

Land Protection and Stewardship in Weston

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Land conservation in Weston turns fifty this year. In 1953, the town established a Committee to Investigate and Report on the Matter of a Town Forest. Within a few years, several small tracts of Town Forest had been acquired, planting the seeds of more than 2,000 acres of open space that we own today. Weston at that time was a town of dwindling farms, fading estates, and a few other seedpods--of residential development. The genetic map by which Weston would unfold was laid down in the early 1950s by two critical decisions: residential zoning, and open space acquisition. The upshot is the suburb we see today: two-thirds detached houses on large lots and one-third schools, golf courses, and protected open space.

The first half of this period, 1953-1977, could be called the era of land *protection* in Weston. The next quarter-century, running into our own time, has marked the era of land *stewardship*. My purpose here is to review protection, look more closely at stewardship, and briefly consider what may become of our land in the next fifty years.

Half a century ago, the only available mechanism for protecting land in Massachusetts was "town forest." The acquisition of municipal forests had arisen in the early 20th century, when the eastern United States was severely deforested and there was fear of a timber famine. The original purpose of town forests was to promote reforestation and timber management, but the movement faded as New England reforested itself and lumber remained cheap and plentiful on the world market. The town forest idea was revived as a means of open space protection in the 1950s. Weston was

among the leaders in this new drive to preserve the rural character of suburbanizing towns.

Beginning in 1955 Weston began acquiring town forests on Highland Street, in Jericho, and on Sudbury Road. In the same year the Weston Forest & Trail Association was established to educate townspeople about the forests and maintain trails within them. Dr. William Elliston was the leader in all these efforts. From the start, the strategy was to acquire large tracts of backland at reduced prices, leaving the owner with street frontage increased in value.

In 1961, as a result of new state enabling legislation, the Conservation Commission was established and took over the job of protecting open space for broad ecological, scenic, and recreational purposes. Land acquisition continued through the 1960s, but became more difficult as land values continued to rise. With completion of the turnpike connector to downtown Boston the pace of development increased, and it became clear that most of the remaining large tracts of open land would soon be gone. Townspeople rallied by passing two bond issues totaling over \$4 million, in 1972 and 1974. This marked the heroic climax of open space protection in Weston. Again Dr. Elliston, along with Hugo Uytterhoeven, Ken Germeshausen, and Bus Willis, led the charge. Over 1,000 acres were quickly added to the 763 already existing. The Weston College land was appended in 1977 (on a separate bond issue, and with state matching funds), providing a crown jewel.

That largely concluded the era of major land protection in Weston. Some important parcels have been acquired since, but they hardly amount to a hundred acres. The Case "Forty Acre Field" was purchased from Harvard in 1986 (as municipal purposes land), more Coburn fields on Church Street were protected through a partial development arrangement, the Dickson and Danforth fields were acquired with state

funds in compensation for the taking of conservation land for the MWRA tank at Normbega. The “Sunday Woods” on Concord Road marked the first parcel to be bought primarily with funds from the Community Preservation Act surcharge on property tax. With that steady stream of income, Weston is likely to continue acquiring small pieces of land for years to come, adding perhaps another one or two hundred acres. Emphasis has shifted mainly to open fields that are visible from the roads, and protection of these valuable parcels will often require creative mixtures of partial development, private fundraising, and CPA funds.

Let us turn now to the era of stewardship, or “community land management.” During the decades that land was being acquired to protect “rural character,” genuine rural activity in Weston was disappearing. At the beginning of the 20th century Weston was a town of active farms and managed woodlots, but productive land use largely ceased during the middle part of century. In the past 50 years, Weston has rapidly grown up in wild forest even as it has suburbanized. Very little open farmland is left, and you could count the remaining private farms on one hand--Danforth, Anza, Dickson, Carter, ...?

As for active forestry, some pine planting and “timber stand improvement” took place on town forest land in the 1950s, but that also petered out. There was no real market for timber, and no real taste for cutting trees. With commercial agriculture and forestry in decline, and a growing feeling among conservationists that the best management was no management at all, one might have reasonably predicted that Weston’s open space would be left to look after itself. But once 2,000 acres of land had been acquired in the 1970s, something much more interesting happened. We can review the rise of community land stewardship in Weston under four headings: trails, fields, market gardening, and forestry.

Weston in the 1950s had an extensive network of riding trails left over from the estate era. Equestrians in town played an active role both in protecting land, and in maintaining the basic trail system. As more conservation land was acquired, many smaller walking trails were added by the Weston Forest & Trail Association. The leading figure in this work has long been George Bates, who along with Hugo Uytterhoeven and others laid out trails, acquired easements over private land to allow access and connect the pieces, and got the whole system properly marked and mapped.

