

## Bristol Flats River Corridor Easement

### *Conservation Projects*

#### The Project in a Nutshell:

Bristol has suffered recurring flooding issues over the years, including a 500-year flood in 1998, which destroyed bridged culverts, and several homes. In 2011, Bristol experienced two significant flood events. Knowing that flooding likely would become more frequent and severe, the town decided to take action. The town of Bristol worked alongside the Vermont River Conservancy, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, New Haven River Anglers' Association, and the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources to secure a river corridor easement that has protected 40 acres of valuable floodplain for the purposes of flood mitigation, improved water quality, and public recreation.

#### Getting Started: What was the genesis of this project/action?

Bristol has suffered several severe floods over the years- including in 1998, when the town experienced a 500-year flood- a flood that has a mere 0.20% chance of occurring in any given year. Kristen Underwood of the Bristol Conservation Commission conducted a geomorphic assessment of the New Haven River, and identified the parcel of land as an important area for floodplain conservation. Due to historical active river management and the river's tendency to deposit large amounts of sediment and meander significantly, erosion and flooding have been major issues along the river in recent years. In 2011, Bristol applied for funding for an updated geomorphic assessment through the Agency of Natural Resources' Ecosystem Restoration Program. Once Bristol received the grant, the town went about securing landowner permission for assessment work. The town selectboard consulted landowners with several ideas, and ultimately decided on a river corridor easement. Kristen Underwood contacted Steve Libby of the Vermont River Conservancy, who was eager to work on the project. Steve reached out to Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, who contributed funding to the project. The total project cost will be approximately \$106,000. Funding was provided by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (\$28,000), New Haven River Anglers' Association (\$1,000), Bristol Conservation Commission (\$6500), and the Agency of Natural Resources' Ecosystem Restoration Program (\$70,000).



Fig. 1: Flood Damage in Bristol

### How was the Project or Action Accomplished?

The landowners -the Saunders family- sold a 40 acre land easement to the Vermont River Conservancy, who in turn, handed the easement over to the town of Bristol. This land, which has historically been used for agriculture, will be open to public access and serve to store flood waters and sediment. The land will also continue to be usable for agriculture, but no development will be allowed within the river corridor easement area.



Fig. 2: Bird's eye view of site

Initially, the town selectboard was hesitant due to the issue of losing tax revenues. Kristen Underwood was instrumental in persuading the selectboard that the value of conserving this land for the purpose of flood resiliency and public access exceeded the monetary loss in tax revenues. Collaboration between several organizations, the town of Bristol, and landowner cooperation were vital to the success of the project. Generous donations of time and money from VRC, VHCB, New Haven River Anglers' Association, and the Bristol Conservation Commission have also been critical. A substantial grant from the Agency of Natural Resources' Ecosystem Restoration Program has also been vital. Key challenges included educating residents about the long-term benefits of the project, and gathering local support for the project. The parties involved agreed that communicating directly with landowners affected by the project was critical to gathering support. In addition to conserving floodplain to store floodwaters and enable sediment deposition, another goal was to protect the riparian area. The river corridor easement will achieve this goal while allowing for public access as well as continued agricultural activity. In addition, a planned riparian buffer will enhance bank stabilization, and provide shade, cooling the water temperature and thus enhancing fish habitat. Steve Bartlett, Conservation Committee Chair of the New Haven River Anglers' Association touted the project; "There's a number of reasons for why this project makes sense for water quality, and for residents looking to enjoy the river".

### Perspectives on Results

This river corridor easement is an excellent example of a project that will provide long-term resiliency to the community. Steve Libby suggested that this project demonstrates that it's possible "...for a town that's grappling with flooding issues to think about conserving lands that are flood prone as a long-term strategy for the town". This project could also serve as a valuable educational tool for the local community as Bristol continues to implement long-term flood resiliency measures. Steve Bartlett of the New Haven River Anglers' Association envisions an educational kiosk which could be used to demonstrate how the river corridor easement enhances water quality and mitigates flood risk in the area. Kristen Underwood noted the importance of having a local presence in the community, in order to coordinate volunteers and communicate important messages and concerns between the local community and the other parties involved. She asserted, "I think one of the greatest lessons that we learned was the importance of communicating directly, one-on-one, with the landowners involved".