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Exeter, A Special Place

EXETER, A SPECIAL PLACE

A Final Report to

The New Hampshire Estuaries Project

Submitted by

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June 30, 2003

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Exeter, A Special Place Initiative
Town of Exeter
Summary of Activities
June 30, 2003
NH Estuaries Project Grant

Executive Summary

Through the *Exeter, A Special Place* initiative, a \$3 million bond for open space protection was passed at the March, 2003 town meeting, with support from 73% of the voters. Prior to the vote, the bond received 100% approval from the Select board. The success of this initiative was due in large part to the public education and outreach campaign conducted for this project.

A brochure and four newsletters were developed to increase public awareness of open space issues in Exeter. A number of media articles were written to publicize the efforts of the Special Place committee, and encourage citizens to show their support for bonding funds for open space protection. Several presentations were made, and one-on-one discussions held to educate citizen groups and key decision makers about the issues. These efforts paid dividends, with a strong public mandate for open space protection.

As a result of these efforts, an open space committee has been appointed by the select board to carry out the goals of the *Exeter, A Special Place* initiative and fulfill the wishes of the Exeter voters to protect the town's natural resources and the unique and special character of the town.

Exeter, A Special Place Initiative
Town of Exeter
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Introduction

For many years the Exeter Conservation Commission actively worked towards protecting Exeter's natural resources through land and easement purchase. The Commission's concern over local development, its rapid growth and encroaching sprawl, and the resulting negative impacts on the natural environment led them to consider taking more serious steps towards environmental protection. This resulted in the development of a new initiative called Exeter, *A Special Place*. The initiative's subcommittee, a group including concerned citizens, Planning Board and Conservation Commission members, focused their campaign on educating Exeter's citizens on the importance of open space preservation. The main objective of the group was to gain voter approval to pass an open space bond initiative in March 2003. The land targeted for protection includes land that protects water quality, scenic and historic landscapes, land that has the potential for public recreational usage, links to existing easements and green beltways and key plant and wildlife habitats.

Project Goal and Objectives

Project Goal

To educate the citizens of Exeter about the importance of environmental protection through land conservation. The ultimate goal is to conserve at least 800 acres, or 25% of the remaining open space land in Exeter.

Project Objectives

- To create a Conservation Commission newsletter to educate Exeter's citizens on the importance of protecting the town's open spaces, and the *Exeter, A Special Place* initiative.
- To develop outreach strategies to educate and inform the public.
- To support the new task force and initiative, *Exeter, A Special Place*, focused on gaining voter approval to pass an open space bond initiative in March of 2003 for the protection of vulnerable land and natural resources.

Methods

1. Assign Project Leader and Establish Project Team:

Gwen English served as project liaison. Other Special Place Committee members included: Don

Clement (committee chair), Barbara Wetherbee, John Henson, Laurie Loosigian, Mark Prescott, and Marcia Tingley

2. Planning the Education and Outreach Campaign

In October 2003, the project team began work to develop a public education and outreach program focused on the importance of natural resources protection through land conservation and other methods – the *Exeter, A Special Place* initiative.

To help focus their efforts, six Committee members attended a facilitated training session on *Developing an Effective Public Outreach and Education Campaign*. This session was facilitated by NROC staff from UNH Cooperative Extension, NH Sea Grant and NH Dept. of Environmental Services.

The *Exeter, A Special Place* Committee met weekly throughout the duration of the project to plan their strategy and conduct the campaign for the proposed \$3M bond issue.

