



3-31-2004

Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project, Degnan, T

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PROTECTING HAMPTON HARBOR WATERSHED PROJECT

A Final Report to
The New Hampshire Estuaries Project
Submitted by the

Rockingham County Conservation District
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March 31, 2004

This report was funded by a grant from the New Hampshire Estuaries Project, as authorized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency pursuant to Section 320 of the Clean Water Act.



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Executive Summary and Introduction

The purpose of this project was to provide significant educational efforts promoting land and water resource protection for two communities within the Hampton Harbor Watershed. The project was to include educational efforts aimed at promoting the NHEP Management Plan's action items for protecting critical land and water resources, to provide sustained technical assistance that involved resource prioritization, support for public relations campaigns for open space bond campaigns, and the preparation of funding applications for important shoreland protection projects for the communities of Hampton and Hampton Falls. The project focus area was not defined, as much of the open undeveloped acreage in both communities was the main focus for protection efforts, which includes several hundreds of acres. The *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project* offered sustained assistance to the two conservation commissions, and was successful in helping to advance the implementation of two significant land and resource protection projects within the Hampton Harbor Watershed.

Although no permanent protection project was completed in full during the length of the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project*, significant education and outreach efforts have been achieved and two significant land protection projects are in process. In fact, with the assistance of this shoreland protection project, one landowner with significant holdings in both communities is participating in a permanent protection project currently underway. The educational efforts on land protection, conservation options, resource prioritization, funding opportunities, and the public relations information to support the passage of local open space bonds brought much enthusiasm into both communities. Both communities became very active and successful with their resultant actions, each with somewhat of a different twist. Moreover, the motivation for permanent protection efforts has been securely established in both communities, and both have a renewed sense of the importance of permanent stewardship of natural resources.

Project Goals and Objectives

The project involved two main phases including:

- 1) Public informational meetings and educational initiatives to promote awareness of the NHEP Management Plan, conservation opportunities, estate planning, and resource prioritization of the significant natural resources located in both communities. Resource prioritization included added importance stressing connecting contiguous habitat blocks, increasing natural buffers, and protecting priority agricultural, wetland, and wildlife areas. This phase included several informal and formal public workshops held in both Hampton Falls and Hampton.
- 2) Offering technical assistance for both Conservation Commissions and for landowners on land protection efforts within the Hampton Harbor Watershed. Additionally, significant assistance and information was provided for the promotion of local open space bonds in both communities. This phase also included the preparation of six substantial funding applications for three different

properties within the Hampton Harbor Watershed, some of which have already proved successful.

Methods

It is important to note that the success of this project involved the collaboration of a variety of natural resource groups and agencies. The UNH Cooperative Extension assisted with outreach efforts, and the Rockingham Planning Commission (RPC) was involved with the GIS mapping efforts. Additionally, the Trust for Public Lands (TPL) was instrumental in its participation in the conservation project in Hampton. Although the result (i.e., a completed and final conservation project) was not reached during the timeframe of this project, significant advances toward the completion of two considerable conservation projects have been achieved. Moreover, the successful passage of local open space bonds within both communities represents a momentous success of this project as well. For both communities, the accomplishments have been very successful, yet somewhat different. The most significant accomplishments for both communities are bulleted for informational purposes. It should be recognized that all parties involved in each of the documented tasks have expended a substantial amount of time, effort, energy, and resources.

- ❖ RCCD coordinated with the Rockingham Planning Commission on mapping needs for this project, and several GIS natural resource maps were completed, including a conservation focus area map (see Appendix H). RCCD completed a natural resource prioritization and criteria ranking for open space protection for the Town of Hampton (see Appendix D).
- ❖ RCCD met with the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission to discuss initiating land protection projects, and produced and sent a letter out to a focus group of over 50 individuals that have large landholdings in town and thought to have an interest in conservation options, and to offer additional technical assistance and/or information to them (see Appendix A).
- ❖ RCCD completed a funding application for prime wetlands designation at the request of the Hampton Conservation Commission (see Appendix C).
- ❖ RCCD produced a Federal Farmland Protection Program (FPP) application that included obtaining all of the information necessary to finalize this funding application in a timely manner for the Town of Hampton (see Appendix C). The Hampton Conservation Commission, in partnership with the TPL, submitted an FPP application to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in May of 2003, and will revamp this application and resubmit a new FRPP in May of 2004. (Appendix C).
- ❖ Throughout the entire project the RCCD met with representatives from the Towns of Hampton and Hampton Falls. RCCD was in constant contact with the TPL and

