

Proposed Wolcott Community Forest Frequently Asked Questions

Compiled by Kate Wanner, The Trust for Public Land
September 1, 2021

Join us on **Sunday Sept. 12th**
at 2 pm for a public site walk
of the proposed Community
Forest. Meet at parking lot of
Wolcott Elementary School.

Introduction: The Town of Wolcott has an opportunity to acquire 307 acres on both sides of East Elmore Road to be owned by the Town as a new Community Forest. The Trust for Public Land (TPL) has been working with the landowners (Leon Whitcomb and Rhoda Bedell), Northern Rivers Land Trust, and the Town of Wolcott to make this potential opportunity a reality.

Where is the property?

The proposed Wolcott Community Forest is currently made of up to 2 parcels:

- 160 acres on the east side of East Elmore Road, owned by Whitcomb/Bedell adjacent to the Wolcott Elementary School.
- 147 acres on the west side of East Elmore Road, owned by Whitcomb/Bedell

Why does Wolcott need a new community forest? How does this benefit the town?

169 Vermont towns have town forests, some in existence for more than 100 years. Together, Vermont's town forests account for approximately 69,000 acres of public land. These areas are recreational, educational, open space, water source protection, and timber management assets for their communities, as well as habitat for fish and wildlife. The 2018-2026 Wolcott Town Plan recommends that the Town pursue the acquisition of land for a Town Forest, to respond to the goals in Section 10 regarding its Land Resources, Water Resources and Wildlife Resources.

➤ *Recreational Opportunities*

The proposed Wolcott Community Forest not only offers close-to-home recreation, but also a place for people to engage with their community and connect with nature. The property is within walking distance of the town center, including the Town Office, Library, Recreation Fields, Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, and Wolcott Elementary School. Parking may be available at the school when school is not in session (weekends, summer), and an additional parking area is being considered off East Elmore Road (for hunters and other recreationists), to provide easy access to the property. This will be discussed in more detail during the management planning process.

Currently, there are a few miles of interior forest roads on the property that can be used for walking, skiing, snowshoeing, wildlife watching, and exploration. If successful in securing a grant from the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative, there is the opportunity to plan and construct a 5-mile network of multi-use trails on the property, by highly respected professional trail builders Sinuosity, from Morrisville. These trails would be maintained and managed by the new Wolcott Community Trails Committee. The western parcel contains frontage on Elmore Brook which could have a nice swimming hole for the public. There is also a beautiful 9-acre open meadow on the property that could serve as a site for community gardens and community events like outdoor concerts, or even be rented out for weddings.

➤ *Economic Development*

Recreation and tourism are recognized statewide as the fastest growing and cleanest forms of economic development. Outdoor recreation is an important industry in Vermont, annually generating \$5.5 billion in retail sales and services (accounting for 18% of gross state product),

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supporting 51,000 jobs, and creating \$505 million in state tax revenue.¹ Creation of a new trail network on the property will not only provide close-to-home recreation opportunities for a healthy community but will also support this recreation and tourism economy. Other trail systems in Vermont have demonstrated benefits to the local economy. For example, the mountain bike trails at Blueberry Lake on Green Mountain National Forest bring in \$1.8 million annually to the Mad River Valley.² The trails on the Barre Town Forest provide an estimated \$25,000 in annual recreational use cost savings to residents and \$130,000 of annual direct spending by visitors. Having a Community Forest at the center of town will help attract new residents who are looking for high quality of life, strong outdoor education programs for their children, and close-to-home recreation opportunities. See <https://www.tpl.org/community-forest-economic-case-studies> for more examples of the numerous economic benefits that community forests across the country provide to their local communities.

The property may also help support a proposed community septic infrastructure which may be located on the adjacent school property. The consultants recommend that the Community Forest host a force main that would lead up to the wastewater dispersal field on the Elementary School site.

