

LAND CONSERVATION TASK FORCE
BACKGROUND PAPER: COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF LAND CONSERVATION

I. Introduction

In looking at the “community benefits” of land conservation, we have defined this term quite broadly to include the following elements:

- Public health
- Cultural connections with land
- Education for all ages in all settings
- Creating livable communities and high quality of life for residents

Unlike more traditional land conservation objectives, these community-oriented goals are more integrated into the everyday lives of Maine people. Community is defined both geographically – meaning local places where people live and work; as well as culturally including Maine’s Native American tribes, New Mainers and others.

While only a crude measure of conservation that is community-focused, the geographic distribution of acreage of conserved lands certainly provides a useful insight. The eight southernmost counties (excluding Oxford County), where the great majority of Maine residents reside, encompass only about 5% of the state’s conservation lands (both fee and easement). Admittedly, a 20-acre open space in an urban setting can have tremendous community benefits for thousands of Maine people.

Connecting land conservation more directly to communities has been an emerging theme in Maine and elsewhere over the past decade resulting in an emerging array of new partnerships and innovative projects. Numerous Maine foundations and land trusts have directed their work in this direction. The make-up of the Task Force membership reflects a desire to bring a broader array of interests into the land conservation discussion.

II. Existing Public Land Conservation Programs that fund acquisition of

Land for Maine’s Future Program (LMF): As directed by statute, the LMF program has placed a priority on funding projects of statewide significance which generally involve large projects encompassing undeveloped natural and recreation areas. Based upon the recommendations of the Land Acquisition Priorities Advisory Committee (LAPAC) in 1997, LMF initiated opportunities to fund local and regional projects. More recently, LMF incorporated community benefits in its scoring system and added bonus points for archeological sites and public water supply protection (more detailed information below).

Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF): The “state-side” component of this federal program provides allocations to states (on a formula basis). Maine allocates a portion of these funds to an annual competitive grant program administered by the Maine Bureau of Parks & Lands for municipal conservation and recreation projects. The program allows for both land acquisition and development of recreation areas such as parks and ballfields. Available funding varies from year to year but is typically in the \$1 million range for Maine.

Transportation Funding – Maine DOT Bicycle and Pedestrian Program Funding: MDOT allocates approximately \$2.3 million of federal funding annually to communities for the acquisition and development of paths, sidewalks and other projects that promote pedestrian and bicycle use.

Other State and Federal Programs: Because of the diverse nature of community-oriented conservation projects there is opportunity to secure funding from sources not traditionally affiliated with land conservation projects including grant programs focused on water quality, municipal infrastructure, public health, local food production, social services and cultural preservation.

III. How Land for Maine’s Future Program addresses community benefits of land conservation.

In its early days, LMF only funded projects of statewide significance requiring lands to be owned by state agencies; limitations that pretty much excluded community-based projects. Beginning in the late 1990’s LMF began funding projects of local and regional significance. LMF’s scoring process still favored projects of statewide significance, giving higher points to resources of statewide significance, however the LMF Board uses their discretion to fund local and regional projects. In 2017 the scoring process did add a category for community and economic benefit for projects that “cultivate and support closer working relationships between land conservation efforts, businesses, and the community” as demonstrated by letters of support from diverse community interests. The scoring system also provides bonus points for public water supplies and undeveloped archeological sites.

