

*Management Plan For*



# **The Westford Town Lands**

Westford, Chittenden County, Vermont

January 2019 - January 2029

**Drafted By The Westford Town Lands Long-Term Management Planning Committee:**

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Approved By:

 9/26/19  
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 9/26/19  
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 9/26/19  
William Cleary, Westford Select Board Date

 9-23-19  
Cara Montgomery, Vermont Land Trust Date

# Introduction

**This Management Plan (MP)** is the result of the **Westford Town Lands Long-term Management Plan Committee’s (“the Committee”)** work over the course of **2018**. The Committee was originally formed following the acquisition of the 130-acre **Maple Shade Town Forest (MSTF)** by the Town of Westford, with the objective of plotting a course for the management of this new, conserved town forest. The Committee chose to expand this charge beyond the MSTF to include the neighboring 70-acre parcel of town-owned forested land located behind the Westford School. This latter parcel was transferred from the Westford School District to the Town of Westford in 2017, and is now called the **Misty Meadows Trails and Forest (MMTF)**. **The MSTF and the MMTE, taken together, will be referred to as the Westford Town Lands (WTL).**

Over 2018, the Committee led a robust, comprehensive and inclusive process of gathering information from the Westford community and from experts in various natural resource areas. The Committee has provided multiple opportunities for residents of Westford to participate in and provide input on the management of these lands, including an online and paper survey, in-person input gathering at public events, and several public walks and meetings. **The result of this work is the following Management Plan, which:**

- **RECOMMENDS specific management strategies for the WTL that honor the wishes of the citizens of Westford, are grounded in the responsible management of natural systems and comply with easement and deed restrictions on these parcels.**
- **PROVIDES a vision for how the WTL might strengthen the Westford community, contribute to a greater quality of life for residents of Westford and beyond, and dovetail with the Town’s stated goal of the responsible development of the Westford Common.**

This MP shall detail vision and goals, current resources, management philosophy, permitted and restricted uses, management goals, objectives, guidelines and actions for the two aforementioned parcels of land owned by the Town of Westford, and also for the WTL as a whole. The management of the MSTF and the MMTF shall differ from one another in some respects due to established uses, easement restrictions and other factors, but these parcels shall be considered together within an overarching management structure (and described together within this MP), to provide a more robust vision for how these municipal lands support each other and the broader goals of the Westford community.

This plan is intended to be implemented by the Westford Conservation Commission, in cooperation with other town committees and commissions and outside partners and experts, and to be used as a reference by anyone interested in the WTL or involved in its management.

This MP will be updated and submitted for approval by the Westford Select Board and the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) every 10 years. This plan is a living document and may be amended as necessary by the Westford Conservation Commission (WCC). The MSTF portion of the MP is subject to Select Board and VLT approval. The MP will undergo comprehensive review in 2028, with a goal of an updated MP being submitted to the Select Board by January, 2029.

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## Process and Findings of the Committee

The Westford Town Lands Long-term Management Plan Committee was put in place by the Westford Select Board in March of 2018. The Committee is made up of seven members:

- Koi Boynton, Westford Planning Commission
- Will Dunkley, Resident
- Michelle Gates, Resident
- Tom Schmidt, Resident
- Rosemary Shea-Cobb, Resident
- Kurt Sherman, Westford School
- Marilyn Thomas, Westford Conservation Commission

During the process of developing the MP the committee has been advised by:

- Dave Adams, Habitat Specialist, VT Dept. of Fish & Wildlife
- Bridget Butler, Bird Diva
- Brock Freyer, District Wetlands Ecologist, ANR, VT Dept. of Environmental Conservation\*
- Steve Hangenbuch, Conservation Biologist, Audubon Vermont \*
- John Hayden, Entomologist and Farm Owner at The Farm Between
- Bob Heiser, Champlain Valley Regional Director, VT Land Trust
- Charlie Hohn, Wetlands Scientists, ANR, VT Dept. of Environmental Conservation\*
- Melissa Manka, Westford Town Planning Coordinator
- Jason Mazurowski, Field Naturalist, Graduate Program, Dept. of Plant Biology, UVM\*
- Cara Montgomery, Regional Stewardship Manager, VT Land Trust
- Sarah Pinto, Westford Resident & Chair of Westford Conservation Commission
- David Rugh, Westford Town Attorney
- Andrea Shortsleeve, Habitat Biologist, VT Dept. of Fish & Wildlife
- Ethan Tapper, Chittenden County Forester, VT Dept. of Forests, Parks & Recreation\*\*

After walking the MSTF with the committee, a number of advisors submitted reports that can be found in the appendices. These advisors are identified by a (\*). Ethan Tapper, our lead advisor and County Forester, is identified by (\*\*) for submitting the Forestry Management Plan, also included as an appendix. Naturalist, Jason Mazurowski did not interact with the committee but did spend three days camping and exploring the MSTF.

Along with meeting with advisors, the committee gathered monthly to track progress, review reports and community findings. The committee chair responded to community emails and inquiries throughout the process and communicated these to the committee.

The committee engaged the Westford community through a series of events, a community survey and community forum. This engagement was designed to both gain a better understanding of the community's vision for the land and provide the community with a better understanding of the MSTF.



