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Town and Local Land Trust Seek to Protect 227 Acres of Land in Amherst

Conservation Purchase Depends on Voter Approval of Town Funds March 8th

Amherst, N.H. – February 17, 2016: On March 8th, Amherst residents will vote on a proposed \$450,000 town appropriation that would go toward the purchase of 227 acres of undeveloped land between Spring, County and Upham Roads in Amherst. The property overlies one of Amherst's highest yielding groundwater aquifers, and provides recharge to nearby residential drinking water wells.

The town funding for the purchase is included in Article #31 on the town warrant, and has the unanimous support of Amherst's Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission and Ways and Means Committee. Amherst Select Board Chair Dwight Brew says "the fact that we have this opportunity in front of us is a small miracle, and if we had missed it, odds are it would not have come again in a year. For this reason the Board of Selectmen strongly supports this great conservation project."

The land came to the attention of the Amherst Conservation Commission (ACC) in late December 2015, when they learned the property was on the market, and a bidding process was slated to begin in mid-January. The Commission reached out to the Piscataquog Land Conservancy (PLC), a non-profit land trust based in New Boston, to see if the group could investigate the opportunity.

In just five weeks, PLC and the Town were able to establish that the property was worthy of conservation, arrange for the appraisal to get its market value, negotiate a purchase price and get

More

a signed agreement between PLC and the private landowners to hold the property off the market for 90 days while town voters decide whether to approve the \$450,000 warrant article.

PLC's Executive Director Chris Wells says "the teamwork between PLC and the Town of Amherst has been truly remarkable, and without it we would never have reached this point. The current owners of the land also deserve huge credit for making a big family decision so quickly, and giving us time to pull together funding for a conservation purchase. This is a really incredible project and hopes are high."

Along with safeguarding drinking water, protecting the land would protect surface water, wetlands and vernal pools which provide flood storage, aquatic habitat and ground water recharge. The land also has potential for the development of recreational trails, including as a possible key component in a "safe routes to school" pathway from Amherst Village to Souhegan High School.

The land's hemlock-hardwood-pine forest is critical habitat for animals like deer, bobcat, fishers, roughed grouse, and purple finch. This land is immediately across Spring Road from the Town's Pond Parish conservation area, and is close to other town lands to the north and east that are part of a larger wildlife corridor extending two miles to the Town of Merrimack's Grater Woods conservation area.

The total cost of the purchase would be \$1,000,000. \$450,000 of this amount would come from Amherst taxpayers if they approve the March 8th warrant article. The Piscataquog Land Conservancy would bring another \$500,000 to the purchase via public and private grants and local fundraising. The final \$50,000 would come from existing ACC conservation funds.

ACC Chair John Harvey says "this funding strategy enables Amherst to acquire this valuable open space for 45 cents on the dollar -- an extraordinary one-time opportunity for the Town."

If all the funds are raised, the purchase would close in the first quarter of 2017. The Town of Amherst would take ownership of the land, subject to a conservation easement held by PLC. The easement is an additional guarantee that the land will remain in conservation in perpetuity, and be managed by the town in a way that protects its natural resource values.

The Amherst Conservation Commission is a state-sanctioned organization chartered to protect open space and the natural resources therein. The ACC manages 2,600 acres of conservation land, approximately 13% of the town. It stewards over 25 miles of trails, conducts planned forest harvests and manages seven meadows to improve wildlife habitat, provides water quality expertise for plans and permits, and conducts an aggressive invasives mitigation program.

Founded in 1970, the Piscataquog Land Conservancy (PLC) is a private non-profit land conservation organization based in New Boston, NH. It serves the 23 communities in southern New Hampshire that encompass the watersheds of the Piscataquog, Souhegan and Nashua Rivers. PLC currently holds land and conservation easements on 103 properties totaling more than 6,200 acres.

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