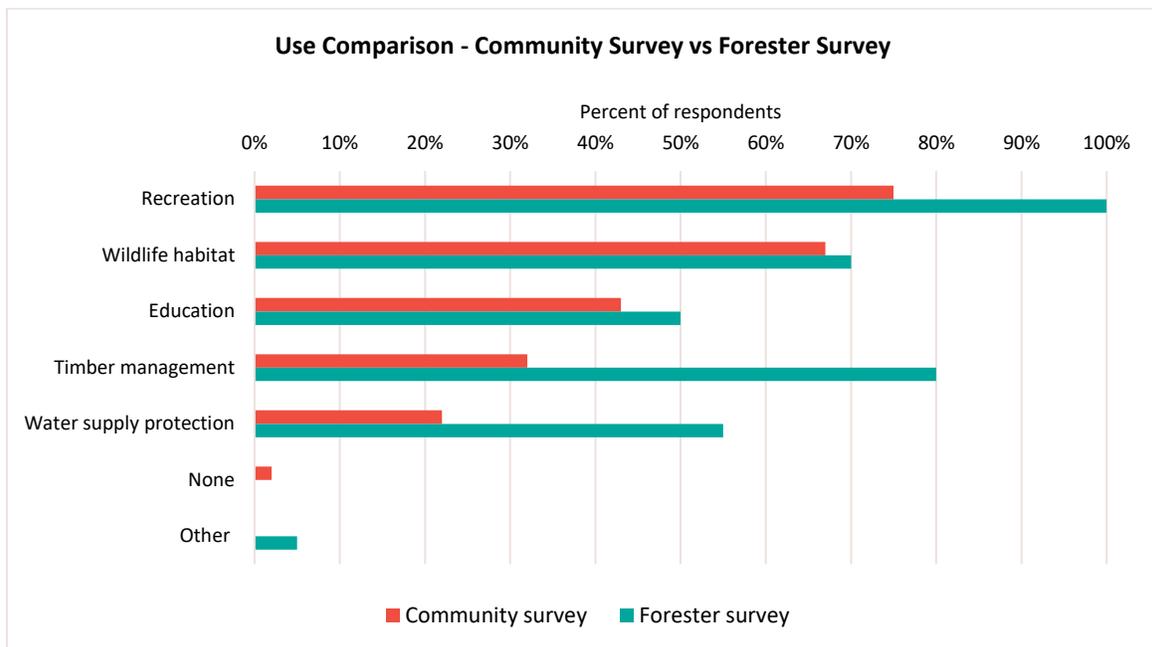


Protection status: The survey also included a question about the protection status of the town owned forest. Fifty-five towns had some sort of protection either a conservation easement, a deed restriction, or some other protective measure. Thirty-six towns however indicated that their town forest is not permanently protected from sale, development, or other.

Primary uses of the Town Forest: All survey responses, both advisors and community members reported the same relative use of the town forest lands in this order:

1. Recreation
2. Wildlife habitat
3. Timber management
4. Water supply protection
5. Education
6. Other

However, when considering each separate category, the two surveys were quite different:



Two striking differences worthy of discussion are in the categories of Timber Management and Water Supply Protection. The foresters reported twice the amount of use in these groups with 80% of the foresters reporting that timber management was a use of town forests, and 55% reporting that water supply protection was a use. However, only 39% of the community respondents reported timber management as a use while only 27% reported water supply protection. There are many possible reasons for this difference of perspective:

- Community respondents may not realize there is timber management happening on these parcels, as it is a long-term process possibly without annual activity.

- County and Consulting foresters would report on their direct work which is timber management.
- There is little overlap between the towns represented by the community respondents and the professional advisors.

Other uses listed in both surveys include:

- Ecological reserves
- Gun club leases and hunting (which may show up in Recreation)
- Floodplain management
- Illegal use of ATVs (which also fits under Recreation category)

Public Access: When asked if public access is guaranteed on these town forests, 86% of respondents answered in the affirmative, leaving 14% of participating towns replying “no,” public access is not guaranteed. The primary comment regarding access was related to lack of access to the parcel; either it is landlocked with no legal access, there are difficulties with the legal right-of-way or abutting neighbors, or access is at the courtesy of neighbors. Some indicated that access is limited to foot traffic only either to protect habitat or to limit motor vehicles.

Hunting: 80% of survey respondents reported that hunting is allowed on the town forests. Comments of note include:

- Hunting allowed on some town owned parcels, not all
- Hunting policy under reconsideration given heavy (other) recreational use

C. Governance: Authority, Responsibility, and Work

The governance project planning team recognized early that there would be many models of governance across Vermont. At the same time, they also anticipated that there were a great many people taking care of multiple land ownership responsibilities, from trail building to acquiring new parcels. The survey was designed to capture these integrated relationships and responsibilities, or basically “who is doing what” in the business of owning and stewarding town lands. Questions were designed to ascertain which volunteers were decision makers, who had final authority, and who is doing much of the day-to-day operational work. Two specific survey questions tried to address this issue:

In the Community Survey, respondents were asked “Who is in charge of making decisions for Town Forests?” They were able to select multiple options in each category.

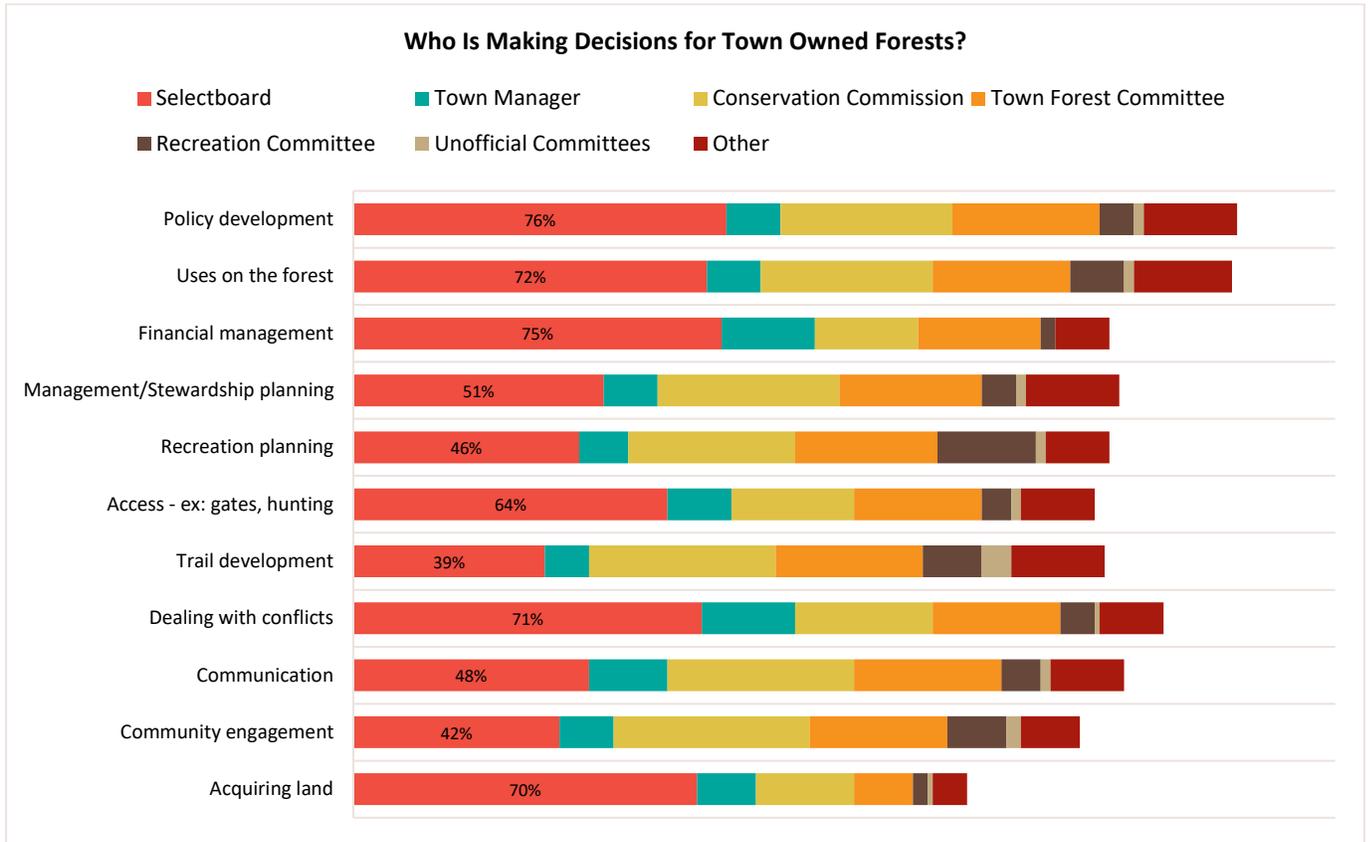
**Final Authority for Town Forest Decisions**