Trail maintenance began as a volunteer effort, and many people continue to help out in various corners of town. But volunteers alone were found to be inadequate to the task of keeping the trails clear, especially following storms such as the heavy May snow of 1977. In 1979 Forest & Trail decided to hire someone--me, actually--to maintain the trails on a regular basis, removing windfalls and cutting back encroaching branches and brush. The following year Land's Sake was formed and has performed this work ever since, under the direction of Forest & Trail. Taking care of trails has proven a good way to introduce Weston's young people to conservation land. Besides the work done by Land's Sake, the trails have been improved by occasional Eagle Scout projects as well. For years, the trails have hosted monthly Forest & Trail outings, and more recently a series of "Biodiversity Day" walks each June. On the whole, Weston has one of the most extensive and best-used systems in the region, with some 65 miles of trails--and the work continues.

Although most of Weston's "open" space is forested, there are also three dozen small fields on public land scattered around town. Most are only a few acres, amounting to perhaps 100 acres in all. These fields provide a lingering element of rural character along our roads, and lend real charm to some of our better-used conservation areas such as Cat Rock, the Weston College land, and the Sears land. At the same time they provide

diverse habitat for grassland and shrubland species not found in deep forest. For some years the fields were mowed by the Highway Department, until the job was delegated to Green Power Farm in the mid-1980s. The mowing duty came to Land's Sake along with the rest of Green Power in 1991. Many of the fields are not mowed until August, to allow time for ground-nesting birds to fledge their young.

Mowing fields and maintaining trails for scenery, wildlife, and passive recreation is about what one would expect a suburban town to do with its conservation land. But in Weston things took a new twist with the birth of community farming and forestry. Market gardening, timber harvesting, and an ethic of active land stewardship have become part of our heritage as well. This story began in 1970 with Green Power Farm on Merriam Street, and a man named Bill McElwain. Green Power started as a volunteer effort to grow vegetables for the inner city, but within a few years the town acquired the land (for municipal purposes) from Weston College and McElwain was hired by the newly-formed Youth Commission. Green Power grew to about 15 acres, and apple cider and maple syrup [described in the Spring, 2003 Weston Historical Society Bulletin] were soon added to the program. The aim of these projects was to involve middle school and high school students with agriculture, and to send low-cost food to urban shelters and lunch programs.

Green Power was transferred to the Conservation Commission upon the demise of the Youth Commission in the mid-1980s, and in 1991 the program was merged with Land's Sake. That organization had been incorporated as a non-profit in 1980, with three central aims: to provide ecologically responsible management for town farm and forest land, to actively involve young people with that land, and to generate as much income as possible directly from sales of products and services. Land's Sake was founded primarily by Martha Gogel and Doug Henderson, who saw an opportunity to build upon what Bill

McElwain had begun. The resulting arrangement, by which Land's Sake contracts with the Conservation Commission, Weston Forest & Trail, and private landowners to carry out a range of land stewardship and educational projects, has proven reasonably efficient and stable.

Land's Sake got its start farming the Case "40 Acre" field in 1981, under the auspices of the Arnold Arboretum. Over the years a successful farmstand and pick-your-own business has been built up, employing young people and largely paying its own way. Harvard pushed the Arboretum to sell the land, and the town bought 35 acres for \$3.5 million in 1986--the largest land deal in Weston's history at the time (and not much less than what had been spent to acquire over 1,000 acres a mere decade before). With the Green Power land on Merriam Street and Concord Road, Land's Sake now cultivates about 25 acres. In any given year 15-20 acres are growing organic fruits, flowers and vegetables, while the rest rotates through soil-building cover crops.

Partly by design and partly by chance, Land's Sake has developed a new model for community farming of suburban open space. The farm strikes a balance between commercial rigor and educational and social purposes--a fruitful marriage of conservative and liberal precepts. It is run by hard-driving professional staff, but also employs and educates interns in their twenties and middle school students. Crops are cultivated by a judicious combination of power equipment and intensive hand transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. On-site retail sales pay most of the bills, but in addition some 20,000 pounds of produce are shipped every year to the city food security network, a donation underwritten by the Town of Weston. Small, irregular fields interspersed with ornamental plantings make an attractive blend of working market garden and arboretum, a place where visitors feel welcome to go for a stroll. Here is open space stewardship that looks terrific, engages people with the land in many ways, and all but pays for itself.

Land's Sake is now internationally recognized, and frequently hosts visitors who hope to try something similar in their own communities, ranging from Rhode Island to Tuscany.

Meanwhile, something even less predictable was going on in the town forest. No active management had been undertaken since about 1960, and letting nature manage its own affairs appeared to be settled doctrine. But with the 1970s energy crisis and the revival of heating with wood came new calls for forest management. The Conservation Commission initiated firewood thinning on a small scale in 1981, and the cutting was carried out by Land's Sake. Through the 1980s about 50 cords were cut each winter in Jericho and Highland Forest, and sold to local customers. In 1989, the Conservation Commission approved a long-range forest management plan prepared by John Potter, who had grown up working for Land's Sake, gone on to the Yale School of Forestry, and returned to run the forest program in Weston for several years. This initiated a new era in Weston's approach to its town forest.