3. Publicizing the *Exeter, A Special Place* Initiative

- Committee members researched and developed a brochure, *Exeter, A Special Place – An Initiative to Preserve our Past and Protect our Future*. The brochure described the initiative's goal of protecting 800 acres of Exeter's significant natural resource areas, including water resources, wildlife habitats, historic and scenic landscapes, and passive recreation areas (see attached copy). Four thousand brochures were printed and distributed throughout town (stores, town offices, recreation department, library, town functions, group presentations, Exeter Master Plan Visioning Session, restaurants and other businesses).
- Committee members spent a great deal of time on the phone with key individuals in town, and met individually with members of the Board of Selectmen to review the initiative. As a result of these efforts, the Board of Selectmen voted unanimously to support the initiative, which included the \$3 million bond.
- A series of four newsletters to educate the public on the issues was researched, written and mailed to all registered voters and town property owners in Exeter between January and March, 2003 (see attached copies). The topics of the four newsletters were:
 - # 1: Open Space Protection and Bonding Funds for Land Conservation
 - # 2: The Arithmetic of Growth: How We Save With Open Space
 - # 3: Questions and Answers
 - # 4: Open Space Protects Our Water
- Committee members wrote a number of newspaper articles and recruited supporters to write letters to the editors of various publications (Exeter News-Letter, Portsmouth Herald, and Carriage Towne News).
- A script was written for the local Channel 22/ government TV station to further inform the public on the benefits of open space and how the bond could help Exeter reach their goals.
- The Committee was invited to make presentations to the members of the Lions Club, the Historical Society, and residents of Riverwoods and Langdon Place. Faculty and Staff at

Phillips Exeter Academy were invited to attend a question and answer session, and a public meeting was held at the Exeter Library shortly before voting day.

- Neighborhood representatives were contacted to help distribute brochures and make phone calls to their neighbors, friends and co-workers to encourage them to get everyone to the polls on March 11 to vote. E-mail notices were sent out shortly before voting day.
- Posters and signs were made and posted in strategic locations and campaign buttons and makeshift bumper stickers were made for group members and supporters. On voting day, Committee members were available throughout the day to answer questions and make sure that the voters were clear on the purpose of the warrant article.

Results and Discussion/Conclusions

- **OBJECTIVE 1: To create a Conservation Commission newsletter to educate Exeter's citizens on the importance of protecting the town's open spaces, and the *Exeter, A Special Place* initiative.**

Four newsletters were produced as a result of this project, each focused on a different topic to educate the public about the value of protecting open space. The committee felt that the newsletters were instrumental in the passage of the bond article on voting day. Further, the newsletters have helped develop a more educated public that will likely be supportive of future land protection efforts in Exeter.

- **OBJECTIVE 2: To develop outreach strategies to educate and inform the public.**

The facilitated training session *Developing an Effective Education and Outreach Campaign* by NROC staff members from UNH Cooperative Extension and NH Dept of Environmental Services helped the Special Place Committee focus the messages for different target audience. This helped the Committee reach a wide range of people with a variety of education and outreach messages. These messages ranged from verbal (presentations and one-on-one discussions), to printed (press releases, brochures, newsletters).

- **OBJECTIVE 3: To support the new task force and initiative, *Exeter, A Special Place*, focused on gaining voter approval to pass an open space bond initiative in March of 2003 for the protection of vulnerable land and natural resources.**

The warrant article to bond funds for open space protection was passed unanimously on March 11, with support from 73% of the voters. The *Exeter, A Special Place* Committee felt that passage of this bond would likely not have taken place without intensive education of Exeter residents and voters through the newsletters, brochure, personal communications, presentations, and other outreach efforts. The committee saw tremendous support at the town deliberative session, and managed to veto the efforts of a small opposition group (Exeter Taxpayers Association) who wanted to change the warrant article and reduce the requested bond amount.

After the town voted on March 11 to support the Warrant Article, the conservation commission drafted a list of potential candidates for the Open Space Committee. The selectmen also posted a notice for all interested parties to submit a letter or interest to the Selectmen. After reviewing the list, the Selectmen appointed seven individuals to serve as members of the Open Space Committee.

As a result of this project, Exeter has developed a strong base of support for land protection. With an Open Space Committee appointed and in place, this group will continue the work of educating town residents, working with landowners interested in voluntary land protection.

Recommendations (for future work or management strategies)

- Work proactively on open space protection in Exeter (Open Space Committee, in conjunction with the Conservation Commission).
- Research sources for possible matching grants in order to leverage the \$3 million bond (Open Space Committee).
- Work with the Town of Exeter to place conservation easements on existing town-owned conservation lands (Open Space Committee).
- Work with the Master Plan Steering Committee (especially the Conservation and Preservation and Future Land Use subcommittees) as they move forward with the selection and protection process (Open Space Committee).
- Communicate with landowners about voluntary land conservation options (Open Space Committee)

Continue to educate and inform the public about the importance of open space protection (Open Space Committee and Conservation Commission).