

Tucker Mt. Special Town Meeting Newbury Town Forest Project: Revote 7:00pm Tuesday, November 28th Questions and Answers

What is the Tucker Mountain-Newbury Town Forest Project?

The Town of Newbury has a now-or-never opportunity to acquire two parcels of 142 acres and 493 acres on both sides of Tucker Mountain Road, including the tops of Tucker and Woodchuck Mountains, from members of the Leach family at a steeply discounted price. Residents of Newbury voted 135-83 in favor of the proposal at a special Town Meeting on Tuesday, September 26th. A citizen petition for reconsideration of that vote means that there will be a second special Town Meeting vote at 7:00 pm. on Tuesday, November 28th.

Why should the Town buy Tucker Mountain?

Public ownership means the Town will take ownership of and responsibility for a wonderful, iconic asset.

Town ownership will guarantee public access to the land for future generations. The town will be able to make decisions about its use and stewardship. If the Town does not acquire the properties, they will be sold on the open market and future owners may not allow, as the Leaches have, public access in the forest and to the top of Tucker Mountain.

Isn't that land already subject to a conservation easement, and open to the public? So, it's not really at risk?

The 493-acre property was conserved in 1992 when the Leach family donated a conservation easement to the Vermont Land Trust (VLT), but the terms of this easement allow the owner to develop two houses, each on 10-acre lots somewhere on the property's 332-acre eastern section. If this project is successful, the two house rights would be eliminated. In addition, the current conservation easement allows for the construction of a seasonal-use cabin on Tucker Mountain itself. The size of the cabin is not limited. The current conservation easement does not require the owner to make the property available to the public, although the Leaches generously have.

The 142-acre property, which includes land on both sides of Tucker Mountain Road just below its high point, is not subject to a conservation easement so, over time, one or more houses would likely be built.

How can the Town of Newbury afford to purchase such a large amount of land?

The Leach family has worked with the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) and offered to sell their properties to the Town at approximately 50% of fair market value. With the purchase price and project costs totaling \$461,000, we are asking the Town to commit \$25,000. Grants and pledges totaling \$315,000 have already been secured. Another \$15,000 grant is pending, and VLT will commit \$50,000 from its forestland conservation fund, leaving only \$56,000 to be raised with the help of a local committee by March 2018.

How will this affect my taxes? And won't there also be costs to own and manage the land?

There will be costs associated with managing the Town Forest. The Interim Management Committee has set a high priority on making sure that any activities and improvements to the property such as road maintenance, parking lot construction, and possible vehicle access to the top will only be scheduled when income from donations, fundraiser or income from timber harvests and possibly maple sugaring licensing becomes available. Proposed maintenance and improvements will happen over time as funds permit. The committee's proposed plan strives to make this town forest financially self-financing and tax neutral. They even propose that, as a first priority, the town reimburse the taxpayers' \$25,000 share of the purchase with income from the land. Other town forests in Vermont, including Wright's Mountain, are partially or totally self-financing.

Timber harvest potential is promising; the forested properties, have been, and can continue to be managed sustainably, in accordance with a Forest Management Plan. Logging has provided and will continue to provide significant income according to Forester Jeffrey Smith of Bitternut Hollow Forestry who conducted a timber inventory on each property last spring.

Won't the Town lose tax revenue? The town portion of the tax revenue loss is approximately \$3,600 annually [\$1.50 per 100k of property value]. The Interim Management Committee is considering this loss as an expense to be covered by income from the land, grants, and fundraising.

What makes the prospective Tucker Mountain-Newbury Town Forest special?

Tucker Mountain and the forestland around it has been a popular place for residents of Newbury for a long time. The open meadow top of Tucker Mountain provides long distance views in almost all directions and has for many years been the destination for an annual visit by Newbury Elementary School students and teachers. The two properties' 635 acres offer recreational opportunities such as hunting, picnicking, hiking, bird-watching, snowshoeing, and backcountry skiing. Several schools attended by Newbury boys and girls would have an outstanding natural laboratory for learning about plants, wildlife, water resources, and forest management. The land is threaded by headwaters streams and the West Branch of the Halls Brook, with its excellent brook trout habitat. Wetlands, vernal pools with frogs and salamanders, many types of plants and wildlife – all help make the proposed Tucker Mt. Town Forest one of Newbury's most important tracts of land.

Have there been challenges with managing the top of Tucker Mountain?

Yes, there have been some challenges with public use of the top of Tucker Mountain. As an example, vehicular access to the top has caused erosion problems. Following the September 26th Town Meeting vote, the Selectboard appointed an Interim Management Plan committee to draft an initial plan that outlines how the Town might approach management challenges such as that. If the Town does acquire the property, a more thorough Management Plan will be developed during the first year of Town ownership, with help from all interested residents and partners in this project. Public ownership means the Town will take ownership of and responsibility for a wonderful, iconic asset. The town will be able to make decisions about its use and stewardship.

Can you tell me more about the cost of acquiring this land?

The 493-acre conserved parcel (with its two house rights and the right to build a cabin) was professionally appraised in 2014 at \$495,000. The 142-acre property's fair market value was estimated to be \$274,000. The family has offered to sell each property at one-half of those values, so the total acquisition price was set in April 2016 at \$384,500 for 635 acres. Additional costs associated with completing the project bring the total amount of necessary funding up to \$461,000.

How much is the Town's share?

The Town warning article asks the voters to approve \$25,000, which is important to the funding sources that have approved grants already secured for this project

What are the other sources of funding for this project?

This project was awarded \$140,000 by the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board; \$50,000 from the Upper Connecticut River Mitigation & Enhancement Fund; \$75,000 from the Open Space Institute; and \$15,000 by the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation. We have received six donor pledges for a total of \$35,000. The Vermont Land Trust is committing \$50,000 from its forestland conservation fund, and we await word on a grant proposal for \$15,000 from the Davis Conservation Foundation. With \$25,000 from the Town, we will raise the remaining \$56,000 from other private foundations and tax-deductible contributions (to reach a total of \$461,000), with the help of a local committee.

If the Town does buy these parcels with the help of the Vermont Land Trust, will VLT remain involved?

Both properties will be subject to a conservation easement that will be held and stewarded by the Vermont Land Trust and Vermont Housing & Conservation Board. Conservation easements will ensure the land will not be

developed, timber harvest will follow best management practices and be sustainable and wildlife habitat will be preserved for future generations.