

## **ACT NOW TO SAVE OUR PUBLIC LAND**

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The Westford School Board is deciding how much of the approximately 65 acres of Westford School District land to transfer to the new Regional Education District in 2017. Should all of the land be transferred, public access to our community playing fields and Town trails will no longer be controlled by Westford residents. The time to take action is now. This is our Town's land, donated, maintained and enjoyed by Westford residents. It belongs to Westford and should be transferred to our Town. Please contact your Westford School Board representative now and let them know that they should not give our public land away.

What we all consider to be "school property" on Brookside Road, actually consists of 3 separate parcels, which were donated to the Westford Town School District through 3 different deeds at 3 different times by Westford citizens. The 3 parcels together total approximately 79 contiguous acres. These are a 14 acre parcel where the school building, parking lots and play ground are located. A 15 acre parcel with playing fields and wooded area. A 50 acre parcel of forest and meadowland where Town trails are located.

With the above being understood, the Planning Commission believes that it will be much more beneficial to the citizens of Westford, in both the short and long term, if the Town owns the 15 acre and 50 acre parcels, rather than the new RED. We do not believe there is any need to spend taxpayer dollars to determine which property interest (ownership vs. leasing) best serves the taxpayers of Westford. On the contrary, we think the decision should be made to transfer the 15 and 50 acre parcels to the Town. The Town should then spend its time and resources determining how to create a mechanism whereby those lands will always remain available for use by the school and remain open and available for citizens of Westford.

In support of its position, the Planning Commission points to the following:

1. The residents of Westford have paid for the upkeep and maintenance of all school property through property taxes and volunteer efforts. It has been through the efforts of Westford residents and Westford tax dollars that these lands have been able to be utilized by many citizens for recreational purposes. It has always been the residents of this Town who have had control over the use and maintenance of these school properties.
2. The Town has no guarantee what the new RED will do, or not do with the school property in the future. It could encumber the parcels with liens, bonds or mortgages that would make it financially impossible for the Town to re-acquire in the future. It could also encumber the lands with additional restrictions and easements that would make it more difficult for Westford residents to access and use these properties. Our Town has no guarantee this brand new school district will manage these lands with the best interest of Westford residents in mind.
3. The 14 acre parcel, on which the school is located, is the only parcel that is required to be retained by the School District for transfer to the Regional Education District pursuant Vermont statutes. The Planning Commission advocates that this 14 acre parcel is all the property the new RED should receive to operate. RED ownership of the additional 65 acres should not effect its ability to provide quality educational services. It does not

appear logical for the new RED to take on the additional responsibility of maintaining these extra lands for Westford's benefit. If ownership and management of these lands becomes a burden, the new RED board could conceivably limit, or restrict access and their use. Whereas under ownership of the Town of Westford, we are guaranteed these lands will always be available to our school children and residents. Town ownership will guarantee that these lands will continue to be utilized for educational and recreational purposes and not encumbered with financial liens, or restrictive easements.

4. Our Westford Town Plan, the vision document our Westford by-laws are based upon, clearly states the importance of Westford's recreation trails and public lands. Section 4.2.6 Recreation recognizes the importance of the school's existing trail network, maintained by Westford's Conservation Commission, as a focal point for school and public recreational activities. Section 9.1 Policy directs the Town "...to sustain the existing public trails system and promote its expansion for use by the public for recreational purposes...." Further more, Westford taxpayers have regularly approved tax spending to upgrade equipment necessary to maintain the school trails and recreational amenities.
5. Should the 15 acre parcel with our playing fields go with our 14 acre school parcel to the new RED the Town would lose its access from Brookside Road. Without this contiguous parcel the 50 acre parcel with our Town trails becomes land locked and the Town will lose its control to provide unrestricted public access for our community. Furthermore, the 14 acre and 15 acre parcels contain the only recreational fields located in Town, which are used consistently by the Town Recreational Department to host the Town's sports programs. Therefore, the Town should retain ownership of some portion of the recreational fields to ensure future access for Town recreational programs.

In conclusion it is the unanimous opinion of the Planning Commission that the Westford School Board transfer its ownership of the 15 acre and 50 acre parcels to the Town of Westford. It is only through ownership by the Town of Westford that we can guarantee these lands will continue to serve our community for public education and recreation activities, with access to all.

**Please act now. Contact your Westford School Board representative and let them know how important it is for the Town of Westford to own these School District properties.**

Sincerely,  
The Westford Planning Commission.

The Planning Commission meets the third Monday of each month at 6:30 pm downstairs at the Town Offices. Meetings are open to the public and you are encouraged to attend. For more information on current projects, or to confirm meeting times and agenda visit:

<https://westfordvt.us/boards/planning-commission/>