➤ *Educational Opportunities*

The property's location, immediately adjacent to the Wolcott Elementary School, provides significant opportunities for the school to expand their outdoor education program and use the Community Forest property as an outdoor classroom where kids can learn about the natural world every day, all year long. Town ownership of this land will help kids develop an interest in science and math through connection with nature, set up patterns for an active, healthy lifestyle, and help build familiarity with and appreciation of nature and stewardship skills for the environment. It also allows the school to expand its mountain biking program in partnership with Craftsbury Outdoor Center off the school property on to new trails. Research has shown school performance increases when children learn outdoors, and that it increases students' physical, mental and social health, and supports emotional, behavioral and intellectual development.³

➤ *Natural Resource Protection*

Conservation of this property along Elmore Branch just upstream from the Lamoille River and the population center of Wolcott will support wildlife habitat, water quality and flood resiliency. According to Vermont Conservation Design (VT Fish & Wildlife, 2015), the property is within a Priority Interior Forest Block and within a Highest Priority Connectivity Block. With elevation ranging from 700 feet along the Elmore Branch to 1,200 feet, the property allows species to move up the elevational gradient as the climate changes. In a state with much of our conserved lands at high elevations, protection of lower elevation forests like these is a priority.

The Property's importance for climate adaptation is confirmed by an analysis by The Nature Conservancy: *Resilient Sites for Terrestrial Conservation in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic Region* by Mark Anderson which includes an analysis of landscape and local connectivity, unique geological settings, complexity of associated landforms and other variables. The majority of the property is

¹ Source: Outdoor Industry Association. 2017. The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: Vermont.

² MRV Moves Active Transportation Plan, 2016. Available at https://mrvmoves.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/mrv-active-transportation-plan-doc_final_opt.pdf

³ Source: Children & Nature Network, 2010. <https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/EducationsynthesisMarch2010FINAL.pdf>

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within a “Focal Site for Climate Resilience” which shows that the property has a higher than average ability to maintain ecological functions and a diversity of native species, even as the species composition changes in response to climate.

- The property provides a rich and diverse habitat for a multitude of species, and the proposed project will benefit many of the State Wildlife Action Plan’s wide-ranging and forest-dwelling Species of Greatest Conservation Need, such as moose, otter, and bobcat. The Property acts as a stepping stone for wildlife between the core forest of Elmore State Park, C.C. Putnam State Forest and East Hill Wildlife Management Area. The primary threats to the viability of these species are habitat loss through fragmentation, degradation and conversion. Early successional habitat, such as that in the open meadow, provides habitat for a variety of songbirds including Chestnut-sided and Golden-winged Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Gray Catbird, Indigo Bunting, Brown Thrasher, American Woodcock and Ruffed Grouse.
- ***Aquatic Benefits***
The property includes frontage on Elmore Branch, just 1/2 mile before its confluence with the Lamoille River. Protection of the river corridor along Elmore Branch is a top river corridor protection objective in the Lamoille River Basin Tactical Plan. Land conversion, erosion and poor management practices negatively affect the health of the Elmore Branch and the Lamoille River, thus permanent conservation of the property will enhance the goals of the Lamoille River Focus Area. The Wolcott Community Forest project will limit future forest fragmentation, which is an extreme stressor in the Lamoille River watershed given the high development pressure. Additionally flood resiliency in the Lamoille River Watershed will be aided by protection of the 17 acres of wetlands, 39 acres of Riparian Areas and a mile of headwater streams and frontage on the Elmore Branch on the property. Providing long-term protection to the river corridor, and encouraging the reestablishment of floodplain vegetation will help prevent future infrastructure damage, and allow the river to flood and move as it was designed to do. The property also contains a portion of a Groundwater Source Protection Area near the elementary school, and portions of the 100-Year Floodplain associated with Elmore Branch.
- ***Timber Revenue***
Forest management can continue on the property under the Town’s ownership, which can support local resource-based jobs and provide periodic timber revenues to the Town. The Town will work with the Lamoille County Forester, with public input, to create a management plan that finds an appropriate balance between recreation, wildlife habitat, water quality protection and timber harvesting. A timber cruise will be done this fall, which will provide the capital timber value and potential economic gain to the town. If desired, the Town can also choose to lease a portion of the forest for sugaring, which could also bring in regular revenue.
- ***Health Benefits***
Protection of the property will contribute to the health of local and regional residents by providing a close-to-home destination for outdoor recreation. Having public land close to population centers is important not only to the physical and mental health of the community, but having protected areas within walking or biking distance reduces car travel, air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and the accidents and stress that are by-products of driving. The trails on the property will help encourage walking and bicycling.

