

Cover Memo

To: Hardwick Select Board

From: Kristen Leahy

Re: Buffalo Mountain Town Forest – Governance and Planning Framework

Date: March 12, 2026

At the request of the Hardwick Select Board, the attached document outlines a proposed governance and planning framework for the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest project.

The Town of Hardwick has voted to proceed with the Buffalo Mountain project and authorized funding to support the acquisition process. As the project moves forward, the Select Board requested a clear and transparent structure for community participation and development of a Management Plan for the property.

The attached packet proposes the creation of a Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Steering Committee to assist the Select Board with community engagement and development of the Management Plan. The committee would serve in an advisory role.

The proposed framework was shared with the Hardwick Conservation Commission, Trust for Public Land, and the Northern Rivers Land Trust for initial review, and adjustments were made to reflect their suggestions. The governance structure used by the Town of Wolcott for its town forest was also reviewed as part of this process. While that model provided helpful reference points, differences in municipal governance between the two communities make it impractical for Hardwick to adopt the same structure directly. The attached framework reflects an approach designed to fit Hardwick's governance structure while incorporating useful elements observed in other communities.

The materials outline:

- a proposed governance structure
- guiding principles for stewardship
- the planning and decision-making process
- the role of the Steering Committee
- opportunities for community participation

The Select Board may wish to review the proposed framework, make adjustments as appropriate, and determine whether to proceed with establishing the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Steering Committee.

Town of Hardwick

Buffalo Mountain Town Forest

Governance and Planning Framework

Prepared for the Hardwick Select Board

Date: March 12, 2026

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Introduction

The Town of Hardwick has voted to proceed with the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest project and authorized funding to support the acquisition process.

The Town is working with Trust for Public Land to assist with the acquisition and related due diligence.

At the request of the Hardwick Select Board, this document outlines a proposed governance structure and planning process for the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest.

Town or community forests are municipally owned forests that provide long-term public benefits such as recreation, wildlife habitat protection, sustainable forestry, water quality protection, education opportunities, and community connection to the landscape.

This framework is intended to support a transparent process for planning the long-term stewardship of the Buffalo Mountain parcel.

Background

The Buffalo Mountain parcel represents an important forested landscape within the Town of Hardwick and contributes to the community's identity and landscape character.

The property contains forest land, wildlife habitat, flood plain, and opportunities for recreation and environmental education that support the ecological health of the surrounding area.

The property is anticipated to be protected through a conservation easement co-held by the Northern Rivers Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.

Long-term stewardship of the forest will be guided by a Management Plan developed with assistance from experts like the County Forester and informed by community input.

Commitment to Transparency

The Select Board has requested that planning for the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest be conducted through a transparent and inclusive process.

Information related to the project will be shared publicly and opportunities for community participation will be provided as planning moves forward.

The goal of this framework is to provide a clear structure for participation while ensuring that the Select Board retains decision-making authority regarding stewardship of the property.

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Guiding Principles for Stewardship

The Buffalo Mountain Town Forest is intended to serve the long-term interests of the Hardwick community.

Community Participation

Residents will have opportunities to provide input during the planning process.

Transparency

Planning activities will be conducted openly and information will be shared publicly.

Long-Term Stewardship

Management will consider the long-term health and sustainability of the forest.

Ecological Health

Management decisions will consider wildlife habitat, forest ecosystems, and watershed protection.

Balanced Use

Planning will consider recreation, conservation, education, and sustainable forestry.

Community Benefit

The forest should provide meaningful benefits to the Hardwick community.

Professional Guidance

Planning will involve professional foresters and natural resource experts.

Adaptive Management

The Management Plan will include monitoring and periodic updates.

Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Steering Committee

Purpose

The Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Steering Committee will assist the Select Board in developing a Management Plan for the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest.

The committee will facilitate community engagement, review information about the property, and develop recommendations related to stewardship and long-term management.

Recommendations developed by the committee will be forwarded to the Hardwick Select Board for consideration.

The committee serves in an advisory role.

Final authority regarding management of the forest remains with the Hardwick Select Board, within the parameters of the conservation easement.

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Committee Organization

The Steering Committee will elect a Chair, Vice Chair, and Secretary from among its members to assist with meeting coordination, communication, and record keeping.

Meetings will be conducted in accordance with Vermont Open Meeting Law.

