

Vermont Town Forest Governance Project: A Summary for Practitioners

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.

Methodology –

Advisory Group - A 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.

On-line Surveys - Three comprehensive online surveys regarding Town Forest governance issues were distributed to

- 301 community officials that were likely to have knowledge of town forests including town staff, conservation commissioners, town forest committee members, planning board members and others
- 12 county foresters
- 29 consulting foresters

Response rate was good, there were eighty eight viable responses from communities, and twenty one completed surveys by county or consulting foresters.

Focused Group Discussions – Three facilitated discussions were held with county foresters, Vermont Land Trust and other foresters, and wildlife specialists all whom work with towns; there were seventeen participants

Findings – Summary of Survey Results

Survey responses

There was a total of seventy seven towns represented in the survey responses, plus nine county foresters, and eleven consulting foresters. 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.

Town parcels

The town parcels represented (or total acreage with multiple parcels) ranged in size from nineteen acres to 1,800 acres; many towns reported owning multiple parcels. Fifty-five towns had some sort of protection either a conservation easement, a deed restriction, or some other protective measure. 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: recreation, wildlife habitat, timber management, water supply protection, and education.

Who has Authority? Who is doing work?

Selectboards, Conservation Commissions and Town Forest Committees were identified as the bodies that held the most authority in decision making for the town forest; each of these were reported to be active in policy, uses of the town forest, dealing with conflicts, and financial management. Recreation committees and unofficial committees had more authority in trail development and recreation planning. According to respondents, Selectboards were less active in the “who does the work” questions. Here, the town administrators, conservation commissions and town forest committees were most active. The consensus among respondents was that Selectboards had final authority (84%), but answers for who did the work was spread relatively evenly across Selectboards (15%), 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.

Finances

The majority of respondents (54%) reported that their town forest does not have a consistent annual budget allocation for town forest lands. However, over thirty percent of the towns indicated that there is a consistent allocation, and over 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:

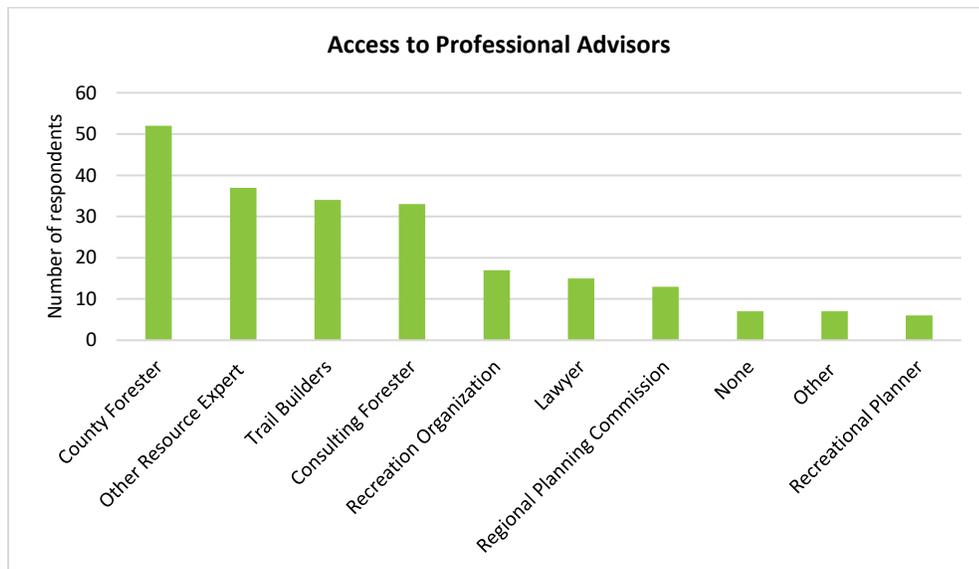
- Parks committee has budget within town budget
- Conservation Commission has limited budget controlled by the Commission
- Conservation Commission recommends and Selectboard approves
- Forest Committee controls and decides
- Recreation Committee can approve small expenditures
- Payments from special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

Approximately one third of respondents (32%) 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 (30%) also reported that the town forest generated no revenue and a significant number (15%) 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.

