



## Proposed Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Expansion Frequently Asked Questions

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**Introduction:** The Town of Hardwick has the opportunity to acquire a 319-acre property to add to the existing Buffalo Mountain Town Forest. Trust for Public Land, Northern Rivers Land Trust, and the Hardwick Conservation Commission have begun a conversation with one of the landowners, Ken Davis, to discuss a possible conservation acquisition of the property.

### **Where is the property?**

The proposed Buffalo Mountain Town Forest expansion consists of two adjacent parcels:

- 179 acres with frontage on either side of the Lamoille River and on either side of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and access from the Wright Farm Road, which runs south along the western edge of the parcel, owned by Ken and Chris Davis.
- 140 acres containing the summit of Buffalo Mountain, with access from three roads in the village center, owned by Chris Davis.

### **Why does Hardwick need a new town forest? How does this benefit the community?**

#### **1. Recreational Opportunities**

The proposed Buffalo Mountain Town Forest expansion offers not only close-to-home recreation, but also a place for people to engage with their community and connect with nature. The property is within walking distance of the town center, including the Town Office, the public library, Atkins Field, Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, Hardwick Elementary School and Hazen Union School, and the downtown businesses.

Recreation on the property will likely include walking, running, hiking, hunting, wildlife viewing, and other pedestrian activities, and could include mechanized uses such as mountain biking, if highlighted by the community as priorities. Recreational opportunities will be discussed in more detail during the management planning process.

The summit of Buffalo Mountain is located on the property. A 2018 community survey regarding the existing town lands highlighted expanding use of the existing 70-acre Buffalo Mountain Town Forest and clearing a viewpoint somewhere on Buffalo Mountain as priorities. While not contiguous to the existing town forest, the expansion property is less than 1/2 of a mile away, connected by Wright Farm Road, which is a public Class 4 road, to the existing Buffalo Mountain Town Forest.

#### **2. Economic Development**

Recreation and tourism are recognized statewide as the fastest growing and cleanest forms of economic development. Outdoor recreation is an important industry in Vermont, annually

generating \$5.5 billion in retail sales and services (accounting for 18% of gross state product), supporting 51,000 jobs, and creating \$505 million in state tax revenue. Creation of a new trail network on the property will not only provide close-to-home recreation opportunities for a healthy community but will also support this recreation and tourism economy. Other trail systems in Vermont have demonstrated benefits to the local economy. For example, the mountain bike trails at Blueberry Lake in Green Mountain National Forest bring in \$1.8 million annually to the Mad River Valley. The trails in the Barre Town Forest provide an estimated \$25,000 in annual recreational use cost savings to residents and \$130,000 of annual direct spending by visitors. Having more public land at the center of town will help attract new residents who are looking for a high quality of life, strong outdoor education programs for their children, and close-to-home recreation opportunities. See <https://www.tpl.org/community-forest-economic-case-studies> for more examples of the numerous economic benefits that community forests across the country provide to their local communities.

### **3. Educational Opportunities**

The property's proximity to Hardwick Elementary School in particular provides opportunities for outdoor educational activities. Town ownership of this land will help kids develop an interest in science and math through connection with nature, set up patterns for an active, healthy lifestyle, and help build familiarity with and appreciation of nature and stewardship skills for the environment.

### **4. Natural Resource Protection**

According to Vermont Conservation Design, the property is within a Highest Priority Interior Forest Block and within a Highest Priority Connectivity Block. With elevation ranging from 800 feet along the Lamoille River to over 1,500 feet at the summit of Buffalo Mountain, the property allows species to move up the elevational gradient as the climate changes. In a state with much of our conserved lands at high elevations, protection of lower elevation forests like these is a priority.

### **5. Timber Revenue**

Forest management could take place on the property under the Town's ownership, which can support local resource-based jobs and provide periodic timber revenues to the Town. Working with the Caledonia County Forester and with public input, the Town can create a management plan that finds an appropriate balance between recreation, wildlife habitat, water quality protection and timber harvesting. A timber cruise will be done this fall, which will provide the timber capital value and potential economic gain to the town. If desired, the Town can also choose to lease a portion of the forest for sugaring, which could also bring in regular revenue.

### **6. Health Benefits**

Protection of the property will contribute to the health of local and regional residents by providing a close-to-home destination for outdoor recreation. Having public land close to population centers is important not only to the physical and mental health of the community but having protected areas within walking or biking distance reduces car travel, air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and the accidents and stress that are by-products of driving. Future trails on the property, in addition to the Class 4 road and the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, could help encourage walking and bicycling.

