

Engaging Residents in Planning for
Municipal Forests

A Case Study of Lincoln, Vermont

National Community Forestry Center
Northern Forest Region

August, 2003

About the National Community Forestry Center . . .

The National Community Forestry Center (NCFC) is a decentralized network with four regional centers and a national coordinator. The four regional centers are located in the Southwest, the Appalachians, the Pacific Northwest, and the Northeast. The Northern Forest Regional Center of the NCFC is administered by Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. of St. Albans, Vermont. The northern forest region, our primary area of service, is comprised of the states of Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont.

The core purpose of the Northern Forest Regional Center is to help rural people conduct and use research to inform decision-making about forest resources. Our goal is to add value to the work of communities, organizations, and institutions in our region who share a vision of healthy communities and healthy forests, now and for future generations.

The work of the Center includes:

- developing partnerships with existing organizations who share our vision
- assisting rural communities in defining research agendas and engaging scientists in participatory research
- conducting targeted research to address region-wide issues and opportunities
- responding to requests by rural people for information and technical assistance related to community forestry
- establishing mechanisms such as listservs, web page, newsletter, and conferences to facilitate information sharing and networking
- publishing fact sheets, reports, and other materials on forest-related topics
- working intensively with up to three communities per year based on priorities established by our Advisory Council.

We look forward to engaging you in this unique opportunity to support rural people in creating healthy communities and healthy forests. We would be happy to respond to your inquiries about the Center's services, or about specific forest topics, and are prepared to assist you in locating forest-related information and resources.

The National Community Forestry Center is a program of the National Network of Forest Practitioners. Network members share an interest in rural community development based upon sustainable forestry, and, even more importantly, a conviction that healthy communities and healthy ecosystems are interdependent.



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Case Studies in Community Forestry

The National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region is committed to sharing information and lessons learned by practitioners of community forestry in our region. This document is part of a series of case studies we are publishing to illustrate the variety of approaches that can be taken to create healthy communities and healthy forests.

Town forests are a unique aspect of forestry in New England. Originally intended as a source of wood supply for the town, these forests now provide a means for educating the community about the value of working forests. What communities continue to struggle with is how best to use these community resources. While in many cases these decisions are made by local governments, many communities are attempting to solicit the input of their residents to aid in the process. This case study of the efforts of Lincoln, Vermont provides some useful lessons.

The story of Lincoln, Vermont demonstrates how a small, rural town can engage its residents in planning for town-owned forests. This study illustrates the steps that can be taken to involve local residents in an effort to determine appropriate priorities for use of town forests. It also shows some of the obstacles a small community needs to overcome in attempting to bring its residents together to discuss municipal forests.



Our Town Forest Legacy

Despite our reputation for individuality and self-sufficiency, New Englanders have a long tradition of community forest stewardship, dating back to the late 1800s.

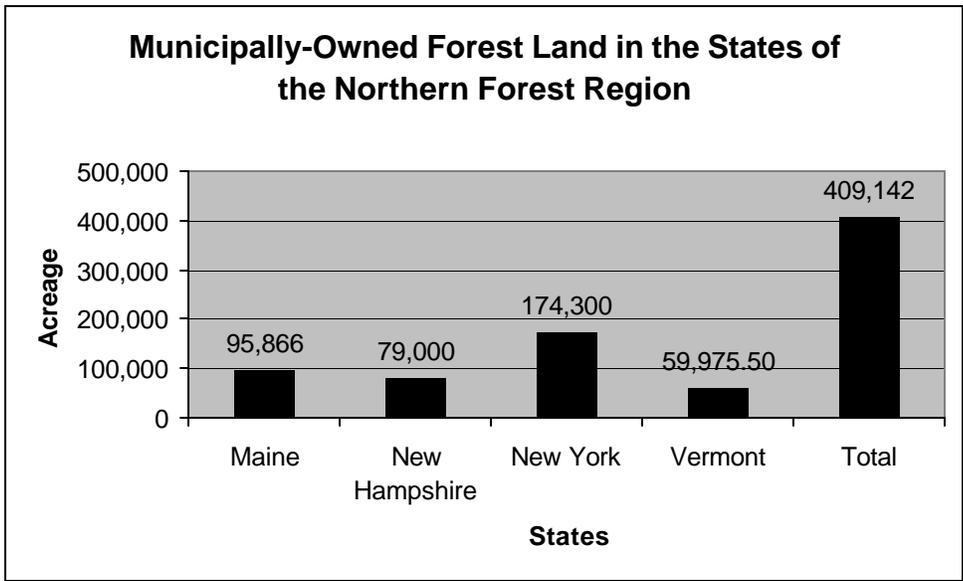
In 1882, Massachusetts became the first state to enable towns to purchase land to be placed in the public domain for the purpose of generating revenue. The Massachusetts legislation explicitly recognized the potential for timber-crop management by towns and acknowledged an important relationship between forests and protection of water supplies. Towns were quick to recognize the benefits of preserving woodland for park purposes.