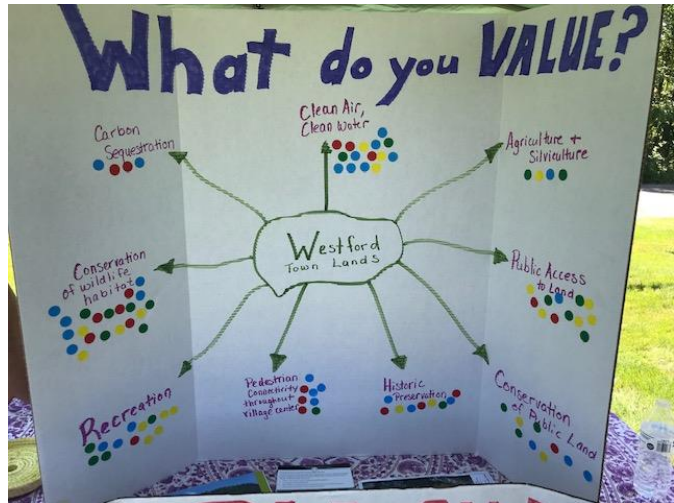
### ---Community Walks---

The committee hosted a series of community walks with advisors including Ethan Tapper, Dave Adams and Bridget Butler. The walks were well attended and each one provided community members with a better understanding of the forest makeup, a closer look at bird habitat and native and non-native species that are present.

*Photo: Community Walk with Dave Adams. 21 attendees learned how to identify and address invasive plants on their own land as well as how to open up forests to improve wildlife habitat*

### ---4th of July Booth---

During the Westford 4<sup>th</sup> of July Celebration the Long-term Management Plan Committee hosted a Dot Democracy booth. We focused on the community's value of the town lands and what recreational opportunities residents would like to see at MSTF. Participation was limited as the temperatures were in the 90's that day and shade is at a minimum on the town common. We conclude that approximately 30 people participated, including children.



*Photo: Dot Democracy What do we value about our Westford Town Lands? At 4<sup>th</sup> of July. **The top 3 values were - #1 Conservation of wildlife habitat, #2 Clean Air/Clean Water, #3 Recreation***

The results of the Dot Democracy, *What recreational opportunities would we like to see?* - **#1 Trail Walking/Running, #2 Camping, Snowshoeing/cross country skiing and Dog Walking tied for #3.**

The results of Dot Democracy at 4<sup>th</sup> of July were fairly in line with the community survey results with the exception of camping and dog walking coming to the top as some community priorities.

### ---Naming Contest at Westford School---

Despite the fact that the recreation paths and fields surrounding the Westford Town School have been open to the public since 1972, the land did not have an official name. The trails are

extensively named but the overall property was without a name. In order to name the property, a naming contest was held. The students ultimately voted on Misty Meadows and the committee finalized it as Misty Meadows Trails and Forest (MMTF).

### ---Community Survey---

The Westford Town Lands Community Survey was developed by the Westford Long-term Management plan committee. The committee reviewed surveys from 3 Vermont communities that have recently established long-term management plans for their town lands. The survey opened in June of 2018 and ran through the end of September 2018. 151 people responded to the survey, with the majority completed online and only 10 completed by paper format that was available at the Town Office and Library. This response rate is the second highest community survey completion rate, representing approximately 10% of the total households. Residents were notified through the town newsletter, Front Porch Forum, postcards circulated at 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Town Office and Library, and the survey link was posted on the town website.

Detailed information on the community survey can be found in the appendices to this MP. Overall, what the committee has found is that the community is very proud that we have come together to secure these two parcels and make them available to the public. **The community priorities for the land include conservation of wildlife habitat along with providing recreation and education opportunities.** The community greatly values the accessibility of the well-maintained trail system on the MMTF, especially during the cross country skiing season. Community members voiced their gratitude for the solitude and connection to nature that the trail system provides. The only piece that the community would like to see improved involves some of the wet spots along the trails.

Since MMTF features well-established and well-used trails, the community does not feel the need to have a VAST trail system through the MSTF. The community would like to see that management of the MSTF focuses primarily on supporting wildlife habitat. The community voiced great pride in conserving this property and the belief that it can serve as a model for owners and managers of forests on how to maintain healthy forests that support vibrant wildlife habitat, among other benefits.

### ---Community Forum---

In November 2018, the committee hosted a community forum to present the findings of the community survey and draft goals for the Westford Town Lands. Approximately 40 people attended the potluck event. After sharing a meal, the community heard about what conservation is and means to our community from Bob Heiser of the VT Land Trust. There was also a panel discussion featuring Steve Hagenbuch of Audubon, VT, Ethan Tapper and Sarah Pinto. After presentations from the panel, the community was able to take time in small groups to provide a vision for the trail system, educational programming and infrastructure and how hunting can happen. Many of the results from the small group work are represented in the actions and recommendations identified in the MP.

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## **Vision for the Westford Town Lands**

The vision statements below articulate the overarching visions for the WTL as a whole, and for the MSTF and MMTF individually, based on the input of the Westford community, the input of experts in various fields, and the easement and deed restrictions on these properties. These vision statements ultimately guide the goals, objectives and management strategies put forth in the Management Plan.

### **Westford Town Lands**

*The Westford Town Lands is public land that provides community recreation and education in balance with wildlife habitat and the health of our native ecosystems. The people of Westford envision lands that host diverse, healthy ecosystems, and management strategies that model the responsible stewardship of forests and other natural communities. The rich natural resources and opportunities provided by these lands are also part of a greater vision for Westford, integrating with the sustainable development of the Westford Common, other conserved properties, and community resources like the Westford School to improve the quality of life for the Westford community.*