	Selectboard	Town manager	Conservation Commission	Town Forest Committee	Recreation committee	Unofficial committees	Other
Policy Development	68	11	31	26	6	2	17
Uses on the forest	64	10	31	25	11	2	19
Financial management	68	17	17	21	3	0	10
Management/ Stewardship planning	45	10	33	25	6	2	18
Recreation planning	41	9	30	25	19	3	12
Access – ex: gates, hunting	58	12	21	23	5	2	13
Trail development	34	8	34	26	12	6	17
Dealing with conflict	64	18	25	22	6	1	13
Communication	43	14	34	26	8	2	14
Community engagement	38	10	36	24	12	3	12
Acquiring land	61	11	19	10	3	1	6

\*Respondents could select multiple answers per category

Across respondents, Selectboards have the highest level of authority with decision-making power in an average of seven categories. Conservation Commissions have the second largest level of authority, making decisions in an average of four categories. Expectedly, unofficial committees have the lowest average level of authority coming in at less than one category; this is a good thing!

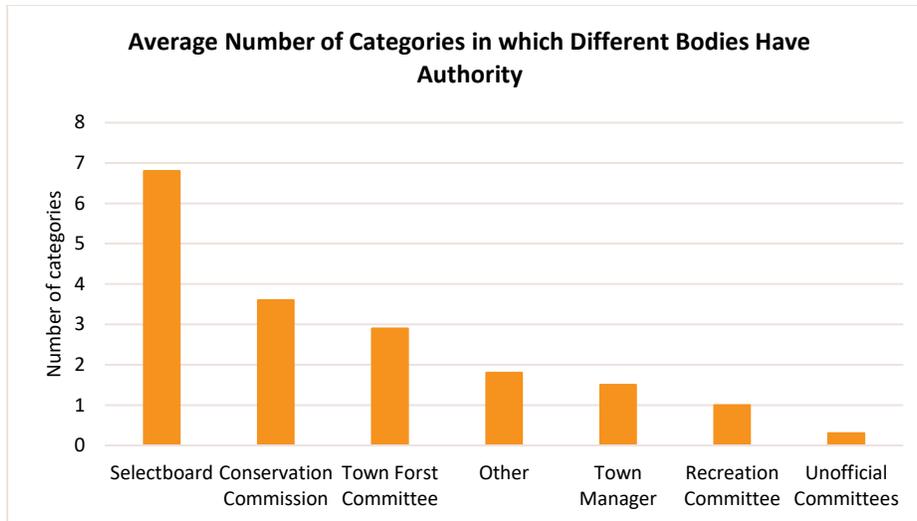
When put into a bar graph, the Selectboard as top decision maker is clear:



An important follow-up question allowed respondents to define “Other,” with these answers submitted:

- Parks Committee
- Tree Warden
- Local Land Trust
- Planning Commission
- State Lands Foresters
- Public Works
- Recreation organizations
- Trails committee as subset of Recreation committee
- A collaborative approach

Recognizing the many types of decisions that are made, the following graph shows the average number of decision categories (listed along the y-axis of the above bar graph) in which different town committees have authority:



In general,

- Selectboards reportedly have high levels of authority in what might be considered as general management categories – finances, policy development, dealing with conflict – and slightly lower levels of authority in more specific, land-based categories such as trail development and recreation planning, though there were some exceptions. For example, Selectboards had a low level of authority across respondents in terms of communication and community engagement.
- Town managers were listed most often as having authority over financial management and dealing with conflict and least often in recreation planning and trail development.
- Conservation Commissions most frequently had authority over community engagement, communication, and trail development, and the least authority over acquiring land and financial management.
- Town Forest Committees had the most authority over policy development, trail development, and communication, and the least authority over acquiring land and financial management.
- Recreation committees had the most authority over recreation planning, community engagement, and trail developments, with little authority over acquiring land or financial management.
- Unofficial committees most often had authority over trail development, recreation planning, and community engagement.

All of this was confirmed in a secondary question when eighty-six percent (86%) of respondents answered that the Selectboard has the final authority when it comes to the town forest land. Only two percent, two answers, and two towns reported the Town Forest Committee as having final authority.

Subsequently, respondents were asked which bodies do the work. there are many potential tasks in managing a piece of public owned land which are separate and distinct from decision making authority in governing town forests.

**Various Responsible Parties for TF Tasks**

	Selectboard	Town manager/ Admin	Conservation Commission	Town Forest Committee	Recreation committee	Trails committee	Professional advisors	Town schools	Unofficial committee	Other
Trail building	11	4	26	22	10	17	12	3	9	17
Trail maintenance	8	4	27	20	9	18	4	2	10	16
Infrastructure- gates, roads, signs, trash	25	11	23	22	6	9	3	2	3	11
Communications: public, neighbors	25	13	33	23	6	6	1	1	3	11
Buying land	47	10	15	2	1	1	4	0	0	4
Fundraising	12	5	27	18	6	5	3	0	2	13
Hosting public events	12	6	33	21	8	7	0	2	6	14
Education (school or public)	8	4	29	19	4	5	2	24	5	13
Other	4	1	3	4	1	0	1	0	0	4

\* Respondents could select multiple answers per category

Responsibility for tasks and projects was distributed somewhat similarly to authority. Conservation Commissions had the highest level of responsibility, performing duties in an average of over two categories, followed by Selectboards and Town Forest Committees tied at just under two areas of responsibility. Professional advisors, unofficial committees and town schools all registered well below even one category.