the Hampton Open Space Commission members on the progress of the educational initiatives and the conservation project. RCCD also met with several individual landowners (sometimes repeatedly) during this project to promote conservation projects and to discuss conservation options. RCCD met numerous times with the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission, Hampton Open Space Committee, TPL staff, UNH Cooperative Extension staff, and various municipal officials and municipal boards to discuss pending conservation projects, and to request support for local open space bonds.

- ❖ RCCD completed a site visit with a landowner who owns property along the Taylor River in Hampton Falls and completed a Land and Water Conservation Fund application for the Town of Hampton Falls (see Appendix C). The landowner was originally interested in conservation options for which this funding application was prepared. Unfortunately, the landowner then decided to move forward with an extensive horse farm development plan, and the funding application that was prepared for the permanent protection of this parcel was withdrawn. RCCD also completed a NH Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) preliminary and final application for a parcel (150+/- acres) in Hampton with an additional 15 acres in Hampton Falls (see Appendix C). RCCD completed a site walk with both Conservation Commissions, TPL staff, and LCHIP staff at the Hurd Farm, and thankfully this application has consequently been awarded partial funding from LCHIP (see Appendix B).
- ❖ RCCD met with landowners in Hampton Falls several times to discuss conservation options and the upcoming Federal Farmland Protection Program (FRPP) 2004 application (due in May of 2004). RCCD completed a draft FRPP application for the Town of Hampton Falls for a considerable and actively farmed property in town (see Appendix C).
- ❖ RCCD provided draft open space bond language for both communities to be submitted for Town Meeting (see Appendix E). RCCD provided draft and final public relations information for promoting an open space bond for the Town of Hampton Falls. Several flyers were sent out to residents in both Hampton Falls and Hampton to promote the passage of local open space bonds (see Appendix F).
- ❖ RCCD organized and completed a public relations brochure for a Conservation Options workshop that was to be held on 9/24/03 (see Appendix G). RCCD provided copies of this flyer to both communities, the Hampton Falls Library newsletter, local cable, and three newspapers. RCCD also sent out the attached letter to 51 landowners in Hampton Falls to promote attendance at this workshop. Unfortunately, not enough registrations were received and the workshop was cancelled. Although RCCD anticipated another similar workshop to take place during the winter of 2004, additional time and effort was instead dedicated toward the educational efforts necessary to promote the passage of local open space bonds in both communities. Several public workshops were held in both

communities on conservation options and on requesting support for local open space bonds. Additionally, another public workshop was offered in Hampton Falls on Municipal Funding Options, sponsored by the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission and Center for Land Conservation Assistance (CLCA) (see Appendix F). A tremendous amount of time and energy has been spent by both Conservation Commission and Open Space Committee members to educate the public on the importance of the passage of the local open space bond in both communities. This tremendous educational effort paid off tremendously in both communities with the passage of a \$2.5 million dollar bond in Hampton Falls (by 66%) and the passage of a \$3 million dollar bond for the protection of the Hurd Farm in Hampton (by nearly 75%) (see Appendix B).