### **Maple Shade Town Forest (Jackson Farm)**

*The Maple Shade Town Forest will be primarily managed to provide high-quality wildlife habitat and light recreational opportunities, in addition to access for hunting and the opportunity for sustainable forest management. Management strategies in this area will focus on supporting unique wildlife habitat and water resources, and preserving and enhancing the MSTF's role as part of a large, unfragmented habitat block. Opportunities for educational collaborations with the Westford School and the surrounding community should be sought in the MSTF, especially around hunting and any active forest management that may occur. The MSTF is subject to a conservation easement held by the Vermont Land Trust and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, and compliance with this easement is paramount to the management of this forest. The MSTF may also provide the opportunity for creating wastewater capacity for the Westford Common, in the area designated in the property's conservation easement.*

### **Misty Meadows Trails & Forest**

*Misty Meadows Trails and Forest will primarily provide recreational and educational opportunities for the Westford School and the surrounding community. The existing trail system in the MMTF may be maintained and expanded, if necessary, to accommodate greater access to this area and support the use of this area for education and sustainable recreation. While recreation is a primary goal in the MMTF, the protection of special and sensitive ecological sites, the protection of water resources along the Browns River and Rogers Brook, and the maintenance of high-quality wildlife habitat are also very important goals that should be considered in any management decisions. Active management of this area through the cutting of trees (other than to maintain trails and open areas) may occur if it enhances wildlife habitat and has an educational benefit in coordination with the Westford School. No hunting or trapping will be allowed in this area. The MMTF will also seek to provide opportunities to connect the Westford Common to the Westford School and the Maple Shade Town Forest through trails systems.*



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## History

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 (now called the Maple Shade Town Forest), owned by David and Lynn Gauthier, to create a Town Forest. In conjunction with funds from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB), the private sale of two additional pieces of the property and additional donations, these funds led to the eventual conveyance of the property to the Town in January of 2018. The 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 MSTF is encumbered by a conservation easement held by VLT and VHCB, which details general restrictions on subdivision, development, management and other activities, in addition to the protection of specific natural resources on the property. This MP shall replace the Interim Management Plan for the MSTF, which has been governing the management of this parcel since the Town took ownership of it in 2018.

The MMTF is comprised of two formerly separate pieces: lands to the east and southeast of the Westford School, donated to the Westford School District in 1972 by Fred and Irene Rope, and a 14-acre property to the north of these lands (east and northeast of the Westford School) donated to the Town of Westford in 2001. The former parcel was conveyed from the School District to the Town in 2017 by a town vote. The former Rope lands are encumbered by deed restrictions, which prohibit the presence of any weapons and hunting/trapping on the property, in addition to the presence or use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

Both the MSTF and the MMTF were at one time managed as pastures, woodlots and sugarbush. Currently, both properties, with the exception of several small areas which have been maintained as open land, have naturally regenerated to native forest types, with the exception of one small area in the MMTF which was planted with red pine trees around the 1970's. More details about the specific history of forests on the WTL can be found in the attached Forest Management Plan (FMP).

The MMTF has been primarily managed for recreation and education since the Westford School District took ownership of the parcel in 1972. There is a trail system in place which loops through most areas of the property, including several trails which are groomed for cross country skiing. Field evidence suggests that prior to 1972 the parcel was managed as a woodlot and possibly as night pasture for cattle.

The MSTF has been managed primarily as a woodlot for at least the last 60 years. The name "Maple Shade" is taken from the historic maple sugaring operation on the property, which was active until around the 1970's, when an unsupervised logger cut most of the mature maple trees on the property. Since that time, harvesting has occurred on at least two occasions, with the most recent occurring around 2014. Barbed wire fencing in the MSTF suggests that cows were once pastured throughout this area, probably between sugarbush trees.



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## Current Resources

Both the MSTF and the MMTF abut Brookside Road and are accessible from the Westford School parking lot, about 0.4 miles south of the Westford Town Common. This location is significant in that it places a large block of public land in a central location where it is accessible to all residents of Westford and easily accessible from the Westford Common.

### Maple Shade Town Forest

The MSTF is a 130-acre block of primarily forested land located west of Brookside Road, across the road from the Westford Elementary School. It is contiguous with several other forested properties, which together comprise unfragmented 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 MSTF contains several small wetland areas, including one small beaver pond (not active), part of another larger pond and several small streams and seeps. The MSTF is accessed by a deeded pedestrian trail that cuts through a recently made gap in the stone wall along Brookside Road across from the Westford Elementary School and follows the wall east and then north along the farm fields to the MSTF trailhead. The stonewall is of historic significance and is protected with specific provisions in the property deed.

#### --- The Forest ---

With the exception of one area of even-aged white pine forest and several wetland areas in the south of the property, forests on the MSTF are dominated by a Hemlock-Northern Hardwoods natural community. These forests were lightly pastured by cows until sometime in the mid-1900's, when they were allowed to revert to forest. Harvesting of timber has occurred periodically in this area, producing forests which are primarily 2-aged. Harvesting around 2014, in addition to blowdown from the 10/30/17 windstorm, may lead to the creation of a third age class of trees in northern and northeastern portions of the MSTF.



#### --- Wetlands ---

The Maple Shade Town Forest supports two beaver pond/wetlands, in addition to a number of seeps and seepage swamps. The property's conservation easement identifies special zones around the wetlands, known as Wetland Protection Zones (WPZ's). Within these wetlands and a 50-foot buffer around them (as mapped by VLT) any management must be directed toward the protection of water quality and aquatic habitats. The attached FMP will detail how any active forest management will comply with the responsible maintenance of these WPZ's and their function.

The Wetlands in the MSTF are in good condition, as determined by the VT Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Wetlands program on a field visit in September 2018. They noted that the wetlands perform many important ecological functions and support values such as wildlife habitat, protection of groundwater, and reduction of the impacts of floods and droughts on downstream waterways. The wetlands may provide special opportunities for education and

outreach. The numerous unmapped seeps in the MMTF were not surveyed in this visit. The photo to the right is one of the soil samples taken by the wetlands biologists to determine if it is a wetland.

