

# ***The Greening of Falmouth***

## **Ten-Year Progress Report, 2006-2016**

### **Land Management & Acquisition Committee**

#### I. Background

Falmouth's first open space plan was adopted in 1989. In 2004, the Long Range Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) asked the Conservation Commission to update that plan. They agreed and created a seven-member sub-committee comprised of people with varied interests in Falmouth land use to prepare the plan. The sub-committee's membership included Conservation Commission members, a Falmouth Land Trust representative, two large landowners, and a developer. The sub-committee worked for two years to produce *The Greening of Falmouth*; solicited public input regarding its recommendations; and submitted the plan to the Town Council in June 2006. The Council adopted the plan in August of that year which included a directive that the town create an Open Space Sub-committee of the Conservation Commission and contract for a part-time Open Space Ombudsman to oversee its implementation. The ombudsman began work in December 2006. The Open Space Sub-committee subsequently evolved into the Land Management & Acquisition Committee (LMAC), a Council appointed committee in 2013.

For the purposes of its work, the committee defined open space as "Any non-developed land and water areas in the community. Open space may include woodland, wetlands, riparian corridors, farmland, orchards, and fields that serve a variety of functions: Wildlife habitat, buffer zones, ecological protection, agriculture, passive public recreation, and scenic enjoyment." The report did not include parks, cemeteries, golf courses, or other active recreational areas in its definition of "open space."



#### II. Vision, Goals

*The Greening of Falmouth* articulated a 100-year vision for our community summarized as follows:

*In 2106 – and beyond – Falmouth is still a community that has significant tracts of open land, healthy & diverse plant & wildlife populations, opportunities for traditional outdoor recreation, and visible rural character. Falmouth continues to be a “quality place.”*

To achieve that vision, the report identified five major goals regarding open space in Falmouth:

1. To retain and protect Falmouth's rural character and natural resources.
2. To protect large tracts of land for wildlife habitat.
3. To insure the availability of outdoor recreation.
4. To provide connectivity between open space areas.
5. To actively manage open space to benefit all citizens of Falmouth.

While not identifying any specific properties to be targeted for future acquisition, the plan did identify two general priorities:

1. Large, contiguous parcels of 250-acres or more; and
2. "Jewel properties" that may have little recreational or wildlife habitat value, but protect scenic views and preserve rural character.

### III. Falmouth Open Space in 2006

Taken together, the Town and Falmouth Land Trust owned or held easements on 1,432 acres of open space. Much of the town-owned land was not publicly identified and inaccessible to most residents, including land that now constitutes Hadlock Community Forest, Woods Road Community Forest, Hardy Road Conservation Area, and the River Point Conservation Area. The Falmouth Nature Preserve and the Land Trust's Blackstrap Hill Preserve were the only large open space properties that had an established trail system.

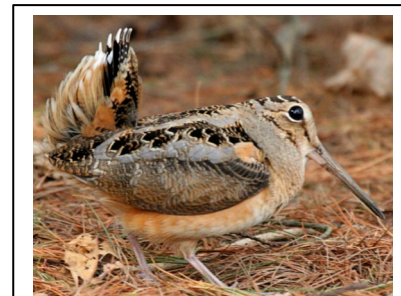


While the town had long standing interest in protecting open space, it had no organized system for identifying and evaluating potential acquisitions, managing the open space parcels it owned, or monitoring the easements it held. Many acquisitions resulted from community concern about preventing development on key parcels such as Wilshire Farm, Blackstrap Hill, Pleasant Hill, and Community Park, and were more reactive than proactive in nature. Likewise, most Land Trust properties came through ownership or a required easement on subdivision conservation set-aside parcels. While there was a great deal of public support for open space protection, there was very little underlying structure actually make it happen.