Town forests rapidly became New England's dominant category of local woodland. The term frequently included watershed lands, and just as often, was applied broadly enough to encompass forest parks. A town forest (also called town conservation area, school forest, community forest and municipal forest) is forested land owned by a town, city, or municipality for the purpose of encouraging the proper management of timber, firewood and other natural resources (e.g. wildlife, water supplies).

The town forest movement continued to evolve through the support of regional, state and local governments as well as private and public organizations. States with the strongest town forest movements were all New England states: Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maine.

Whether the primary focus was commercial harvest, protection of water supplies, recreation, or some combination of purposes, the town forest movement's primary objective was the cultivation of trees for common public benefit. However, the movement floundered almost as rapidly as it began when local forestry committees proved both politically and technically inept at long-term forest management. To derive community benefit from community-owned forests requires a combination of citizen input, technical expertise, and the long-term perspective required by sustainable forestry. Attempts by state and federal agencies to offer assistance were frequently met with concern over outside interference. Conflicts between user groups emerged. By the mid-1950's, many municipal forests were converted to alternatives public use or sold back into the private domain. Many simply languished, forgotten by public officials and local residents.





* New York does not break out county-owned and municipally-owned forestland.



Case Study: Lincoln Town Forest Project

The town of Lincoln, Vermont is situated on the western slope of the Green Mountains in the northern portion of Addison County. The principal watershed of Lincoln is the New Haven River, which runs through the center of town. All subwatersheds of Lincoln are part of the greater Otter Creek watershed. Approximately 25 percent of Lincoln, the eastern portion along the ridge, is part of the Green Mountain National Forest. Of that U.S. Forest Service land, a substantial portion is part of the Breadloaf Wilderness and a very small bit is part of the Bristol Cliffs Wilderness (the rest of which abuts Lincoln's western border).



Like many rural Vermont towns, Lincoln has slowly been reforested as working farmland has been abandoned. Recently it has begun to reckon with development pressure, as people are able to commute greater distances from industrial centers or work entirely from home. Lincoln has a population approaching 1,250 and has little industrial base beyond a pallet mill. It has a commercial sector comprised of a general store, an inn, a mechanic, and a small collection of artisan shops/galleries. Agriculture and forestry are still practiced in Lincoln, but the scale is comparatively smaller now than in the past.

Within the town of Lincoln are three town-owned forests: the Colby Hill forest, 170 acres; the Ripton Lot, 104 acres; and the former Urz property, 88 acres. Both the Colby Hill forest and the Ripton Lot were essentially given to the town — Colby Hill in 1969 and the Ripton Lot in 1933. The town purchased the former Urz property in an effort to relocate its Town Garage in March 2000. There was some controversy over the town's purchase of nearly 90 acres for the purpose of developing two acres of sheds and equipment. The Town Forest Project is partly a result of that controversy.

Benefits of community forestland

- ◆ Protection of water sources
- ◆ Protection of wildlife habitat
- ◆ Recreational opportunities
- ◆ Site for observing and studying nature and forest management
- ◆ Models of conscientious resource management
- ◆ A place to view the effects of silviculture and wildlife management over the long-term
- ◆ A source of periodic income for the town
- ◆ An opportunity to designate preserve areas as part of an overall management scheme
- ◆ A place where residents can relish the spiritual/aesthetic values of a non-urban lifestyle

Getting Started

Lincoln's Town Forest Project began through a citizen initiative, in response to the perceived lack of citizen input regarding the care and use of Lincoln's town-owned forests. Shortly after the town's approval to purchase the Urz property, a local forester was contacted so that he might assess the value of the timber within the Ripton Lot, for possible sale to a local timber company. The Selectboard at the time (March 2000) was doing what it thought was in the town's best interests: offsetting the cost of the Urz property with revenue generated by timber sales from the Ripton Lot. A citizen petition containing over 100 names interrupted this process. The petition was asking the Selectboard to, "refrain from signing any logging contract for Town-owned properties without a forest management plan for each property, formulated, with citizen input, by a third party independent forester and approved by Lincoln voters; and support the establishment of a Town Forest Committee to develop a management plan and to oversee the ongoing management of the Town Forests" (April 2000).¹

