

Testimony Notes
House Natural Resources Committee
Pat Haller, Westford, Vermont
Feb 2, 2017

Westford is a small town in Northern Chittenden County with a little over 2,000 residents and under Act 46 recently merged school districts and is now part of the Essex/Westford School District. Our small school is a pre-k through 8 near our Town Center and the property we are able to conserve with the help of the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board is directly opposite our beloved school. **See Slide 1, Map.**

We are excited to be on our way to closing the complicated deal that will conserve approximately 42 Acres of pastureland that will be purchased by the Pouliots, a local dairy farming family, and conserving and creating a 130 acre Town Forest to be open to the public.

The land has productive soils and forest and is a beautiful example of our farming and rural landscape, with expansive views and rolling terrain. The farm is treasured by many in our community. Generations of school children have passed by on their way to the school on the opposite side of the unpaved road, and many children and adults have admired and volunteered labor to maintain a nearly mile long dry-stacked stone wall that encompasses the pastureland. **See Slide 2, Sign and Sign Crew.**

Huge Community interest:

To garner support and provide opportunity to see the resource we were trying to protect first hand, we arranged for public walks. The first of which was in October of 2015 with over 30 people beginning on a very awful, sleeting Saturday morning, **See Slides 3, 4.** The next hike was this past October, 2016. Over 80 people came to enjoy the day and to see the forest. For the walks we parked at the school, walked across the road and headed to the forest. We can't wait to get into the forest along with our kids! **See Slides 5, 6, 7 Walks.** Stay on Slide 7 rest of time.

Help from VHCB:

The property owners were very dubious about working with us. They had the idea that pursuing conservation meant losing money. A few years earlier they inherited the property and it was they who, over decade ago, had discouraged their long retired farming father, Robert Jackson, from closing a nearly complete deal with the Vermont Land Trust. At the time Mr. Jackson was 84.

Negotiating with the owners required great care including exhibiting organization, resolve, and financial backing. A volunteer committee of 10 (now 13) formed in late Spring, 2015 to carry the effort from beginning to end and although our volunteer committee has shown the resolve (see BFP Newspaper- us on the wall, pass out BFP) and organization, when it came to financial backing we knew we needed a lot!

Without the solid footing and support from the VHCB, the project would have failed. Some key concepts/relationships where the VHCB mattered.

- Owner/buyer negotiations: Through the last 2 years, from beginning to now near the end, the Owners needed to see and believe that there was financial viability to the negotiations. The very existence of the VHCB was integral to the perception and ultimately trust in the good faith

negotiations. They needed to see that we had a snowball of a chance to pull this complicated project off.

- Local Dairy Farmers. The local dairy farming family who lease the pastureland of this property for hay and nutrient management didn't want to lose access to this nearby land for their business. As with most Ag. land in the State and especially in growth centers like Chittenden County, land subdivision and development takes up more and more tracts of land. Land area supporting their operations continued to lessen year in and year out requiring both farther afield locations and more expense. They wished to purchase this land but couldn't compete on development value. The VHCB grant gave them the opportunity to buy affordable farmland.
- Town Administration and Elected Officials. The Town's administration and elected officials also needed to see and believe that there was financial viability, for there was NO WAY the Town could bond for the full sum. Property taxes in all communities are of course a big issue and for the small 2,000+ population of Westford we simply couldn't support fully funding the project. The VHCB provided the much needed seed funding. Even before granting us funding their very existence and wherewithal, along with the matchup of our Town Plan to the VHCB's mission gave our Admin and Officials confidence to pursue this project.
 - At the Selectboard meeting directly following the exciting announcement of winning the VHCB grant, the Selectboard Chair stated that winning the grant in the least validates the importance of this land to the State and the VHCB goals, in turn validating all the efforts of the committee as not just of importance locally but of State importance.
 - That evening the Selectboard unanimously voted to officially support the project, paving a clear path toward another key step- a town-wide ballot initiative to bond for a substantial portion of the overall cost.
- Community Volunteers
 - Understanding that here was a rag-tag group of a 10+ community volunteers, who worked tirelessly to negotiate the offer, to engage with the Town Administration and Elected officials, to inform the public, to campaign for the Town Bond portion of the cost, and even today continuing private fund raising to reach the last bit of funds needed, VHCB's ability to help kept us optimistic. When we learned of winning the competitive grant we were proud and emboldened to forge ahead.
- Citizens of the Town
 - Although largely in favor of protecting the resources of this land for the benefit of the Town, it is doubtful the residents could afford the raise in property taxes that would have been needed for the full sum.
 - Nor do I think the bond Vote to cost share a portion of the total costs would have won if it had not been for the VHCB's strong anchor sum that covered 52% (\$330,000) of the \$630,000 project cost.
 - Last November, we voted 812 to 365 in favor to bond for \$185,000
 - And in just 3 months, we've raised \$42,000 of the final \$50,000 goal that we need to fully fund the project.