### IV. Falmouth Open Space in 2016

As a result of *The Greening of Falmouth*, the town now has a robust system for proactively acquiring and managing open space properties. The key elements of that system are:

- The Land Management & Acquisition Committee (LMAC), a group of citizens and town staff that:
  - ✓ Develop procedures for how conservation land and associated facilities are created, managed, and maintained in accordance with town ordinances.
  - ✓ Advise the Town Council on matters pertaining to the acquisition and management of conservation lands.
  - ✓ Create management plans for each designated conservation property owned by the town.
  - ✓ Produce information and guidance for the public regarding trails, land, and public facilities in Falmouth.
  - ✓ Recommend funding levels for the acquisition of new properties and for the management of existing properties.
  - ✓ Design and conduct public information events and activities regarding open space issues.
- The Open Space Ombudsman, who:
  - ✓ Works with landowners interested in permanently protecting their property from development.
  - ✓ Oversees the development of management plans for each open space property, and is responsible for implementing those plans.
  - ✓ Builds relationships with external entities and agencies in a position to support and further the town's open space efforts, including the Falmouth Land Trust.



*Protecting wildlife habitat is a major management priority.*

- ✓ Monitors easements held by the town.
  - ✓ Raises funds for open space acquisition and management activities.
  - ✓ Provides the day to day leadership needed to keep things moving and on track.
- The Falmouth Conservation Corps, a group of volunteers who provide much of the labor required to effectively manage town and Falmouth Land Trust open space properties. Over 6,700 hours of volunteer time has been logged by a multitude of volunteers since 2007.



*People with a wide range of recreational interests use our trails.*

The Town now has a system for identifying and rating possible acquisition parcels; a set of policies and procedures for managing those properties; and the annual budget appropriations needed to accomplish its goals.

During the past decade, the Falmouth Land Trust has become more proactive acquiring easements and ownership of conservation properties. The town has also enacted a conservation subdivision ordinance that mandates at least 30% of new subdivision land be preserved as open space.

The effectiveness of this system can be seen in the results, as summarized in Table I:

Table I: Open Space Acreage	2006	2016	% Change
Total acreage of designated Town open space properties <sup>1</sup>	798	1,830	129%
Total acreage of Falmouth Land Trust open space properties	634	1,045	65%
Other open space parcels <sup>2</sup>	39	86	121%
Number of miles of pedestrian trails, town wide <sup>3</sup>	8.4	48.6	479%

Perhaps the most impressive accomplishment is how connected many of these parcels are, both to other Falmouth conservation properties as well as to adjacent towns. To have so much permanently protected land in the most developed area of Maine is a real gift to future generations.

However, not much success has been realized in protecting “jewel properties.” While almost thirty such properties have been tentatively identified by LMAC, only one has been protected.

<sup>1</sup> Does not include land the town owned that was not designated as open space at the time. 698 acres of town-owned conservation land have been newly acquired since 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Includes conservation land owned by Portland Trails, Maine Coast Heritage Trust & the State of Maine.

<sup>3</sup> Doesn't not include Portland Trails, Macworth Island, or Maine Audubon trails.

Town-Owned Open Space Properties	
Name	Size (acres)
Blackstrap Hill Community Forest	234
Brookfield Open Space	17
Deer Ridge & Wildwood Way Open Space	19
East Branch Conservation Area	56
Falmouth Community Park North	61
Falmouth Nature Preserve	83
Hadlock Community Forest	294
Hardy Road Conservation Area	68
High Meadows Open Space	15
Longwood Road Forest	27
North Falmouth Community Forest	373
River Point Conservation Area	41
Town Forest	22
Suckfish Brook Conservation Area	94
Woods Road Community Forest	160