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

The Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national land conservation organization, has a signed letter of intent with Rhoda Bedell and Leon Whitcomb, the owners of 307 acres, and are working on finalizing an option agreement.

How would Town ownership work?

The Town of Wolcott would acquire the property subject to a conservation easement held by the Northern Rivers Land Trust (NRLT). If funds from Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) were used as part of the acquisition, VHCB would co-hold the easement. This easement would ensure that the property would be protected as forestland and open land, and that wildlife habitat, public access, and water quality would be protected in perpetuity. Specific easement terms will be determined by the town, TPL, NRLT, and either VHCB or Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, depending on the ultimate funding source for the acquisition. Sustainable timber harvesting would be allowed which could improve forest health and wildlife habitat or, if desired, be a source of income for the town.

The Selectboard has the ultimate authority over the property and management decisions. TPL recommends that the Town form a Community Forest Committee that would be responsible for development of Community Forest policy utilizing community input, and management and oversight options for the final stewardship plan.

How will property be managed?

The uses allowed and management conducted on the Community Forest will be determined by the community, within the broad allowances of the conservation easement. The Stewardship Plan will be created by the Town with help from TPL, the Lamoille County Forester and the Northern Rivers Land Trust, with significant public input. Based on initial discussions, and requirements of the funding sources and easement holders, the Town Forest could be managed for multiple uses, including recreation, sustainable timber harvesting, watershed protection, education, community food production, and wildlife habitat.

Will hunting, fishing and trapping be allowed on the Community Forest?

The Conservation Easement requires that the property be open to the general public for all types of non-commercial pedestrian recreational and educational uses, including bird-watching, cross-country skiing, fishing, hiking, hunting, snowshoeing, swimming, trapping, walking and wildlife observation. However, the community may choose to limit or restrict public access to protect public safety or natural habitats (including the right to permit, regulate or prohibit fishing, hunting and trapping). Next year, a Community Forest stewardship committee would draft a management plan, using input gathered from the community, the County Forester and staff from Department of Vermont Fish & Wildlife, and make recommendations to the Selectboard. The Selectboard has the ultimate authority over management decisions such as these. The management plan will be revised and updated over time. We encourage the public to be involved and share your opinion on this topic once the management planning process starts.

What other restrictions would there be on the land?

A conservation easement will require that wildlife habitat, public access, water quality, and cultural resources be protected, with final language agreed upon by the Town, TPL, NRLT, and either VHCB or VT DEC. A Community Forest Management Plan will have to be developed that is approved by NRLT, VHCB, and the County Forester.

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Can the town log the property?

Yes, the town can choose to harvest wood on the property. It is expected that the property would be managed sustainably for forest management purposes which could provide Wolcott with periodic income, and which could be rolled back into improvements on the property. The property may also be tapped for maple syrup. Other towns that have acquired productive timberland find that the revenue from periodic harvests can be used to fund special projects after any debts have been satisfied. Some towns make firewood available from their town forest for low-income families. Under the terms of the easement, the town would be required to work with a professional forester to develop a forest management plan prior to any proposed harvests. A management plan may include provisions for no logging in certain areas. Other possibilities include a community orchard or “food forest,” which could include fruit and nut trees, berries, mushrooms, and more. There may also be scientific research opportunities for students of all ages.

