

Submission of Written Testimony
HOUSE GENERAL, HOUSING & MILITARY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
SENATE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, HOUSING & GENERAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
Joint Hearing
February 9, 2018

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, and on the board of the recently established 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 began selling for as little as \$100 thousand. Single-family homes at the resort lost 12% of their value. This decline in value equated 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 searched 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 was 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 December 2015, 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.
- In late 2015, with the property now secured, Ascutney Outdoors was established to manage, develop and protect the recreational, educational, and environmental assets on the West Windsor Town Forest.
- Our governor has recently acknowledged and supported outdoor recreation and its tremendous potential as an economic driver for our state. Not only does outdoor recreation benefit outdoor oriented businesses, it brings economic benefits to local B and B's, restaurants, and businesses. To revitalize communities, strengthen our economy, and improve the housing market people need a reason to come to Vermont. To strengthen the economy of West Windsor, we needed a reason for people to come to our town.
- VHCB assistance was critical to securing the permanent protection of our trail system and former resort property. With this belief in us people paid attention. With this some called us Comeback Mountain. With this excitement people had hope and wanted to participate. Two years ago we started with an abandoned, dismantled and burnt ski area. Now people call us and ask if they can host their event at our location. There aren't enough weekends for all the requests, and we've only just begun.

As addition to our four season trail system, in the two short years since Ascutney Outdoors was established we've:

- Built a community rope tow and provide free skiing, weekly races, and school programs.
- Renovated a warming hut for use with winter activities.
- Secured the permitting, design, and funding of a tubing lift to be operational for 2018/19 season.
- Purchased the burned down Mt. Ascutney Base lodge, completed demolition, and begun construction of the Ascutney Outdoors Center to be used for community events, gatherings, education, arts, and recreational activities.
- Received the donation of a T-bar, raised the funds for installation, expect to be operational for 2018/19 season.

To support outdoor recreation tourism economy for the area in 2018 a few of the major events we will host include:

- Ragnar Relay - a nationally known running event, approximately 2000 visitors.
- Gnar Weasels - an EFTA mountain bike race, a few hundred visitors.
- Point to Point - a biking event to benefit the Vermont Food Bank, approximately 700 visitors.
- Vermont Mountain Bike Festival - a few hundred visitors.
- Vermont 50 mile Mountain Bike Race and Ultra Run - to benefit Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports,

approximately 2000 visitors.

This summer UVLT did a study of the trail use on the mountain. Almost 300 users of the trail system were individually surveyed over the month of July. It is clear our vision is happening. Only 12% of the users were from the immediate Windsor/West Windsor area. And 56% of all users were from out of state, including 10 from Texas and 1 from Hawaii. Statistics from large scale race events are consistent with these findings, out of state entrants are greater than in state participants.

- We have created a Town Forest that combines a high quality recreation resource while also protecting on of New England's finest examples of elevation-dependent biodiversity. 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. Currently, Ascutney Outdoors is working with the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program at the National Park service to design and implement an interpretive trail which will highlight the unique features of our forest and encourage stewardship of our remarkable land.
- This truly is only a tiny sample of what is happening on this property and in our town since the acquisition. None of this would have been possible without VHCB's \$300,000 grant. It has leveraged many donations and sparked our success. In a very real sense a single VHCB grant may turn out to be a primary component of keeping West Windsor and Brownsville an economically vibrant community into the future.
- 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. There are many other communities and forests in Vermont that need permanent protection and financial support from VHCB to be successful.
- 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.**