The lower beaver wetland consists of a large area of open water and emergent marsh mostly bounded by steeper slopes. The wetland also includes a narrow strip of Hemlock-Balsam Fir-Black Ash Seepage Swamp extending north and providing the pond with water from seeps and springs. Beaver wetlands are ecosystems defined by change, so plant species composition is likely to change from year to year. The small seepage swamp was not surveyed in detail but includes hemlock, yellow birch, and jewelweed.

The upper beaver wetland is smaller than the lower one, with shallower water, more dead snags, and a smaller adjacent seepage swamp. The water supports abundant watershield, with the adjacent emergent marsh full of bur-reed and cattails.

There are a number of seeps in the MSTF. The largest was surveyed by the VT Wetlands Program. This seep extends north from a trail crossing and occupies two gullies amidst upland forest of old-field white pines. Pine and hemlock trees overhang the seep and pines have fallen into the seep (adding to a coarse woody debris layer and enhancing habitat) but few trees or shrubs are rooted in the seep itself. Instead, the seep supports a layer of sensitive fern, jewelweed, marsh bedstraw, and other small herbaceous plants typical of Vermont seeps. The wetness index shows a wetter than average seep.



No functioning vernal pools have been mapped and verified as such in the MSTF, but several potential vernal pools have been observed on the property. In the future, steps should be taken to verify which potential vernal pools are functioning as such and to map these features.

### --- Wildlife ---

The MSTF supports a number of wildlife mammals, amphibians, reptiles and birds. White-tailed deer are frequently seen foraging in the adjacent fields and are most likely supported by the forest, especially in the winter months. A few signs of black bear were noted on the property. It was also noted by one expert that the property contains features that could support bobcat and theorized that the presence of this species could increase as the land is managed to improve wildlife habitat. Both ponds on the MSTF have recently supported beaver.

Because of its wetlands, vernal pools and seeps, it is likely that the property features habitat, including breeding habitat for a number of amphibians and reptiles.

An abundance of bird life has been noted on the property, including a large flock of turkeys who often forage in the adjacent fields. It was noted by a number of experts that the property has many features conducive to the use of the MSTF by many species of birds, and that the MSTF could be managed to augment bird habitat and woodland bird diversity.

In a late summer survey, one expert noted that monarch butterflies were quite abundant along the stone walls and trail. In addition, two species of tussock moth and the uncommon West Virginia white butterfly were seen in the spring of 2017.



### --- Trails ---

The Maple Shade Town Forest is primarily accessed by a trail that starts across the road from the kiosk at the Westford School on Brookside Road. The trail follows the stone wall south, west and then north to an established entrance to the Maple Shade Town Forest. A number of old logging roads exist on the MSTF and a few of these have been recently enhanced to make trails that can be used to access the two beaver ponds on the property.

### --- Access ---

Dispersed pedestrian access to the MSTF is permitted in the property's conservation easement, though the only means of access not requiring crossing through a neighbor's property is along a foot trail extending primarily along the southern and southwestern boundary of the conserved Pouliot farmland, connecting an access point in the southeast of the MSTF to Brookside Road. The Town of Westford retains 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 Westford Conservation Commission, through volunteer assistance, has developed this trail and continues to maintain it. The WCC has also created an opening in the stone wall and pedestrian signage on Brookside Road, which allows accessibility from the WTL parking area at the Westford School.

The Town has vehicular access to the MSTF north of the historic Jackson (now Haller) farmhouse as depicted on the Westford Town Forest site map. This entry onto the property would afford access for forest management to the MSTF or to develop an open area in the northeast of the MSTF for septic capacity for the Westford Common.

## **Misty Meadows Trails & Forest**

The Misty Meadows Trails and Forest consists of approximately 70 acres of primarily forested land behind the Westford School and athletic fields. In addition to forested land, the MMTF also features a small meadow that is routinely mowed and an abandoned meadow that is growing to shrubs. The land abuts the Browns River on its east side and is abutted by a tributary of the Browns called Rogers Brook, to its south. This parcel is crisscrossed with a number of trails that are used frequently in all seasons by town residents and students from the Westford School, who use the trails for nature study and physical education.

### --- The Forest ---

The MMTF features areas of young forest in the north which are likely to have established since the conveyance of this property in 1972, and in the planted red pine stand in the southwest, established around the same time. The central portion of the property is similar to the Hemlock- Northern Hardwood areas of the MSTF, but without the most recent harvesting. This area features small



pockets of blowdown from the 10/30/17 windstorm. A small area in the south of the MMTF, between Rogers Brook and the Browns River, features a young hardwood stand.

### --- Wetlands ---

The MMTF also contains a number of seeps, some wet meadows and some forested seeps.

### --- Wildlife ---

The MMTF most likely supports a variety of wildlife species similar to those found on the MSTF, though it does not as easily connect to a large forested block. Large mammals have not been observed as much on the property, possibly due to the frequent use of the trails by recreationists and dog walkers. Porcupine have been observed on the property and there are some old signs of beaver along the Browns River. Songbirds have been observed all over the property. The shrubby disturbed wetland by the school is habitat for red-winged blackbirds and others. In addition, kestrel, hawks, woodcock, snipe, killdeer, barred and great-horned owls have been observed on and near the property by local residents.

### --- Trails ---

A network of about 5-8 miles of trails crisscross the Misty Meadows Forest. These are accessible from the same parking lot at the Westford School on Brookside Road as the MSTF. These trails are frequented by runners and dog walkers in the summer months, and by skiers and snowshoers in the winter. In addition to recreationists, the trails are frequently used by school children for nature study and physical education classes. This system of trails receives the highest use of any trails in the Town of Westford.