As a result, the Selectboard refrained from signing the logging contract. A Town Forest Committee was never established, but, by the approval of the current Selectboard, the Lincoln Conservation Commission (LCC) was formed in January 2001. The town of Lincoln also adopted a revised Town Plan. Acknowledging the presence of valuable town-owned forest resources, one of the goals of the revised Town Plan was to "establish a Forest Management Committee made up of Lincoln residents to develop a management plan² (p.18)." The Town Plan also noted that it was important to "enhance citizen connection to public lands" and "develop management plans for Town owned lands that are long-term and sustainable and do not threaten the non-timber resources of forestland, such as biological integrity, wildlife habitat, education, and the benefits to humans of wilderness³ (ibid, p. 14)."

Coincidentally, some citizens became aware of Yellow Wood Associates, Inc., at a presentation, *A Forest for Every Classroom*. Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. is a consulting firm specializing in rural community development that was already working with the Town Forest Committee in Starksboro, Vermont. Through this association, the LCC was put in contact with the National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region (NCFCNFR), whose core purpose is to "help rural communities conduct and use research to make informed decisions about forest resources." The NCFCNFR provided the LCC with financial support to fund a local coordinator who was to begin exploring, with citizen input, the care and use of Lincoln's three town-owned forests.



Lincoln's intention with its Town Forest Project was to develop and document resident interest in its three town-owned forests. A second goal of the project was to provide the town's selectboard with management guidelines regarding the future care and use of the town-owned forests. It was the intent of the LCC that these guidelines reflect the attitudes and concerns of the town residents to as broad a degree as possible.

Questions that helped to guide Lincoln's town forest project that could help other communities in planning for their town forests include:

1. **What do you individually know about your town forests? What are your memories of your town's forestlands?**
2. **What options would you consider for use of your forests? What do you know of what other communities have done with their town forests?**
3. **Who are the local resources with respect to forests in your town?**
4. **What do local residents desire with respect to our town forests? How do these desires match the opportunities and constraints of the actual town forest parcels?**



Conservation Commissions

Municipal conservation commissions do not have a long tradition in Vermont, but since their authorization by the state in 1977, they have become a significant force for local conservation. Over one-third of Vermont's towns now have conservation commissions. Conservation commissions may be formed by a vote at a regular or special Town Meeting. Their duties, which are specified in statute, are largely advisory. Conservation commissions work closely with their community's legislative body and planning commission on a variety of matters related to land conservation, natural resource preservation, and environmental protection.

In New Hampshire and Maine, the authority for municipalities to establish conservation commissions is also specified in statute. New Hampshire and Maine conservation commissions are expected to conduct research into local land and water areas; coordinate the activities of unofficial bodies organized for similar purposes; index and plan for all open space and natural, aesthetic or ecological areas within the city, and all marshlands, swamps and all other wetlands. Conservation commissions in Maine can also acquire land in the municipality's name.

Step 1: Look Before You Jump -- Clarify Goals

Before jumping right into a planning process, communities attempting to make decisions about the best uses and goals for their town forest resources should be clear about their goals. Priorities for forest use and forest management planning are two distinct pieces of this process.

According to the Lincoln Town Plan, one of Lincoln's town goals is to "develop management plans for the three parcels of town-owned forest." However, prior to developing a management plan for a forest, it is necessary to decide on priorities for the use of that forest. Lincoln needed to develop priorities for the forests before entering into management planning.

It is important to distinguish between setting priorities for forest use and forest management planning. Setting priorities for forest use involves broad decisions about what visions people have of their forests and their communities. These broad priorities inform forest management planning, which involves specific ways of managing forests, such as whether or not to log, how much, and for what species of trees and what types of wildlife the forest will be managed. The priorities instruct forestry professionals about what direction to move in, while the management plan deals with what exactly needs to be done in order to follow those forest priorities.

While setting priorities for forest use is an appropriate goal for a town and its citizens, the creation of forest management plans is typically undertaken by forestry professionals. Forestry professionals typically advise the selectboard and planning commission in the best management of town forests. This does not mean that citizens cannot have input into forest management planning. Professional forestry expertise can be incorporated into a citizen-based effort, just as citizen input can be incorporated into professional forestry planning. In fact, there may be professional foresters in the community willing to donate their expertise to developing management plans for town-owned forests.

