

Town of Falmouth Board/Committee Annual Report - 2015

Committee/Board Name: **Land Management & Acquisition Committee (LMAC)**

1. Significant accomplishments, completed tasks, unfinished projects/tasks.

- Falmouth trails were recognized by *Downeast Magazine* as the "Best of the Best." Falmouth was also awarded a 2015 "Landowner of the Year" award by the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife in recognition of its land management efforts.
- One hundred acres of open space land were added to the North Falmouth Community Forest in August with a purchase financed by a 2014 grant awarded by the U.S. Forest Service's Community Forest Program. The town contributed the other half of the funds required for this purchase, with the hope that these funds will be reimbursed via our 2014 Land for Maine Future grant should those funds ever be released. We received donations from the Falmouth Lions Club (\$500) and Walmart (\$1,000) in support of the Falmouth Conservation Corps projects. We were also awarded an \$80,000 Land & Water Conservation Fund grant for acquisition of a property on Mast Road. That purchase agreement later fell through and the grant award was declined.
- Twenty-four acres of new conservation land abutting the Hardy Road Conservation Area were acquired through an agreement with the developer of a new sub-division on Hardy Road. That property includes a small pond and the historic Leighton burial crypt. It also abuts other town-owned land to the east.
- An \$8,041 Recreational Trails Grant was received to establish a handicapped accessible trail in Woods Road Community Forest. That quarter-mile trail was constructed in July, the first such trail in our trail system.
- The amount of time volunteered by Falmouth Conservation Corps members declined significantly this year, from 1,030 hours of time last year to 282 hours this year. This reflects the fact that our trail system is now nearly fully built out. Maintaining the trails requires much less effort, by smaller work parties, than building new trails.
- Constructed 0.9 miles of new trail in the upper region of North Falmouth Community Forest, including a connection made to existing trails in Windham's abutting Lowell Preserve. That connection allows hikers and bikers on the Cross Falmouth Trail to extend their journey another 1.5 miles to the Windham Fire Station on Babbidge [Falmouth] Road. Another quarter mile new trail was constructed in the Hardy Road Conservation Area.
- Constructed a new 0.8-mile entry trail from Longwoods Road into Woods Road Community Forest. That work reestablished an overgrown trail laid out when the Cornerstone subdivision was built in 1995. An existing unused parking area dating from the same era was reestablished as well.
- Constructed a hand-carry boat launch ramp to the East Branch of the Piscataqua River on Falmouth Road and cleared fallen trees from the river west of the Field Road bridge. Much more tree clearing will be necessary in 2016 to re-open the river to canoe or kayak travel.
- Eradicated thousands of invasive plants - honeysuckle, bittersweet, buckthorn, multiflora rose, knotweed, and barberry - on various conservation properties, including the East Branch, River Point, Hardy Road Conservation Areas and Blackstrap Hill, Woods Road, Hadlock and North Falmouth Community Forests. Some of this work was done by volunteers; other as part of the Conservation Commission's contract with Vegetation Control Services.
- Prepared a letter to send to all landowners abutting town conservation properties soliciting their help in monitoring these properties and reminding them of prohibited activities on town land. That letter will be sent in January 2016.
- Issues with pets on our public lands were discussed at length in multiple LMAC meetings. LMAC's proposal to host a public meeting on this issue was approved by the Council. That meeting will be held in 2016. The problems with pets are piling up and can no longer be ignored.

- With considerable help from the Parks staff, we fully implemented the vegetation management plan for River Point. That work involved bush hogging four areas of that property to retain their grassland habitat type. Portions of these fields were rapidly growing into forest.
- Our open space acquisition rating guide was revised to include points awarded for properties that lie within the Rural Area designated in the town's 2014 Comprehensive Plan.
- Continued to promote a bird migration research project conducted at River Point Conservation Area by the Biodiversity Research Institute. Also conducted a breeding bird survey on portions of Woods Road, Blackstrap Hill, & North Falmouth Community Forest and River Point Conservation Area. Results of that survey are still being compiled. Brush piles to foster New England cottontail rabbit and other wildlife populations were built in our River Point and North Falmouth properties.
- Hosted a well-attended woodcock mating flight field trip through Parks and Community Programs and led by the Biodiversity Research Institute at River Point.
- The Council approved the placement of an easement on the 24-acre former Stillings parcel on Blackstrap Road. The Falmouth Land Trust accepted the easement without payment of a stewardship fee, pending release of the LMF funds. Those funds would include a stewardship fee for this and two other parcels included in the LMF agreement.
- Managed a forest harvesting operation in Woods Road Community Forest to create more understory browse in order to provide a winter source of food for deer in that state-designated Deer Wintering Area. A public meeting and field trip were conducted to acquaint the public with that operation.
- The Council, after considerable debate and a presentation by Maine Natural Areas Program forest ecologist Andy Cutko, approved a forest management plan for a portion of Blackstrap Hill Community Forest. That work, designed to create more early successional habitat and improve forest health, will be done in 2016.
- The new River Point Conservation Area bridge was dedicated in June with a well attended ribbon cutting ceremony. The new bridge now makes this property safely accessible by service vehicles and pedestrians once again, enabling the kind of management work cited above.
- The Council declined LMAC's recommendation that we submit another US Forest Service grant to acquire a ±35 acre property abutting North Falmouth Community Forest that the committee had rated highly as an acquisition target. They supported the acquisition itself, but were uncomfortable funding it given that there is not a plan in place to fund acquisitions over the long haul. The Committee will develop and submit such a plan in 2016.

2. Summary of ongoing duties, tasks, charge, etc.

Our purpose is to implement the five goals specified in *The Greening of Falmouth*:

1. Retain and protect Falmouth's rural character and natural resources,
2. Protect large tracts of land for wildlife habitat,
3. Insure the availability of outdoor recreation,
4. Provide connectivity between open space areas, and
5. Actively manage open space to benefit all citizens of Falmouth.

To accomplish these goals we plan, acquire, manage, and communicate. More specifically, we

- Set strategic direction;
- Collect and manage data;
- Identify and assess key properties for acquisition;
- Create strategies for acquisitions;
- Create and implement management plans for acquired properties; and
- Communicate with town officials, other organizations and the public.

3. Goals or a work plan for 2016.

- Construct an enhanced mobility accessible trail in the Suckfish Brook Conservation Area that would give people with limited mobility access to the beaver pond overlook.
- Harden areas of existing trails that need attention and place more benches along existing trails.
- Construct new parking areas at trailheads on Blackstrap and Field Roads, and post trail-crossing signs at key trail-road intersections, to alleviate safety concerns.
- Implement the Blackstrap Hill forest management plan.
- Demolish the house at River Point Conservation Area that is in poor condition and has become an attractive nuisance for vandals.
- Build a new entry trail at the Hurricane Road entrance to Blackstrap Hill Community Forest to alleviate the level of use the River Trail in that area receives. CMP permission will be required for this project.
- Clear obstructing fallen trees along the East Branch to open up the canoe trail along that river.
- Actively pursue acquisition of additional conservation land that meets *The Greening of Falmouth* and Comprehensive Plan goals.
- Continue to kill invasives plants on various town conservation properties, with particular attention to the harvest areas in Woods Road and Blackstrap Hill Community Forests.
- Develop a new financial plan for acquisitions.
- Continue to inform the public about our work.

4. Budget request.

- **Ombudsman: \$55,000 • Acquisition Fund: \$300,000 • Land Management Fund: \$18,000**