Again,

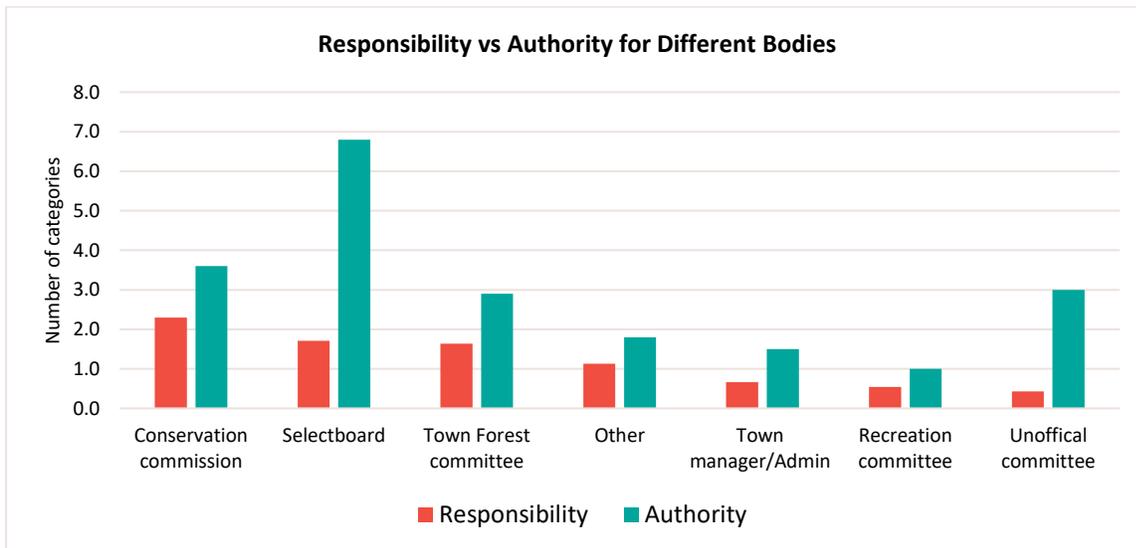
- Selectboards are most active in management level tasks such as buying land; nearly twice as many respondents reported Selectboards performing this duty than any other task. On the other hand, and likely due to their full plate of responsibilities for town business, the fewest number of respondents reported Selectboards doing such work as trail maintenance and education.
- Town managers/administrators were reported to perform duties in the communications and infrastructure categories most often, and, similar to the Selectboard results, performed work in the education, trail building, and trail maintenance categories the least often.
- Conservation Commissions performed duties in communications and hosting public events most often, and in buying land and infrastructure least often.
- Town Forest Committees seem to have responsibility for communications, trail building, and infrastructure most often, and for buying land and fundraising least often.
- Recreation committees most often had responsibility for trail building and trail maintenance and least often for buying land and education.
- Similarly, trails committees most often had responsibility for trail building and trail maintenance, and least often had responsibility for buying land, education, and fundraising.

- Professional advisors were reported as having responsibility for trail building three times more often than any other task; there are many towns that use trail building organizations.
- Town schools were overwhelmingly reported to have responsibility for education and did not have significant responsibility in other areas.
- Unofficial committees were reported to mostly do work in trail building and trail maintenance.

Similar to authority, responsibility for tasks and projects was distributed mostly evenly across categories of work and most respondents reported two or more bodies performed work for every task.

Combining these categories of tasks and simply asking “Who do you consider to be the governing body for the town forest, in terms of who does the work?” yielded these results in percentage of answers:

- Conservation Committee - 31%
- Other – Tree Warden, Parks Committee, Planning Commission, Land Trust - 20%
- Town Forest Committee - 20%
- Selectboard - 16%

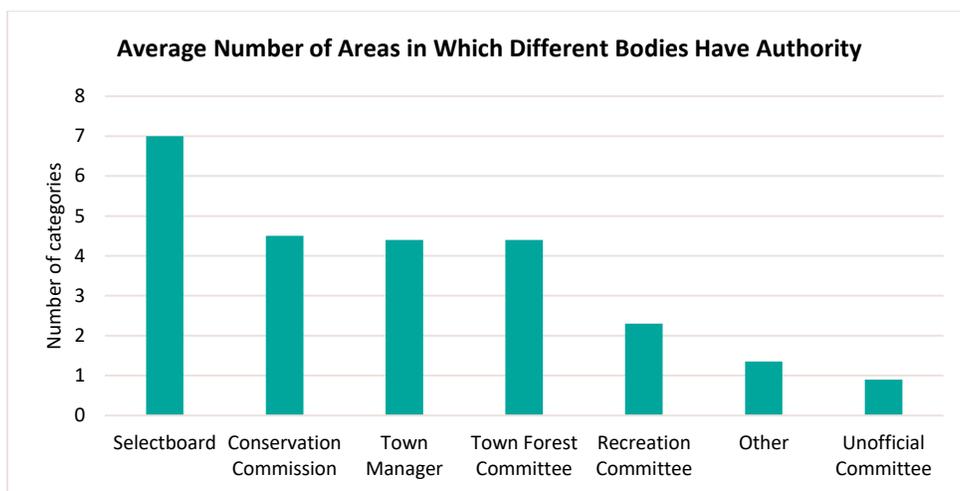


*Forester perspectives on Authority and Responsibilities:*

The county and consulting foresters were asked to complete an identical matrix as the community survey matrix (on page 15) to identify decision making bodies. Respondents could select multiple answers for each category.

### Foresters' View of TF Authority

	Selectboard	Town Manager	Conservation Commission	Town Forest Committee	Recreation Committee	Unofficial Committees	Other
Policy Development	16	8	9	9	5	2	2
Uses on the forest	15	9	11	8	8	4	2
Financial management	17	11	5	5	1	0	2
Management/ Stewardship planning	13	8	10	9	5	3	3
Recreation planning	9	6	9	10	8	1	2
Access - ex: gates, hunting	11	8	5	8	2	0	3
Trail development	10	6	9	9	6	3	3
Dealing with conflict	16	8	7	8	3	1	3
Communication	9	9	8	9	3	1	3
Community engagement	8	6	10	9	4	1	2
Acquiring land	15	9	6	4	1	2	2
Other	1	0	0	0	0	0	0



\*Respondents could choose multiple answers per category

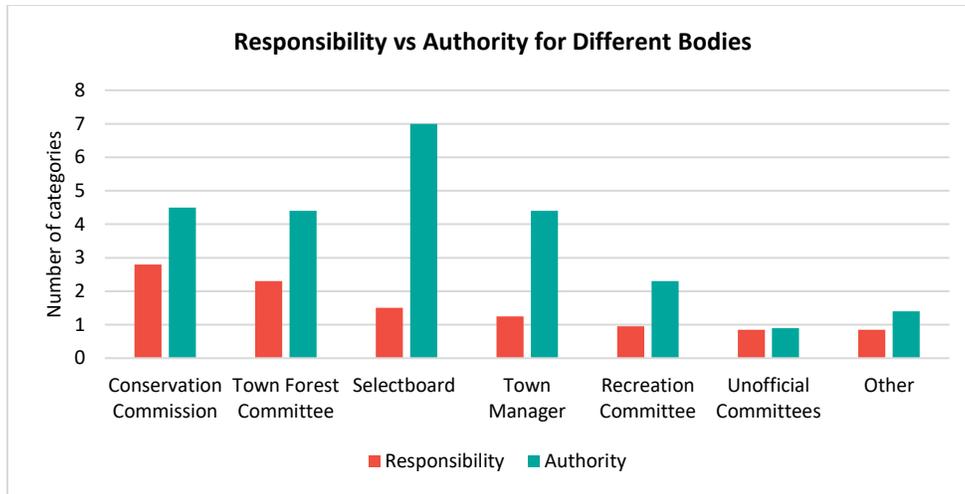
Again, Selectboards are reported as having the highest overall level of authority, with foresters listing them as having decision making power in an average of seven categories. Next was Conservation Commissions with authority in almost five categories while Town Managers and Town Forest Committees keep busy in four areas each of responsibility. Recreation and unofficial committees only occasionally have any authority.

The county and consulting foresters also identified which bodies were involved in each aspect of governing or managing the town forests, not from the view of authority but from the view of getting work done. This matrix was identical to the one in the community survey seen on page 18. The respondents could select multiple answers for each category.