Lincoln eventually made this distinction in their workplan by changing its wording from "management plan" to "management guidelines." According to Lincoln Conservation Commission minutes for July 3, 2002, 'this change was made in light of the fact that "management plans" has specific meaning in regard to forestry and is beyond the scope of the LCC at this time.'



Alternative Options

Exploring alternative options for town forests should begin early in the process of considering forest priorities. Different towns will no doubt have different priorities. For example, a community might consider its municipal forests in a watershed, recreational, working land, hunting, educational, energy, or forestry context, or different combinations of all of these. Examples of towns planning for their forestland can be found in publications such as *Who's Planning for Forests?*— a March 2001 report available from the National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region.

The Town of Plaistow, New Hampshire was featured for its town forest management plan. Plaistow chose to pursue selected harvesting, receiving a net income of \$34,000, to be invested in a trust fund to improve and expand town efforts in forestry. Plaistow's municipal forest management plan also includes land conservation and acquisition, multiple uses, recreation, sustainable forestry and forest aesthetics.

Towns may consider their town forests in the context of the watershed or as a resource for local educational institutions. With 4,000 acres of city forest in the watershed, Rutland, Vermont requires the sale of all timber in the Rutland City Municipal Forest to be carried out under approved watershed management practices, to provide a regulated harvest of timber products, and to protect and ensure maximum sustained yields of usable water. The city continually considers the purchase of additional forestland to protect its watershed. In an educational context, the Stafford Technical Center Forestry/Natural Resources Program uses the Forest to train students in forestry and logging techniques. The city maintains a tree nursery to provide ornamental trees for the municipal planting program. Trees are dug and planted by students from the Technical Center.



Organizations and educational institutions can be helpful resources in planning for town forests. The town of Milton, Vermont contracted with the University of Vermont's Field Naturalist Program to develop a management plan for its town forest that would include strategies for balancing recreational use with continued preservation of the natural area. Once reserved as a watershed to protect Milton Pond, the town's drinking water supply, the forest has been used primarily for snowmobiling, hiking, hunting and fishing since the mid-1980s, when the town switched to another water supply. After the land was poorly timbered in 1986, concerned citizens lobbied the Selectboard to designate the town-owned land around Milton Pond as a municipal forest in order to prevent future damage. The result of this partnership between the town of Milton and the University of Vermont was a comprehensive guide outlining the physical and aquatic features, cultural resources, vegetation and wildlife. The guide shows how different uses would affect the area. If the town is concerned with minimizing soil erosion, for instance, it might restrict mountain biking and horseback riding during snowmelt. To maintain wildlife habitat, existing trails could be routed away from fragile habitat areas.



Step 2: Learn About Your Community's Town Forests

Relationships with Forests

Town-owned forests can play a supporting or integral role in different towns and municipalities, often depending on the extent and history of forests owned in a particular town. This information is best gathered from sources of town history. In searching for this type of information, some places to look are town records, town maps, town histories, town libraries, and other town resources. People can be helpful as well, including any older residents who may be able to piece together town history and any forest industry professionals who once worked the land or still do.

Gathering Information

Before any informed decision-making can occur, data gathering must take place. The entity in charge of the project (in Lincoln's case, the Lincoln Conservation Commission) should gather as much information as possible for their own education and the future education of the town's residents. The town of Lincoln's information-gathering process involved broad public participation by its citizens. Information such as maps, reports, and discussions with people can create a clear picture of the community and the town forests.

Here is how Lincoln approached the stage of information gathering. The first step was becoming familiar with the Town Clerk's office and other town and outside contacts. This endeavor was fruitful in that a coherent picture began to emerge with acreage and boundaries and the names of the town forests' adjoining landowners. Early on, the project coordinator determined that it seemed necessary to directly notify the adjoining landowners about the Town Forest Project in a good faith effort to be as clear as possible about what was going on. As a result, the LCC and project coordinator did not encounter any surprise hostilities from people feeling caught off-guard. The second step was contacting the county forester, David Brynn. Not only had he written a report regarding one of the town-owned forests, but he also opened the door to a world of state-run institutions in place to help these types of efforts, notably the regional planning commission, which helped tremendously in pulling together geographic resources, like maps.



Inventory

One of the first steps in deciding how to deal with town forests is knowing where and what they are. It is in the best interests of those communities interested in guiding the use of their town forests to inventory these forests to determine their extent, composition and current use. Such an inventory might include a description of where they are located, resources such as parking and facilities, topographical features, management history, natural features and communities, wildlife present and any other valuable information. It is also important to be aware of who has the responsibility for managing these forest resources and how the decision-making occurs.