The plan identified 1,440 acres of manageable oak, pine, and red maple forest throughout Weston's conservation lands, of which part was to be set aside as a wild reserve. The remainder was to be thinned every 15 years or so as it grew, and then to be harvested of mature pine and hardwood timber on about a 120 year rotation. This would mean that some 10 acres every year would be cut heavily enough to release young seedlings, using either "shelterwood" or "group selection" methods that avoid jarring clearcuts. The purpose of such sustainable forestry is to continually regenerate a small percentage of the forest in ways that imitate the periodicity and scale of natural disturbances such as hurricanes and nor'easters. This allows one to harvest high-quality wood products and at same time maintain a diversity of habitats, dominated by mature forest but with some younger patches scattered throughout the forest.

In practice, nothing like as much cutting as the plan called for has been carried out. It's very hard to make such careful, small-scale forest management pay--it's just not the same as selling organic strawberries to an eager local retail market. Nevertheless, through the 1990s and to this day Land's Sake has continued cutting on about 5 -10 acres every winter, on the Sears land and in the Ogilvie forest as well as the Highland forest and Jericho. This has been mostly firewood thinning, but some larger hardwood and pine timber has been harvested as well. Most timber has been sold to commercial sawmills, a smaller amount cut into lumber on a bandsaw mill and sold to local customers. Young people are involved in the forest project by splitting firewood. Modest as it may be, this program of active suburban forest management is also regarded as a model, and like the farm has attracted visitors from as far away as Scotland and Japan.

Where is this innovative program of community land protection and management likely to go in the next half century? Historians never predict the future with much confidence, but I will venture a few guesses in order to provoke some thought. The largest challenge that Weston's land will face in the coming years may be increased public use of our trail system. Overall, I believe this is a good thing--Weston now depends on the city of Boston for its existence and suburban conservation lands are inevitably a metropolitan resource. On balance the educational value of city people walking in the woods far outweighs any minor ecological disturbances. But recreational use does pose some difficult issues. We will need to steer people and dogs away from areas that harbor rare species, for example. Heavy dog traffic that makes the trails uninviting for other users may prove the greatest challenge of all, and the Conservation Commission is already confronting it.

Our open fields present a challenge that might be made into an opportunity. Every year the forest creeps in closer behind the mower. Now the Forest & Trail Association and the Weston Historical Commission are looking into using CPA funds to push some of the field edges back to the stone walls, restoring their historic dimensions. This would greatly improve their scenic quality. And we might look into maintaining these expanded fields with livestock. Nothing restores rural character like putting a few sheep in a field, as Faith and I discovered when we kept sheep throughout Weston. Concord and Carlisle are now *renting* sheep to maintain many of their open lands. Rotational grazing with portable fences need not hinder public access, and can be compatible with grassland birds. Since there is a growing niche market for grass-fed meat, such a project could cover a substantial part of its own costs, while reducing the need for mowing.

We should see continuing growth in demand for local, organic produce as well. We can expect market gardening in Weston to slowly expand in acreage, in intensity, and in variety of crops produced, and to keep involving plenty of young people. But there will be competition from other users for the limited supply of open land in Weston. Most of what is now being cultivated is “municipal purposes land” which may also be desired for recreation, schools, or community housing. Just how strongly distaste for the industrial food system will push us to prefer locally-grown food to these other pressing needs, is hard to guess.

It may be even more risky to predict future trends in forest product markets than in farming. Will the energy crisis return to stay? That would improve demand for firewood and for chips, which might be used to efficiently heat a municipal building. Sustainable local timber production is being promoted by some environmentalists as a way to combat the “illusion of preservation”--that is, setting our own forest aside while

we import 98% of our forest products from other, more vulnerable parts of the world. This might work best as part of a community forest coalition across several towns in the region, which would provide an adequate forest base to support timber processing for a local retail market. We can imagine sustainably-certified flooring, paneling, and furniture made of our own “character wood.” The major challenge of such a program will be to satisfy Weston residents that other ecological values of the forest, such as protection of biodiversity, are also being served.

During the past half century Weston has emerged as a national leader in land protection and stewardship at the local, community level. This did not happen by chance, but because of the foresight and persistence of Bill Elliston, Bill McElwain, George Bates, and many others who poured themselves into the cause. These people did not always agree on which land was most important to protect, or how best to care for it, but they did share an unshakable conviction that hanging onto a decent amount of farm and forest land, and encouraging townspeople to stay in touch with that land, is vital to our community. Whether the coming generations of Weston conservationists are willing to devote themselves to this land with the same vision and tenacity will determine what is to become of this noble heritage.

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