**Foresters' View of TF Responsibilities**

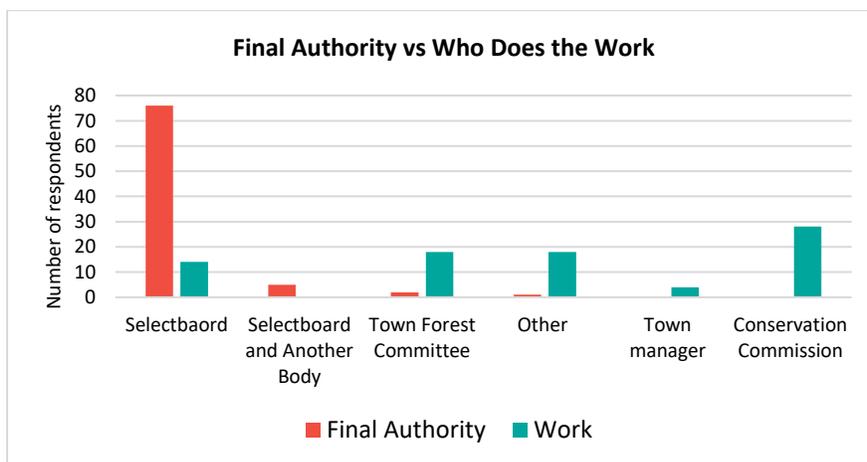
	Selectboard	Town manager/ Admin	Conservation Commission	Town Forest Committee	Recreation committee	Trails committee	Professional advisors	Town schools	Unofficial committee	Other
Trail building	2	2	8	7	5	6	4	4	3	3
Trail maintenance	2	1	5	5	5	6	1	3	3	1
Infrastructure: gates, roads, signs, trash	7	6	8	9	2	1	3	0	2	3
Communications - public, neighbors	7	6	8	9	2	1	3	0	2	3
Buying land	9	5	5	2	0	0	0	0	2	1
Fundraising	1	1	8	4	2	1	1	1	3	0
Hosting public events	2	3	9	8	2	4	3	1	2	3
Education (school or public)	1	2	6	4	0	1	5	6	1	4
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Respondents reported Conservation Commissions as having the highest level of responsibility, doing work in an average of three categories. Town Forest Committees did work in over two categories, followed by Selectboards in an average of about one and one half categories. Respondents reported that town managers/administrators perform work slightly over one category. Others, such as trail committees, professional advisors had responsibility for an average of just over one task. Recreation committees, unofficial committees, other committees, and town schools all had low responsibility; this may be because their work is very specialized.



According to the foresters, Selectboards performed the most work in buying land, communications, and surprisingly, in infrastructure. They performed the least amount of work in education and fundraising. Town managers or administrators were reported to have responsibility most often for communications and infrastructure and least often for fundraising and trail maintenance. Conservation Commissions most often had responsibility for hosting public events, with four other public relations and physical labor categories tied for second. They were reported to least often have responsibility for buying land and trail maintenance. Town Forest Committees most often had responsibility for infrastructure and communications, and least often for buying land, fundraising, and education. Understandably, recreation committees most often had responsibility relating to trails.

Overall, the data from the community survey and from the forester survey paint similar pictures of town forest authority and responsibility. Both data showed that Selectboards had overwhelming authority over decisions but did not perform most of the operational work. Financial authority in particular fell mostly to Selectboards. Responses from the two groups each showed that Conservation Commissions performed the most work related to town forests. Both showed a large gap between the amount of authority and the amount of responsibility each body had, possibly caused by volunteers performing most of the work, but still unexplained. In general, both survey data sets showed that in a given category of decision making, multiple bodies usually shared authority.

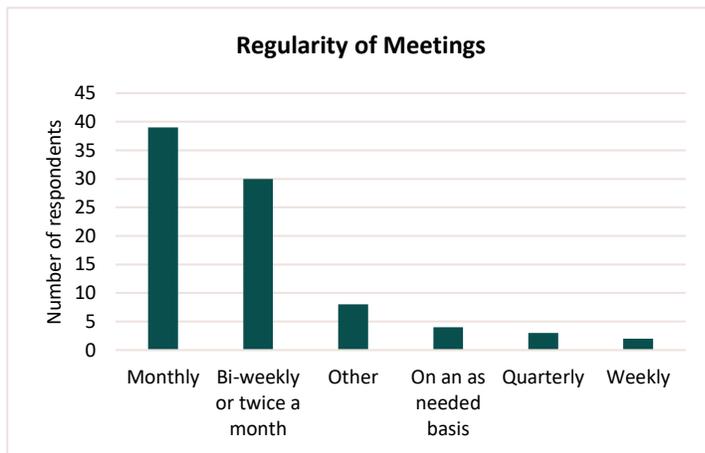


These data reflect the general sentiments indicated in questions nineteen and twenty of the community survey, where respondents had to pick the governing body in terms of who does the work and who has final authority, respectively. The consensus among respondents was that Selectboards had final authority (86%), but answers for who did the work was spread relatively evenly across Selectboards (16%), Town Forest Committees (20%), Conservation Commissions (31%), and other unlisted bodies (20%).

One confirming point from the focus group discussions is that Selectboards have too many other responsibilities to be effective at handling governance of town forest lands. Many professionals agreed that Conservation Commissions and Town Forest Committees are much better able to focus deeply on stewardship, recreation, and other issues. Many respondents in the community survey noted that good communication between these bodies and the Selectboard is a key component of excellent governance, and yields satisfying cooperation with positive outcomes for the community and the forest. An additional comment from focus groups was that the Selectboard having final authority can protect the commissions or committees from volunteers with special interests.

All of the above discussion regarding Town Forest governance includes multiple bodies including Selectboards, Conservation Commissions, trail committees and more. This takes a lot of volunteer time and energy. When asked about regular meetings of these various boards, the results indicate a vast majority of these town committees are meeting once or twice a month.

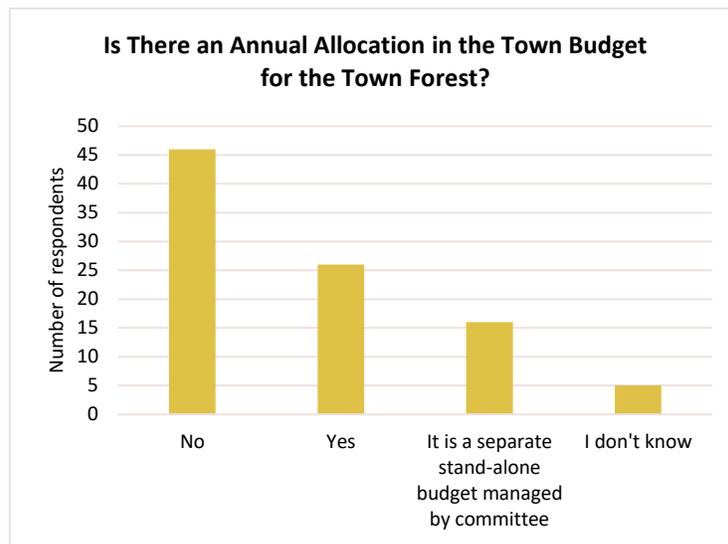
Nearly half of respondents (44%) reported that the governing body of the town forest met monthly. Close behind was bi-weekly/twice a month with thirty answers (34%). Very few respondents reported that the governing body met weekly (2%), quarterly (3%), or on an as-needed basis (5%). Eight respondents reported some sort of unique meeting structure not included in these categories or did not know.



D. Governance – Finances to support Town Forest Stewardship

Survey designers expected a mix of financial policies in regard to managing town lands. Some towns keep a separate account or budget for conservation work or town land management, others mix it all into the town budget. Survey questions also included specifics about revenue, expenses, and control of the budget.

The majority of respondents (52%) reported that their town forest does not have a consistent annual budget allocation for town forest lands. However, thirty percent (30%) of the towns indicated that there is a consistent allocation, and just under twenty percent revealed that there is a separate stand-alone budget.



