

**Vermont House Committee on Corrections and Institutions**

**Chair: Representative Alice M. Emmons**

**Testimony by Mike DeBonis**

**Executive Director, Green Mountain Club, Inc.**

**Wednesday January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019**

Good afternoon, my name is Mike DeBonis and I am executive director of the Green Mountain Club. I live in Moretown and have been with the club since 2014. Thank you, Chair Emmons and committee members, for inviting the club to speak to you today.

The 109-year old Green Mountain Club is the founder and maintainer of Vermont's Long Trail – the oldest long-distance hiking trail in the United States. The Long Trail runs for 272-miles along the crest of the Green Mountains from Massachusetts to Canada.

In 1985 the Vermont Legislature, recognized the Long Trail as a *“unique, historic and irreplaceable resource, whose protection is of great benefit to the people of the State of Vermont”* and resolved that the *“General Assembly supports the efforts of the Green Mountain Club to protect the Long Trail System.”*

The Green Mountain Club launched the Long Trail Protection Campaign in 1986, precipitated by the Long Trail being temporarily closed in Jonesville when a house was built on the treadway. At the same time, several large tracts of timberlands in northern Vermont were put on the market and the club was unsure if future landowners would continue to allow the trail on their property.

In order to address these challenges, the club decided to move forward in acquiring land and easements to bring long-term certainty to the Long Trail.

Over the last thirty-three years, the Green Mountain Club has worked with private landowners; the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation; and partner organizations to conserve more than 25,000 acres of land on and near the Long Trail. This work was completed with the goal of protecting the trail from closure, buffering it against development, and preserve the landscape and mountains that Vermont treasures.

Over 17,500 acres of land conserved in the Long Trail Protection Campaign has been added to the Vermont State Forest system thanks to appropriations funding through the state's capital bill.

The Campaign has relied heavily on state support and we thank the General Assembly for promoting this partnership. We owe special thanks to the late Senator Bob Gannett, former Governor Howard Dean, and Senator Mazza for their long-time support.

When the Long Trail Protection Campaign started there were over 90 miles of Long Trail that were on private land with no long-term agreement or legal protection. Today, over 80 miles of Long Trail treadway have been protected through the conservation of over 25,000 acres and 91 different conservation projects, with state, federal and private funding. The State of Vermont has contributed over \$3.5 million to this land protection effort, vital support that has made this body of work possible.

For many years in the 1990's and early 2000's GMC requested annual appropriations to support a strong pipeline of projects as willing landowners agreed to conserve all or part of their land. Since the Long

Trail System travels through a defined landscape, the number of potential parcels for acquisition have grown smaller and the pace of available projects has slowed. Today, approximately 6.5 miles of Long Trail treadway remain on 19 parcels of private land with no legal protection. The Campaign to protect the Long Trail is not over. The threat to this “unique, historic, and irreplaceable” State resource will remain until the last foot of Long Trail treadway is legally protected.

The Green Mountain Club remains as dedicated as ever to see the success of the Long Trail Protection Campaign, although we face significant logistical and financial challenges to do so.

The club does not and will never seek to utilize such tools as eminent domain to protect the trail. Instead, we seek only willing sellers who are open to the idea of selling their property to the club or selling – or donating – an easement for the trail. This means that the work of communicating with landowners and developing potential projects to the point of acquisition takes time and a measured approach.

Today, I am thrilled to be able to say that this long and measured approach has paid off, the landowner of a 167-acre property that straddles the Johnson-Waterbury town line has indicated that he is ready and willing to move forward with a sale of the property. This parcel has 1/3 of a mile of the Long Trail and is a gap in the Long Trail State Forest. For this project the Green Mountain Club is partnering with the Trust for Public Land (TPL) to close the deal. An option agreement is currently being negotiated and is expected to be signed by early February. An updated appraisal for the property has been ordered and is due in late March. GMC and TPL will seek town support for the project once it is under contract in February. The Green Mountain Club has been working to protect this property since 1990 and its protection will close a long-standing gap in the protected Long Trail corridor in northern Vermont.

There are other projects on the horizon, but since they are not close to being under contract, GMC is not requesting State support for their acquisition at this time.

One particularly exciting potential project is a 181-acre property, also in Johnson, that may be on the market soon. The Green Mountain Club is working with the Trust for Public Land to investigate this potential project as well. The parcel could be an exciting addition to the Long Trail State Forest and allow the Club to move the Long Trail from private land onto permanently protected land with a half mile relocation. The feasibility of the project is currently being explored, but I hope to be able to present this project to you in the near future as another exciting Long Trail Protection Campaign project.

To conclude, the club continues to focus on the protection of the Long Trail through the Long Trail Protection Campaign. Although the pace of projects had slowed from previous decades, GMC hopes that the General Assembly and State of Vermont will continue our long standing, productive, and mutually beneficial partnership to protect the “*unique, historic and irreplaceable resource*” that is the Long Trail in Vermont.

Thank you.

Michael DeBonis