- RCCD was in constant contact with UNH Cooperative Extension and TPL, as well as with the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission and Hampton Open Space Committee, to discuss focused land protection strategies, and the necessity for both Towns to move forward with an open space bond request, although for different reasons. Due to the previous two attempts at passage of an open space bond, the Town of Hampton insisted that if a bond were to be suggested, that the conservation project (i.e., the Hurd Farm) had to be the only focus. The Town of Hampton Falls, on the other hand, knew from previous negotiations with landowners that sometimes things just happen with discussions regarding land. They decided that it was in their best interest to promote the passage of the open space bond for general land protection strategies, although they had been negotiating with one landowner for well over a year. This aspect of the project involved several personal contacts with RCCD, as well as numerous email and phone conversations, and additional meetings.
- RCCD continuously worked with the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission and provided significant information on what other communities have completed for open space initiatives, and what had passed for open space bond articles within the past few years. RCCD provided the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission with additional technical assistance on public relations and education that are often necessary to pass an open space bond. RCCD provided significant public relations information for the town newsletter and for flyers to be sent to all residents prior to Town Meeting. The Hampton Falls Conservation Commission became so immersed in this project that they developed signs and stickers for cars to promote the passage of the open space bond. With a limited amount of time and resources, the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission and Hampton Open Space Committee both had tremendous success in seeing the passage of their independent open space bond questions at the 2004 Town Meeting. These are tremendous successes for both communities, particularly with the addition of two very significant properties well on their way to be permanently protected in the Hampton Harbor Watershed. Two working farms with approximately 350 acres will be permanently protected in this critical watershed! This significant accomplishment is due in large part to the success of the educational efforts and

technical assistance offered under the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project!*

Results and Discussion

The two main objectives at the onset of the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project* have been achieved. The variety of formal and informal workshops offered were well attended (except for one) with valuable information provided, and excellent questions asked by the various participants. Significant educational efforts on the importance of protecting natural resources, municipal funding options for open space, and conservation options were achieved for municipal officials and residents alike. The outcome from these educational efforts led both communities to have tremendous support for assessing their natural resources, and to understand the implications of further development verses preservation of special lands. Additionally many residents became more aware of wildlife habitat, importance of riverine protection, and of the special natural resources that exist within the Hampton Harbor Watershed. Increasing the awareness of natural resource protection and conservation options among both municipal officials and community members proved to be an outstanding success in both communities.

The main difference between the successes of both communities is that Hampton chose to support the permanent protection of one significant and historic parcel, and Hampton Falls chose to support the permanent protection of special natural resources within the community. A strong similarity between both communities' successes was in the recognition of the importance and uniqueness of the disappearing agricultural lands within this watershed.

Prior to this project Hampton had attempted two previous passages of a generic (non-property specific) open space bond, with two resultant failures. Hampton Falls had initiated a public relations campaign on educating residents on conservation options, but did not feel confident to request funds other than the 100% current use penalty tax that they already received. Both communities knew that they had not been able to financially assist landowners interested in permanently protecting their critical properties due to the limited available funds. There simply were nearly not enough funds available in the conservation fund accounts to offer willing landowners with significant landholdings equitable incentives. Land negotiations with landowners becomes even more complex with local and regional developers eyeing every parcel of land and offering those landowners extremely large sums of money, looking for large scale developments in return. For coastal communities with limited available funds, it makes it very difficult to even try to compete with what developers will offer. Yet with the technical assistance of this project, both communities have prevailed with the passage of their independent local open space bonds. Another outstanding success of the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project* is that two of the three landowners chose the conservation project instead of the development route. This is in direct contrast to a similarly funded NHEP (2003) project that involved the towns of Brentwood and Fremont.

It is interesting to note that for the past two years with all of the assistance that the Town of Hampton Falls has received, the Conservation Commission was still reluctant to attempt the passage of an open space bond in order to financially assist landowners to permanently protect critical properties. This was a very new avenue for the Town of Hampton Falls to undertake and although they had much success with their education initiatives on open space protection, and a new and invigorated Conservation Commission, they still did not feel that they had the time, energy, resources, or knowledge of conservation options and values to move this effort forward. Through the support offered under this project, they were able to move forward, embrace the challenge, and ultimately be extremely successful with this endeavor.

During the ending stages of this project, the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission, with the support of the local municipal boards, decided to move forward with an open space bond campaign. Knowing that they would not have to be totally responsible for all efforts involved in an open space bond campaign also removed some of the pressures they were feeling to be able to complete the campaign in a timely manner.