Additional comments indicated that there is indeed a mix of how finances are handled:

- Parks committee has budget within town budget
- Conservation Commission has limited budget controlled by the Commission
- Conservation Commission recommends and Selectboard approves
- Forest Committee controls and decides
- Recreation Committee can approve small expenditures
- Payments from special Conservation Fund must be approved by Selectboard

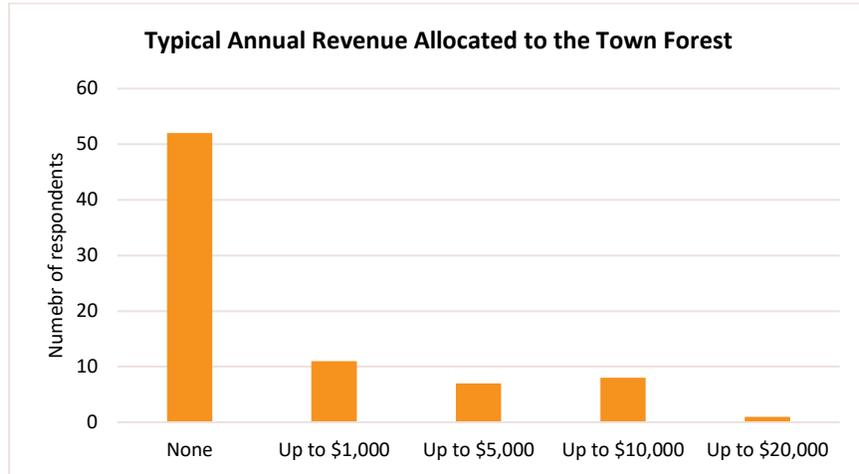
The comments also confirmed that there is a lot of collaboration between various town committees in planning and spending money to support town forest needs.

For revenue separate from a municipal budget, approximately one third of respondents reported that funding comes from timber harvesting (35%), grants (36%), and private donations (31%) (note: respondents could select multiple answers). Additional sources include:

- Tree and shrub sale
- Maple sugaring
- Cell phone tower rent

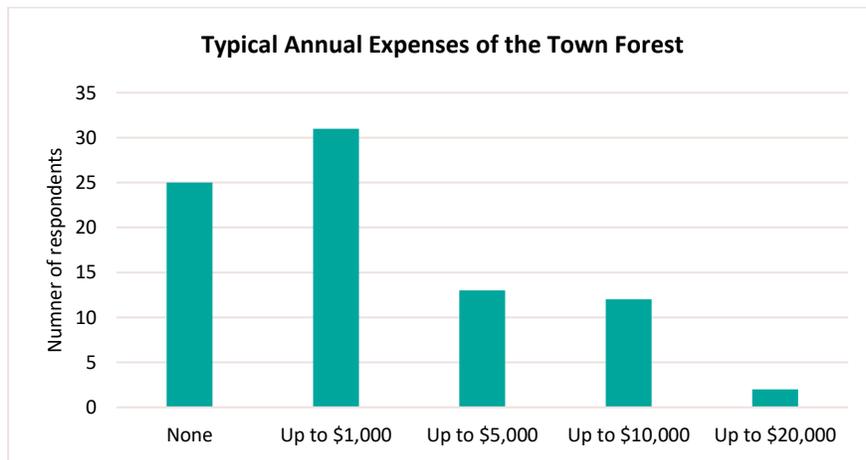
- Recreation impact fees

Even with all of these sources of revenue, the majority of towns noted there is no annual revenue for managing the town’s forest lands.



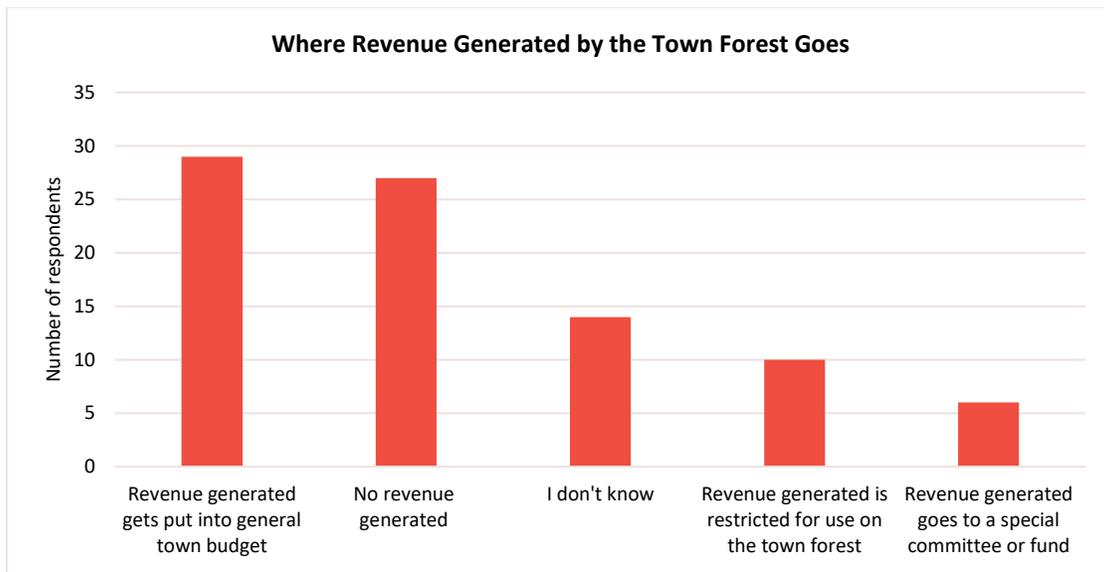
Matching the lack of revenue, annual expenses for the town forest were also generally low:

- 25 towns reported having no expenses,
- 31 reported up to \$1,000, 13 reported up to \$5,000,
- 12 reported up to \$10,000, and
- 2 respondents reported up to \$20,000 in annual expenses.



As for how these expenses are dispensed, the majority of respondents (57%) reported that the Selectboard had final say in how money was spent on the town forest. Selectboards were reported to allocate money by more than three times as many respondents as any other governing body.

Finally, the survey queried what happens to funds generated on the town forest, perhaps from a timber harvest:



One third of respondents (33%) reported that revenue generated by the town forest is put back into the general town budget, meaning town forests do not necessarily benefit from the profits they generate. Many towns (31%) also reported that the town forest generated no revenue and a significant number (16%) said they did not know what happened to the revenue. These three findings raise concerns about how towns financially support their town forests and if they are receiving the funding they need.

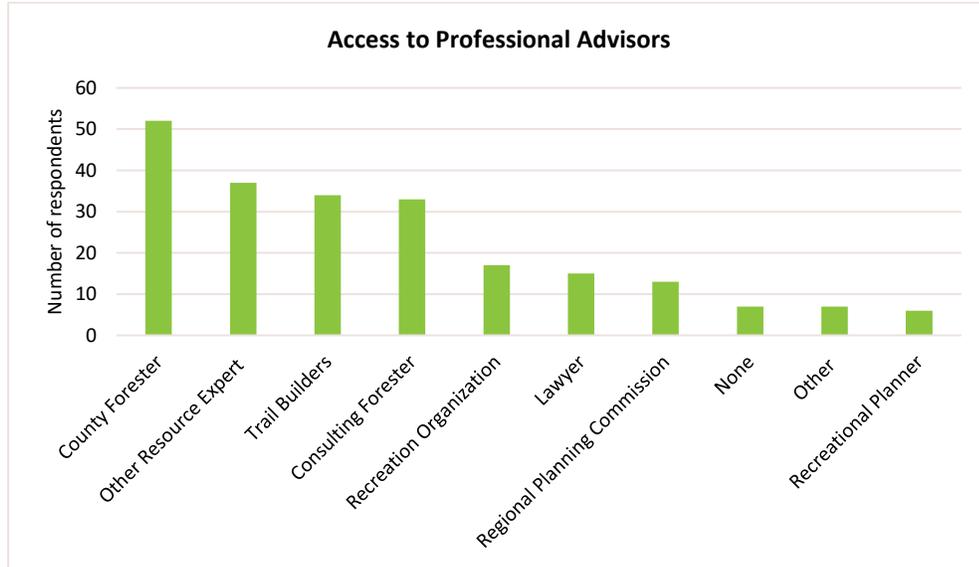
Some additional comments:

- Timber harvest revenue goes to endowment.
- Revenue goes to special fund per the terms of donor gift.