How much will this property cost and where will the funding come from?

The purchase price will be the fair market value of the land as determined by an independent appraiser. As soon as the Town approves the acquisition and the property is under option agreement, TPL will hire an independent appraiser to appraise both properties. The forestland of the Whitcomb/Bedell parcel is valued at \$415,400 on the Grand List, if the 14 acres with the house is removed from the current assessment. With the recent increase in land values due to out-of-state acquisitions during the pandemic, we expect the fair market value to be higher than current Grand List values. There are another \$252,000 in costs associated with the project (title work, survey, appraisals, timber inventories, environmental investigation, legal costs, TPL staff costs, community forest program reinvestment, management endowment for the Community Forest, and a stewardship endowment for NRLT to monitor the conservation easement in perpetuity.) Planning and construction of a multi-use trail network by a professional trail building group, construction of a parking lot and installation of kiosk and trail signs is estimated at \$177,000, proposed to be funded by an upcoming grant opportunity with the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative. This brings the total estimated cost to \$904,500. The Town of Wolcott is requested to contribute \$25,000, only 3%, towards the full project cost. The Trust for Public Land, with cooperation from a local fundraising committee, will raise the remaining funds for the purchase and the transaction costs from a mix of federal, state, and private sources.

Has any money been committed to the project already?

TPL has engaged with VT DEC and the City of Burlington to explore sponsorship of the proposed Community Forest through the Water Infrastructure Sponsorship Program (WISPr) of the Clean Water State Revolving Fund. The WISPR program allows a municipality that is borrowing funds for wastewater improvements from the Clean Water State Revolving Fund to increase their loan by up to 10% to sponsor a natural infrastructure project that has water quality benefits. If a municipality agrees to increase their loan to fund a natural resource project like permanent forest protection, their administrative fee rate on the loan is reduced, which would save Burlington more than \$200,000 over the life of their loan. See <https://dec.vermont.gov/water-investment/water-financing/cwsrf/WISPr> for more details on the program. The City will be making a decision whether to sponsor the Wolcott Community Forest (for the land acquisition cost and some limited project costs) by the end of November. If they decide not to sponsor this project, The Trust for Public Land will work with the Town to apply to the federal Community Forest Program and Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, to cover the acquisition cost of the property. The Trust for Public Land has successfully funded three recent Community Forests (Barre Town Community Forest, Catamount Community Forest in Williston, and Huntington Community Forest) with these mix of funds.

TPL and the Wolcott Planning Commission recently submitted a Letter of Intent to the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative to fund the trail planning and construction on the Community Forest as

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well as planning and construction of a new trail and pedestrian bridge to connect the Elementary School north to the recreation fields. If invited to submit a full application, and if successful, this will cover the \$177,000 of recreation infrastructure on the Community Forest and provide another \$27,000 for the school trail and bridge across the Elmore Branch north of Flat Iron Road. This has been a priority for the Planning Commission for years.

What is the Town's contribution?

The Trust for Public Land has requested that the Town contribute \$25,000 to the project, or approximately 3% of the full project costs. This might be an eligible use of ARPA funds that the Town will be receiving. This is a long-term investment in the town's future. Funding requests from federal, state and private sources are much more successful if the town has shown financial commitment to the project.

How will this acquisition affect property taxes?

Once municipally owned, the property would be taken off the tax rolls, and the grand list would decrease by \$4,154. The annual municipal tax loss resulting by the creation of this Town Forest is estimated to be approximately \$3,000. Fourteen acres of the current Whitcomb/Bedell property that includes a residence on East Elmore Road will remain privately held, continuing to provide tax revenue. The creation of open space has been clearly documented to increase resale values of homes adjacent to the conserved land.⁴ Property owners will benefit from higher property values when they sell their homes and the town will benefit from an increased tax base, over time. According to a 2001 survey by the National Association of REALTORS® by Public Opinion Strategies, 50 percent of respondents said they would pay 10 percent more for a house located near a park or open space. Lastly, a Community Forest with a trail network that connects to the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail could attract new residents and new businesses.

