



## Community Forest Case Study:

# Mills Riverside Park

Jericho and Underhill, Vermont

The Vermont Land Trust (VLT) holds the conservation easement on a number of community-owned properties for which a management plan is required by the easement. This plan is an important guide for how multiple uses of the property will be balanced. We interviewed people in seven towns who were involved in the creation of their community forest plan. The following case study focuses on Mills Riverside Park.

## Background

Mills Riverside Park offers visitors breathtaking views of Mt. Mansfield, while the Browns River forms a natural boundary to the north. Old stone walls suggest past agricultural use of the fertile soils along the river. Prior to conservation, the forest was managed for timber and maple sap. An RV campground was operated by the previous landowner on 34 acres.

The Jericho Underhill Land Trust (JULT) recognized the significance of the Mills property and its vulnerability to development pressure. VLT helped JULT with legal work, mapping, and fundraising to buy and conserve the land. In 1999, JULT bought the land with funding from the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB), the Freeman Foundation, the Towns of Jericho and Underhill, Free Press Foundation, Williams P. Wharton Foundation, IBM,

## Property Snapshot

**Size:** 216 acres, conserved with the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board.

**Uses:** Walking, cross-country skiing, biking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, ice skating, sledding, running, and picnicking. A weekly farmers' market is held in summer.

**Description:** Most of the park is in Jericho; only about 10 acres are in Underhill. Sixty-seven acres are open meadow. The remainder is forested with mostly sugar maple, red maple, white pine, yellow birch, and other hardwoods. The park has over a half-mile of frontage on the Browns River, which provides habitat for three species of rare fish—Finescale dace, Rosyface shiner, and Trout-perch. The forested wetlands along the river contain large red maples, ash, box elders and willows, which provide dense shade for the river. Vernal pools are also located throughout the property. There is strong evidence of black bears marking and feeding on American beech trees.

**Special protections:** 56 acres of forest have further conservation restrictions (e.g. limits on timber cutting) because of extensive use by black bear and other wildlife. All land within 50 feet of the Browns River is protected to ensure good aquatic habitat and water quality. Activities in these areas must be in the management plan and approved by VLT staff, who ensure consistency with the easement.

and IDX. They then donated a conservation easement to VLT and VHCB and transferred ownership to the Jericho Underhill Park District.

The elementary school, middle school, a preschool, and the town library are all within walking distance of the park, which makes this property a great resource for both recreation and education.

## Management planning process

From the start, strong local community support was key to the project's success. Resident involvement was always welcome, and feedback was continuously incorporated. Several public meetings were held before the property was even purchased.

After the land was purchased and transferred, the Jericho Underhill Park District's Board of Trustees distributed a questionnaire at the Jericho and Underhill town meetings to understand what recreational activities, events, and facilities residents wanted.

The feedback from the survey was used to structure the public input meetings. "Ultimately, the feedback was that folks in both communities were eager for two things: a trail system, which we did not have, and community-building events," recalled Livy Strong, chairperson for JULT and Jericho Underhill Park District. "A place where people can meet-and-greet and see their neighbors and friends."

The management plan was discussed at two public meetings, which were well advertised. "Folks with a variety of interests showed up," Livy. "We had a large map and talked about the various zones embedded in the conservation easement... They all have permitted uses and restrictions. We were able to talk about that and engage the public in what they wanted to see."

Many hands make light work. The following inventories and assessments were conducted and incorporated into the management plan:

- Greenleaf Forestry created a forest management plan.
- Morse and Morse Forestry conducted a wildlife habitat inventory. Staff with VLT, the Jericho Conservation Commission, and JULT helped with the wildlife inventory and GPS mapping.
- Goodhue Land Design offered trail design recommendations.
- Staff with the Department of Fish and Wildlife and Browns River Watershed Council made recommendations for managing the land along the Browns River.
- High school students were offered credit to look at the property and develop management strategies within the easement guidelines.

## Plan in action

Since the plan was adopted, a pavilion was built to host local events, such as weekly summer concerts. The pavilion can also be rented by private parties. The trail system took advantage of the existing network of logging roads.

The largest management issue has been dogs. "Dogs are a very emotional management issue," explained Livy. "There are defensive dog owners and an upset public. Sometimes it can get very confrontational. We do have a lot of education on how to pick up waste; we have dispensers and receptacles all over the place. Compliance is high though; each box has 200 dog bags, and we replace that weekly."

Pets are allowed throughout the park, but must be leashed in all areas including the parking lot and trails, except for a designated off-leash area, where they can run free and enjoy swimming in





**Browns R. Middle School**

**Rawson Memorial Library**

**River Rd**




**Browns River**

**Route 15**

**Wildlife Habitat Area**

Scale: 1:10,000

# Mills Riverside Park (Jericho/Underhill)

-  Parking
-  Pedestrian Trails
-  Streams



0 45 90 180 270 360 Meters

0 200 400 800 1,200 1,600 Feet



the Browns River. “[This] is probably the highest level of our management: making sure dog owners obey simple rules,” said Livy.

The Jericho Underhill Park District continues to engage the public in park management. They invite the public to join them at two meetings a month held at the library. Meetings and other events are advertised on the park website [millsriversidepark.org](http://millsriversidepark.org), Facebook, Front Porch Forum, and through paper posters.

## Lessons Learned

**Engage professional help when needed.** Foresters, wildlife biologists, and aquatic ecologists were hired to conduct different assessments. “We have a really good professional [currently] helping with the trail system and identifying issues and prioritizing them,” noted Livy.

**Engage the public from the very beginning.** This is especially important from a funding perspective. Public engagement was critical to funding the acquisition as both towns contributed public money. Once the property was purchased there have been ongoing management costs.

**Dedicate funds so that there’s money to deal with management issues when they arise.** One year a truck went right through the bridge. “Nobody could get to the park unless you walked through the river,” recalled Livy. “We had put money aside; it ended up being \$30,000 for that event alone... If we really need something, we have the ability to finance it. We’re a municipal entity; we put together a budget and send it to both select boards... Once the budget gets approved, Underhill pays 40 percent and Jericho pays 60 percent.” ☪



*To see other studies and learn more, visit: [vlt.org/townforeststudy](http://vlt.org/townforeststudy) or contact Caitlin Cusack at (802) 861-6504 or [caitlin@vlt.org](mailto:caitlin@vlt.org).*

 **Vermont Land Trust**  
CONSERVING LAND FOR THE FUTURE OF VERMONT