

HEBRON OPEN SPACE LAND ACQUISITION COMMITTEE

ANNUAL REPORT – FISCAL YEAR 2021/22

Brian O’Connell, Chairman
John Mullaney, Vice-Chairman
Frank Zitkus, Secretary

The Hebron Open Space Land Acquisition Committee (the Committee), formed by Town Ordinance on June 4, 1998, consists of eight members including one representative from the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Finance, the Planning and Zoning Commission, the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Conservation Commission. Three members from the public also serve on the Committee. The Committee is charged with the responsibility of evaluating and recommending open space land acquisitions to the Board of Selectmen.

The Ordinance also created a Hebron Open Space Land Acquisition Fund, to be used for preservation and acquisition of open space. The Fund is financed primarily by an annual appropriation of up to ½ of a mil as approved in the town budget. Land Acquisition funds are also derived from fees received by the Town in lieu of open space dedications required with subdivision applications, from state grants and from voluntary contributions. Open Space land can be acquired or preserved through direct purchase by the Town, by the acquisition of conservation easements, the purchase of development rights or by landowner donation.

The Committee continued to work closely with other Town boards and land use commissions in open space planning and evaluating open space preservation possibilities, especially for those parcels that can be linked into a town-wide greenway system.

The Committee has adopted its top preservation priorities to include “Watercourse / Waterbody Protection”, “Farmland Preservation”, “Extension of Existing Open Space Properties”, “Air Line Trail Corridor / Connections” and “Protection of Gateway / Scenic Parcels”. The Committee has further identified its highest priority areas within the town for open space preservation to include the Fawn Brook / West Branch Fawn Brook corridor, the Raymond Brook Marsh and the Judd Brook areas for passive recreational and natural resource protection and the Gilead Hill area for farmland preservation. The Committee also continues to pursue opportunities to connect the Air Line Trail to Hebron Center via Raymond Brook Preserve.

To this end, the Committee conducted 3 Regular and 2 Special Meetings in fiscal year 2021/22, including an April 2022 site walk of the O’Connor property located along Chittenden and Hoadley Roads for site assessment and open space acquisition consideration.

As part of its public outreach efforts, the Committee hosted a booth at the August 2021 and June 2022 Hebron Day Events as well as at the 2022 Maple Fest. In addition, the Committee contributes open space acquisition articles for the quarterly “Hebron Views” and annual “Salmon River Watershed Partnership Annual Newsletter” publications.

In September 2021 at Special Town Meeting, attending voters approved acquisition of the 215.5-acre Bernstein property. The Bernstein property, with frontage along Old Colchester

Road, with additional access from Birch Hill Road, extends along the eastern border of the Air Line Trail for over 1/3 of a mile providing a scenic view from Grayville Park to the Judd Brook bridge crossing. Judd Brook traverses a portion of the property featuring historic bridge foundations for an Air Line Railroad spur used to carry materials to construct portions of the Air Line Trail. The property abuts Salmon River State Forest land designated as an Old Forestland Site (reserved to become Old Growth) and town-owned open space providing an extensive area of undisturbed mixed forest, host to many “Species of Special Concern”. Judd Brook and its upland wetlands merge with Jeremy River, a Class A watercourse, just south of the property. A \$199,960 State Department of Energy and Environment Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant supported this purchase.

In June 2022 at Special Town Meeting, attending voters approved the 8.5-acre Raymond family parcel, located along Millstream Road and within the Raymond Brook Greenway as depicted in the Plan of Conservation and Development, for open space land acquisition. The property, which contains Raymond Brook, lies between Town-owned open space parcels at its southern and northern boundaries and its acquisition affords an opportunity to connect Raymond Brook Preserve towards the Air Line Trail while protecting the upstream watercourse of the Raymond Brook Marsh, a State-wide Wetlands of Special Concern and potential source of future drinking water.

To date, upon extensive research and recommendation of the Committee, the Town has permanently preserved 949 acres of open space, including Burnt Hill Park, Raymond Brook Preserve, open field land on Jagger Lane and forested land off of Church Street, Old Colchester Road, Gilead Street and along the Raymond Brook Marsh protecting Hebron’s high water quality streams and areas of potential future drinking water supplies. In addition, the Town’s two most recent acquisitions have preserved nearly 300 acres of pristine forest along the Air Line Trail. These town-owned properties include marked and unmarked trails that can be viewed at hebronpaths.org.

In coordination with the State, the Committee has identified and referred several large open space parcels to the State Departments of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) and Department of Agriculture (DOA) for their subsequent open space preservation. A total of 488 acres has been acquired by DEEP including 54 acres along the Air Line Trail and 293 acres of forest and farmlands abutting and directly across from Gay City State Park. The DOA has acquired the development rights of 604 acres of active farmland resulting in the permanent preservation of such land for farming. These cooperative efforts with the State have aided in the preservation of the town’s rural landscape while enhancing in-town tourism and maintaining farming business activity.

The Committee wishes to reiterate the many varied benefits of Open Space preservation including enhancing home values; mitigating future tax increases (preserved open space produces tax revenues in excess of its cost of services); protecting the town’s productive and scenic farmland; preserving areas of historic heritage and cultural assets; providing for recreational areas and opportunities, both passive and active, which promote healthy exercise and in-town tourism, a help to local business; providing a desirable setting for harmonious economic growth and living environment; preserving forest lands in their natural condition to enhance biodiversity of vital habitat for plant and wildlife; safeguarding our natural resources including clean air, soils and drinking water; and sequestering / storing carbon emissions, a

most-effective manner to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change. In fact, two very recent surveys of town residents conclude that the town's rural characteristics and open spaces are the first and third reasons, respectively, that people move to and remain living in Hebron.

The Committee is chaired by Brian O'Connell, public representative, with Planning and Zoning Commission member Frank Zitkus serving as Secretary and John Mullaney serving as Vice-Chairman. Regular meetings are scheduled on a bi-monthly basis, beginning with the first Wednesday in January, at 7:00 p.m. (conducted remotely via GoToMeeting due to the COVID-19 pandemic), unless otherwise posted. All residents and Hebron landowners interested in participating in development of the town's open space vision are encouraged to join us at our meetings and contact the Committee. The Committee hopes to provide such landowners an opportunity to share in the future stewardship of open space land in Hebron.

Respectfully submitted,

Frank Zitkus, Open Space Land Acquisition Committee Secretary