

**Testimony by Jude S. Hersey, Williston Conservation Commission
The Value of Conservation of Catamount Community Forest
And The Role of Vermont Housing and Conservation Board
February 9, 2018**

It is a pleasure to speak to you today in support of the funding for Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. As a 15-year member of the Williston Conservation Commission, I have seen over the years VHCB's great work and support provided for both affordable housing and conservation of Vermont's most valuable assets - its land and its people.

Vermont has a national image of being progressive in recognizing how to balance the needs of its residents for housing, economic opportunities, environmental resources and year-round recreational options. To achieve this balance, it requires cooperative efforts on many levels and Vermont is indeed fortunate to have such organizations as Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, The Trust For Public Land and the Vermont Land Trust to assist local towns as they pursue conservation and stewardship projects. Grants to leverage costs for such projects are often the result of working jointly with these groups and the funds they contribute are many times the make or break of realizing the goals for these worthwhile projects. Recently, Williston has been provided a spectacular opportunity by the McCullough Family to secure a huge tract of land that has been operating for years as a year-round recreation center. It serves not only the Williston community, but provides a wide variety of activities that benefit an ever-growing population from Chittenden County and far beyond. People of all generations are able to use an extensive network of trails for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, mountain biking, cross country track events, birding and walking in a safe and unique environment. It is a gem to have such a location so close to where more than a third of the state's population resides. It serves individuals, families, schools and colleges, out-of-state visitors, and training for even Olympic hopefuls.

As Vermont landowners, many of whom had been farmers and/or have inherited tracts of land from prior generations, the McCulloughs have been faced with the increasing tax burdens and financially considering the possibility of selling to developers that wish to build housing developments that could contribute to urban sprawl. It takes a great generosity and commitment on the landowner's part to decide to protect these tracts for recreation, wildlife, breathtaking vistas and enjoyment of undeveloped

forests and meadows, bodies of water and streams that would continue to foster the reputation that Vermont has nationally for preservation of its cherished landscape.

With the growing health threat of obesity and families facing the challenges for affordable recreation, especially near-by, the McCullough facility has been a grand solution on a year-round basis. Research has shown that frequent exercise is beneficial to both physical and mental health.

Catamount also provides a safe location for the growing senior population to get adequate exercise without requiring lengthy transportation to access this beautiful area. Records show annually that approximately 20,000 visitors take advantage of this wonderful facility. It is a true partner in the state-wide resource for outdoor recreation that adds to our economy bringing in \$2.5 billion annually.

This 376 acre parcel from the McCulloughs, as well as an adjacent landowner's donation of 17 acres, have been valued at \$2.3 million.

However, the McCulloughs are willing to sell this choice property for \$1.6 million, in keeping true to their many generations' commitment to share the natural resources that are so precious to the Vermont quality of life.

In order to complete this conservation project, a grant from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board has provided for a grant of \$325,000 towards the establishment of the Catamount Community Forest. It will be leveraged 6:1 with contributions from the Town of Williston (\$400K), federal (\$400K) and private donations.

This complicated project has been fortunate to have the Trust for Public Land organization provide the expertise they have gained from establishing similar parks and protection of land in the U.S. for generations to come.

They are coordinating a group of Town appointed citizens who are gathering public input, as well as guiding the structure, development and funding for this rare opportunity to conserve the huge portion of land in Williston.

The project would not be able to succeed without the lawmaker's support of funds required by Statute of \$20.4 million from the Property Transfer Tax to VHCB. Over time, this type of support has been proven to be a very effective method for benefiting municipalities and enhancing Vermont's economy and welfare.

It is an exciting venture for all those involved in this planning, funding and creation of one more gem in Vermont's dedication to utilizing its beautiful

countryside in ways that benefit such diverse recreational activities, while conserving critical forested areas and wildlife habitat.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of continued funding for VHCB to remain the driving force to aid in such worthwhile projects!