Many of the MMTF trails are groomed for cross-country skiing during the winter by volunteers working for the town recreation department. The trails are mowed in the summer months, also by volunteers, when they aren't too wet. A number of improvements have been made to the trails over the years including bridges and turnpikes. Water management is an issue on some of these trails due to the numerous seeps.



### --- Access ---

There are several established access points into the MMTF from the Westford School through fields, established recreational trails and historic forest management roads. Trails are well established and have been used for years by many different types of users.

While parking for both MSTF and MMFT is currently provided at the Westford School parking area, in the future users of WTL may be able to park at the Westford Common and access the WTL through private property. This could only be done if agreements with abutting landowners could be developed, and recreational trails on these properties could be established.

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## Management Philosophy

The WTL will seek to balance a variety of uses on the property while ensuring the health of ecosystems and wildlife populations.

### --- Community ---

As described in the Recreation and Education sections, below, and in the Vision Statement for the WTL, a major goal for the management of these lands is to improve the quality of life for the Westford community. This includes access to opportunities for recreation in wild, vibrant natural spaces and the integration of Westford's community resources, including the Westford School, the Westford Common and the WTL.

A long-term goal for the WTL will be to support the responsible use of, and access to, the MSTF and MMTF. The WTL will aspire to support the responsible development of the Westford Common, as detailed in Westford's Town Plan, by pursuing trail connections and easy access from the Common to the WTL, enriching the lives of Westford residents and others that may visit the Common. The MSTF will further support this potential development by providing additional wastewater capacity for the Common.

In combination with these other community resources, the goal of the WTL will be to support a Westford that is a wonderful and healthy place to live and be.

### --- Recreation ---

One of the benefits of public land is the opportunities that it provides for the public to appreciate the values and benefits of open spaces, ecology, and natural resources. Recreation is an important way that people connect with the land, fostering an appreciation for the natural world and supporting a conservation ethic. Westford community members surveyed in the creation of this MP named recreation as one of their most important uses of the WTL.

It is a stated goal of the WTL to implement recreation that minimizes negative impacts on wildlife, forest ecology and water resources, and balances recreational opportunities on the MSTF with those on the MMTF. Walking and hiking, trail running, wildlife viewing, and cross-country skiing are permitted and unrestricted on the WTL and should be supported in the management of the property as long as they can be reasonably implemented and exist in combination with other restricted uses.

The MMTF features a number of existing recreational trails which offer great views, diverse terrain, and high-quality recreational opportunities throughout much of the property. These trails have been a valued recreational resource for the Westford community for many years. In addition to walking and trail running, cross-country skiing trails are maintained in the MMTF.

While the MSTF is open to public dispersed recreation per its conservation easement (held jointly by VLT and VHCB), the property did not feature existing recreational trails when it was conveyed to the Town. A small loop trail, with side trails accessing the property's two wetland areas, was established on existing logging trails in the southern section of the MSTF in 2018. The goal for recreation in the MSTF is to support low-intensity recreational use while also protecting sensitive resources identified in the property's conservation easement and doing as much as possible to protect its function as a wildlife travel corridor and unfragmented habitat block. Recreational trail

development will be restricted to southern and eastern portions of the property to mitigate disturbance to wildlife caused by recreation. See the Goals & Objectives section of this plan for more information about recreation.

#### **--- Hunting ---**

It is a stated goal of the WTL to implement hunting in the MSTF that supports wildlife objectives and limits impact on the Westford School community. As noted in the Goals & Objectives section of this plan, ensuring the hunters do not enter the 1,000 foot 'Gun Free School Zone' established by federal law and reinforced by state law, school policy and the town's agreement with the school is critical to allowing hunting. Since this buffer zone is within the public access point, hunters will not be able to use the established public access point and will need to seek permission from adjacent landowners that are not within this 1,000 foot buffer zone in order to access MSTF from the north or west. Other access points may be determined in the future.

In MMTF, easement restrictions prevent hunting and the wielding of weapons of any kind on the MMTF. Hunting is not, and will not, be allowed on this portion of the WTL.

All state and federal hunting laws and guidelines must be followed and hunters should be particularly sensitive to the proximity of MSTF to the Westford School and nearby houses. More information about hunting and action and recommendation items are identified in the Goals & Objectives section. The Westford Conservation Commission, in addition to other town bodies, will be responsible for implementation of these items.

#### **--- Education ---**

It is a stated goal of the WTL to develop relationships with the Westford School, the Essex-Westford School District and other local schools to create and enhance educational opportunities around the MMTF and MSTF for these schools and the Westford community.

The schools near the WTL have utilized and will continue to utilize the MMTF for educational purposes, including access to the Browns River, which borders the MMTF. Forests, streams and beaver ponds at the MSTF offer similar opportunities.

Any and all forest management and/or wildlife habitat management activities should seek to create educational opportunities for the Westford community, the Westford School and other schools in the area as a primary objective of that management.

Action items and recommendations related to education can be found in the Goals & Objectives section of this plan.

#### **--- Forest Management ---**

It is a stated goal of the WTL to maintain a diverse and healthy forest, in addition to promoting the health of wetlands, meadows and all natural communities present. The management strategies employed for all areas of the WTL shall seek to promote the health of complete forest ecosystems and the myriad services they provide, especially emphasizing the maintenance of vibrant, abundant habitat for wildlife. More details about the management of the WTL's forests can be found in the in the Goals & Objectives section of this MP, and in the attached Forest Management Plan.