There were a few comments that more funds would be nice for town forests, but overall, the financial situation seems to be working. However, with increased interest in town forests, especially for recreational use, towns will need to consider carefully if their existing financial habits and structures can support the additional cost of recreational infrastructure maintenance.

E. Governance – Getting support, advice, and professional assistance

In addition to their own volunteers, towns are using many professional resources to manage their town lands. Here are results of the survey question: “What professional advisors does the town use?”



Note: respondents could select multiple answers

Additionally, towns reported using these professional advisors as well:

- Engineers for bridges
- Tree Wardens
- State Archeologist
- Wildlife biologist
- Road maintenance specialist
- Wetland scientists
- Trail construction

Vermont County Foresters have a responsibility to assist with town owned lands. Most towns take advantage of this opportunity for professional guidance (69% according to survey results). Consulting foresters and foresters with organizations such as the Vermont Land Trust are utilized as well (approximately 40%). Many reported having professionals on their Conservation Commission or Town Forest Committees; one lucky town reported they had the combination of a forester, a botanist, an ecologist, and a land trust professional on their Conservation Commission.

Though this looks like towns are accessing good support with professional advisors, the follow-up question yielded different results: “Are you getting the support you need?” Forty percent of the community participants replied “Yes, all set,” while the remaining 60% listed areas where they need assistance. About twenty percent need help with financial matters, forestry & wildlife management, recreational trails, and community engagement. Less, in the range of 8-12%, chose general governance, education, land protection, acquisition, and volunteer coordination as categories for assistance.

Additionally, easements, Class IV roads, volunteer recruitment, invasives (including money), surveying, and forest stewardship planning were listed as areas of needed support.

Only 33% of the foresters who participated in the survey, all of whom work with towns, reported that towns are getting sufficient professional guidance and support.

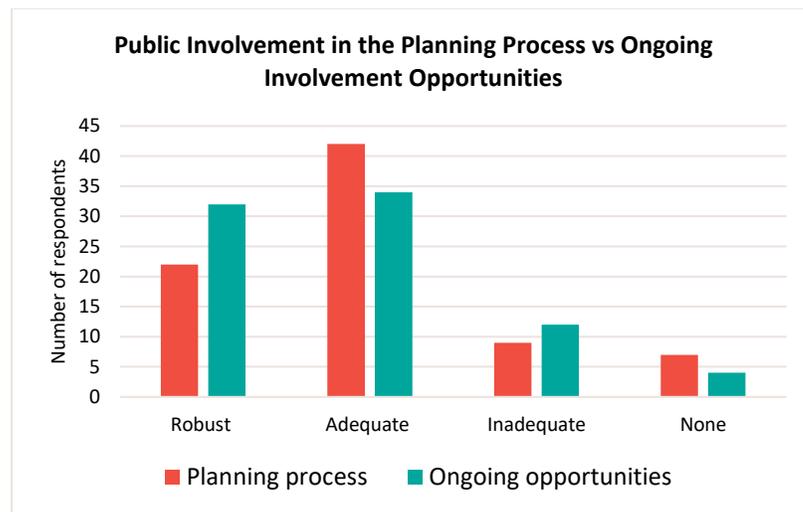
Towns often engage professionals in the forest management and recreation planning process. The survey asked if towns had forest management or recreation plans in place, or if they wanted one. Here are the survey results for stewardship and recreation plans from the communities that participated in the survey:



Clearly there is still a need for planning assistance in Vermont town forests: over twenty communities want a forest management plan, and fourteen want a recreation plan.

## F. Governance – Public engagement

There is much more community involvement in the management of town owned lands than decades ago. People today are interested in how these lands can be used for a multitude of benefits including conservation, recreation, and revenue generation. Though some town leaders remain hesitant, many towns welcome public engagement in setting priorities, making plans, and getting things done. The community survey asked two questions regarding the opportunity for public involvement – during a planning process (such as a forest management or recreation plan), and during normal non-planning periods. The combined results:

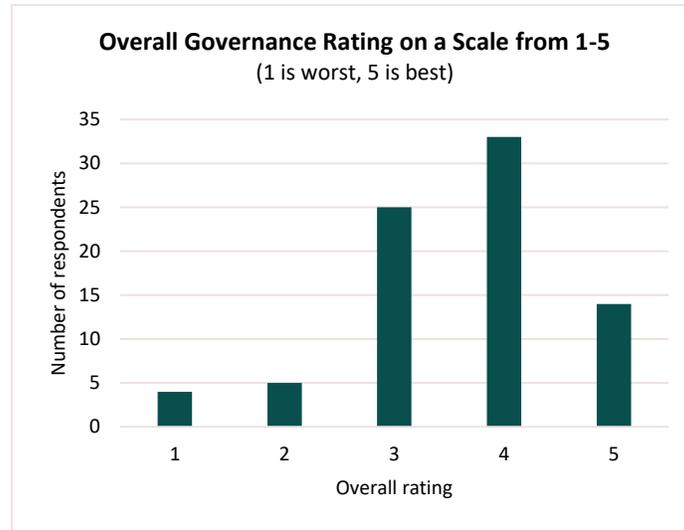


These results are encouraging – during a planning process eighty percent (80%) of community respondents felt there was either adequate or robust opportunity for public involvement. Adequate was defined as “good opportunity for input,” whereas Robust was defined as “welcoming and integrative – with multiple opportunities for conversations and input.” Less than 20% reported inadequate or non-existent opportunity for input.

This trend was mentioned in a focus group discussion when one participant noted that it is easier to have enthusiasm and momentum during a public process, but it is hard to sustain that momentum during the implementation stage of a plan or even ongoing work.

## G. Governance – Quality of governance structure

Though various models of governance have been discussed above, one other survey question aimed to create a baseline of opinions: “Is your governance structure working smoothly and effectively?” With recognition that this is a subjective question, the answers provide a good picture of town forest governance across Vermont.



Good news again with fifty-eight percent (53%) of responses rating their local governance structure (whatever it may be) as good or excellent. Roughly a third of respondents (28%) feel their town has modestly effective governance. Only one tenth (11%) of the towns clearly need some assistance in governance having rated themselves as ineffective, inconsistent, non-functional, or non-existent.

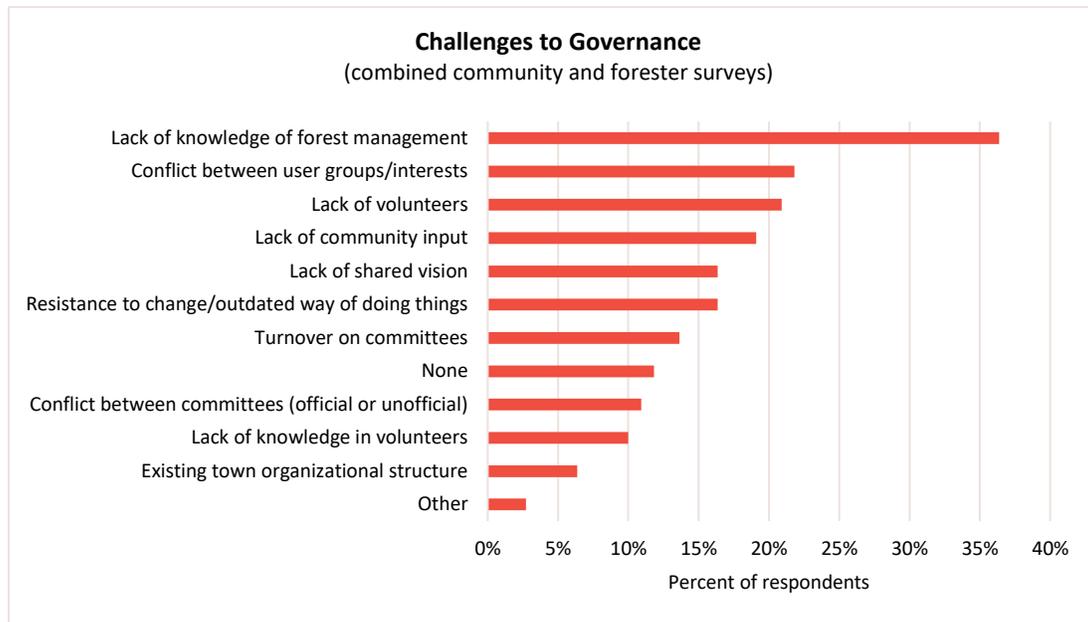
Here are some quotes from respondents explaining their rating:

- So much to do, with so little time. Since we are all volunteers, things move a bit slowly!
- We struggle with Conservation Commission membership and general excitement.
- Public is informed and involved in decisions. Conservation Commission works well with Select Board.
- Main issue is that decisions are reactive, nothing is done proactively or based upon long-term strategic objectives.
- Same few people, same few ideas.
- Town Forest Committee has a paid conservation planner that is always present at meetings.
- The Forest Committee has been hobbled by special interests. These few restrict forest use and obfuscate the intentions of the land’s covenants.
- The stewardship committee hasn’t been effective, can’t seem to make progress on simple tasks. The Selectboard doesn’t have time to manage on its own.