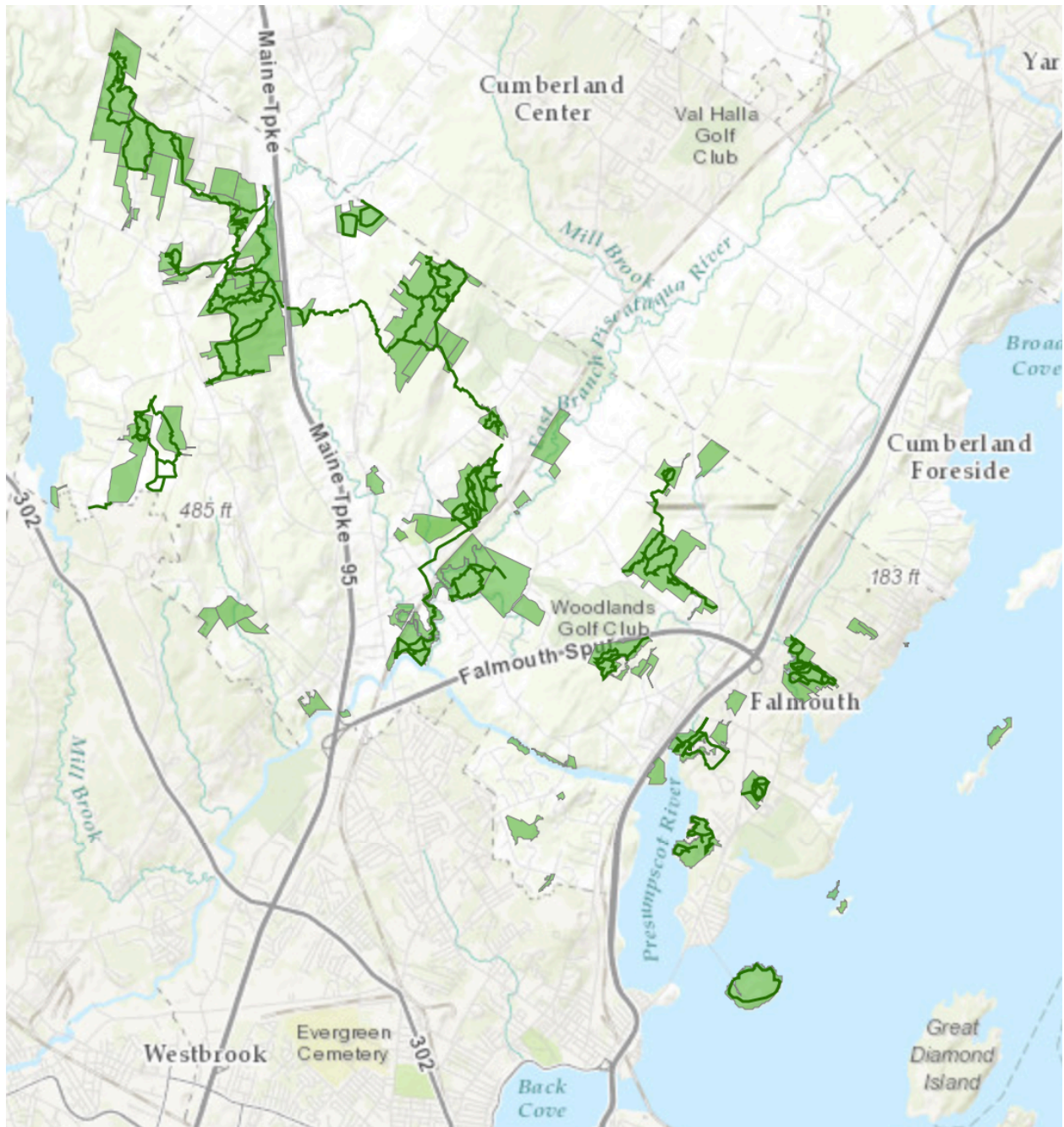
#### IV. Financial Summary

In 2007, 69% of Falmouth voters approved a ballot measure that authorized the Town Council to appropriate \$5,000,000 over the next ten years for open space acquisition. It did not require the Council to spend that amount, but sent a clear message of support for such spending. Annual appropriations have varied over the years with the ups and downs of the economy, but Town Council support for open space has been strong during that period. The town has also been very successful with fundraising to support open space acquisition and management. These efforts are summarized in Table II:

Table II: Open Space Funding, 2006-16.		
Town Appropriation	Other Funding	Total
\$1,971,969	\$3,980,343	\$5,952,312

In addition to funding acquisition costs, the town has also spent \$35,592 from 2008-16 on property management expenses, such as trail building supplies and materials, kiosks, invasive plant control, signage, and parking areas.