Here's how the town of Lincoln, Vermont described one of their town-owned forest parcels. This description and the ones for the two other town forests were developed by the Lincoln Conservation Commission and the Lincoln Town Forest Project with the help of the county forester.

Colby Hill Forest

aka: Town Forest on Bald Hill, or the Keeseville Lot

The Colby Hill town-owned forest is situated in the far northwestern corner of the town of Lincoln and is most easily accessible from the end of Colby Hill Road. There is no official parking area but a bus/plow turn-around provides adequate room to be clear of the road. The lot itself is approximately 170 acres. It rises from nearly 1,400 to 1,600 feet and contains two distinct summits.

This lot currently provides a connection between the slopes of the Green Mountain National Forest and the basin of the Champlain Valley. A local chapter of Keeping Track has been running a trail along a NNW/SSE trending ridgeline. Though one summit is named Bald Hill, both summits are completely forested. In fact, Marc Lapin (2000) has suggested that the slopes of the northern summit were never cleared for agricultural purposes.

Approaching the lot from the end of Colby Hill Road, a visitor will come first to a small clearing east of the ridge. This area has been informally managed in the recent past to maximize wildlife forage. In both 1998 and 1999, youth work crews released a number of the apple trees; the area also has a decent supply of grape, shad plum and hawthorn, as well as red oak and hazelnut. The red oak becomes more prominent along the ridge and is reported to be the only full stand of oak within the town of Lincoln. If a visitor were to work their way westward toward the ridge, they would most likely



encounter a ski trail that runs the length of the ridge and beyond the boundaries of the property. Use of this ski trail seems to be entirely local and could be said to be minimal.

One point of interest along the trail is a glacial erratic, perfectly perched atop the ridgeline. On the whole, the forest consists of northern hardwood, northern hardwood-red oak, and mixed hardwood-red spruce swamp forests (Lapin, 2000). It is quite passable throughout most of the lot, though thicker places prevail in the ansect through this forest and has documented the presence of moose, bear and fisher.



Step 3: Engage Town Residents in Their Town Forests

What have other communities done with their town forests?

What are the options for use of forest parcels?

Do any local needs coincide with options for forest use?

What do local residents desire with respect to town forests and how do these desires compare with the realities of the particular town forest parcels?

In the nearby town of Starksboro, Vermont, town forests are occasionally logged; the resulting timber has been used to make bookshelves for the Starksboro Town Library. The goals and uses of the forests are, in most cases, determined by the town selectboard, with input from town residents. As with any public resources, public input and decision-making are important to determining the best use of these resources.

Yet, in some instances, residents have no idea of the forest resources at their disposal. Without knowing where the town forests are and what they contain, residents are hard-pressed to make informed decisions about their usage. As a result, it is necessary to introduce residents to their forest resources. This can be done in many ways, including guided walks, maps and public meetings.

In an attempt to educate residents about Lincoln's town forests, the Town Forest Project held a number of walks on the town-owned forest parcels, including some work project events aimed at re-blazing the property boundaries. Other events included a snowshoe outing, a tracking outing, and trail-planning.

Getting the word out about events, actual work and progress is another challenge for small communities. There are many venues and media for this type of outreach, including posters, press releases, town and school newsletters, generating and publicly displaying a series of provocative questions, neighborhood meetings, and public presentations.

Lincoln Town Forest Project Timeline

2000	Petition presented to selectboard asking that town forests not be logged without a management plan – requested committee of residents.
2001	Town purchases Urz property
November 2001	NCFCNFR chooses Lincoln as a target community
January 2002	14 people attend participatory research workshop in Lincoln
March 2002	Conservation Commission voted in at Town Meeting
April 2002	Andrew Lindsey hired as coordinator
May 2002	Andrew Lindsey and Jackie Tuxill attend forest indicator workshop in Starksboro. Andrew Lindsey becomes familiar with Lincoln's town forests and town government.
June 2002	14 people hike Colby Hill Town Forest Andrew Lindsey meets with people outside town.
September 2002	Public forum on Town Forest Project.
Fall 2002	Walks/work sessions on 3 properties.
November 2002	Forum in community



Step 4: Gathering Residents to Discuss Priorities for Town Forests

The Town Forest Forum

Once a critical mass of information about the town forests has been gathered and residents are familiar with their town forests, it is time for discussion about priorities for use. In the case of Lincoln, a forum held to educate participants about their town forests also attempted to gain consensus on priorities for management and use of the town forests. A potluck supper started the evening in a relaxed manner. Participants were encouraged to browse the posted information, including maps, descriptions of each of the forests and specific reports about the ecology of different parcels, while they fixed themselves some supper prior to the working part of the meeting.