How about the long-term responsibility and cost of maintaining the property?

The Town will be responsible for maintaining the property, with assistance from volunteers for trail maintenance, such as the new Wolcott Community Trails Committee. The Town is eligible for a number of public grants to create new trails or infrastructure such as a parking lot or natural resource projects such as wetland restoration. The project budget includes \$20,000 for a community forest management endowment, controlled by the Town, to be used for the maintenance and improvement of the property for public use.

When will this acquisition happen?

If the Town and TPL are able to secure the necessary funding as hoped, it is likely the land can be transferred to Town ownership by January of 2023.

Are there any environmental issues with the property?

Prior to acquiring the property, there will be a thorough investigation by a professional firm for any environmental issues or title problems like old rights of way or mineral rights controlled by third parties. Under the terms of the contract, the property must not have any significant defects in order for the acquisition to go forward. The results of the environmental and title investigations will be made available to the Selectboard prior to the commitment of any funds.

What happens if the Town does not purchase the property?

If a conservation outcome fails, the landowners will likely put some or all of the property on the market, and it would likely be developed. Fragmentation has been characterized as the dominant regional stressor on Vermont's forests. Erosion of the health of Vermont's forests through fragmentation has serious ecological, economic, and cultural implications for landowners and communities. Fragmentation leads to

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

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loss of biodiversity; increases the incidence of invasive plants, pests, and pathogens; and reduces water quality. Reducing forest fragmentation where possible now will create more resilient, adaptable forests for the future. Fragmentation and conversion of forests not only decreases resiliency to floods and climate change, it also limits public access, degrades wildlife habitat, decreases human health and well-being, and forever alters the landscape⁵.

What is the role of the Trust for Public Land and the Northern Rivers Land Trust?

The Trust for Public Land is a national land conservation non-profit organization with a mission of conserving land for people. TPL is leading the real estate negotiations, due diligence and the fundraising for the land acquisition. TPL has considerable expertise in real estate, law, finance, and fundraising in support of purchasing conservation land for public agencies and municipalities. TPL operates a community forest program in New England that assists towns in the creation of new municipally owned forests. TPL has successfully created new community forests in Williston, Hinesburg, West Fairlee, Barre Town, West Windsor, and Huntington, Vermont and in Errol, Freedom, Randolph, Milan, and Meredith, NH, among other places. Please see tpl.org/our-work/community-forests for more information.

The Northern Rivers Land Trust is a non-profit conservation organization serving the towns of Hardwick, Woodbury, Walden, Wolcott, Albany, Greensboro and Craftsbury. They are dedicated to protecting the natural, scenic, and working landscapes in the headwaters of the Winooksi, Lamoille and Black Rivers and are excited to engage with the Wolcott Community on a new Community Forest. The Northern Rivers Land Trust will hold the conservation easement (or potentially, co-hold the easement with Vermont Housing and Conservation Board) in perpetuity. NRLT will assist with creation of the management plan, monitor the easement annually, and work cooperatively with the Town to ensure the conservation values of the property are protected.

For more information contact:

Kate Wanner, Project Manager at The Trust for Public Land, kate.wanner@tpl.org, 802-922-0180

