

Hartland Town, School Partner To Develop 17-Acre Wood

By Curt Peterson, Standard Correspondent

The Hartland Conservation Commission and Hartland Elementary School have a joint plan to utilize some land that is practically landlocked, has remained unused for many years, and that's now called "the 17-acre wood," for both education and recreation.

At the Hartland Community Connections monthly breakfast forum on April 16 HES principal Jeff Moreno described "Wednesday in the woods," one day each week when kindergarteners spend their entire school day outdoors on the plot of land.

"They go out in all kinds of weather," Moreno said. "The kids never complain, but the teachers sometimes aren't as enthusiastic."

The sessions begin at an assembly spot where the children hear about behavior expectations and about safety in the outdoors. Right now the kindergarteners are the only class with a formal weekly schedule for the emersion program, an idea that has Scandinavian roots, according to Moreno, but the older students also often make use of the property, doing their normal class work outdoors and relating it to the natural environment.

Moreno said getting the kids out of the classroom improves student behavior as well as inspiring increased attention and interest in their studies.

Jennifer Waite, chair of the Conservation Commission, described ways in which the property can be used for recreation.

"We presently have only a small amount of trails," she said. "We want to expand the trail system to eventually access most of the property."

In 2012 Miceh Heaney, a Hartland Troop 235 Eagle Scout candidate, built a stairway on the steep slope at the beginning of the trail from the school building, and a footbridge across the creek at the bottom as a project, the first of multiple bridges that will be required to access the rest of the forest via trails. Heaney's bridge, with the help of Bill Stack, local forester, is made of decking over felled tree logs and is now in need of replacement due to age, wear and tear. According to Stack the replacement materials are at the site, awaiting installation.

"His original stairway and bridge were quite impressive," Stack commented.

Before additional trails and bridges are completed the Conservation Commission wants to make sure the property boundaries are accurately identified and marked. Stack used a survey map obtained from the town to locate several of the boundary markers, and later identified the line with painted tree blazes. According to Waite, local surveyor Tim Rockwood will be doing an official survey of the property, a process Stack recommended to the Commission.

"I have some questions about possible incursions by neighboring property owners that would be revealed by the survey if they exist," Stack said.

"The school also has an opportunity to engage students in management of the dense growth of invasive plants," Stack said. "They could help restore the natural vegetation."

Besides trail expansion, Moreno said plans include a "tree house village," an idea originally suggested by Community Connections director Jaxon Morgan. The tree houses would consist of waist-high decks, with railings, amongst the trees on the property. HES kindergarteners produced their own drawings of how they thought the proposed tree houses would look.

Moreno said the development plans will have to take the Americans With Disabilities Act into consideration. HES has a few students whose disabilities would make access to the woods difficult without some accommodation. He has gotten volunteer help in basic concepts from both the Upper Valley Trails Alliance and Keith Robinson of Black River Design Architects in Montpelier regarding making the trails, the bridges and the prospective tree houses ADA compliant.

"To do this right for the students and the public, and to avoid legal and liability issues, we know we are going to have to engage professionals to oversee both design and implementation of our plans," Moreno said.

Neither he nor Ms. Waite have an idea yet how much funding will be required to complete the projects they have in mind. She mentioned applying for grant money once the designs and costs are known. Resident Andrea Ambrose, who said the Hartland Winter Trails Association would love to provide volunteers to help do the trail work, since they would expect to be able to ski and snowshoe on them during the winter months, suggested the town should really have a grantwriter available to seek funding for projects like this one, and others, so taxpayers don't have to shoulder the burden alone.

Hartland has a capital reserve fund, according to Town Manager Bob Stacey, that locals refer to as "the MBTE money." Stacey said in 1997 an Irving Oil Co. truck loaded with gasoline drove off of the Quechee-Hartland Road near Merritt Road and tipped over into the ditch, spilling what Irving said was approximately fifty gallons, but which bystanders thought was considerably more. Subsequent evidence of well contamination involving a gasoline additive referred to as MBTE enabled Hartland to join a class-action suit from which they received approximately \$550,000. The Select Board decided to set up a capital reserve fund that is used to finance various projects and needs - the 17-acre wood development might qualify, Stacey said, but it would have to be approved by the voters at Town Meeting if an application was made.

Clyde Jenne, Hartland Town Clerk and unofficial historian, said the parcel was once called "Steele Meadow" as the heirs of David Sumner owned it. The Steeles used a hydraulic ram to pump water from the swamp to supply the Sumner mansion. In the early part of the 20th century Hartland's Progressive Grange staged an annual fair where the school now stands, and they also drew water from the parcel, according to Jenne.

In its recent history a developer named Martin Jefferson Davis carved off all of the buildable lots and, left with 17 acres of unusable land, ceased paying

real estate taxes on the parcel, which was assessed at \$34,000 according to Bob Stacey. In 2002, faced with an imminent tax sale, Davis transferred the land to the town for \$1.

Besides access through the HES campus there is a small amount of frontage on Martinsville Road. At one time the Conservation Commission considered providing trail access from a small parking area there, but concerns about safety for the children dictated "gating" that access. According to Moreno entering the land from the road is made very difficult by terrain and thick overgrowth, and HES hopes to leave it that way to discourage questionable visits. The property has been posted prohibiting hunting and trapping, and public access, Moreno said, will be limited to non-school hours for the children's protection.

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