Professional Advisors

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

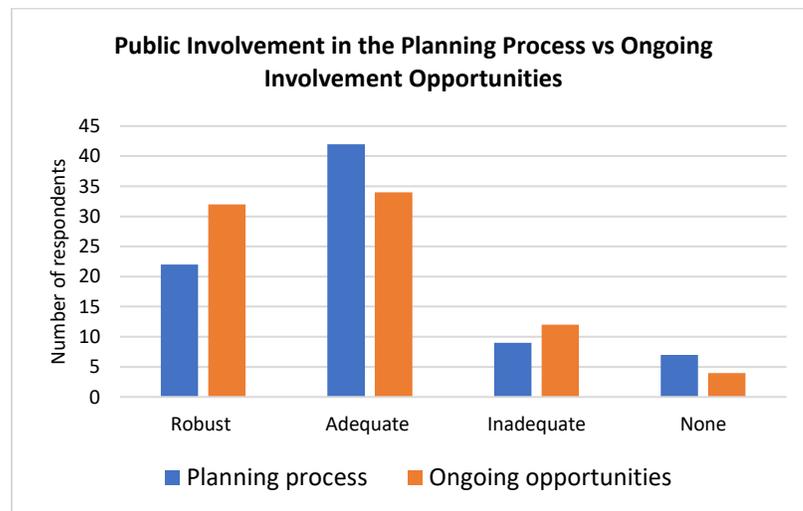
- Road maintenance specialist
- Wetland scientists
- Trail construction

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.

Public Engagement

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:



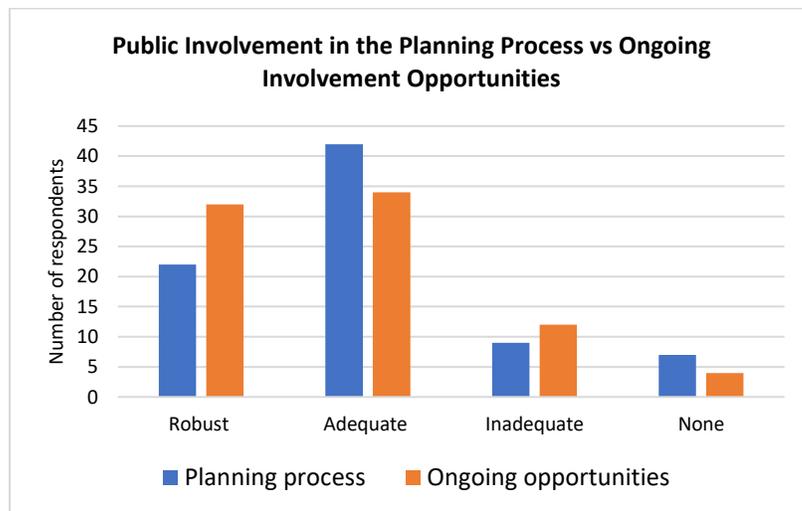
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These results are encouraging – during a planning process eighty percent (80%) of community respondents felt there was either adequate or robust opportunity for public involvement. Adequate was defined as “good opportunity for input,” whereas Robust 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 one of our focus group discussions 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.