The meeting began with an introduction to the Town Forest Project. The LCC stressed its advisory role to the Selectboard, to assure people that the formal system for making decisions regarding the town forests remained in place. The goal of the meeting was reiterated and elaborated upon, specifically to attempt to identify “management priorities for the three town-owned forests in Lincoln.” Finally, a brief verbal description of each forest was restated and participants broke up into three separate discussion groups of 10-12 people.

There were no particular guidelines as to how the participants should go about designating particular management priorities for each of the town-owned forests. Instead, a member of the LCC was present in each group to record questions and comments, keep the discussion focused, and make sure everyone had a chance to be heard.

What was stated most clearly was that participants appreciated being involved in the discussion. Working out management strategies for shared resources is never easy, but people genuinely respected having a forum for their voice and took the role conscientiously. Another general theme was the higher degree to which people wanted to be informed. People wanted to know more about the forests, particularly their histories and ecological inventories. This curiosity extended into the realm of possible logging, in which everyone agreed that a thorough management plan should precede any potential logging on any of the town-owned forests.



Priorities for Use

From various data collection efforts, public outreach and participation efforts should come priorities for the use of town-owned forests. Whether such priorities make sense for the particular parcel(s) being discussed is another issue altogether.

Thinking about what makes sense for the particular forest parcels can happen at different stages of the process. In the case of Lincoln, the inventorying and data gathering gave residents a fairly good idea of what had been happening with these forests. As a result, the priorities that arose seemed to make sense for the particular parcels. The next section will discuss the issues surrounding particular forest priorities.

Lincoln's Town Forest Project, through the use of meetings, walks and forums designed to stimulate discussion and eventually consensus, created a number of priorities for its town forests. There were places of immediate consensus and areas of definite disagreement. One thing that was quite clear was that the participants who turned out to discuss the future care and use of the town's forests had the best interests of Lincoln, and future generations of its residents, in their hearts and minds.

Presumably the information gathered early in the process would help a community choose intelligent priorities for its forests. Maps can be helpful in determining what types of natural resources, such as wildlife, or marketable timber, may be found in the forests.

As a result of Keeping Track-sponsored wildlife tracking in the Colby Hill Forest, residents felt strongly that this parcel should be managed for wildlife habitat. This naturally brought up questions about logging, hunting and motorized access. Due to the Ripton Lot's history of logging, residents discussed possibilities for timber extraction. Finally, there seemed to be a discussion of using the Urz property as an outdoor educational resource for school children. These perceived priorities, which may or may not represent consensus, will help Lincoln to proceed in its future discussions of the use and management of its town forests.



Step 5: Reality Check

What the Lincoln Town Forest Project did especially well was to discuss options for the town forests that took into account the specific parcels, their current uses, locations and needs of the community. Using a holistic approach to thinking about potential uses for town forests can help to eliminate impossible and unwise plans. Lincoln's example in this endeavor can serve as a model for other communities attempting to look at their town forests.

Particularly, once a community has some ideas of potential uses for its town forest parcels, that community's residents, with the help of forestry professionals, should determine if such uses make sense taking into account the historical and geographical contexts of those parcels and the needs of the community. While this may be best done while potential uses are being discussed with residents, this could also take place afterwards as a reality check.

While a great deal of work has already been done in order to reach agreement on priorities for the Lincoln town forests, the project is far from over. The town of Lincoln still needs to focus on the remaining questions that were brought up at the forum.

Any drafting of specific *management plans* will need to involve substantial guidance from necessary experts (i.e. independent foresters or wildlife biologists). The LCC can begin investigating what are the best approaches to allowing residents and experts to collaborate on such plans. In the meantime, residents should reconvene to discuss more specifically the finer points of the priorities above. Each parcel should be considered in light of its perceived priorities. Answers to questions about implications for hunting, types of access (i.e. motorized/non-motorized, horse, bike and considerations for the disabled), recreation and development will further help determine if the desired priorities make sense for the parcels for which they are being developed.

After wrestling with how to accomplish these goals, Lincoln decided to deal with one town forest at a time. As there are no pressing threats to any of the three town forests, the conservation commission felt that this was a comprehensive way to go about determining plans for management. Since its February 2003 Town Forest Forum, the Lincoln Conservation Commission has focused on the Ripton lot. An event was held, at which the Addison County forester, David Brynn, led the conservation commissioners and interested residents through the Ripton lot. As the priority for this lot was determined to be logging, discussion focused on the challenges to logging this forest, as well as the resources needed to deal with logging.



