



Largest Project in Land Trust History Comes to Fruition

Acquisition celebration March 8 "introduces" the new Whitaker Woods property

As land preservation projects go, the acquisition process for the 270-acre Whitaker property in Somers was not unique. But in terms of the size of the task, from the acreage to the funding challenges, it has been one that has "put the Trust on the map", according to President Culver Modisette. As of Friday, February 10, the property can be considered protected as the closing was finalized and \$1.2 million changed hands. Notice of the accomplishment has been published in the Journal Inquirer, Hartford Courant, and even received attention in the February 12 New York Times as part of an article "Open Space: Preserving it Takes a Village", which included a picture of President Modisette walking the property.

Whitaker Woods, as it has come to be known, is mostly forested, with 18 acres of agricultural and pasture land. It borders the Trust's McCann Family Farm and the Shenipsit State Forest, and includes Gulf Stream and Shady Brook, both of which have the state's highest water purity rating of "AA", or drinking water quality. Aquifers feeding the Somers water supply also originate on this property, making it a high priority for protection by the Town of Somers. The Connecticut Water Company operates 3 wells along the boundaries of the property, all of which feed off this aquifer.

Acquisition of the property has been in the works for over three years. The Town of Somers and the Trust purchased the property jointly, with the help of a matching grant from the Connecticut DEP's Open Space and Watershed Protection matching grant program. When details of the final property definition are complete, the town will deed the property to the Trust for stewardship and management. Somers Town Planner Patrice Carson stated "the purchase of Whitaker Woods fits perfectly into the Town's newly adopted Plan of Conservation and Development, and was the highest priority on the Town's acquisition list."

The property, acquired from the Estate of Howard Whitaker, was the subject of a major residential development effort about 10 years ago, but never received approval from town commissions because of several issues, including the environmental impact. The property had been owned by several long time Somers families, and even has an old spring house fed by underground springs. The rock-lined, well-like excavation is approximately 20 feet square and was protected by timbered walls and roof until collapsing within the last year.

According to NCLT Treasurer Jim Gage, the Trust's fund raising efforts contacted close to 30 foundations for interest in the project, and formally applied for six grants. Major funding was received from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, the Bafflin Foundation, the Fields Pond Foundation, and the Antonacci Family Foundation. The Norcross Wildlife Foundation provided a large 1 year, interest-free loan to allow the closing to take place. But the task is not complete until this loan can be paid off, so efforts will continue until the last \$110,000 is in hand. Requests have been mailed to the membership, with more than a 10% response at the time of this newsletter. A 100% participation in the giving process was achieved by the Board of Directors, spurred in part by a challenge matching grant from George Grant if each Director contributed. To celebrate the success of the project, and to thank donors and encourage additional donations to complete the acquisition, there was an open party Wednesday, March 8 in the Somers Town Hall, with all members, donors, and interested public invited to hear about the success.

Plans for the property include creating extensive hiking and riding trails, linking up with those already existing on the McCann Farm and the adjacent state forest. Rehabilitation of an old ski hill would hopefully be cleared and opened for sledding in the winter. And there are discussions about planting hybrid chestnut trees from a project with the American Chestnut Foundation, mentioned in last month's newsletter, to re-establish one of New England's oldest inhabitants once

again. Grant applications are already being readied for the Recreational Trails Program to help fund improvement projects such as parking areas and access to the property.


When the project was undertaken several years ago, the Board of Directors felt that success would change the future of the organization. Proving that such a large effort could be handled would open the door to further opportunities. And as expected, publicity from the Whitaker project has already spurred contacts from around the state. Offers of other properties, hoping to be

preserved by environmentally conscious owners, have come in. Folks interested in the Whitaker property itself have inquired of the intended use for various forms of recreation, and have offered the loan of equipment to aid in the development and maintenance of trails and removal of invasive species. The Trust has definitely taken a huge step forward in presenting the image of an organization which is serious in its objectives of natural resource protection and its capabilities in making progress towards those ends. Thanks to all for your support!



Stewardship Teams Looking for Help with Equipment

Maintenance of the Trust properties is an ongoing task for Jerry Stage's volunteer teams. And as our list of properties continues to grow, these efforts become more extensive. To assist in removing invasive species, keep undergrowth under control, and maintain trails in good condition for public use, a call is going out for anyone with equipment that would help with these jobs or would wish to donate equipment or funds to contact Jerry at



jerrystage@aol.com. Volunteers interested in contributing time on weekends at the various sites can also contact him to get on his work party list and help keep up our stewardship efforts. Watch the Website also for work party announcements. Acquiring the properties for protection is only the first step in our open space objectives. After that, the hard work begins!

Open Space Losing Ground in Connecticut

Is it too late to react?

Connecticut lost 12 percent of its farmland between 1997 and 2002, the highest rate of the 50 states. An average of 19 acres of forest disappeared every day while adding 12 acres of development between 1985 and 2002. The 2000 census showed small towns all around the state growing at breakneck speed, while population decreased in four of the five largest cities. 10 year population increases were as high as 33 percent in Colchester, 28 percent in East Hampton, 24 percent in East Haddam, and 22 percent in Hebron. In 2005, Mansfield's Planning & Zoning Commission approved 80 new lots, up from a 10 year average of 20 for the years 1995 to 2004

In 1998, the state legislature set a goal of preserving 21 percent, or about 673,000 acres, of Connecticut's 3.3 million acres by 2023. It has been estimated that about 70 percent of that goal has been achieved, much of it stimulated by the millions of dollars of matching grants provided through the open grant and farmland preservation programs. These programs help towns and non-profits like the NCLT to work to offset some of the rampant growth in Connecticut. Your help has been immense in supporting our efforts. Continuing activities are ongoing in communities that the Trust serves. In Vernon, an open space bond referendum is expected to be put to the voters in June to approve bonding for \$2 million to help with open space protection. Ellington has plans to develop an open space plan and prioritization list, after which it will seek voter approval for a similar bonding program. Stafford and Vernon both have set-aside ordinances which are intended to provide either open space contributions or equivalent funds from developers when new residential areas are built, but which are rarely enforced. It is up to all of us to be aware of these public issues and become involved in supporting them as they arise, and to get out and vote when the opportunities are presented. Don't let sprawl change Connecticut forever to the detriment of our quality of life and that of future generations!