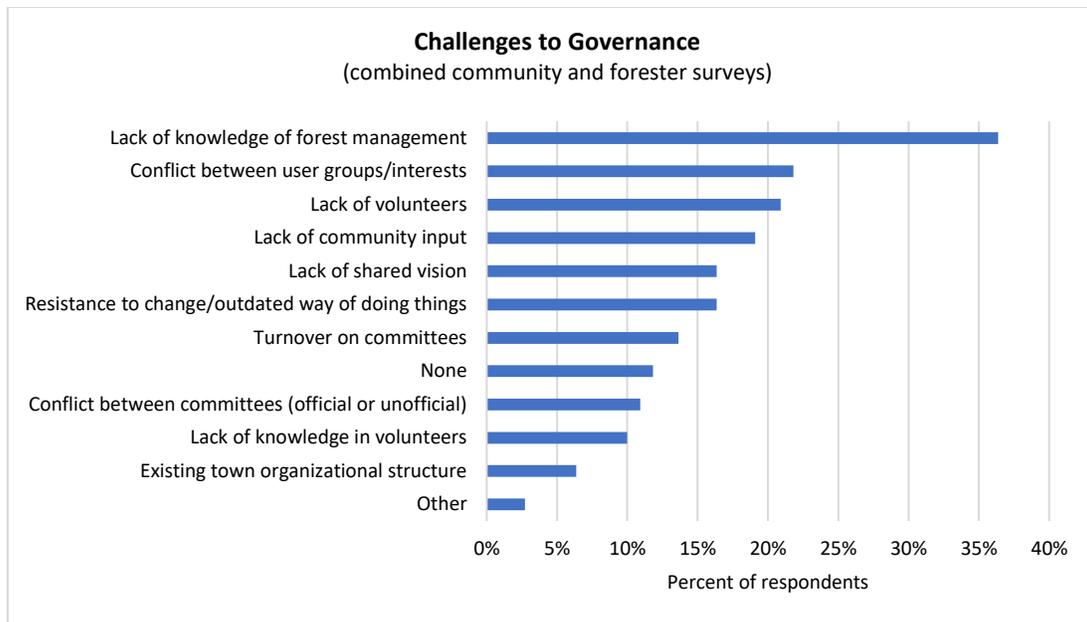
Quality of Governance

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 (58%) of responses rating their local governance structure (whatever it may be) as good or excellent. Roughly a third of respondents (31%) feel their town has modestly effective governance. Only one tenth (10%) of the towns clearly need some assistance in governance having rated themselves as ineffective, inconsistent, non-functional, or non-existent.

Barriers and Challenges

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.



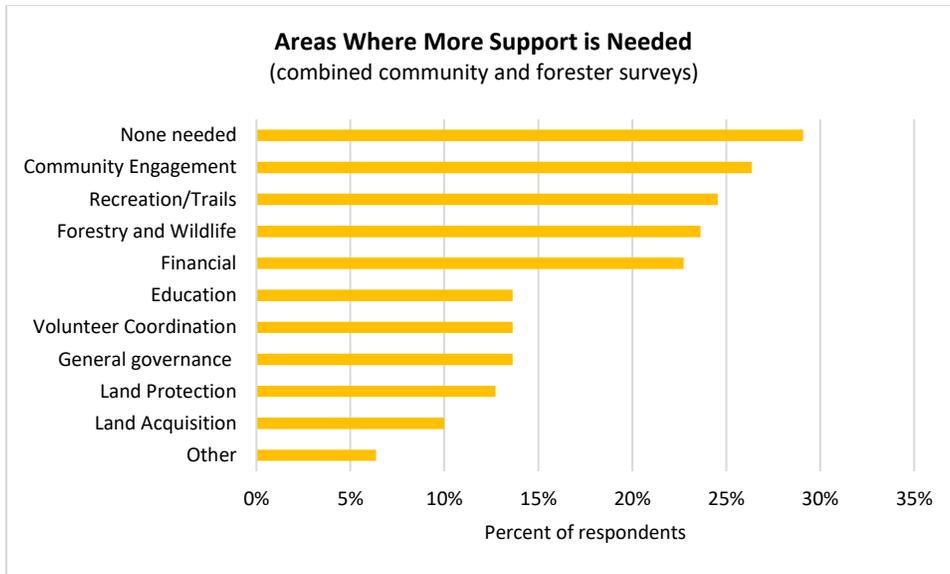
Note: respondents could select multiple answers

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.

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

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, communities reported needing help with managing vandalism, ATV management, and 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.

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.

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 –

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 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, here are some to consider:

At the Town level:

- Volunteers managing town forests will benefit from educational opportunities in
 - Science based: 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 – 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 our land and our people both.