The Ripton Lot - Timber Extraction

A priority for the Ripton Lot should be the health and diversity of marketable timber. Discussion of the Ripton Lot included the *idea* of logging. Due to its history of logging and the fact that there is marketable timber clustered in the parcel's center, logging seemed to be an appropriate use. As such, there was talk about the benefits of a "working landscape," generating revenue for the town, "green certification," and the growing concept of sustainable logging practices. The finer points of a management plan and how restrictive it might be are yet to be worked out. Despite the timber focus, people were also interested in making the forest more visible and accessible to the community, through posting directions to it from a nearby road and having a trail that wound through the property.

The Colby Hill Town Forest: Wildlife Habitat

The overwhelming consensus for the Colby Hill Town Forest to be managed for wildlife habitat arose from its role as a forested corridor from the Green Mountains to the Champlain Valley and the wildlife tracking that had been taking place there. As a result, it was fairly clear that logging was not compatible with a plan for wildlife habitat for this parcel.

Hunting

Another issue was hunting on Colby Hill. The idea of creating a "wildlife refuge" came up. But in general, how does hunting relate to an area managed for the benefit of wildlife? The issue of restricting hunting was not an anti-hunting perspective but rather a concern about recreating in the woods during hunting season. One person said, "I would like to know there are places to be in the woods during hunting season – safely." This discussion necessarily brings up some general questions. Would the land be visibly posted? Does posted land achieve the goal of allowing one to "feel safe" while in the woods? Are the boundaries established clearly enough to ensure they would be noticed?

The Urz Property: Recovery and Civic Use

A priority for the former Urz parcel should be recovery and civic use. The Urz property has the only open space (non-forested) of the three town-owned forests. A method and schedule to keep the meadow open, a desire of the residents, seems to be a next step on this property. Another defining factor is the parcel's proximity to the Lincoln Community School.



The hope is that the town-owned forest may provide a more complete outdoor education experience for the school children. The size of the parcel is large enough to feel completely immersed in the forest ecosystem and still be within walking distance to the school. The exact uses the school has planned are still undecided, but the design and maintenance of a “nature trail” has been discussed.

The issue of hunting raises questions about the school children’s use of the Urz property. Could hunting be off-limits during certain hours of the day? Could there be a signal that informs hunters school children are on the property? And most importantly, would those types of steps be enough to ensure the safety of the teachers and kids?

Finally, the Urz property has potential for affordable low and middle-income housing that is quickly becoming unavailable in Lincoln.

Recreation and Access

While looking at Lincoln in its present state is helpful, the value of management priorities is that they help prepare for the future. So, though there is no pressing need for recreational trails and no precedent for motorized access, the possibility of each should be considered in light of how they relate to wildlife management (Colby Hill), timber management (Ripton Lot), and educational uses (Former Urz Property) and in that manner be better incorporated into a management plan.

Recreation and access go hand in hand; recreation generally implies trail-building, and trails invite access. Logging, too, enters the equation in that it also implies the construction of trails. The basic facts are that none of the parcels have a history of motorized vehicle use for recreational purposes. Only the Colby Hill Forest has a maintained, albeit unofficial, trail running through it. Any discussion of “recreational opportunities” should include the feasibility of construction and maintenance of walking trails.

Logging

There was no clear position regarding whether logging should occur on the parcel. Much of the parcel is in rough shape due to past logging; it was discussed whether a forester’s management plan might speed recovery.



Step 6. Approach the appropriate decision -makers about priorities for town forests.

Decision-Making

Most smaller Vermont towns have a selectboard, which is in charge of town management, planning and financing. Eighty-three Vermont municipalities have established conservation commissions or similar committees, and these commissions can play an important role in advising selectboards on natural resource issues related to town decision-making.

New Hampshire and Maine have similar town government structures, including selectboards and conservation commissions. Smaller, rural towns have their own Supervisor and a Town Council, plus staff members, such as Town Clerks and Town Administrators. Like Vermont, some small towns have conservation boards and some do not. Understanding the structure of your town's government may help those who are concerned about town-owned forests to organize themselves and appeal to the appropriate people. Knowing how decision-making happens in your town will also be helpful in organizing public participation to think about the use of town-owned forests.

