

Interim Management Plan
for the
Maple Shade Town Forest
Westford, Vermont

Prepared by:

Westford Conservation Commission; Sarah Pinto, Chair
Ethan Tapper, Chittenden County Forester

With information from the 2009 Use Value Appraisal Program Forest Management Plan for the Robert Jackson property, prepared by Greenleaf Forestry, Westford, Vermont and amended by Charlie Hancock, North Woods Forestry, Montgomery Center, Vermont;
And the Stranahan Property's Interim Management Plan, prepared by the Marshfield (Vermont) Conservation Commission, dated July 18, 2007.

PURPOSE OF INTERIM MANAGEMENT PLAN

This document is intended to inform the management of the Maple Shade Town Forest (MTF), also known as the 'Jackson Farm' which was acquired by the Town of Westford, Vermont in 2017. This will serve as the Interim Management Plan (IMP) for the property, to dictate all allowed management activities in the WTF until it is replaced by a 'final' management plan approved by the Westford Selectboard.

The purpose of this IMP is to identify and address issues that may arise during and after the transfer of the MTF from its current private owner to public ownership. This plan will serve until the town can develop a full-fledged Management Plan (MP), utilizing a public process, and a Forest Management Plan (FMP) prepared by a licensed forest management professional.

BACKGROUND

The Town of Westford voted in November, 2016 to borrow an amount not to exceed \$185,000 to purchase 130 acres of the 'Jackson Farm' Property, previously owned by David and Lynn Gauthier, to create a town forest. In conjunction with funds pledged by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB), the private sale of two additional pieces of the property, and additional donations, these funds will cover the cost of the MTF, in addition to administrative costs accrued in the conservation of the property. This effort to conserve and purchase this property was spearheaded by citizens of Westford, the Westford Conservation Commission, the Westford Planning Commission and the Vermont Land Trust (VLT). The property will be owned by the Town of Westford as a Maple Shade Town Forest, subject to a Conservation Easement held by VLT and VHCB.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Maple Shade Town Forest (MTF), which is the 130-acre portion of the Gauthiers' property to be retained by the Town of Westford, is a large block of primarily forested land located just west of Brookside Road in Westford, across the road from the Westford Elementary School. It is contiguous with several other forested properties, which together comprise a forested block approximately 750 acres in size, bounded by Brookside Road, Vermont Route 128, Woods Hollow Road, and Maple Tree Lane. In addition to forested land the MTF contains several small wetland areas.

Forests on the MTF property are dominated by softwood and mixed wood cover types, including a young stand of nearly pure white pine in the south of the property. Among productive forested areas, the predominant natural community present is Hemlock-Northern Hardwood Forest, though Northern Hardwood Forest and Hemlock Forest are present in some areas. Some areas in the northeast of the property were logged in 2014-15. This harvest targeted mainly mature hemlock trees, and removed some small groups of stems. Some mature and low grade hardwood was also cut at the time of this harvest.

The MTF features 3 wetlands areas mapped as 'Class II' on the National and State Wetlands Inventory Maps. Class II wetlands are considered 'significant' by the state of Vermont. Two of these wetland areas feature open water and are excellent habitat for a variety of wildlife, including beaver, otter, muskrat, and waterfowl, in addition to fish, reptiles and amphibians. They are also home to a number of important and sensitive plant species and their associated vertebrates and invertebrates. Wetlands such as those found on the MTF provide critical water filtration services and mitigate the effects of flooding. These wetland areas drain into Rogers Brook, which connects to the Browns River just to the east of the MTF.

The history of the MTF is similar to many forested properties in Vermont, in that it was likely cleared in the early to mid-1800's for sheep pasture. During this period, approximately 80% of Vermont was cleared of forests. Probably beginning in the late 1800's, areas of the property were allowed to revert to forest. Since that time the MTF has returned to being primarily forested. The youngest forests on the property appear to have established from pasture abandonment or planting in the 1960's. The legacy of this history on the MTF is historical artifacts and features, such as agricultural soils, stone walls, and antique farm equipment in forested areas.

PUBLIC ACCESS

Public access to the property shall be along a trail extending primarily along the southern boundary of the farmland from Brookside Road. The Town of Westford will retain an easement to maintain a pedestrian trail along that boundary line,

with some deviation from the southern boundary as the trail enters from Brookside Road and in the wooded ledges along the path as is necessary for easy pedestrian passage. The Town will also be able to create an opening in the stone wall at the farmland's southern frontage on Brookside Road to allow the public onto this trail from the nearby parking at the Westford School. The Town also has vehicular access for Town management use north of the separately-owned farmhouse and around the edge of the meadow as depicted on the Maple Shade Town Forest site map.

Parking will be provided at the Westford School on the other side of Brookside Road. Soon after acquisition, the Town of Westford will be commissioning work on the stone wall along Brookside Road to create an opening for the Town Forest access trail. The Town will be installing a culvert in the ditch along Brookside Road, installing a crossing to the new opening in the wall, and creating the trail over the privately-owned farmland to get to the Town Forest. Within the first month of ownership the public will be informed that access via Brookside Road will be restricted for up to two months while the access is constructed. The Town will clear brush and mow along the stone wall to demark the location of the trail and to limit its impact on existing farmland as much as possible. Where necessary, the Town will use stakes, signage, or other methods to keep pedestrians on the trail. The Town will develop a trail through the small, wooded ledge area as this trail proceeds west to the Town Forest. The Town will maintain close contact with the Pouliot family, or subsequent owner of the farmland, to identify potential issues along this interface of agricultural use and public access, ideally before they arise.