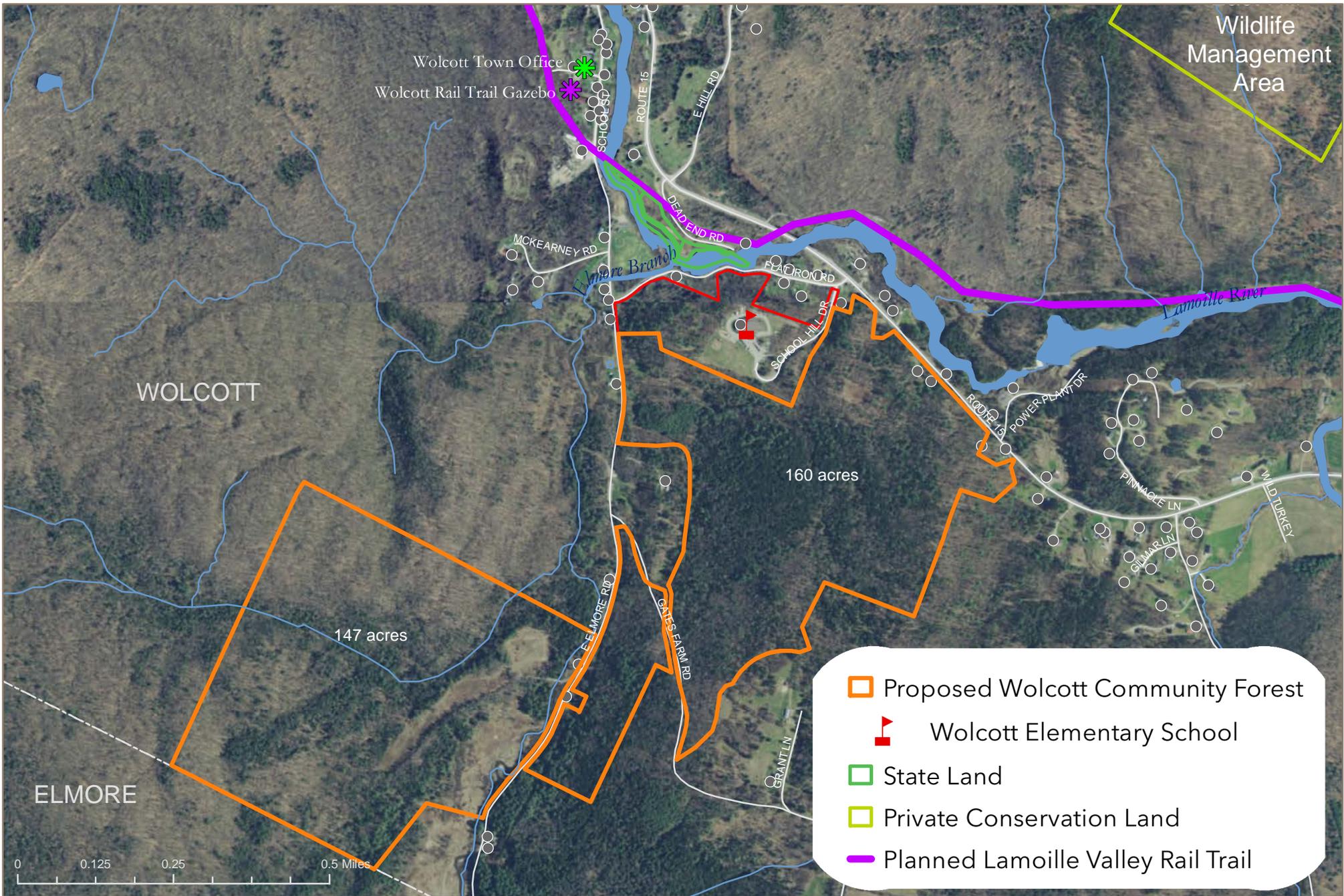
Jack Travelstead, Chair, Northern Rivers Land Trust, jctravel54@gmail.com, 802-472-3332

To join the Wolcott Community Trails Committee, please contact:

