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Rockingham Land Trust

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Technical Assistance and Outreach Program for Landowners and Municipalities in the Upper Reaches of the Exeter River Watershed

A Final Report to
The New Hampshire Estuaries Project

Submitted by
Rockingham Land Trust
14 Center Street
Exeter, NH

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Executive Summary

The Rockingham Land Trust (RLT) worked with Conservation Commissions and private landowners in five communities in Rockingham County to increase awareness of the Land Trust's services and to increase, over the long term, the amount of land protected by conservation easements.

The RLT met with interested Conservation Commissions and private landowners, held two workshops on estate planning and land protection, produced educational materials to increase awareness and understanding of the Trust, and worked with organizations in the region involved in land protection to discuss priorities and ways in which the groups can work together to maximize land protection efforts. The highlight of this project is the pending donations by two landowners of two conservation easements in the Exeter River watershed.

Introduction

The Rockingham Land Trust (RLT) is nonprofit organization founded in 1980 to protect land and water resources in Exeter and surrounding communities. Recently, the Board of Directors of the RLT voted to expand the organization's service region to include all the communities in Rockingham County. This action was taken due to an increased demand for the Trust's services by municipalities and landowners.

The purpose of this project was to increase awareness of the Land Trust in towns in the new service area and to work with interested community officials and landowners to increase the amount of land protected by conservation easement. The towns targeted to receive technical assistance as part of this project were Chester, Sandown, Raymond, Fremont and Danville. All of these towns are outside the Trust's original service area, are in the Exeter River corridor, and have projected population growth rates double the regional average.

Project Goals and Objectives

The goals of this project were:

- To increase awareness of the Rockingham Land Trust and the services it provides in communities in the upper reaches of the Exeter River watershed.
- To increase, over the long term, the number of acres of land protected by conservation easement in the region.
- To increase understanding of the funding mechanisms available for land protection, including the tax benefits associated with donating conservation easements.
- To increase awareness of the importance of protecting large, contiguous blocks of land.

With support from the NH Estuaries Project (NHEP), the RLT's objective was to increase the amount of staff time spent actively working with Conservation Commissions and landowners interested in land protection.

Activities

The RLT worked with Conservation Commissions, municipal land protection committees, Planning Boards, and private landowners in the five target communities. In addition, Land Trust staff worked with the Exeter River Local Advisory Committee (ERLAC), Rockingham Planning Commission (RPC), Bear-Paw Regional Greenway, and Rockingham County Conservation District (RCCD) to increase the effectiveness of the outreach provided.

Tasks completed for this project include:

- Attended monthly meetings of interested Conservation Commissions to discuss

conservation easements, assist with prioritization of parcels for land protection, and discuss funding mechanisms for protection.

- Met with private landowners to explain the conservation easement process.
- Conducted two workshops on estate planning and land protection to explain conservation easements and the tax benefits associated with land protection.
- Met with land protection organizations working in the region to discuss each organization's priorities and areas of interest.
- Developed educational materials for landowners and municipal boards that explain the Land Trust's activities and the conservation easement process.

Results and Discussion

The most outstanding result from this project are two pending conservation easements, one on 36 acres of managed forestland in Danville and the other on 7 acres along the Exeter River in Sandown. Both parcels are in the Exeter River watershed and both easements are being donated by landowners interested in protecting wildlife habitat and water quality. Further, these two conservation easements may lead to additional conservation projects within the community as a result of the positive media coverage and increased landowner awareness that will result.

In addition to working with the landowners donating the two easements, RLT staff and Board members conducted two workshops on Estate Planning and Land Protection, one in Raymond and one in Kensington. Over two dozen landowners attended the sessions and received specific information on how to protect their land from development. Because the land protection process can have a long time horizon, it will be months if not years before the RLT learns how effective these workshops were at increasing the number of acres protected from development. However, the workshops did require each Conservation Commission to identify and prioritize land for protection and enabled the RLT to establish a working partnership with the Commissions. In addition, the workshops provided landowners with an opportunity to meet and talk with each other about their mutual interest in conservation.

Behind the scenes, RLT staff and Board Members spent a considerable amount of time talking with Conservation Commission members about securing municipal funding for land protection and prioritizing undeveloped parcels for protection. Discussions also took place on the importance of placing conservation easements on town owned land acquired for conservation purposes. The level of knowledge and interest varied widely among local officials and landowners in the five targeted towns. In addition, the level of funding provided by each municipality for land protection varied greatly.

Working and meeting with individual Conservation Commissions is time consuming and can prove frustrating. The success of this part of the project was dependent on a Conservation Commission's ability to provide the RLT with information and complete tasks

outside of the time RLT staff spent with the group. Often, the Commission members were unable to gather information requested or able to spend extra time outside monthly meetings. Further, some of the Conservation Commissions originally targeted for support, such as the Fremont CC, were focused on existing projects and lacked the time to commit to collaborating with RLT. In addition, other conservation organizations, such as the Nature Conservancy, Rockingham County Conservation District, and the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, were spending considerable time in Fremont on the conservation of the Spruce Swamp area.

Because of these local limitations, RLT spent some time outside of the 5 priority communities on technical assistance and landowner outreach, including in Brentwood, Durham, Epping, and Newmarket. These projects are within the Exeter and Lamprey River watersheds of Great Bay and meet the identified tasks of this grant.

Conclusions

The level of interest in land protection in Rockingham County will continue to increase, and time constraints will prevent the RLT from working with every Conservation Commission or landowner in the region. This project provided RLT staff and Board members with an opportunity to gauge the level of awareness of the Trust among landowners and municipal officials and to learn more about how best to target staff time when working with municipalities. RLT hopes to continue to work with conservation commissions and expand our work in the upper reaches of the Exeter River watershed.

Recommendations

The RLT will continue to partner with Conservation Commissions and other interested parties to host Estate Planning and Land Protection workshops. In addition, the Board of Directors of the RLT will spend the next year developing a land protection strategy for the organization which will enable staff to focus efforts in an effective manner.

One suggestion would be for NHEP to help facilitate communication among grant recipients so as to prevent overlapping of service areas and project areas during a grant round. This would increase the effectiveness of the NHEP's limited grant funds and our organization's time and resources.