The town will also improve a trail on the School property to Brookside Road from the new opening in the wall to lead the public across to the Town Forest access trail. The Town will work with the Road Commissioner to determine any road crossing signage or painting to ensure safe passage across the road. The Town will install signage to:

- identify the Town Forest access trail,
- inform the public that they are crossing private property and instructing them to remain on the trail across the farm property, and
- inform the public of allowed uses during the period covered by this interim plan.

Signage will be placed in some combination of the School Parking Lot and Trail System, at the new opening in the wall, and at the opening to the Town Forest. Given the interim nature of this plan, signage will likely be simple in form.

Forest Management Access

Access to the property for forest management purposes should be considered in any access agreement the town reaches with neighboring landowners for public access of the MTF. Access improvement for forest management may occur over the vehicular access described above, without amending this IMP.

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

As detailed above, the MTF features a compelling mix of important natural resources, including healthy, diverse natural communities, wetlands, significant historic and cultural features and wildlife habitat. Attached as an exhibit to this Plan is an Ecological Report completed by Allaire Diamond, Conservation Ecologist for Vermont Land Trust.

The management of these resources will be conducted in accordance with best practices, in addition to the objectives of the Town, as determined in this IMP and in future MP's and FMP's. Until a final MP can be drafted, these resources will be managed as follows:

Forested Areas:

No silvicultural treatments shall occur until the Westford community is able to create a comprehensive Management Plan, using an inclusive public process. Once a long-term Management Plan is created, forested areas in the MTF will be managed for long-term health, productivity, and ecosystem function. These areas will only be actively managed under the supervision of a licensed professional forester, acting in accordance with an MP and FMP approved by the Town of Westford and Vermont Land Trust. Forest Management activities should center around encouraging the growth of healthy, productive forests, the encouragement of species and structural diversity, maintenance and protection of surface waters, and management of high quality wildlife habitat for a wide variety of native species.

Open Field Area:

The Town will continue to allow the Pouliot family to hay the open land on the Town Forest property and to use the hay for their farm operation.

Wetlands and Riparian Areas:

Wetlands and riparian areas in the MTF will be managed in accordance with state recommendations for the protection of these areas and the Conservation Easement held by VLT and VHCB. In the event of harvesting, these areas will be managed in accordance with Vermont Acceptable Management Practices (AMP's) for maintaining water quality on logging jobs. The primary objectives for wetland and riparian areas is to preserve them as intact, functional ecosystems, important wildlife habitat, and sources of clean water.

Cultural and Historic Features:

Cultural and historic features, defined here as the evidence of human land use present in the property, should be protected in the course of land use and forest management whenever possible. Resources of high anthropological or historical significance should be reported to the appropriate state, federal or local authorities. The stone wall along several boundaries of the Westford Town Forest is of historic, cultural, and scenic importance to the Westford Community. The

Town will not destroy the stone wall, and any work done on the stone wall shall preserve its historic character as much as reasonably possible.

PROPOSED PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS

There are no existing physical improvements on the property, with the exception of a network of logging roads and sections of the stone wall. No new physical improvements are planned on the property for the period covered by this IMP. However, during the first year the Town may install a kiosk informing residents of allowed and prohibited uses as well as other pertinent information deemed necessary and appropriate.

Trails

The potential for future recreational trails will be evaluated during preparation of the final MP. Until that time, no new trails will be established in the MTF. The Town will inventory the existing logging road network and evaluate their use as trails. During the period covered by this IMP, the Town may close roads during mud season and/or if there is evidence or concern of resource impact in particular locations. Furthermore, the Town may mitigate and/or repair stormwater and erosion damage on logging roads, excluding installation of permanent infrastructure, to protect natural resources and water quality.

ALLOWED USES

Potential future uses of the MTF include: sustainable forestry, hiking, skiing, snowshoeing, other forms of recreation, hunting, outdoor education, horseback riding, and the development of municipal septic capacity. Enabling the property to pass into public ownership will assure that these or selected other uses will be available to all members of the community in perpetuity. Allowed uses of the property will ultimately be determined in the final MP, in conjunction with a public process to determine the wishes of residents and interest groups in Westford. Non-motorized public access is required by the VHCB/VLT easement that will encumber the property following its conveyance to the Town, but the Town may limit access to the Property to assure compliance with any requirements of the grant of development rights and conservation restrictions or to protect public health and safety. At the time of the acquisition of the MTF, the property may be used for hiking, nature viewing, skiing, snowshoeing and hunting.

MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

This IMP will be submitted to the Westford Selectboard for approval prior to the acquisition of the MTF, and followed by a final MP, conducted with a public process, within a year of its approval. An updated FMP should be drafted within 5 years of the approval of this IMP. Following this update, the MP and FMP will be updated every 10 years. Review of these documents will be conducted by the

Vermont Land Trust, the Westford Conservation Commission, the Westford Selectboard, and the Chittenden County Forester.

ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

Ultimate ownership of the property will be held by the Town of Westford. VLT, along with VHCB, will co-hold the conservation easements on the property. All subsequent management and operational details will be handled by the Town's Selectboard and Conservation Commission, including monitoring the Property for illegal use, and ensuring that activities occur in accordance with the appropriate management documents.

Partners and Contact Information

Chittenden County Forester, Ethan Tapper, ethan.tapper@vermont.state.gov, (802) 585-9099

Vermont Land Trust, Cara Montgomery, Regional Stewardship Manager, cara@vlt.org, 802-861-6406

APPENDICES

Site map

Primary agricultural soils map

Copy of Conservation Easement (Signed version to be added at closing)

VLT Ecological Report

Approved by the Town of Westford Selectboard the _____ day of _____, 2017.

Allison Hope

Casey Mathieu (Chair)

David Tilton