Maxfield English at maxfielenglish@gmail.com or

Megan Jolly at 802-730-0659 or jollyvermont@gmail.com

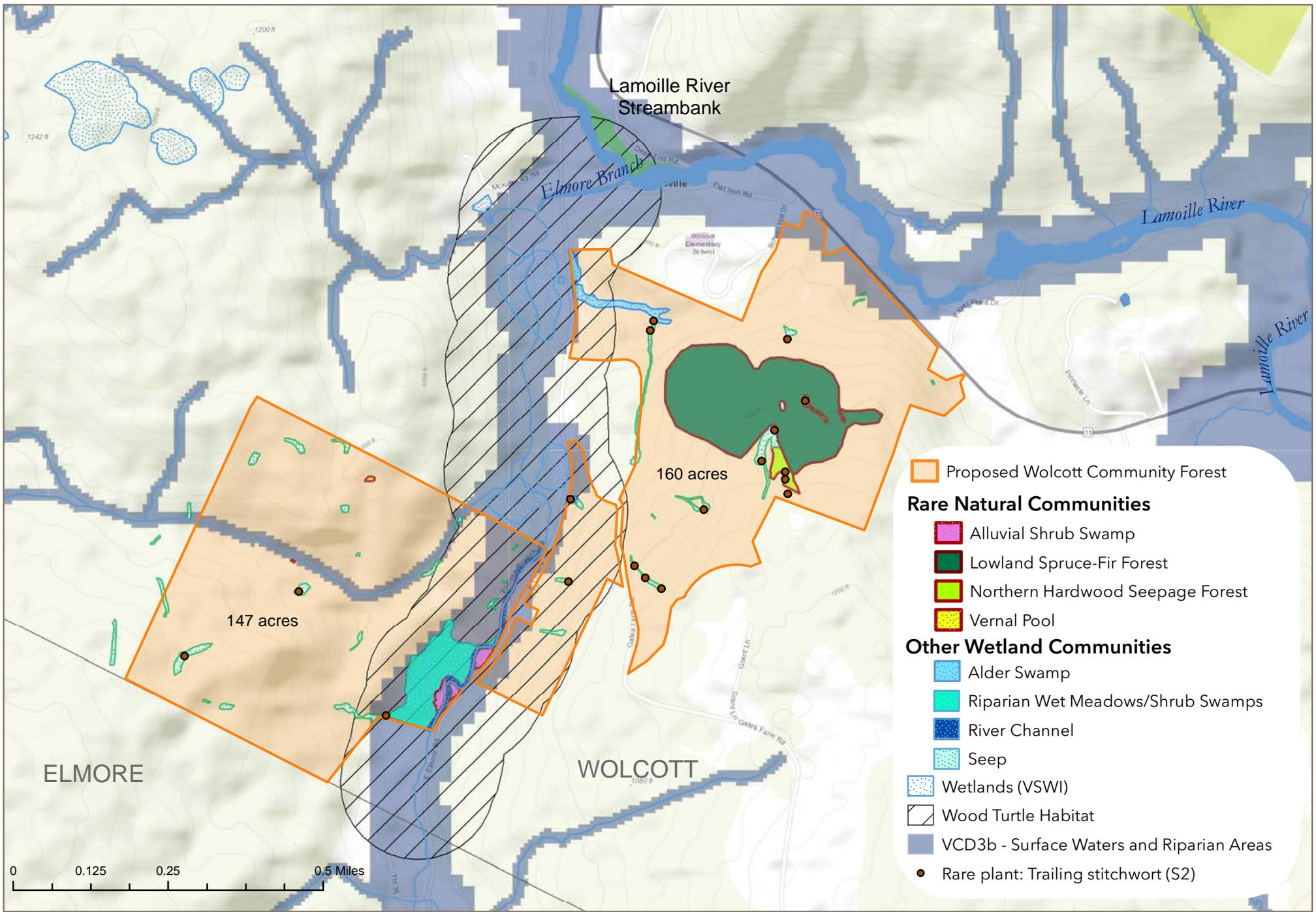
⁵ 2015 Vermont Forest Fragmentation Report: Report to the Vermont Legislature, Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation and Agency of Natural Resources, April 2015.



Proposed Wolcott Community Forest

Wolcott, Vermont





Proposed Wolcott Community Forest ~ Natural Resources

Wolcott, Vermont

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