Steering Committee Membership

The committee may consist of up to seventeen (17) members appointed by the Hardwick Select Board. The goal of this structure is to allow participation from a range of community perspectives while maintaining a workable committee size.

Possible representation will include:

- Select Board liaison
- Planning Commission representative
- Conservation Commission representative
- forestry or natural resource professionals
- recreation or trail representatives, both motorized and non-motorized
- education or youth representatives
- community members interested in stewardship or recreation

This broad membership structure is intended to encourage community participation and representation of diverse perspectives.

The Select Board will publicly advertise opportunities for residents to express interest in serving on the Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee will be advised in the drafting of the management plan by Trust for Public Land and Northern Rivers Land Trust as non-voting advisors to the Steering Committee.

Selection Process

The Hardwick Select Board will appoint members to the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Steering Committee.

The Select Board will publicly advertise the opportunity for residents to express interest in serving on the committee through the Town website, Front Porch Forum, and other appropriate channels. Interested individuals will be asked to submit a brief Steering Committee Interest Form.

In making appointments, the Select Board may consider a variety of factors including:

- representation from relevant town committees
- interest in forestry, conservation, recreation, or education
- ability to work collaboratively in a committee setting
- representation of a range of community perspectives
- availability to participate in meetings and planning activities

The Select Board may also appoint liaisons or representatives from relevant Town committees such as the Planning Commission or Conservation Commission.

Appointments will be made during a publicly warned Select Board meeting in accordance with Vermont Open Meeting Law.

The Select Board retains authority to adjust committee membership over time as needed to support the work of the committee.

Decision Structure

*Steering Committee

Facilitates community engagement and develops recommendations.

*Professional Experts

Provide technical expertise related to forestry, recreation, and natural resource management.

*Northern Rivers Land Trust and Trust for Public Land

Provide guidance and examples from other town and community forests regarding management planning and community input, and ensure the Management Plan is aligned with and in compliance with the Conservation Easement.

*Select Board

Reviews recommendations and retains final authority regarding the Management Plan and long-term stewardship policies.

Final decisions regarding policy, management activities, and adoption of the Management Plan remain the responsibility of the Select Board, with the Management Plan requiring concurrence from the Northern Rivers Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to ensure compliance with the Conservation Easement.

Community Engagement

Community participation will be an important component of the planning process.

Opportunities for community input will include:

- public meetings
- community surveys
- site visits or field walks
- engagement with local organizations and schools

Community input will help inform development and review of the Management Plan.

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Forest Management Plan

A Management Plan will guide long-term stewardship of the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest. As part of that process, a Forest Management Plan will be prepared to provide a detailed inventory of forest resources and outline recommended forestry practices.

Forest management plans describe the forest's natural resource inventory, identify stewardship goals, and outline management strategies related to recreation, habitat protection, and sustainable forestry.

The Forest Management Plan shall be consistent with the purposes of the Conservation Easement and include at least the following elements:

- 1. Town's forest management objectives;*
- 2. An appropriately scaled, accurate map indicating such items as forest stands, streams and wetlands, and major access routes (truck roads, landings and major skid trails);*
- 3. Forest stand ("treatment unit") descriptions (forest types, stocking levels before and after harvesting, soils, topography, stand quality, site class, insect and disease occurrence, previous management history, and prescribed silvicultural treatment including harvest schedules);*
- 4. Description of any sugaring operation, including how management will account for impacts on species diversity and ecosystem health, and impacts on wildlife movement and public access;*
- 5. Plant and wildlife considerations (identification of known significant habitats and management recommendations);*
- 6. Aesthetic and recreational considerations (impact on viewsheds from public roads, trails and places);*
- 7. Historic and cultural resource considerations (identification of known resources and associated management recommendations); and*
- 8. Management practices to be applied within Ecological Protection Zones, if one is identified.*

The Forest Management Plan is expected to be prepared by the County Forester in coordination with the Town and informed by the work of the Steering Committee.

Forest management plans guide stewardship activities over a ten-year period and may be updated every ten years.

Expected Outcome

The primary outcome of the Steering Committee's work will be development of a Management Plan for the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest.

The plan will summarize information about the property, identify stewardship goals, and outline management strategies related to forest health, wildlife habitat, recreation, and sustainable forestry.

The final plan will be reviewed and approved by the Hardwick Select Board, Northern Rivers Land Trust, and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.

