

Testimony by Melinda Scott, Town of Williston Conservation Planner

Role of Vermont Housing and Conservation Board

In Protecting Catamount Community Forest

February 15, 2019

My name is Melinda Scott, and I am the Town of Williston's Conservation Planner. It is a pleasure to speak to you today in support of the funding for Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. Having worked as a Planner in Vermont for the last eight years, I have seen over the years VHCB's great work and support provided for both affordable housing and conservation of Vermont's most valuable land assets. Vermonters recognize how important it is to balance the needs of 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. VHCB grants that leverage funds from federal, municipal and private sources are critical to accomplishing conservation on a broad scale.

Recently, Williston has been provided a spectacular opportunity by the McCullough family to secure a 376-acre tract of land that has been operating for decades as a year-round outdoor recreation center known as the Catamount Outdoor Family Center.

The nonprofit Catamount Outdoor Family Center in Williston, Vermont got its start in the late 1970s when Jim and Lucy McCullough inherited the historic 500-acre property and opened it to the public for cross country skiing. By 1990 their small experiment in the outdoor industry had become a wildly successful four-season operation that is still open for hiking, biking, skiing, and educational opportunities for children, college students, and adults.

Despite this success, financial constraints are now forcing the family to sell 376 acres of the property, which could have resulted in the loss of public access to this incredible outdoor recreational resource. But true to the Vermont values by which they live, the family has embraced an opportunity to sell the land to the Town of Williston as a community forest, ensuring permanent protection of its natural resources and its function as a recreational hub for generations to come.

The town was fortunate to receive a grant of \$325,000 from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board towards the establishment of the Catamount Community Forest. The VHCB grant leverages a donation of 17 adjacent forested acres by a generous neighbor, a bargain sale from the McCulloughs, \$1.2 million of federal and private funds, and a \$400,000 contribution from the Town of Williston.

Catamount 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 and abilities are able to use an extensive network of

trails for cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, mountain biking, cross country races, birding and walking in a safe and unique environment. Catamount provides access for all, including 3 miles of fully accessible trails to sit-skis and wheelchairs. It attracts more than 20,000 visitors per year, serving individuals, families, schools and colleges, out-of-state visitors, and even as training ground for Olympic hopefuls. In a community like Williston that continues to grow at a rapid rate, close to home outdoor recreation is increasingly important, especially as access to open space becomes scarcer.

As Vermont faces a changing climate, and more frequent, violent, and destructive storms, protection of our headwater streams and forests are ever more essential. Protection of the largely forested acreage of the property with 8 acres of wetlands, a vernal pool, 29 acres of riparian areas and nearly 4,000 feet of headwater streams benefits water quality through stormwater attenuation and infiltration, helping to prevent erosion of steep slopes and erodible soils. The development of this property would contribute to sedimentation in the Winooski River, just one mile downstream, which flows into Lake Champlain. Permanent protection of the property as a Community Forest will protect the wetlands, vernal pool, riparian areas and stream corridors on the property, including wetlands currently visited by thousands of migratory waterfowl.

Forestland conservation and maintenance of forest cover were identified as central strategies in increasing flood resiliency and improving water quality as part of the 2012 Winooski River Basin Water Quality Management Plan. According to this Plan, water quality problems in this basin tend to be associated with decreasing amounts of natural land cover. Land conversion and poor forestry management practices negatively affect the health of the Winooski River, and thus, Lake Champlain. The Catamount Community Forest project will reduce future forest fragmentation, which is an extreme stressor in the Winooski River watershed given the high development pressure.

Large tracts of intact forestland, such as Catamount, are rare in Chittenden County as subdivision and development continue to fragment the landscape. The proposed project will benefit many wide-ranging and forest-dwelling Species of Greatest Conservation Need, such as black bear, fisher, otter, and bobcat. The property contains 84 acres of a 714-acre deer wintering habitat, one of the largest wintering areas in the increasingly fragmented towns surrounding Burlington. Green Mountain Audubon Society named the Catamount Outdoor Family Center an "Important Bird Education Site." They have documented 136 species of birds on the property, including the state-endangered bald eagle and 24 Species of Greatest Conservation Need, according to Vermont Wildlife Action Plan (2015). In many ways, the proposed Catamount Community Forest can be seen as a microcosm of Vermont's wild backcountry within the fastest growing town in the fastest growing county in the state. Protecting it will help preserve the region's dwindling natural landscapes and the diversity of life that depends on them.

In addition to generating many environmental and community benefits, creation of the Catamount Community Forest and the continued operation of the outdoor center will help protect the regional economy, which largely depends on tourism and recreation. While the Town of Williston is home to just over 9,000 people, the outdoor center receives 20,000 visits each year. 37 percent of visits (7,400) come from visitors living outside Chittenden County who inject new money into the local economy. These external visitors are responsible for more than \$875,000 in total sales each year, which generate more than \$60,000 in sales tax and \$9,000 in income tax for the State of Vermont.

In the future, projects like these would not be able to succeed without the legislature's support of funds required by Statute of \$21.8 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 portfolio, demonstrating its dedication to preserving 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 in such worthwhile projects!