- Coordination between Selectboard, Conservation Commission, and Parks Board is sometimes bumpy but generally it gets worked out.
- Selectboard has final authority but they only get involved if pushed by the Conservation Commission.
- Conflicts over uses and level of use. Maybe too much marketing for economic development in some people's opinion.
- Committed Board members.
- It was rough going for a few years until the Selectboard began to trust our committee as we provide them with many updates.

## H. Governance – Barriers, Challenges, and Educational Needs

In all the surveys, participants were asked what challenges or barriers might be contributing to quality of governance and offered ten possible answers; respondents could choose up to five answers. The full response is presented below, but “Lack of knowledge of forest management” was the consistent lead response to the question of Challenges or Barriers to good governance.



Note: respondents could select multiple answers

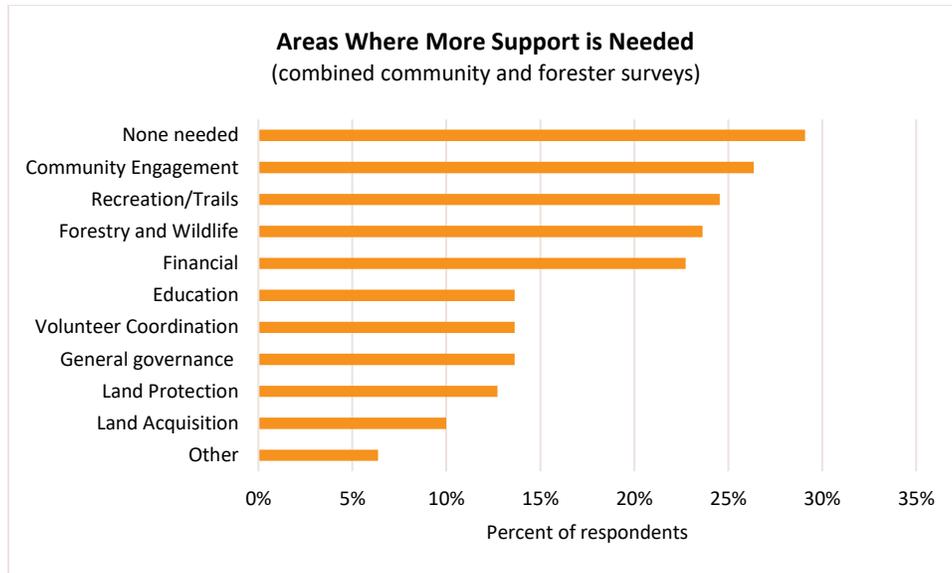
As the above graph shows, both community members and foresters feel a lack of knowledge regarding forest management is a barrier to good governance. Many survey participants also highlighted concerns with conflicts between user groups, which became more prevalent as people sought outdoor recreation opportunities during the pandemic. Volunteerism, and turnover of those volunteers, was also cited as a challenge in maintaining a solid town governance structure. This theme of small towns with too many volunteer needs and too few volunteers was a repeated theme discussed in the focus groups. One conversation noted that new faces are needed as the baby boomer generation is often over-represented on town committees.

Additional comments provided:

- Neighbor issues especially with increased recreational use
- Little enforcement of rules, constant repair due to ATV use and damage
- Condition of Class IV roads
- Two strong interest groups at odds with each other – ecology v recreation
- Lack of interest by the Selectboard
- Funding
- Ignorance of forest management

- Balancing stewardship and uses
- ACT 250 requirements
- High demand for recreation and some rude behaviors

This project was intended to provide a foundational point of understanding about the governance of Vermont town forest land. This data will be important in suggesting future research and programming opportunities. The following graph depicts areas where community members and professional forester advisors see opportunity for support and education.



Note: respondents could select multiple answers

As previous commentary suggested, some towns feel confident in their knowledge, capacity, and quality of governance regarding town-owned land. This group is reflected here with almost thirty percent of respondents answering the support question with “none needed.” However, a significant audience (over 20%) identified desired support in community engagement, recreation & trails, forestry & wildlife, and financial matters. Though sixty towns reported having a Forest Management Plan, fifteen more said they want one. Ten to fifteen percent listed education, volunteer coordination, general governance, and land protections as areas of support or educational interest. Within the additional comments, results included:

- Managing vandalism
- ATV management
- Funding for surveying and boundary work

The final question in the community survey asked if community volunteers would want conversations together regarding town land governance. Sixty-five percent of participants answered yes. The advisory team for the project recognized this hunger for peer learning early in project discussions. There have

been a few great meetings in the last few years regarding Vermont's Town Forests, but it seems an opportunity to bring folks together on a regular basis to learn about these topics.



Ethan Tapper, Chittenden County Forester, on Hinesburg Town Forest,  
*Photo Courtesy of Bob Heiser, VLT*

## Findings – Summary of Discussions with three professional focus groups

Facilitated discussions with natural resource professionals who work with many different towns in various roles allowed for a deeper exploration of successes, challenges, and needs for good governance of town forest land. Sixteen professionals from UVM Extension, the State of Vermont, Vermont Land Trust, Trust for Public Land, and other organizations provided their thoughtful observations about town forests. Their passion for town owned land, its conservation, use, and protection were palpable in the conversations; their input to this project is much appreciated and highly valued. Here the conversations are summarized into familiar themes (to the surveys above), and notes from the discussions are available in the Appendix.

### *On Governance:*

Participants had experience with all models of governance for town owned forests, but highlighted Selectboards, Conservations Commissions, and Town Forest Committees in their respective discussions. Their observations include:

- Works well when committees bring things to the Selectboard, keep them informed
- Tough dynamics in town politics now – can be harsh and controversial
- Committees are doing too many things; often ends up being counterproductive
- There is a lack of clarity of responsibilities – based in lack of clarity in state law
- Town Forest Committees seem to be more proactive
- Selectboards have too much going on – need a more focused committee for TF management
- Committees often feel like they are making it up as they go along – no training = no confidence

### *Challenges in Governance:*

- Transitions in County Foresters
- Turnover and transition with Conservation Commission members
- Fatigue for implementation after exhaustive planning process
- Human capacity – not enough people power
- Volunteers on committees with one passion – not interested in learning larger perspective
- Fear of public input
- Town Forest Committees are often ad hoc, and therefore have no real authority
- Conflict management is not what people expect when they volunteer

### *On Finances:*

- Timber harvests for immediate financial return (or crisis) is not forest management
- Need to promote value of designated funds (revenue generated from land to support the land)
- General lack of funds for basic infrastructure

*On Management Including Uses and Conflicts:*

- Sometimes no follow-through implementation of plans
- Need forest management activity every few years so people understand the working forest
- Land stewardship gets forgotten when volunteers have so many other things to take care of in municipal government
- Towns are trying to have their lands be “everything to everybody”
- Conservation goals are getting lost in recreation interests
  - Wildlife considered too late
  - Quiet disperse recreation like hunting has less impact than today’s biking & hiking
  - Recreation always seems to be the starting place now

*On Educational Needs:*

- Value of public involvement
- More on forestry and conservation to balance the recreation
- Understanding of Vermont laws and responsibilities of respective boards
- Forest Management AND Wildlife ecology as basis for all – including landscape level impacts to small parcel decisions
- Impacts of recreation on the ecosystem

*On Other Opportunities to Support:*

- Facilitation
- Networking and peer-to-peer learning opportunities
- Expand capacity of County Forester assistance

## Summary – Governance of Vermont Town Forests

This project reached over 200 people to gather observations and experiences about the governance of town owned forests in Vermont. Municipal officials, community volunteers, and natural resource professionals offered valuable comments and insights.