While one round of LMF grant allocations is not conclusive, the geographic distribution of the latest round of LMF projects indicates a growing interest and success of more local projects:

CONSERVATION & RECREATION

Bethel Community Forest	Bethel
Caterpillar Hill	Sedgwick
Easter Hill Beaches	Owls Head
Hope Woods	Kennebunk
Kennebec Highlands Strategic Additions	Vienna, New Sharon
Madison Branch Multi-Use Trail	Oakland, Fairfield, Norridgewock, Madison, Anson, Embden
Mirror Lake Conservation Easement	Camden, Hope, Rockport
Robinson Pond South	Cape Elizabeth
Schooner Cove	Pembroke
Woodward Point	Brunswick
Yarmouth Riverfront Woods Preserve	Yarmouth

FARMLAND

Brigeen Farms	Turner
Old Talbot Farm	Arundel

WATER ACCESS

Pettegrow Point	Machiasport
Lubec Boat Landing	Lubec

IV. Progress over past thirty years and any major shortcomings.

As discussed above, the past generation of land conservation started with a focus on large land and easement acquisitions of lands with outstanding recreational and wildlife/ecological values mostly in the undeveloped and least populated areas of Maine. However, over the past 15 years there has been a steady increasing focus on land conservation initiatives closer to where people live and work and projects that have involved multidisciplinary partnerships and objectives. Some examples of these trends include:

- LMF initiating a working waterfront program and incorporating community benefits, water supply protection and archeological sites into their scoring process.
- A growing number of trail projects within communities and connecting communities.
- Maine municipalities contributing over \$15 million to land conservation projects.
- New local and regional partnerships for land conservation including water districts, hospitals, cemeteries, chambers of commerce, seniors' organizations, developers, New Mainers, and many others.
- Initiatives focused on outdoor recreation and exercise to improve the health of Mainers, ranging from children to seniors. Just one example is Winterkids, which has helped over 100,000 Maine children to be active outdoors in the winter through unique education programs statewide.
- Innovative new environmental education programs utilizing local open space as an outdoor classroom.
- Increased emphasis on community-based projects by major Maine philanthropic foundations including the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation and the Maine Community Foundation.
- Initiatives aimed at connecting Native American culture to land conservation such as the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail and the current First Light Learning Journey.

Community-based land conservation is an evolving and expanding enterprise with many different pathways and players. If the Task Force were to decide to recommend an expanded state focus on community projects, it could propose a variety of changes to the LMF program that would shift priorities to local and regional projects and provide increased support for projects that included objectives such as public health, alternative transportation, cultural connections and vibrant communities.

V. Key Guidance and Resources for Community Benefits of Land Conservation

Whereas the community conservation "movement" is still in its infant stage, and is so diverse, no overall statewide assessments or plans have been developed. Most information available is project specific and is available through the multitude of land trusts and other organizations that have sponsored projects.

From purely a recreational perspective, a Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) studying the demand for, and supply of various types of outdoor recreation facilities and activities in order to prioritize outdoor recreation needs throughout the state.

VI. Some key issues and questions for the future

- Should there be an increased emphasis and priority placed on land conservation projects located where people live and work?
- How can land conservation goals best be coupled with other public objectives including environmental education, public health, cultural connections for Native Americans and New Mainers and others, and improving the livability of Maine communities?

VII. Suggested resources for those who want to dig deeper

What is Community Conservation? <https://www.landtrustalliance.org/topics/community-conservation>

Amplifying Community Conservation: Taking the Lead:

https://tlc.lta.org/topclass/uploads/documents/349500/Alliance_CC%20Program%20Assessment_08-17-2017_Final.pdf

Assessing and Planning Community Conservation Impact:

<https://s3.amazonaws.com/landtrustalliance.org/publication/files/AssessingPlanningCommunityConservationImpact.pdf>

Community Land Conservation Videos: <http://www.mltn.org/meetings/conservation-conference.php>

First Light Learning Journey Website: <https://firstlightlearningjourney.net/>

The Nature of Americans: Disconnection and Recommendations for Reconnection:

https://lccnetwork.org/sites/default/files/Resources/Nature-of-Americans_National_Report_1.2_4-26-17.pdf

Kennebunk Conservation Trust work with at-risk youth:

<https://www.landtrustalliance.org/success-story/last-chance-education>

List of Resources Exploring Diversity and Inclusion Issues:

<http://www.mltn.org/perch/resources/resources-for-exploring-issues-of-diversity-1.docx>