NCLT 2006 Hike Schedule – Public Invited

March 18th Saturday 10 a.m. to noon Enjoy Your Exercise in Vernon, Valley Falls

Scenic exercise hike of four miles in Valley Falls Park in the morning.

Second hike 12:30 p.m. to 2:30 Scenic exercise hike of four miles in the DEP Belding WMA in the afternoon. Lookouts, vernal pools, rivers, ponds, and much more. Meet at Valley Falls Park by taking I-84 exit 66, take Bolton Rd south about 1.4 miles; go right on Valley Falls Rd. about 0.1 mile and then left to Valley Falls Park.

Leader: George Arthur 860-871-0137 or trailsarthur2@comcast.net. Co-leader: Joe King

April 8th Saturday 10 a.m. “Discover Your Land Trust” Hike, Vernon

Hike NCLT property Andrew Kenneth Webster Preserve. This property was acquired several years ago and includes 30 acres. Enjoy scenic overlooks of Railroad Brook Valley and Valley Falls Park. See three of the largest vernal pools in Vernon. This hike is at a moderate pace and is about three miles. Bring lunch for optional post-hike stop at the Valley Falls Park pavilion. Meet at Valley Falls Park parking lot on Valley Falls Rd. in Vernon. Leader: George Arthur

April 8th Saturday 6:30 p.m. (5:30 for pizza) Sunset/Moonlight Hike, Somers

Catch the sunset on Skyline Scenic Area on this moderately-paced hike. Be prepared for some steep and rocky sections, and follow the leader through the woods by moonlight. This hike is a NCLT tradition and is a lot of fun. Great for families with children 8 yrs and up. Meet at the Somers Town Hall parking lot on Rte. 190 a short distance east of Rte. 83 at 6:30 p.m. for the hike or meet there at 5:30 for pizza at a local restaurant.

Leader: Jerry Stage at 860-870-4255 or JerryStage@aol.com Co-leader: George Grant

April 22nd & 23rd Saturday and Sunday NCLT Earth Day Weekend, McCann Family Farm

This weekend is set aside for cleanup, trail maintenance, and other land stewardship projects. Informal hikes will be led throughout the day. Work will be performed on McCann’s and the recently acquired Whitaker property. Refreshments will be available and families are encouraged to participate. Work and fun will start at 9 a.m.

Please call Ginny Patsun 860-763-4047 or email gpatsun@yahoo.com for more information.

May 6th Saturday Spring Birds on NCLT, Somers’ properties

Spend the morning with a veteran birder looking for spring migrants and other birds in the McCann Family Farm, Scantic Riparian Area and perhaps elsewhere. By visiting an array of habitats on these NCLT properties it is possible to see 30 to 40 or more species at this time of the year. We will hike 2-3 miles. Mud and/or shallow puddles will likely be on the SRA trail so bring appropriate footwear.

Leader: Jerry Stage

May 28th Sunday 9 a.m. Late Spring Wildflower Hike, Somers

Spring flowers can usually be found on the forest floor, taking advantage of warm sunlight shining between the naked branches before the leaves open up. Several of these flowers are perennials including the brilliantly colored wake-robin found on stream edges. This leisurely-paced educational hike will take hikers through several kinds of habitats. Meet at the Somers Town Hall parking lot.

Leader: Jerry Stage

Watch the CALENDAR for more information at www.northernctlandtrust.org

Scantic River Watershed Association Gaining Momentum

At the annual meeting of the Scantic River Watershed Association (SRWA) the following officers were elected: Michael Dynia, Chairman; Judith Snyder, President; Patrick Sharron, Vice President; Margaret Steinbugler, Secretary; and Jan Collins, Treasurer. The Board of Directors is comprised of the above officers as well as Jeff Dynia, James Gage, Albert Grant, Richard Houle, Scott King, Arend Knuttel, Culver Modisette, Paul Scannell, Richard Sherman, and Thomas Vaghini. Interested persons are welcome at the Board meetings, which are held on the second Monday at the Warehouse Point Library in East Windsor starting at 7 PM.

The next event will be the “SCANTIC SPRING SPLASH” to be held on Saturday, March 25th with registration starting at 9 AM. This will be the 15th anniversary of the splash and promises to be bigger and better than ever. For details contact Mike Dynia – mdynia@yahoo.com or call 745-9986. Information is also on the web at www.scanticspringsplash.com. The Splash Committee has also been incorporated into the SRWA with the Association being the main sponsor of the event. Volunteers are welcome.

The group is also planning a canoe and kayak tour Saturday May 6, starting at the Somers Mill Pond. Watch for further details in the local newspapers or on the NCLT Website.



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If you have a friend interested in joining the Trust and supporting the work of protecting our natural resources, please pass this newsletter on to them. Contributions are tax deductible.

MEMBERSHIPS:

Student - \$2.00 Individual - \$20.00 Family - \$30.00
Business - \$100.00 Life - \$250.00 Patron - \$500.00
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TELEPHONE: _____ **E_MAIL:** _____

Would you like to receive the newsletter by e-mail? _____

Mail to: Northern Connecticut Land Trust
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If you would like to volunteer to work projects such as fund-raising, trail maintenance, newsletter, or others, please check **YES** ___ **NO** ___