As a baseline, it appears that the governance of town-owned lands is in good hands. The knowledge and commitment of town volunteers and their various professional advisors ensures reasonable efforts to balance forest management with both ecosystems and people in mind. Self-reporting by these volunteers indicates they have confidence in their efforts and results both. Professionals have identified some areas for education which will enhance these efforts and strengthen results.

### **Key data points to consider:**

- The survey and discussion groups did not reach everyone who is doing town forest governance, but hopefully the results represent a cross-section of all communities.
- There are many different contributors to the work of governing/managing town owned land including town administrators/managers/planners/other staff, plus Selectboards, Conservation Commissions, Town Forest Committees, recreation committees and more. Not only did survey results indicate that each of these bodies is doing multiple tasks, but that the tasks probably have multiple committees working on them!
- Selectboards most often have the final authority, but Conservation Commissions and Town Forest Committees are very busy with multiple responsibilities.
- Other participants in town forest governance include town staff (admin, parks, public works), recreation committees, parks committees, local land trusts, and regional planning commissions.
- Selectboards have multiple high-level town responsibilities and may not have adequate time to also be managing town lands.
- Conservation Commissions may enjoy stewardship but should understand all of their responsibilities in land use regulation as well.
- Most bodies involved in town forest governance could benefit from at least occasional outside facilitation assistance.
- From this limited survey, it appears that town forests in Vermont range in size from under 200 acres to over 1,000 acres. Future research could deliver exact data. Likewise results here show over fifty towns have their town owned land protected using some conservation tool; more research needs to be completed to get the entire picture.
- As expected, five top uses of the town forest land include timber management, wildlife habitat protection, recreation, water supply protection, and education. This is in line with town forests across the northern New England region.
- The recent trend of increased recreational pressure on these community lands is a concern, especially if it is impacting the integrity of the land for ecological protection or increasing demands for infrastructure and volunteer capacity for small towns.
- There are town-owned lands without access.

- There are many examples of smooth governance structures with a balanced split between authority and responsibility.
- Communication is a key factor in a successful shared-governance situation.
- Few towns have an annual allocation of funds for the town owned lands, but also little money is spent on the town lands each year. Some towns fundraise to support infrastructure and other needs.
- Towns access significant professional advice and benefit from those relationships, though survey results indicate there are still some towns to reach. The State of Vermont is unique in their commitment of County Forester and wildlife professional time for town assistance.
- Primary challenges to good governance were reported as lack of forest knowledge, conflict between user interests, limited volunteers (turnover, and lack of new), and lack of shared vision for the properties.
- Areas identified as opportunities for support and education included community engagement, recreation planning and trail development, forestry & wildlife stewardship, and handling access issues.

## Opportunities

Survey responses and focused discussions also identified many opportunities to improve town forests and their governance which are worth consideration:

At the Town level:

- Volunteers managing town forests will benefit from educational opportunities in
  - Natural science: basics of ecology, forestry, and wildlife management
  - Social issues: Managing recreation, balancing uses including user conflicts, and community engagement
  - Board development: Understanding roles & responsibilities, communication, finances
- Municipal committees need more support in forestry and wildlife management, recreational trails, community engagement, finances, and managing invasives.
- Networking and peer-to-peer learning opportunities (between towns) – classes, meetings, forums, events, or perhaps an annual summit – is a critical need for towns to interreact and share successes and challenges.

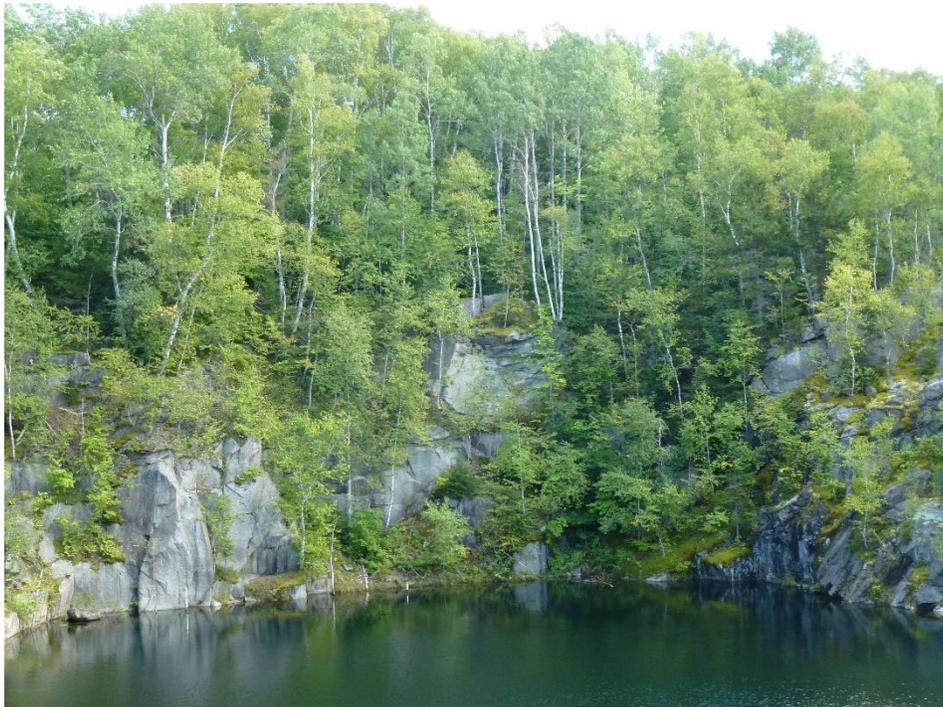
At the State level:

- Strong and accurate data of town-owned land and the bodies that manage them will provide a foundation for support services and educational programming. It will also provide justification for funding requests for support programs.
- Increasing the capacity of the County Foresters, specifically their responsibility to towns, will enable more towns to access their services, improve time available for each forester to serve towns effectively.
- Increase support to towns utilizing other resources/personnel beyond the County Foresters; natural resource education, board governance issues, and facilitation could become the responsibility of others.

- Increase educational communication with TF governing bodies through organizations such as the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions and others, to remind town volunteers of resources available.

## Conclusion

Current data indicates that Vermont has almost 70,000 acres of town owned land. These lands provide ecological, economic, and social benefits to all. These benefits include ecosystem basics of clean air, clean water, wildlife habitat, and biodiversity, but also important social benefits of a quiet place to walk, a place to recreate, and a close local place to experience nature. The commitment to these lands is commendable, both at the local volunteer level and at the state level with personnel assigned to municipal assistance. The present mosaic of governance arrangements seems to be working, though as this report shows there are opportunities for improvement. Increasing capacity at both local management and state assistance levels, in ways discussed above, is the summarizing recommendation of this report. Town and community forests have a long history in New England; moreover, both towns and forests need long-term perspectives, commitments, and structures to thrive through time. Bolstering systems that ensure healthy town forests into the future is a good investment for both our land and our people.



Barre Town Forest, *Photo Courtesy of Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, & Recreation*