In general, active forest management through the harvesting of trees may occur in the WTL provided that it is done in accordance with a forest management plan written by a licensed forester which is adopted by the Westford Select Board and approved by the Vermont Land Trust. Any

active forest management must also be supervised by a licensed forester in agreement with the Town of Westford. In general, forest management in the MSTF will seek to actively encourage the growth of healthy, high-quality trees and diverse wildlife habitat conditions, while timber harvesting on MMTF will be more limited and emphasize education and connections with the Westford School. Invasive plant management will occur as necessary on both properties.

#### **--- Property Boundaries ---**

The boundaries of the WTL are marked by old barbed wire, stone walls, trees which are marked with axe blazes and/or paint and by the Browns River and Rogers Brook. In some areas, boundary markings are sporadic and missing completely.

It is important that boundaries be well-marked so that users of the WTL are aware if they are entering an adjacent property and so that visitors on adjacent lands are aware they are entering WTL. All boundaries on the WTL should be marked with bright, durable boundary marking paint in the next 5 years and be maintained on a 5-year interval thereafter. Additionally, as noted in the Goals & Objectives section of this plan, 'Gun Free School Zone' signs will be posted 1,100 feet from the boundaries of school properties along Brookside Road and in other areas that hunters may use to access the MSTF. This is in an effort to ensure that hunters or others who may be carrying firearms are aware they are entering a gun-free area. More general information about boundaries on the WTL can be found in the Boundaries section of the attached Forest Management Plan.



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# Restricted and Allowed Uses

## Maple Shade Town Forest

### Public Access

The conservation easement requires that the property be open to the general public for all types of non-commercial, non-motorized, non-mechanized, dispersed recreational and educational uses.

### Restricted Uses

- In general, the conservation easement limits the use of the MSTF to education, forestry, non-motorized, non-commercial recreation, habitat conservation, natural area, and open space purposes. Notwithstanding the limitations on commercial recreation, the easement allows fees to be charged to cover reasonable costs of maintenance and recreation opportunities.
- Residential, industrial, or mining activities are not permitted.
- Disturbing the surface, such as excavation or removal of topsoil, is not allowed (unless reasonably required for an allowed use under the easement).
- Motorized vehicles are prohibited, except for allowed uses such as forestry and recreation management, agricultural use, emergencies, or for use by people with mobility disabilities.
- Streams and other water courses on the property cannot be manipulated, except as reasonably necessary to further the purposes of the conservation easement (such as trail crossings).
- Maintaining trash dumps on the property is prohibited.
- Commercial advertisement signs or billboards are prohibited.
- Hunting is allowed during the state turkey and deer season and youth seasons.
- The harvest of forest products may only be performed as dictated by a forest management plan for the WTL, approved by the Select Board. Forest management plans for the MSTF must also be approved by the Vermont Land Trust.
- Horseback riding and mountain biking may be restricted during times of excessive wetness as identified and posted by the WCC.

### Permitted Uses

- Non-motorized, non-commercial recreational uses (bird-watching, cross-country and backcountry skiing, fishing, hiking, picnicking, snowshoeing, trapping, walking, horseback riding, biking and wildlife observation and other similar activities).
- Dogs are allowed on the trails in accordance with town ordinance and existing practices on MMTF.
- Maintaining fields, orchards and pastures for agricultural, recreational, scenic, and open space purposes is allowed. Any conversion of forestland to create open land needs to be approved by VLT.
- Forest management for timber and wood products is allowed if conducted under a forest management plan approved by VLT. Maple sugaring is also allowed on the property.
- The easement allows for the maintenance of existing recreational trails and the right to build new trails if addressed in the Management Plan.
- Events and entertainment for the public are allowed on the property.

- The maintenance and construction of structures reasonably necessary to carry out the purposes of the conservation easement (such as sugaring structures and modest structures to support public outdoor recreation) is allowed with prior approval from VLT.
- The Town has the right to place a community wastewater system on the protected property in the area depicted on the survey of the property.

## Misty Meadows Trails & Forest

The following uses are allowed and restricted under the Shared Use Agreement between the Town and School:

### Applicability of School Laws & Policies

All laws applicable to the School District and all School District policies shall apply to the MMTF and Rope Field when they are being used for School District activities and functions.

### Restricted Uses

- Use of tobacco or tobacco substitutes is prohibited on the MMTF.
- The manufacture, distribution, dispensation, possession, use or consumption of alcohol or any drugs is prohibited on the MMTF. A Drug means any narcotic drug, hallucinogenic drug, amphetamine, barbiturate, marijuana or any other controlled substance as defined by state or federal statute or regulation.
- Weapons of any type are prohibited on the MMTF. The use or possession of weapons of any type will not be tolerated.
- The Town will comply with Vermont Statute 13 V.S.A. § 4004, prohibiting the possession of all dangerous or deadly weapons, replicas or facsimiles of any dangerous or deadly weapon at school or on school grounds. Due to the property's use by the school and proximity to the school, weapons are prohibited on the MMTF, which are located on the *east* side of Brookside Road, (including but not limited to woodlands, athletic fields, recreational trails, parking lots, personal vehicles, school or town-sponsored events and leased facilities). This policy is in effect 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and 365 days a year.
- A Weapon means any firearm, knife, fighting instrument or other weapon-like device, instrument, material or substance, whether animate or inanimate, which in the manner it is used or is intended to be used, is known to be capable of producing death or serious bodily injury. Examples of such weapons include knives, clubs, brass knuckles or nunchucks. Weapon also includes any reasonable facsimile, reproduction or replica of the above.
- Hunting and trapping are prohibited on the MMTF.
- Motorized vehicles are prohibited on the MMTF.
- The harvest of forest products may only be performed as dictated by a forest management plan for the WTL, approved by the Select Board.
- Use of any motorized vehicle is prohibited on the WTL except for grooming of cross-country ski trails, the maintenance of fields and open areas and forest or wildlife habitat management dictated by the property's forest management plan.
- Short-term camping that leaves no trace is allowed upon notifying the town of camp date and duration. The section of land where the Browns River meets Rogers Brook has been identified as the ideal spot for a campsite.
- The development of new trails is allowed with the permission of the town.

## Permitted Uses

- Non-motorized, non-commercial recreational uses (bird-watching, cross-country skiing, hiking, picnicking, snowshoeing, walking, horseback riding, biking and wildlife observation and other similar activities).
- Forestry, agriculture, silviculture are allowable in identified areas of the property and in compliance with the FMP.
- Programs run by the recreation department or as part of the Town's network of recreational trails on MSTF.

### **--- Public access ---**

The WCC will monitor public access to the WTL and the use of these properties, especially with regard to ecologically sensitive resources, and those identified in the MSTF's conservation easement. Access to the property may be closed or restricted by the WCC, to address public health and safety concerns, to protect the properties' natural resources and/or to ensure compliance with the terms of the MSTF's conservation easement. Concentrated public use causing degradation of sensitive natural features, hunting out of season, threat of fire, or danger from active timber harvesting operations are all examples of issues that may require WCC to restrict public access. The Town, WCC and VLT will work in good faith to manage and maintain public access to the MSTF according to the terms of all applicable agreements and easements. The WCC and the Town of Westford will work in good faith to do the same on the MMTF.

### **--- Community Oversight ---**

The Westford Conservation Commission is responsible for caring for the WTL and implementing the actions and recommendations highlighted in this plan. Community members are encouraged to share relevant information about trail or forest conditions, violation of restricted uses, or other concerns with the WCC.

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## **Goals & Objectives**

### **Goal #1: Maintain a diverse and healthy forest, wetlands and meadows, with an emphasis on maximizing wildlife habitat.**

The goal for all forests in the WTL is that they are healthy, resilient and diverse. Where active management is appropriate to support these values it may occur, provided that it is in line with the goals and restrictions expressed in this MP. All management should seek to model and support the natural processes and functions of these natural systems.

**Objective 1a:** Ensure any harvesting of trees is done in conformance with a forest management plan written by a licensed forester and approved by the County Forester and the Vermont Land Trust. Any trees to be harvested must be marked, and harvesting must be supervised by a licensed forester.

- i. **ACTION:** Create Up to 5 acres of young forest habitat (see Forest Management Plan).
- ii. **ACTION:** Address non-native invasive plant species.
  1. Non-native plant species are present along the trail right-of-way to the southeast of the MSTF and scattered throughout the northern section of the MMTF. These species include, but are not limited to, Autumn Olive, common buckthorn, shrub honeysuckle and Japanese barberry. The WCC should integrate cutting and pulling of these plants in its regular trail maintenance plan.
  2. The use of low volumes of herbicide may be necessary to control these species. If herbicide is to be used, the utmost care should be taken to use as little as possible and to avoid impacts to non-target plants.

**Objective 1b:** Allow forests, wetlands and meadows to grow and develop subject to natural processes as much as possible, but use judicious active management to preserve and enhance habitat diversity for wildlife.

- iii. **ACTION:** Retain biological legacies and promote development of large-diameter (24"+ DBH) living trees, snags, and downed deadwood.
- iv. **ACTION:** Maintain open areas for pollinator habitat.
  1. The field that is set aside for municipal wastewater capacity in the MSTF, as well as open areas in the MMTF, should be mowed once a year in late October to allow for the establishment of native plant species, providing food and habitat for native pollinator species such as bumblebees and monarchs.
- v. **ACTION:** Protect natural processes in beaver ponds/wetlands.
  1. Ensure that recreational and forestry usage appropriately buffer wetlands, streams and seeps. Consult with the DEC Wetlands program when management strategies are unclear.

### **Goal #2: Implement recreation in the MSTF that minimizes impact on wildlife and is in balance with existing opportunities at MMTF.**

The MMTF trail system provides well-maintained, easily-accessible trails running through meadows, forests and along rivers. Those that utilize the trails find them to be a place where they can connect with nature, find peace and quiet, and take a walk, run or cross-country ski. According

to information collected in the development of this MP, the maintenance of these trails is greatly appreciated by community members, especially for cross-country skiing in the winter. Trail users do not find Misty Meadows to be crowded and therefore do not feel that an extensive trail system must be implemented in the Maple Shade Town Forest.

By limiting trail development in the MSTF to the existing recreational trails in the south of the property and along the eastern edge of the property, and designating the western side as a “no trails” zone, the community can limit impacts on wildlife habitat.

**Objective 2a:** Enhance existing trails in the Maple Shade Town Forest

- i. **ACTION:** Promote trail connections from the WTL to the Westford Common.
  1. Reach out to landowners to the north of the MMTF and MSTF to see if a multi-use trail or trails could connect these properties to the Westford Common without needing to utilize Brookside Road. A trail connection to the MSTF from the Common would support hunting on the MSTF without hunters being too close to the Westford School (see below).
  2. If agreements with neighboring landowners can be developed, create trails that access the WTL from the Common, using funding sources identified below.
  3. Create a kiosk or kiosks at the trailhead(s) to these new sections of trails.
- ii. **ACTION:** Loop existing trails
  1. To the north of the existing trail system that brings visitors to the small and large beaver ponds, there is an opportunity to create an additional loop in the east and northeast of the property that will connect two existing logging trails. This trail should follow the stone wall on the eastern side of the forest and potentially lead to the waterfall in the northeast section of the property. This trail should take into consideration the distance from the stone wall and ensure that wildlife using the stone wall, such as rodents, insects and snakes are not disturbed. If the WCC identifies that a clear access to the waterfall is not possible, a stone wall trail should remain the priority. See Trails Map for proposed loop trail.
- iii. **ACTION:** Improve signage
  1. Replicate Misty Meadows trail signage in the Maple Shade Town Forest. Currently, visitors are finding it confusing to navigate the existing trail system. In order to accomplish this, trail names may need to be established and the small and large beaver ponds may need signage. It has been noted by many trail walkers that the beaver ponds can cause confusion because it almost feels as though you have walked from the eastern side to the western side of the same pond. Clearer signage where the trails meet the ponds will remove this confusion and increase visitors’ ability to navigate the land.
- iv. **ACTION:** Acquire funding for new trail development on the MSTF.
  1. The WCC should consider applying for funding from the Recreation Trails Program (RTP), or another similar grant, to establish new trails as described above. Ideally, funding would be used to hire the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) or another local trail-building organization.

**Objective 2b:** Protect and Enhance Wildlife Habitat

- i. **ACTION:** Establish a “No Trail” zone in western portions of the MSTF to protect the function of the habitat block that it is a part of.
  1. A zone should be established in the west of the MSTF in which no recreational trail development may occur.

- ii. **ACTION:** Protect the West Virginia White and associated reptilian and amphibian populations in the MSTF.
  - 1. Protect seeps, vernal pools wetlands and streams with buffers in which no forest management or recreational trail development can occur, as dictated by the MSTF's conservation easement, Vermont AMP's, and the WTL's forest management plan.
- iii. **ACTION:** Promote a small area of young forest.
  - 1. See above.
- iv. **ACTION:** Promote management that allows applicable sections of the WTL to continue to function as Deer Wintering Areas.

**Objective 2c:** Ensure the safety of trail users

- i. **ACTION:** Provide hunting information at kiosk.
  - 1. The MSTF will be open to hunting during deer and turkey hunting seasons each year. Annual dates should be identified and posted in a highly visible manner.
  - 2. Encourage visitors to wear orange if they use the land during allowable hunting times.

**Goal #3: Develop school and community education opportunities that create community connections and foster volunteerism.**

**Objective 3a:** Support education that celebrates Vermont's hunting culture by encouraging hunter education both on the land at and the school.

- i. **ACTION:** Promote Youth Hunting Weekend in the Maple Shade Town Forest.
  - 1. The WCC, Recreation Committee and community hunters should work collaboratively to promote youth weekends associated with allowable seasons. This program must be in partnership with Essex Westford Unified School District and the school Principal.
  - 2. The Recreation Committee should work with community hunters to host hunter safety or other hunter education at/or in collaboration with the Westford School.

**Objective 3b:** Host guided hikes for community to build landowner knowledge of land use and management.

- ii. **ACTION:** WCC will organize community walks that educate about nature and land use practices such as: active forest management, managing invasive species, mushroom foraging, and bird watching.

**Objective 3c:** Enhance outdoor classroom opportunities

- iii. **RECOMMENDATION:** Consider on-site structures in the WTL that enhance or advance education and community building opportunities.
  - 1. Consider developing an outdoor classroom in the MMTF, a multi-use, covered space that blends into its natural surrounding and provides a site for outdoor education and community gathering.
  - 2. Access to Browns River could improve educational opportunities for the Westford School. The WCC should work with Westford School and Wetlands Biologists to identify if there is a natural spot on the Browns to provide easy, safe access for students.

3. Observation decks at beaver ponds in the MSTF could help to protect visitors from the rice cutgrass and arrowleaf tearthumb which dominate the pond edge. These should be removable - not fixed - and allow for removal at any time.

*Potential sources of Funding:*

1. *State of Vermont, Building and General Services Community Facility Grants*
2. *State Better Connects Grant*
3. *NE Grassroots Environmental Fund*
4. *Vermont Community Foundation*
5. *Windham Foundation*

## **Goal #4: Implement hunting in the MSTF that supports wildlife objectives and limits impact on school community.**

Hunting is an important cultural tradition in Vermont. Hunting supports land conservation through direct dollars and ensures animal populations are controlled. The MSTF should be a place that celebrates this culture and encourages the next generation of hunters.

**Objective 4a:** Allow hunting during the state determined [deer seasons and turkey seasons](#) and the youth weekend for each. During these regulated times, hunting of any animal species that is identified by the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife is permissible.

- i. **ACTION:** Hunting of any state approved species will be allowed in the MSTF during deer and turkey seasons each year and the accompanying youth weekend for each season.
- ii. **ACTION:** 'Gun Free School Zone' signs should be extended to 1,100 to identify established buffer around the Westford School and Barn School properties. In accordance with federal 18 USC 922(q) and State 13 VSA 4004.
- iii. **RECOMMENDATION:** The WCC work with hunters in the community, the school, and neighbors of the property to identify a possible public access that is not within the 'Gun Free School Zone'.

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## **Maps**

- [Gun Free School Zone Map](#)
- [Existing & Proposed Walking Trails](#)
- [MSTF Logging Trails](#)

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## **Addendums**

- [Forest Management Plan](#)
- [Expert Reports](#)
- [School Property Shared Use Agreement](#)
- [School Easement](#)
- [MSTF Conservation Easement](#)
- [VLT What is Conservation Presentation](#)
- [WTL Community Survey Results Presentation](#)
- [WTL Community Survey](#)