While the Lincoln Conservation Commission made significant efforts in bringing its residents together to discuss the future of town forests, neither the residents nor the conservation commission have the ultimate responsibility to make the final decision. They can provide advice to the Selectboard and make a case for or against specific decisions. The findings and concerns that came out of their Town Forest Project will eventually be brought to the attention of the Lincoln Selectboard, which makes the final decision regarding the town forests. How the Lincoln Selectboard deals with the information given to them and what decisions they will ultimately make are not known.



Lessons Learned

Through its work on the Town Forest Project, the town of Lincoln learned many lessons that may be helpful for other small, rural communities attempting to establish priorities, involving residents as active participants, for their town forests.

- ◆ **Create a detailed workplan of the project.** A workplan acts as a roadmap, guiding a project and the tasks that need to happen at each stage.
- ◆ **Introduce residents to town forests.** Many residents may not even know where they are. Plan outdoor activities to bring them in contact with their forests.
- ◆ **Use all the resources at your disposal.** Resources can include people, agencies, nonprofits and other organizations, libraries, etc.
- ◆ **Visual resources**, such as maps, help people to think about their town and its resources. Maps and photos can help people to visualize relationships that they may not notice otherwise.
- ◆ **Publicize what you do.** Promote yourself in the local newspaper. Publicity can help get more people interested in your work and their community. Report on the success of past events and plans for future events. Enlist the participation and assistance of community members. Bulk mailings are an excellent way to get the word out.
- ◆ **Build momentum for important events.** Scheduling events in clusters makes them more prominent. Planning a series of events, and sending out a bulk mailing about them can get people's attention. Potluck suppers are excellent forums for community discussions.
- ◆ **Make a tangible link between peoples' efforts and the results.** People enjoy participating; however, they want to see that their participation makes a difference.



Conclusions

Research can create even more questions than it answers. Lincoln's experience in managing a citizen-based initiative to look at its town forests illustrates the challenges and eventual rewards of involving residents in decision-making. Its experiences also demonstrate the fits and starts that a small community can encounter in bringing people together to discuss community issues such as town-owned forests.

Lincoln residents clearly care about the use of their shared natural resources. Underlying that care is a strong sense of practicality that framed issues in terms of "usefulness" and a "working landscape." Furthermore, citizens were able to discuss the idea of "usefulness" without losing sight of the forests' inherent value as a place for wildlife, solitude, and as a means of preserving a healthy community. In this light, a place that is actively managed for wildlife habitat *is* a "working landscape" as much as a place where timber is extracted for economic benefit, especially if it is the residents of Lincoln that come together every so often to do the work and to revisit their goals.

Promoting the forests' "usefulness" is also a way to ensure that the forests are not forgotten. In Lincoln, a clear understanding surfaced that to be aware and to participate is the surest way to support the health of the town forests. Forests can exist without our "helping hand;" however, managing parcels as small as those in Lincoln makes sense within a municipal context. Lincoln found that there is at least a core of Lincoln residents who want to be informed and want to participate in the future of the town-owned forests. Keeping these citizens informed is the joint responsibility of the Selectboard, Planning Commission, and Conservation Commission. Encouraging and cooperating with a responsive and motivated citizenry is in the best interests of any town in planning for its town forests or any other town-owned resources.



The Process of Planning for Town Forests

1. What are the goals of your project?

2. Learn all you can about town-owned forests.

What types of information do you need and what are potential information sources?

Where are they?

What is the history of town forests and their past roles and uses?

What type of land is currently there and what are their current uses?

Are there any plans for acquisition of more forestland?

Have any studies or inventories been done about town forests?

3. Organize events whereby community residents can be introduced to town forest resources.

What types of events will attract people and attention and introduce people to their town forests?

How can you group events to get even more attention?

What is the best way of publicizing events? How can you reach people?

Who will present these events? Other residents? Professional ecologists?

4. Convene town residents to discuss their priorities for town forests.

What type of gathering will work best to bring together town residents to discuss priorities for town forests?

What resources will help residents and participants to make educated decisions about town forests?

Who needs to be there to provide information?

Who needs to be there to help residents make educated decisions?

How will your event happen? What is the agenda? What are the goals?

5. Reality check.

Having come up with some resident-driven priorities for town forests, do they make sense?

Which ones make sense in light of what is actually on the ground?

What additional issues do these priorities bring up?

If the priorities are implemented, what issues need to be resolved?

6. Approach the appropriate decision-makers about priorities for town forests.

Who are the appropriate decision-makers?

What is the process for making decisions?

