

Testimony – Jon Binhammer, Director of Land Protection, The Nature Conservancy 2/11/2022

Joint hearing of the House Corrections & Institutions and Senate Institutions committees

Thank you, Senators and Representatives, for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's impact on Vermonters' quality of life. I'm certain you all are aware of VHCB's many enhancements to our quality of life over the past 35 years of its existence; I wanted to share a recent project with you that exemplifies both VHCB's longevity and continuity of purpose, and how important those aspects are to Vermonters.

I want to take you back to the mid 1990's. At that point, VHCB was less than 10 years old, and several once-in-a-lifetime opportunities arose to conserve highly significant Lake Champlain lakeshore properties. Two of them, 180-acre Knight Island, and 608-acre Alburgh Dunes, were purchased by The Nature Conservancy and conveyed to the State of Vermont to create two new State Parks, providing the public unparalleled access to the natural resources of the Islands region, which could not have occurred without significant VHCB funding.

Alburgh Dunes State Park was only part of a larger land holding of the Phillips family. In 1996, The Nature Conservancy and the State of Vermont acquired 600 acres of the Phillips family land, which included the large beach and 500 acres of wetland behind it, leaving the family with 160 acres, which had been divided into 16 "spaghetti lots", each with 300 feet of shorefront. A purchase of the entire Phillips property at that time was beyond what could be funded. So, the thinking was that the State and The Nature Conservancy would discuss adding the rest of the land to the State Park at some point in the future. After the death of the patriarch, we began negotiating with the Estate, and reached a verbal agreement in 2003, but after many discussions, and a VHCB award of \$500,000 to the project, the deal was never inked. Then, in early 2020, after being held for over 17 years in the Estate, we were told that the Probate Judge had appointed a new executor, and given the Estate 6 months to sell the property. We hurriedly engaged two appraisers to arrive at a value for the property, and, after lengthy negotiations, secured a contract at the appraised value of \$1.1 million. About half of the funding will come from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, VHCB has committed \$496,000 for the project, and the rest will come from several other sources, including private fundraising.

This 160-acre tract includes 4,800 feet of frontage on Lake Champlain, part of a sand beach, long shale beaches, 20 foot high shale bluffs, gorgeous views of the Green Mountains, the Adirondacks, Isle La Motte and the main lake, 86 acres of forested wetland, 15 acres of upland meadows, and the rest forest land. An ecological survey of the parcel discovered the presence

of 27 rare, threatened or endangered species, only two of which were previously known, and 16 natural community types, making this one of the biodiversity hotspots in the Islands region.

Without VHCB's longstanding effort to conserve places like Alburgh Bluffs for Vermonters, together with their dedication to conserving those places that support the highest biodiversity and recreational access, and water quality for Vermonters, places like Alburgh Dunes State Park would be developed, and public access denied. Thus, we encourage your support for VHCB's work, now and in the future.

I'll be happy to take your questions if you have them.