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Scope of Work

Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Steering Committee

The committee will assist the Select Board with planning and stewardship discussions related to development of the Management Plan.

Activities will include:

- supporting community engagement activities
- reviewing information about forest resources and site conditions
- conducting site visits to better understand the property
- coordinating with technical experts including the County Forester
- assisting development of the Management Plan
- identifying stewardship priorities and opportunities
- providing updates and recommendations to the Select Board
- supporting development of long-term stewardship recommendations

The committee will also coordinate with other Town committees and community organizations as appropriate, including the Planning Commission, the Recreation Committee, the Conservation Commission, recreation groups, conservation organizations, and regional partners involved in stewardship of the forest.

Project Timeline

Phase 1

Steering Committee formation and community engagement

Phase 2

Forest inventory and technical assessment

Phase 3

Draft Management Plan

Phase 4

Public review

Phase 5

Northern Rivers Land Trust and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board review and approve Management Plan

Phase 6

Select Board consideration and adoption

Phase 7

Long-term stewardship

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Project Partners

Potential partners may include:

- Trust for Public Land
- Northern Rivers Land Trust (Conservation Easement co-holder)

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (Conservation Easement co-holder)

- County Forester
- conservation organizations
- recreation groups
- schools and community organizations
- volunteers

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Expectations for Steering Committee Members

Members are expected to:

Participate in Meetings

Attend meetings and review materials when possible.

Engage Respectfully

Maintain respectful discussion and collaboration.

Represent Community Interests

Consider a range of community perspectives.

Support Transparency

Help ensure information is shared openly and Vermont's Open Meeting Law is followed.

Focus on Planning

Develop recommendations while recognizing the Select Board retains decision authority.

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Committee Review and Sunset

The Steering Committee is intended to support development of the Management Plan and early stewardship planning for the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest.

Following completion and adoption of the Management Plan, the Select Board may review the role of the Steering Committee and determine whether:

- the committee should continue to assist with stewardship activities
- the committee's role should be modified
- the committee has completed its work

The Select Board retains authority to modify or dissolve the committee as appropriate.

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Frequently Asked Questions

What is a Community or Town Forest?

A community or town forest is a forest owned by a municipality or community organization and managed to provide public benefits such as recreation, conservation, and sustainable forestry, and where there is community participation in, responsibility for, and accountability in management and use of the land.

Who will own the Buffalo Mountain parcel?

The Town of Hardwick, with a conservation easement co-held by Northern Rivers Land Trust and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.

Who makes decisions?

The Select Board retains final authority over the management plan, as approved by Northern Rivers Land Trust and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board.

Has the Town already voted?

Yes. The Town has voted to proceed with the project.

Is there a petition under consideration?

Some residents have circulated a petition related to the Buffalo Mountain project. Regardless of petition activity, the Select Board remains responsible for overseeing planning and stewardship of municipal property. This framework simply outlines a process for community participation and development of a Management Plan should the project move forward.

Will the public be involved?

Yes. Community participation may occur through meetings, surveys, and public review.

What is the Trust for Public Land?

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. Hannah Redmon is TPL's project manager working on the Buffalo Mountain project.

What is the Northern Rivers Land Trust?

The Northern Rivers Land Trust (NRLT) is a non-profit conservation organization serving the towns of Hardwick, Woodbury, Walden, Wolcott, Albany, Greensboro, and Craftsbury. NRLT is dedicated to protecting the natural, scenic, and working landscapes in the headwaters of the Winooski, Lamoille, and Black Rivers and is excited to engage with the Hardwick community on the expansion of the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest. 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. Paul Cillo and Jack Travelstead are the NRLT Board Members working on the Buffalo Mountain project.

What is the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board?

VHCB is an independent quasi-state funding agency that uses revenue from the property transfer tax to make loans and grants to non-profit organizations, towns, municipalities and state agencies. VHCB invests in the construction of affordable housing and conservation strategies that work together to ensure equity, resilience, and vitality for Vermont communities in perpetuity.

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Steering Committee Interest Form

Name:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

Are you a Hardwick resident?

Why are you interested in serving on the Buffalo Mountain Town Forest Steering Committee?

Relevant experience or interests (examples: forestry, trails, wildlife habitat, recreation, education, conservation, community engagement):

Are you able to attend periodic evening meetings?

Additional comments: