

White Rocks Gateway: Proposed Addition to Green Mountain National Forest

Frequently Asked Questions

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Introduction: The Trust for Public Land (TPL) and the Green Mountain National Forest (National Forest) are partnering to conserve approximately 481 acres in Wallingford as an addition to Green Mountain National Forest. This area, that we are calling White Rocks Gateway, is a priority acquisition for the National Forest.

The Wallingford Selectboard would like to hear from Wallingford residents before deciding whether to support the acquisition. Please let your voice be heard by contacting the Town Administrator at 802-446-2872 or townadmin@wallingfordvt.com

Answers to frequently asked questions are explained below:

Where is the property?

The proposed addition to the National Forest includes a portion of the property currently owned by Fernfield Farms Partnership. It is on the east side of Hartsboro Road and south of Ice Bed Rd, and southeast of White Tail Dr. A map may be viewed at tpl.org/our-work/whiterocks

How does this project benefit the town of Wallingford?

The property contains an existing trail network through mature hemlock and white pine that has been open to the public for decades. Conserving this resource will permanently protect public access, prevent habitat fragmentation, protect significant wetlands, protect water quality, and help stimulate the local outdoor recreation industry. The protection of this property directly responds to the 2018 Wallingford Community Visit Report and Action Plan developed in partnership with Vermont Council on Rural Development. That three month community visioning effort, involving over 150 Wallingford residents, concluded with three priorities, one of which was “Build Multi-Use Trails and River Access and Boost Recreation Capacity.” The project is also consistent with the Wallingford Town Plan.

What recreational opportunities will be preserved if White Rocks Gateway is protected?

The property will provide new access to White Rocks National Recreation Area and the Ice Beds. The property contains direct access to the Ice Beds trail and continues on to connect to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and the Long Trail, a National Recreation Trail and the nation’s oldest long-distance hiking trail. This acquisition will help protect a remote experience, and the scenic viewshed and soundscape of the Appalachian Trail and the Long Trail.

The Property also provides new access to Butternut Falls and could also provide a potential parking area directly on Hartsboro Road, offering new access to GMNF from the west. Once owned by the Green Mountain National Forest, the property will be available to hikers, hunters and other dispersed pedestrian recreation.

Wallingford prides itself as the gateway to the southern Green Mountains and hopes to continue to build outdoor recreational opportunities. The 2018 Action Plan also identified a Key Opportunity of better connecting Wallingford to the Appalachian Trail and Long Trail. This could help attract new visitors and residents and provide economic benefit to Wallingford as a Gateway town to this nationally recognized trail.

What are the other benefits of permanently protecting White Rocks Gateway?

Protection of Wetlands, Streams and Watersheds

The property contains 18.3 acres of wetlands, 2.3 miles of headwater streams, and 87 acres of Riparian Areas. These flow just one mile downstream to join the main stem of the Otter Creek, which ultimately flows into Lake Champlain, a drinking water source for residents of Vermont, New York and Quebec. Permanent protection of these wetlands, streams and riparian areas maintain watershed storage, increase absorption and interception and reduce sediment production, which in turn protects water quality downstream. Forest protection also reduces flood risks and reduces downstream flood damages. The health of the Otter Creek drainage and Lake Champlain relies on intact forested headwaters because headwater streams in forested watersheds take up nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen.

Wildlife Habitat and Natural Communities

This acquisition would substantially enhance landscape-level connectivity for wildlife. The land supports habitat for bear, state-endangered Little Brown Bat and federally-threatened Northern Long Eared Bat, as well as hunting grounds for the peregrine falcon that nest on nearby White Rocks. The property also contains 315 acres of deer wintering area, which is part of one of the largest deer wintering areas in the state. Protection of White Rocks Gateway would eliminate the risk of fragmentation and enhance connectivity within the Green Mountain Wildlife Linkage, the largest north-south wildlife linkage in Vermont, allowing species to move and adapt to a changing climate. A Rich Fen, with known occurrences of rare Rose Pogonia, would be protected and managed for its biodiversity values.

Economic Development

Outdoor recreation is a fast growing and critically important industry in Vermont, annually generating over \$12.5 billion in retail sales and services (accounting for 12 percent of gross state product), supporting 35,000 jobs, and creating \$187 million in state tax revenue.¹

Protection of the opportunity for recreation on this property and the integrity of the Appalachian Trail, Long Trail and the National Forest support the local and state recreation and tourism economy. The 200,000 people that use the Long Trail each year spend more than \$4 million in the surrounding communities².

How will property be managed by Green Mountain National Forest?

The property would be managed as “Green Mountain Escarpment,” per the Green Mountain National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. The emphasis is on management to maintain natural community diversity and to maintain or enhance populations of rare or uncommon plant and animal populations³. The existing trails may be maintained with assistance from an organized or volunteer group, if they are not negatively affecting the natural resources. New motorized trails are prohibited. Wind turbines, communication towers, new utility and pipeline corridors are not allowed. The Green Mountain Forest Plan is approaching the 15-year mark in 2021. Forest plans are generally revised on a 15 to 20 year planning cycle depending on available resources to complete the work. Public involvement regarding proposed changes to the management area designations would be considered at that time. The National Forest is willing to consider the development of a variety of recreational opportunities on the property if there is interest from a local partner.

¹ Source: Outdoor Industry Foundation. 2006. The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: Vermont.

² Economic and Fiscal Impact Analysis of the Vermont Trails and Greenway Council Member Organizations. 2016.

³ See https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5334042.pdf

How does this acquisition affect property taxes?

Once owned by the National Forest, the Wallingford lister estimates that \$423,500 of listed value will be taken off the grand list. The federal government will submit a Payment of Lieu of Taxes annually to the Town of Wallingford and a payment from either the Secure Rural Schools Act or the 1908 Act to the Mill River School District. An analysis of municipal tax impact (available at the town office) concluded that federal payments of \$1,332 that will be received by Wallingford are slightly less than the \$1,589 in municipal taxes lost from the property, with a net revenue loss to the town of \$257, (about 14 cents per Wallingford resident). The school tax rate on homestead properties could decrease slightly as well as result of the federal school payment of \$312. There would be no change in the school tax rate on non-residential properties. Conservation of the property will also avoid a potential increase in demands for municipal services along Hartsboro Rd and Ice Bed Rd if the property were to be developed. The creation of open space has been clearly documented to increase resale values of homes adjacent to conserved land⁴, which will, over time when those nearby homes are sold, positively impact the grand list.

The families that own this land have been good neighbors and generous philanthropists in Wallingford for decades. They have a deep connection to this property and would love to see it permanently protected and open to the public.

What happens if the Town chooses not to support this acquisition?

If the Town does not support this addition to the National Forest, The Trust for Public Land, working in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, will not pursue funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund for its acquisition. While town support is not legally required, The Trust for Public Land and Green Mountain National Forest are committed to securing community support for land acquisitions. The landowners are in the process of selling one of their other parcels on the open market and are looking to decrease their carrying expenses. If a conservation outcome is not successful, the landowners may pursue the sale of this property to another party or parties. A new owner, or owners, of these lands would likely have different goals for the property than the National Forest with no guarantees that the property would remain undeveloped or open to the public for hunting or recreation.

What is the status of the negotiations to buy the land?

The Trust for Public Land, a national land conservation organization, will finalize an option agreement with the landowners after securing support from the town.

How much would this acquisition cost, where would the funding come from, and when would it occur?

The Green Mountain National Forest would pay fair market value for the property as determined by an independent appraisal. The Trust for Public Land will be applying for funding from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund for the purchase. Note that these are not taxpayer dollars, but are a portion of offshore drilling fees paid by oil companies. The Trust for Public Land would raise private funds to cover associated costs (surveys, title, appraisals, and legal costs). The property will be submitted as a candidate this fall for federal Land and Water Conservation funding. Although we are confident this is a very strong candidate to receive funding due to its important recreational and natural resource values, it may take several years to secure the funding and eventually transfer the property to the National Forest.

What is the role of the Trust for Public Land?

The Trust for Public Land is a national non-profit organization with a mission of conserving land for people. The Trust for Public Land is leading the real estate negotiations, due diligence and the fundraising for the land acquisition, and has considerable expertise in real estate, law, finance, and fundraising in support of purchasing conservation land for public agencies. The Trust for Public Land has focused our land protection work in the Green Mountains, protecting strategic and important forestland that protects recreational access,

⁴ The Economic Benefits of Land Conservation by Constance deBrun. Available at www.tpl.org



connected wildlife habitat, working lands, and drinking water sources, including recently, the creation of the new Jim Jeffords State Forest in Mendon and Shrewsbury. The Trust for Public Land has successfully partnered with Green Mountain National Forest on 22 different projects, protecting more than 33,000 acres for permanent public access.

For more information please contact:

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