### **What is the status of the negotiations to buy the land?**

Currently, the land is listed for sale on the open market. Ken Davis has met with representatives of the Hardwick Conservation Commission, Trust for Public Land (a national land conservation organization), and Northern Rivers Land Trust (a local land trust) and is open to a town purchase of his and his brother's property, but if another buyer comes along before an agreement can be reached, the landowners must consider other offers.

### **How would Town ownership work?**

The Town of Hardwick would acquire the property subject to a conservation easement held by the Northern Rivers Land Trust (NRLT). If funds from Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) were used as part of the acquisition, VHCB would co-hold the easement. This easement would ensure that the property would be protected as forestland and open land, and that wildlife habitat, public access, and water quality would be protected in perpetuity. Specific easement terms will be determined by the town, Trust for Public Land (TPL), Northern Rivers Land Trust, and either VHCB or other funders. Sustainable timber harvesting would be allowed which could improve forest health and wildlife habitat or, if desired, be a source of income for the town.

The Selectboard has the ultimate authority over the town forest and management decisions for the land. TPL and NRLT recommend that the Town form a steering committee to guide the development of the management and use planning for the town forest. The steering committee would be responsible for engaging community input and creating a draft management plan for the Selectboard.

### **How will property be managed?**

The uses allowed and management conducted on Buffalo Mountain Town Forest will be determined by the community within the broad allowances of the conservation easement. A management plan will be created by the Town with help from Trust for Public Land, the Caledonia County Forester and the Northern Rivers Land Trust, with significant public input. Based on initial discussions, and requirements of the proposed funding sources and easement holders, the Town Forest could be managed for multiple uses, including recreation, sustainable timber harvesting, watershed protection, education, community food forests, carbon sequestration, climate resiliency, and wildlife habitat.

### **Will hunting, fishing and trapping be allowed in the town forest?**

The property will be conserved with a conservation easement that requires that the property be open to the general public for all types of noncommercial pedestrian recreational and educational uses, including birdwatching, cross-country skiing, fishing, hiking, hunting, snowshoeing, swimming, trapping, walking, and wildlife observation. However, the community may choose to limit or restrict public access to protect public safety or natural habitats (including the right to permit, regulate, or prohibit fishing, hunting, and trapping).

Should the Selectboard approve the project and an agreement be reached between the landowner and the project partners, a town forest stewardship committee will draft a management plan, using input gathered from the community, the county forester and staff from Department of Vermont Fish &

Wildlife. That committee will make recommendations to the Selectboard. The Selectboard has the ultimate authority over management decisions for the town forest. The management plan will be revised and updated over time. We encourage the public to be involved and share opinions on use and management of the town forest once the management planning process starts.

### **What other restrictions would there be on the land?**

The property will be encumbered with a conservation easement requiring that wildlife habitat, public access, water quality, and cultural resources be protected, with final language agreed upon by the Town, Trust for Public Land, Northern Rivers Land Trust (NRLT), and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) and other funders. A town forest management plan must be approved by NRLT, VHCB, and the county forester.

### **Can the town log the property?**

Yes, the Town can choose to harvest wood on the property. Sustainable timber harvesting for forest management purposes could provide Hardwick with periodic income, which could be rolled back into improvements to the property. The property may also be tapped for maple syrup. Other towns that have acquired productive timberland find that the revenue from periodic harvests can be used to fund special projects after any debts have been satisfied. Some towns make firewood available from their town forest to low-income families. Under the terms of the easement, the Town would be required to work with a professional forester to develop a forest management plan prior to any proposed harvests. A management plan may include provisions for logging restrictions in certain areas. Other possibilities include a community orchard or “food forest,” which could include fruit and nut trees, berries, mushrooms, and more. There may also be scientific research opportunities for students of all ages.

### **How much will this property cost, and where will the funding come from?**

The purchase price will be the fair market value of the land as determined by an independent appraiser. As soon as the Town approves the acquisition and the property is under option agreement, Trust for Public Land (TPL) will hire an independent appraiser to appraise the property. Currently, the property is listed at \$545,000.

Other costs associated with the project are estimated to total \$230,000, including title work, survey, appraisals, timber inventories, environmental investigation, legal costs, TPL staff costs, community forest program reinvestment, management endowment for the town forest, and a stewardship endowment for Northern Rivers Land Trust to monitor the conservation easement in perpetuity.

Depending on the community’s desired outcomes for the property, there will be costs and additional funding opportunities associated with trail construction, signage, habitat restoration, or other recreation or natural resource-related activities.