# Falmouth's Publicly Accessible Parks & Conservation Properties



[As of September 2016]

A breakdown of the “Other Funding” category includes these sources:

Table III: Sources of Outside Funding.	
Source	Amount
Grants	\$1,822,506
Cash Donations	30,461
Bargain Sales	530,808
Land/Easement Donations	397,000
Resource Sales	39,568
Land & Water Conservation Fund Mitigation	1,160,000
TOTAL =	\$3,980,343

Grant funders for property acquisitions have included the Land for Maine’s Future Program, Maine Natural Resources Conservation Program, Casco Bay Estuary Project, Maine Department of Environmental Protection, and the U.S. Forest Service. Trails have been funded by the Recreational Trails Program grants, and donations from the Falmouth Lion’s Club, and the Falmouth Walmart.

Bargain sales represent the value of the charitable contribution seven different landowners made when selling their land for less than its appraised value.

Resource sales come from the value of wood harvested from town property during forest improvement operations.

## V. Opportunities & Challenges

While we have made a great deal of progress protecting and managing open space in our community, the next decade will offer additional opportunities and challenges. They likely include:

- ❖ *Maintaining public support for new open space acquisitions.* There are still prime undeveloped parcels in town that have high or very high conservation value, particularly parcels that add to the size of existing conservation areas or which provide connectivity between parcels. Size is important to preserving high quality wildlife habitat and connectivity is important to maintain and/or expand our extensive trail network. Currently, several privately held parcels include key segments of our trail system that might eventually be sold to new owners less willing to allow trails on their property. Acquiring these parcels in fee or by easement should be a high priority.



*This is one of several awards Falmouth has received for its management of open space properties.*

- ❖ *Managing our open space properties for multiple uses.* These parcels were acquired with the intent of keeping them wild places, where important ecological functions and values such as recharging ground water, protecting water quality, preserving wildlife habitat, sequestering carbon, protecting air quality, and providing people with opportunities for the kind of reflection and recreation only available in the natural world. As the popularity of our trail system grows, conflicts will likely increase between and among different user groups. These include mountain bikers, dog walkers, bird watchers, geocachers, hunters, hikers, and nature enthusiasts. It will be a challenge to manage these conflicts and the overall level of use, while keeping the preservation of our open space properties natural ecological functions and values foremost.
- ❖ *Finding a new generation of conservation leaders and volunteers.* New Town Council members are elected every year and town staff positions change over time. LMAC members turn over periodically; volunteers age out, move on, or lose interest in the work; and new town policy priorities capture the public and policy maker’s attention. Unless new leaders are well informed and supportive of Falmouth’s open space initiative, it will be hard to sustain this work over time. Periodically updating the open space plan and making a determined effort to inform elected and appointed leaders about the work will help address this problem.
- ❖ *Offering more opportunities for outdoor recreation to children and adults.* Our open space properties are wonderful classrooms for learning about the outdoors. In an era when “nature deficit disorder” has become a recognized problem nationally, there is much we can do to reconnect citizens with the natural resources that sustain us all. More offerings could be scheduled through Falmouth Parks and Community Programs and much closer connections can be made with our public and private schools and universities.
- ❖ *Creating a new open space plan that will guide this work in the coming decade.* Investing the time and effort required to develop a new iteration of *The Greening of Falmouth* would do much to lay the groundwork for addressing the aforementioned challenges and opportunities. Done well, it will also reengage the public and policy makers in thoughtful consideration regarding the kind of community we hope to leave to future generations.



*Our open space properties offer many opportunities for learning about nature.*

## VII. Conclusion

The Town of Falmouth’s open space initiative has had a substantial impact on our community over the past ten years, and has drawn widespread praise from environmental leaders both regionally and statewide. At this juncture, it would be easy to declare it a success and move on to other policy priorities. In our view, that would be premature. There is still more to be done if we are to fully realize *The Greening of Falmouth’s* vision, and given the steady pressure on our remaining undeveloped land, little time left to do it. Creating a new open space plan focused on our goals for the next decade would be a logical next step to address the identified challenges and opportunities.