With the assistance of RCCD, the Hampton Falls Conservation Commission unanimously approved moving forward with a \$2.5 million dollar open space bond authority for all of Hampton Falls, rather than focusing only on one particular property. In Hampton, with similar technical assistance, the Hampton Conservation Commission and Hampton Open Space Committee also unanimously approved moving forward with a \$3 million dollar open space bond authority for the permanent protection of the Hurd Farm. This component of the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project* would never have occurred if the significant educational and outreach efforts during the past year had not been completed.

The Hampton and Hampton Falls Conservation Commissions now feel empowered to continue with large-scale conservation efforts within each community, with assistance from those agencies and groups that have been working with them throughout this project. The overall project has allowed both communities to advocate for critical resource protection issues and techniques, and has clearly strengthened the local capacity of both Conservation Commissions. Both communities have also greatly appreciated the ability to assist landowners in town with permanent protection efforts, particularly with funding support to help leverage their existing dollars.

Due to the education and outreach efforts from the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project*, the conservation efforts will be continued in a more positive and informed manner during 2004/2005 than we could have ever hoped. Moreover, with the permanent protection of over 350 acres within the Hampton Harbor Watershed likely to be completed in 2004, this project should be considered a considerable achievement. This accomplishment is the direct consequence of the education, outreach, and technical assistance provided under the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed*.

The Towns of Hampton and Hampton Falls have significantly expanded their conservation capacity through the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project*. Both communities have progressed in obtaining significant funds for permanently protecting critical land and water resources within each community through the passage of local open space bonds.

Most of all, both Conservation Commissions are now ready, willing, and able to implement their first significant conservation project(s). All of these positive efforts are the direct result of the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project*. It is very likely that this effort will be a catalyst for additional protection efforts in both communities, and perhaps in adjacent communities within the Hampton Harbor and NH Coastal Watersheds.

Conclusions

The *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project* has ended successfully. For the conservation commissions that have been involved with this project, the members from the Towns of Hampton and Hampton Falls have strengthened their capacity to educate residents on critical natural resources, imperative conservation projects, and to initiate and work toward implementing considerable conservation projects. Obviously, the results achieved from a final and completed conservation project within the Hampton Harbor Watershed would have highlighted the ultimate success of the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project*. However, it is well known that land conservation efforts can often take a long time, and the fact that there are signed agreements with two landowners with significant land holdings worthy of protection is a success in itself. The two landowners have been in discussions with town members for over two years regarding land conservation options and protection efforts on their lands. It is outstanding that these two conservation projects are underway in the Hampton Harbor Watershed, where the increased population and intense development pressures are incredible. Additionally, both commissions became very effective in becoming educated themselves, and in being able and willing to advocate and protect the considerable natural resources within their respective communities that have increased dramatically through the duration of this project. That in itself is a significant accomplishment for the health of the entire NH Coastal Watershed. Moreover, due to the increases in requests for technical assistance for these types of services from communities throughout Rockingham County, RCCD can confirm that the type of technical assistance offered to the Towns of Hampton and Hampton Falls has significantly expanded their conservation capacity through the *Protecting Hampton Harbor Watershed Project*, which is desired, and therefore should be considered another accomplishment of this project.

Recommendations

RCCD has an impressive and longstanding history with natural resource initiatives in Rockingham County. At the completion of this project, several other communities have come to RCCD in need of similar technical assistance. The need and desire for technical assistance for natural resource protection projects is genuine in Rockingham County, as

well as throughout the entire NH Coastal Watershed. Many of the communities do not have funds available to request this technical assistance, and this is where the assistance of the NHEP is imperative. Once this type of technical assistance is provided, some communities can then find additional funds more readily available, as the results of this assistance often lead to significant educational opportunities for all involved. The considerable outreach and educational efforts that resulted from this project achieved stunning results, impressive natural resource efforts, and significant conservation enthusiasm within both communities. Moreover, any conservation projects that are implemented because of this technical assistance often become the tangible natural resource projects that can emphasize the importance of this work, and importance of the stewardship of the natural resources within each community and within the Hampton Harbor Watershed. This result not only benefits the community members involved, but also benefits all that live and enjoy in the NH Coastal Watershed.