

Submission of Written Testimony  
Vermont House Corrections and Institutions Committee  
February 26, 2016

Submitted by:

Laura Stillson, West Windsor Conservation Commission, Board member of Ascutney Outdoors, resident of West Windsor.

- Good morning, my name is Laura Stillson. I am a resident of West Windsor, I am a member of the town's Conservation Commission, a board member of Sport Trails of Ascutney Basin, and on the board of the newly created Ascutney Outdoors. Thank you for the chance to share my story about the benefits of VHCB with you. Here is my story:
- West Windsor was once home to a thriving ski area and local economy. Several restaurants and two general stores in the village of Brownsville benefited from thousands of visitors that frequented Mt. Ascutney each year.
- The ski area closed in 2010 and went through a lengthy foreclosure process that was not finalized until 2013. We all had hopes of the ski area re-opening but when prospective buyers found it necessary to invest in excess of 10 million dollars, we came to the realization Mt. Ascutney would never be a commercial ski area again.
- With the ski area shuttered and hundreds of jobs lost in the region, local businesses suffered. Even businesses in nearby Windsor, Reading and Hartland felt the negative effects of the lack of activity at the mountain.
- The West Windsor grand list has suffered as well as a result of the resort being closed.
- Between 2010 and 2013, condos at the resort lost (on average) 45% of their value. Some condos which originally sold for nearly \$300 thousand are now selling for \$100 thousand. Single-family homes at the resort lost 12% of their value. This decline in value equates to a significant loss in municipal property tax revenue annually. When property values drop like that, tax rates have to increase.
- Clearly, having a popular recreational facility in town keeps property values up and tax rates down.
- The ski area began to be sold piecemeal and it was apparent that there was no long range plan for the property. The select board felt we needed to gain control of the situation. With discussions of possible large-scale timber harvesting it was clear we needed to quickly act in the best interest of the town. With a commercial ski area no longer an option and a liquidation in process, we looked for a viable alternative.

- We focused on our highly regarded recreational trail system located in the 1100 acre town forest and on 469 acres of resort land which is used for hiking, biking, backcountry skiing, horseback riding, and other outdoor activities.
- There's just one problem: we only owned half of the trail system. The other half was available to the town under a revocable license by the party that foreclosed on the ski area. To secure and revitalize our recreation-based economy and to ensure permanent public access to this property, we needed to purchase the 469 acre resort parcel.
- Fast forward to this past December, the town of West Windsor, with great help and assistance from The Trust for Public Land and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, purchased the 450 acre Ascutney Mountain ski resort, added it to our existing 1,100 acre Town Forest, and conveyed to the Upper Valley Land Trust and VHCB a conservation easement over the full town forest that will, among other things, allow for permanent public access to this incredible natural and recreational resource.
- VHCB assistance has helped secure the trail system and former resort property. As such, we hope future visitors may again stay at a local B&Bs, have dinner at local restaurants, as well as frequenting businesses in Windsor, West Windsor and the surrounding communities. If they have a good experience, they'll come back. If they have a great experience, maybe they'll think about buying a second home, re-locating or retiring here. If we want to preserve ecological values, revitalize the community, strengthen our economy, and improve our housing market, we have to give people a reason to come to West Windsor.
- As well, as a result of the conservation effort, we have also protected a very important and valuable natural area. More than half of our expanded Town Forest will be protected as a Natural Area, becoming an old-growth forest over time, to fully protect 12 state-significant natural areas and one of New England's finest examples of elevation-dependent biodiversity. -The 1.4 miles of headwater streams and vernal pools on the property are restricted by a Surface Water Buffer Zone in the Conservation Easement, limiting trails, harvesting and disturbance within a 50 ft buffer.
- As for water quality protection, the property contains 222 acres of the Source Water Protection Area of a public water supply servicing 750 people. In addition, 7.6 acres of the property are within the Primary Recharge Area, and half an acre is within the isolation zone around a Public Water Source. Conservation of this property will ensure the water quality and safety of this drinking water supply.
- As we know, the last five years have brought frequent violent storms and heavy flooding to Windsor County. West Windsor has been heavily affected, receiving almost \$700,000 in federal disaster assistance funds from FEMA for Tropical Storm Irene alone. As Vermont deals with a changing climate, and more frequent, violent, and destructive storms, protection of our headwater streams and high- and mid-elevation forests are even more essential. Forestland conservation and maintenance of forest cover were identified as central strategies in increasing

flood resiliency as part of the 2011-2012 America's Great Outdoors Initiative. The Ascutney Mountain project will also restore some fragmented forest and limit future forest fragmentation, which is an extreme stressor in the Connecticut River watershed given the high development pressure.

- As a headwaters area, the mature forest functions to benefit water quality by collecting and filtering rainfall, slowing the release of stormwater into streams and protecting against erosion of steep slopes and erodible soils. If this property were to be developed, or heavily harvested, it would have negative effects on sedimentation in Mill Brook and the Connecticut River, downstream by just 8 miles.
- So, I am here today to thank you for our incredible past support for the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and to ask that you continue to provide strong financial support, full statutory funding, in the coming year as there are many other communities and forests in Vermont that need permanent protection and financial support from VHCB to be successful.
- Without funding from VHCB (\$300,000), our town would not have been able to buy and protect this important natural and economic asset.
- Over the next few years, the town's efforts to promote our trail system and re-establish a small ski area should increase the value of adjacent resort property. That increase in value will cancel out the decrease caused by removing the property from the tax rolls. An increase of just 3.25% of the 181 houses and condos at the resort would be enough to offset the decrease.
- VHCB's public investment in West Windsor, and across the state, create **amazing leverage of other public and private funds and result in jobs, immediate and long term economic activity, and enrich the quality of life in our communities. We witnessed this at the recent ribbon cutting for the new rope tow, where over 150 people showed up to express their support and appreciation for this conservation effort.**
- Thank you for your time and your continued support for this very important program.