The total estimated cost, just for the acquisition, before any specific improvements or management activities are budgeted, is \$775,000.

This is a long-term investment in the Town's future. Regarding the Town's contribution, there is no exact dollar amount or percentage of project costs that must be covered by the Town or its residents in order to demonstrate investment. Funding requests from federal, state and private sources are much more successful if the Town has shown financial commitment to the project. TPL, with cooperation from a local fundraising committee, will raise the remaining funds for the purchase and the transaction costs from a mix of federal, state, and private sources.

**Has any money been committed to the project already?**

Currently, the project is in its early stages, and funding has been neither requested nor committed. Once the Selectboard has approved the project and Trust for Public Land has negotiated a preliminary agreement with the landowners, fundraising will begin.

**How will this acquisition affect property taxes?**

Once municipally owned, the property would be taken off the tax rolls, and based on the preliminary numbers from the 2025 town-wide reappraisal the grand list would decrease by \$4,626. The annual municipal tax loss from this property resulting from the expansion of the Town Forest is estimated to be approximately \$5,000. The creation of open space has been clearly documented to increase resale values of homes adjacent to the conserved land. Nearby property owners will benefit from higher property values when they sell their homes and the town will benefit from an increased tax base, over time. According to a 2001 survey by the National Association of REALTORS® by Public Opinion Strategies, 50 percent of respondents said they would pay 10 percent more for a house located near a park or open space. Lastly, a town forest with a trail network that connects to the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail would likely attract new residents and new businesses.

**How about the long-term responsibility and cost of maintaining the property?**

The Town will be responsible for maintaining the property, with assistance from volunteers for specific activities. The Town is eligible for public grants to create new trails or infrastructure such as a parking lot or natural resource projects such as stream bank restoration. The project budget includes \$20,000 for a town forest management endowment, controlled by the Town, to be used for the maintenance and improvement of the property for public use.

**When will this acquisition happen?**

If the Town and Trust for Public Land are able to secure the necessary funding, the property could be conveyed to Town ownership in 2027.

**Are there any environmental issues with the property?**

Prior to acquiring the property, there will be a thorough investigation by a professional firm assessing any environmental issues or title problems like old rights of way or mineral rights controlled by third parties. Under the terms of the contract, the property must not have any significant defects in order for the acquisition to go forward. The results of the environmental and title investigations will be made available to the Selectboard prior to the commitment of any funds.

### **What happens if the Town does not purchase the property?**

If a conservation outcome fails, the landowners would likely put some or all of the property back on the market, and it could be fragmented or restricted from public access. Fragmentation has been characterized as the dominant regional stressor on Vermont's forests. Erosion of the health of Vermont's forests through fragmentation has serious ecological, economic, and cultural implications for landowners and communities. Fragmentation leads to loss of biodiversity; increases the incidence of invasive plants, pests, and pathogens; and reduces water quality. Reducing forest fragmentation where possible now will create more resilient, adaptable forests for the future. Fragmentation and conversion of forests not only decreases resiliency to floods and climate change; it also limits public access, degrades wildlife habitat, decreases human health and well-being, and forever alters the landscape.

### **What are the roles of Trust for Public Land and the Northern Rivers Land Trust?**

Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national non-profit land conservation organization with a mission of conserving land for people. TPL is leading the real estate negotiations, due diligence and fundraising for the land acquisition. TPL has considerable expertise in real estate, law, finance, and fundraising in support of purchasing conservation land for public agencies and municipalities. TPL operates a community forest program in New England that assists towns in the creation of new municipally owned forests. TPL has successfully created new community forests in Wolcott, Williston, Hinesburg, West Fairlee, Barre Town, West Windsor, and Huntington, Vermont and in Errol, Freedom, Randolph, Milan, and Meredith, New Hampshire, among other places. Please see [tpl.org/our-work/community-forests](http://tpl.org/our-work/community-forests) for more information.

The Northern Rivers Land Trust is a non-profit conservation organization serving the towns of Hardwick, Woodbury, Walden, Wolcott, Albany, Greensboro, and Craftsbury. They are dedicated to protecting the natural, scenic, and working landscapes in the headwaters of the Winooski, Lamoille, and Black Rivers and are excited to engage with the Hardwick community on the expansion of the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest. The Northern Rivers Land Trust will hold the conservation easement (or potentially, co-hold the easement with Vermont Housing and Conservation Board) in perpetuity. NRLT will assist with creation of the management plan, monitor the easement annually, and work cooperatively with the Town to ensure the conservation values of the property are protected.